PERFORMANCE AND SEXUALITY DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: GLADYS BENTLEY AND MA RAINEY

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Women’s Studies

by

Mary E. Kasik

Summer 2016
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Mary E. Kasik:

Performance and Sexuality During the Harlem Renaissance: Gladys Bentley and

Ma Rainey

[Signatures]

Susan Cayley, Chair
Department of Women’s Studies

Doreen Mattingly
Department of Women’s Studies

Sarah Elkind
Department of History

5/12/16
Approval Date
DEDICATION

To my girlfriend, family, and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Performance and Sexuality during the Harlem Renaissance: Gladys Bentley and Ma Rainey
by
Mary E. Kasik
Master of Arts in Women’s Studies
San Diego State University, 2016

This thesis focuses on two famous blueswomen during The Harlem Renaissance: Gladys Bentley (1907–1960) and Ma Rainey (1886–1939). The purpose of this thesis is to use the Harlem Renaissance as a cultural context in order to address the ways both women performed sexuality and gender throughout their career and personal lives. In particular, I use historical analysis, lyrical analysis, and ephemera analysis in order to analyze how they expressed themselves and fashioned their identities within the Harlem Renaissance. This research is beneficial because it highlights the experiences of two women of color from the 1910s and 1920s and their contributions to queer culture, which can serve as evidence of queer history in the United States.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................... viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Terms ................................................................................................................... 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality ............................................................................................................... 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background/Literature Review .................................................................................... 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method ......................................................................................................................... 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance ............................................................................................................... 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Outline ......................................................................................................... 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE ....................................... 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “New Era,” “New Woman,” and Their Influence ............................................... 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth of the Harlem Renaissance .............................................................................. 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexities of the Harlem Renaissance .................................................................. 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainey and Bentley Before and During the Harlem Renaissance ......................... 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 BLUES MUSIC AND ITS LYRICAL MEANINGS .................................................... 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin of Blues Music ............................................................................................... 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Harlem Renaissance and Blues Music ............................................................... 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Rainey’s Blues Songs ......................................................................................... 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladys Bentley’s Blues Songs .................................................................................. 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Public Perception ............................................................................................... 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 THE BULLDAGGER IDENTITY AND ITS IMPORTANCE ..................................... 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Masculinity in the 1920s ............................................................................... 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition and Origin of Bulldagger ....................................................................... 39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attitudes Toward Bulldaggers ................................................................. 40
Rainey’s Use of the Bulldagger Identity .................................................. 44
Bentley’s Bulldagger Identity ................................................................. 48
Historical Significance and Relation to Queer ...................................... 54
Bentley and Rainey’s Legacies/Conclusion ........................................... 55
REFERENCES ......................................................................................... 57
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ma Rainey in a sparkly top/dress and necklace</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ma Rainey in a dress</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ma Rainey’s album cover for “Prove It On Me Blues.”</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gladys Bentley in a top-hat</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Gladys Bentley in full masculine attire</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gladys Bentley in more masculine attire</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gladys Bentley with a bow-tie and slicked back hair</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Gladys Bentley’s “I am a woman again” (1952) photoshoot</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my upmost gratitude to my Chair, Dr. S.E. Cayleff, for her guidance, encouragement, and support throughout this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Doreen Mattingly, for her help and advice, and Dr. Sarah Elkind for her feedback and suggestions. All three readers were patient and understanding throughout the entire process and I could not thank them enough for their dedication and assistance.

In addition, I would especially like to thank my girlfriend, Risa Scott, for always being there for me. I couldn’t have gotten this far without her love. I also appreciate my wonderful Graduate Cohort, Emma Fuller, Helen Lockett, and Olivia Jaffe-Pachuiolo for constantly supporting me throughout my Master’s program.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I remember sitting in my United States History class in my junior year of high school, flipping through the pages that evoked stories and images of war, colonization, and the lives of white men. I recall there being a few pages on The Harlem Renaissance, which discussed the boom in African American culture, art, and writing. However, these pages only mentioned Black men such as Langston Hughes or W. E. B. Du Bois. I did not question why there was a lack of women, and why, when women were discussed, it would be about white women like Eleanor Roosevelt and not Sojourner Truth or other powerful women of color. I had been raised unaware of the contributions of various women in history, particularly contributions made by women of color.

Moreover, when I awakened as a feminist in my sophomore year of college and started coming to grips with my newfound sexuality as a queer/fluid woman, I became even more bothered. Why was I just starting to learn about the numerous queer figures in history? I had lived my whole life thinking that heterosexuality was the norm and that if you weren’t heterosexual it meant you were gay or a lesbian, but I did not even know what that meant. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people were invisible in history classes and there was very little representation in the media regarding LGBTQ individuals that didn’t focus on gay men or stereotypes about queer people. Currently, I wonder what it would have been like if queer women were present in my high school history textbooks. What would have happened if I had known that there was this whole world of influential, queer role models that had been hidden from me this entire time? Would it have opened my eyes to alternative possibilities to heterosexuality at an earlier age? This is the thought that has encouraged me to write this thesis, so that I can highlight the importance of queer women of color from history and bring awareness to the contributions these women have made.
KEY TERMS

There are three key terms that I am using throughout this thesis: queer, bulldagger, and performativity*. Based on literature from other sources, queerness is viewed as an identity or existence that “delineate[s] the multiple possibilities for sexuality” (Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000) and rejects assimilative assumptions of LGBTQ people, because the binary assumption is that one is either heterosexual or homosexual. I use this description of queer in my thesis, and have split it into two separate definitions. Queer is: 1. An umbrella term for someone who has a non-heterosexual sexual identity or engages in non-heterosexual acts. 2. A non-heterosexual person who takes a political stance against binary assimilation in the LGBTQ community. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the first definition of this word. I use queer as both an identity category and as a way to identify non-heterosexual and non-normative behavior/performances during the Renaissance. Blueswoman Gladys Bentley (1907–1960) displayed a queer identity throughout her blues career in the 1920s. Ma Rainey (1886–1939), another popular blueswoman during the era, produced the queer song “Prove it On Me Blues” (edmundusrex, 2013) and her career demonstrates the intrigue surrounding the queer community in that time frame. I analyze the different ways these two successful blueswomen performed gender and sexuality. Previous research often labels these women as lesbian or bi-sexual because of their same-sex relationships, but historical sources do not justify these labels. I did not find enough evidence to substantiate the claim that Rainey was queer. In regard to Bentley, I reinterpret her as queer or as the historically relevant term, bulldagger.

Bulldagger was a slang term in the 1920s and, according to one definition, it derived from the word “bull-dogging,” which referred to the act of a rodeo cowboy wrestling a steer to the ground (“bulldagger,” n.d.). Based on this definition I define bulldagger as: 1. A slang word that originated in the 1920s as a way to described a woman who likes women. 2. She is usually depicted as big/burly, “aggressively” masculine, and African American. Bulldagger is a racialized term that was not usually applied to queer, white women from the 1920s; bulldaggers differed from other queer women in terms of their presentation and ways of moving through the world. Like queer, I use it as a way to identify Bentley. I explore this in my thesis when I discuss performativity and the bulldagger identity.
Out of the two women I am researching, Bentley is the one that most expressed a bulldagger identity, and numerous sources refer to her that way, such as Eric Garber (1988, 1989), James F. Wilson (2010), and Regina V. Jones (2012). This term could be applied to her because she was African-American, had relationships with other women, and performed female masculinity on stage. Her bulldagger identity was revealed through her stage productions, song lyrics, and personal life. Rainey had a more normative persona. But she did sing one song from a bulldagger’s perspective in her song “Prove It on Me Blues.”

For the last descriptor, performativity, I use Judith Butler’s (2006) definition: “Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body” (p. xv). Butler describes gender as something that is performed, and that identity is derived through this repetitive performance. She sees LGBT identities as unstable constructs that are constantly performed as well. In the context of this paper, I examine the performances of Rainey and Bentley through both their physical appearances and their song lyrics. I analyze how these women created/expressed their identities, and if their identities were on-stage personas, authentic representations of self, or both.

**POSITIONALITY**

It is crucial for me, as the author, to be reflective in my research and talk about how my own identity impacts my research findings. I am aware of my power as the researcher and as someone who is extracting my own interpretations from their lives. I am an Eastern-European/Scottish/English, middle-class, fluid/queer woman and I am researching Black, working-class, women from The Harlem Renaissance (1920s–1930s). First, as a queer woman, I am aware of the fluidity of sexuality and how one’s sexuality falls outside of the homosexual/heterosexual binary. By using queer and bulldagger as identifiers in my thesis, my goal is to change the way researchers approach sexuality. From my own experience, I have seen that individuals enjoy labeling others, oftentimes disregarding how person herself has identified. For example, I am often mislabeled as a lesbian because I have a female significant other, which obscures the reality of my sexuality and my self-identity. In addition, identifying oneself as bi-sexual or as a lesbian was less common in the time period I am researching because these socially constructed identities were only just beginning to be used.
Mainly, LGBTQ individuals were called inverts or were said to engage in sexual perversions (Johns, 1934a). Further research should be done regarding what words LGBTQ people claimed as sexual identities, or if they used identifiers much at all.

I am conscious of the fact that Rainey and Bentley’s experiences were impacted by their marginalized identities as Black, working-class women. They encountered hostility and outright racism because of their identities. I address the ways in which these marginalized identities affected their lives/music and how they negotiated their social positions throughout their careers as blues musicians during The Harlem Renaissance (1920s–1930s).

**BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW**

To fully analyze the lives of Rainey and Bentley, it is crucial to situate their experiences within the context of early-1900s American culture in general, Black American culture, the Harlem Renaissance, and queer theory. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons’ (1989) *Passion & Power: Sexuality in History* contains two separate sections, one on sexuality and historical meaning and the other on the emergence of modern sexuality. This is very important for my research because the authors show how forces such as class, race, or gender have shaped/constructed sexuality. They argue, “Examining the changing focus of sexological inquiry points out how important it is in our study of the history of homosexuality to reconstruct the conceptual frameworks in which homoerotic desire and relation have been understood” (Peiss & Simmons, 1989, p. 108). Throughout my thesis, I use queer to describe Bentley in order to reconstruct an understanding of her gender and sexuality. I also use queer to describe Rainey’s 1928 song, “Prove It on Me Blues” (edmundusrex, 2013).

Two queer theorists I utilize are Cathy J. Cohen’s (2005) “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics” and Judith Butler’s (2006) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Cohen’s (2005) article stresses the importance of intersectionality in research and queer theory. She claims that the queer has the potential to transform systemic domination of sexuality, race, class, etc., but only if it involves an intersectional approach (p. 459). This is a point that is at the forefront of my thesis, because my subjects have intersectional identities and their multiple social locations greatly impact their lives. Judith Butler (2006) promotes the deconstruction of categories,
even categories like woman or heterosexual. She claims that these categories are created and reaffirmed through scripts and actions, and that gender is a performance (p. xv). Both Rainey and Bentley’s performed or took on different identities in different stages of their lives, and applying Butler’s analysis to their experiences/actions sheds light on new findings and meanings.

The historical context is multi-layered. Early-1900s America was experiencing a new wave of entertainment, culture, and art during/after World War I. According to Lynn Dumenil’s (1995) *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and massive immigration transformed the landscape of the United States in the 1920s (p. 4). She states that these changes, along with shifts in women’s roles and religious beliefs, resulted in many white Americans being afraid. While some were excited about the growing diversity, others deplored what they saw as “urban decay” (Dumenil, 1995, p. 6), and used laws like the Eighteenth Amendment, or prohibition, to outlaw alcohol and promote morality as well as white Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultural values (Dumenil, 1995, p. 9).

The article “The Roaring Twenties” provides historical and scholarly documentaries of the 1920s and reiterates many of Dumenil’s points, including the emphasis on change, immigration, and mass culture (History.com, 2010). However, this section mostly discusses the “cultural Civil War” and social tension present during the 1920s between: city-dwellers and small-town residents; Protestants and Catholics; “New Women” and advocates of patriarchal family values, and African Americans and white Americans. For example, there was an increase in Ku Klux Klan activities in the 1920s, which, to many white Americans, signified a return to “values” that were being trampled by the fast-paced, city life and Black migration. Furthermore, an anti-Communist “Red Scare” in 1919 and 1920 prompted the passage of an extremely restrictive immigration law, the National Origins Act of 1924, which excluded a wide variety of immigrants from United States entry.

Other sources focus on the changing economic landscape of the United States and its ensuing mass consumer culture. John M. Cooper Jr.’s (1990) *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900–1920* notes that immigration skyrocketed, and over eight million immigrants came to the United States in hopes of a better life. Improvements in technology, travel,
agriculture, and industry enhanced the United States economy, but the wealthy benefited the most from these advancements (Cooper, 1990, p. 4). Cooper (1990) claims that Black Americans were the poorest in the country, as well as the least educated (p. 6). This shows the hierarchy of social and economic power present in the United States during this time.

Complementing Cooper’s analysis is the role of Paul V. Murphy’s (2011) *The New Era: American Thought and Culture in the 1920s*, which looks at mass-consumer culture. Murphy claims that the New Era was marked by consumerism, intellectualism, and innovation. A new culture of material wealth and commercial interests took root in the United States in the thirty years preceding the 1920s that encouraged a society where social success was defined by wealth and luxury (Murphy, 2011, p. 45). He also notes that the 1920s were defined by modernity, a sense of change, and a commitment to personal fulfillment (Murphy, 2011, p. 12). This emphasis on capitalistic desire led to a society that focused on material goods and fulfillment.

These concepts of modernity and change encouraged a transformation in women’s roles during the 1920s as well. Laura Doan’s (1998) *Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s*, Laura L. Behling’s (2001) *The Masculine Woman in America, 1890–1935*, Andrea Barnet’s (2004) *All Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem, 1913–1930*, Laura Horak’s (2016) *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908–1934* all discuss how the “New Woman” of the 1920s was connected to modernity, female masculinity, and queerness. While Rainey and Bentley did produce progressive music and images, they did so in a time period that was supportive of female rebelliousness. This historical research on American culture in the early-1900s highlight the complex cultural atmosphere of the time, and exemplify the raced, classed, and gendered struggles and experiences Rainey and Bentley encountered.

Within these complex times, the lives of Black Americans during the early-1900s are examined by John P. Davis’s (1966) *The American Negro Reference Book*. J. P. Davis (1966) provides information on employment, migration patterns, politics, legal status, sports, and music. J. P. Davis (1966, p. 110) states that between 1910 and 1960, around one million Black Americans moved north, with most migration happening during The Great Migration between 1910 and 1920. This helps explain how Harlem in New York City became a beacon
of Black culture, art, and music during this time. J. P. Davis also has a chapter on blues and jazz music and how it came to be, mentioning that artists like Ma Rainey “re-create[d] certain serious areas of [Black people’s] lives” (p. 760) through their music.

Complementing J. P. Davis’ work is John Hope Franklin’s (2010) *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African American*. Franklin proposes that the Harlem Renaissance was not only a movement dedicated to art, culture, and music. In addition, it developed as a response to the social and economic problems plaguing African Americans in the United States. He claims that Black Americans expressed their anger artistically, using popular forms of expression such as writing and music to gain a wider audience and voice their defiance against injustices facing the Black community (Franklin, 2010, p. 402). This relates directly to Rainey and Bentley’s music, which connected with the Black audience and resisted societal norms through their lyrics and stage productions.

A vital primary source from the era is W. E. B. Du Bois’s (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*; this work was a direct shot at another well-known Black thinker at the time, Booker T. Washington. They had differing views about what the Black community should do to gain acceptance/respect within white America. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) argues that Black people must fight for civil rights in order to see progress. He believed in equality (Du Buois, 1903, p. 35). However, Booker T. Washington (1907) took a more accommodating stance on civil rights. In his book, *The Negro in the South* he claimed that “the Negro did get certain benefits out of slavery” (Washington, 1907, p. 12) and that white people can bring out the best in them. This directly opposes Du Bois’ statement that Black individuals should struggle for equality and that they have faced great injustices because of white people. Washington seems to try to pacify white audiences with his book, while Du Bois is appealing to other Black Americans. Both perspectives influenced race relations in the era of my research and demonstrate the different ways Black Americans reacted to racism in the early 1900s.

An extensive amount of research has already been done on the Harlem Renaissance, a time in from the early 1920s–1930s that was dedicated to African-American culture, art, and music. Several sources are particularly valuable; Steven Watson’s (1995) book, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture* provides an historical background on how
the Harlem Renaissance came about. As more African Americans migrated north, Harlem transformed into a mecca of “Negro society” (Watson, 1995, p. 13). With the end of World War I, Harlem welcomed home The Hellfighters, the all-black 369th Infantry Regiment, and this celebration paved the way for cultural nationalism and pride, which sparked The Harlem Renaissance (Watson, 1995, p. 15). Sandra West and Aberjhani’s (2003) Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, contains multiple summaries and definitions about the Harlem Renaissance. This source provides biographies about Rainey and Bentley, defines the blues and examines other influential Black people.

The role of sexuality within the Renaissance movement is key to my research. Eric Garber’s (1989) “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem” addresses LGBTQ subculture within the Harlem Renaissance because Harlem was also a mecca for queerness as well as blackness. He analyzes how LGBTQ individuals could explore their sexual identities within its culture. James F. Wilson’s (2010) Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in The Harlem Renaissance focuses on performance and the bulldagger identity, which is crucial for my work on how Rainey and Bentley displayed their sexuality and gender identity through their stage productions.

Three other sources also describe same-sex sexuality within the context of The Harlem Renaissance, with a specific emphasis on the lives of Rainey and Bentley. Lillian Faderman’s (1991) Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-century America talks about Harlem as a space for bi-sexual and lesbian women. Faderman brings up the important intersections of race and class with sexuality, claiming that while Harlem was a space for LGBT expression, it was also an area where white, middle-class people would participate in “sexual colonialism” and treated Harlem as a commodity by going to Black clubs as spectators (Faderman, 1991, p. 68). Shedding light on this aspect of the movement helps me construct my intersectional analysis of Rainey and Bentley’s experiences. Two other sources on sexuality that I utilize in my thesis are Bonnie Haggerty and Zimmerman’s (2000) Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures, which defines various terms that have to do with LGBTQ identities and experiences. It contains short biographies on Rainey and Bentley, while also defining Harlem as “one of the few
places where female sexual experimentation, along with whites and blacks, was permitted” (Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 354). This definition brings attention to how LGBTQ communities were created within the space of the Harlem Renaissance. Delroy Simms’s (2001) *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities* looks deeper into African American communities and their responses to same-sex love. Simms (2001) describes the openness of Harlem but also analyzes the ways in which Black communities did not accept LGBTQ people. He finds that religion is a major factor in Black individuals’ opposition to homosexuality, which greatly influenced Bentley’s life in particular (Simms, 2001, p. 68).

Music is a fundamental part of my thesis, because Bentley and Rainey’s influence emerged through their songs. The following seven secondary sources provide a background and understanding of blues music, and also illustrate how Rainey and Bentley’s songs showcased their performative identities. Daphne Duval Harrison’s (1988) *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, Virginia L. Grattan’s (1993) *American Women Songwriters: A Biographical Dictionary* and Angela Davis’s (1998) *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* all introduce musical biographies or lyrics of Ma Rainey and/or Gladys Bentley, and describe how they became blues singers and icons of 1920s music. Dick Weissman’s (2005) *Blues* is a foundational text for understanding the blues as a category of music, and how it originated. I intend to analyze at least two songs by Rainey and Bentley in order to answer how they expressed themselves through their music.

Multiple primary sources show how the Black press’ reactions differed in response to Rainey and Bentley’s lives and careers. Two Black newspapers, the *New York Age* and the *Chicago Defender*, provided me with numerous primary sources from the era. Vere E. Johns’s (1934a) “In the Name of Art” from *The New York Age* called for an end to immorality. Johns (1934a) believed Bentley was promoting perversion, stating that she was an affront to morality. However, Roy Rob (1948) from the *Chicago Defender* applauded Bentley’s stage productions in “Gal with Slacks, Clever Ditties, Also ‘Real Gone.’” Rob (1948) claimed, “No one else on the scene could hold a candle to her style,” insinuating that he approved of Bentley’s stage presence and saw it as risqué and different. Rainey was celebrated in, “Ma Rainey’s Review” in the *Chicago Defender*; the author of the article, Bob
Hayes (1926), claimed that “Ma Rainey, with her Georgia Jazz band and all-star vaudeville revue, opened here Monday night, week of Feb. 2, with one of the hottest shows that ever played here…” These Black newspapers shed light on the reactions the Black community had toward Bentley and Rainey. Pamela L. Caughie’s (2013) “‘The Best People’: The Making of the Black Bourgeoisie in Writings of the Harlem Renaissance” explores how these reactions were impacted by social class. Another source I use in my thesis is an autobiographical piece by Gladys Bentley herself “I am a Woman Again” from the 1952 issue of the Black magazine, Ebony. In this article, Bentley rejects her queerness and gender non-conformity, stating that she has changed since getting married. She explains that she has left that “strange” (p. 93) part of herself behind. Ebony magazine listed this article as a self-help piece, showing that non-normative behavior was not fully accepted in middle-class, Black magazines in 1952.

The last sources I look at are biographies of Rainey and Bentley, which include Eric Garber’s (1988) “Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues,” Hine, Brown, and Terborg-Penn’s (1993) Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, Sterling A. Brown’s (1998) “Ma Rainey,” Biography.com’s profile (Biography.com Editors, n.d.), and Sandra West and Aberijhani’s (2003) Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance. These sources flesh out the lives of Rainey and Bentley, and include information about their hometowns, childhoods, and the beginning of their careers. These sources are useful because they inform me of their social class backgrounds and how they began their careers in blues music.

**METHOD**

The method I use is: American historical analysis utilizing primary, secondary, ephemera, and lyrical analysis. Historical analysis can be defined as “an integral component of the study of history. Specifically, it entails interpretation and understanding of various historical events, documents and processes” (Wesleyan University 2011). Using pictures, lyrics, personal statements, music clips, newspaper, and magazine articles from secondary and primary sources on the Harlem Renaissance era (late 1910s to late 1920s) provides answers to my research questions. With historical analysis and methodology, I look at the
content contained within my historical sources as a way to illuminate the atmosphere of early-1900s American culture and the Harlem Renaissance.

My methodology incorporates the ideas introduced by Peiss and Simmons’s (1989) *Passion & Power: Sexuality in History*. It provides articles about the history of sexuality and best practices to research it. In the introduction of their book, Peiss and Simmons (1989) explain that sexuality is often portrayed as a separate entity distinct from the rest of human experience and many researchers do not tie sexuality with class, gender, or race. I aim to connect these intersecting social realities in my thesis when describing Rainey and Bentley’s lives (p. 3).

Furthermore, I expand on theories Padgug (1979) showcases in, “Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History.” He argues that the use of sexual categories is a relatively new way to define sexuality. For example, in historical texts he has found, such as in Greek history, he sees that they did not use sexual categories but instead talked about the sexual instinct itself, rather than emphasize the object (Padgug, 1979, p. 15). In other words, identity categories like heterosexual, homosexual, gay, or lesbian were not ascribed to people until later in history. Padgug (1979) asserts, “In any approach that takes as predetermined and universal the categories of sexuality, real history disappears” (p. 16). While these identity categories were becoming more popular in the time period I am researching (early twentieth century), I refrain from labeling my subjects or other people from the era with any one of these identity categories. Throughout this thesis, I use the words “queer,” “non-heterosexual,” and “same-sex” to better encapsulate what I believe is a more honest depiction of the era. These terms are broad and more focused on action rather than identity. However, I do analyze the bulldagger identity in my thesis, which was a term used during the Harlem Renaissance era. I look at how Rainey and Bentley performed or did not perform this identity through their stage productions, images, and personal lives.

Padgug (1979) claims, “Homosexual and heterosexual behavior may be universal; heterosexual identity and consciousness are modern realities” (p. 24). This means that historians and researchers place their own modern understandings of sexuality onto history. Same-sex behavior/actions are converted into roles and personalities and ultimately into entire subcultures (Padgug, 1979, p. 23). Therefore, because Rainey and Bentley engaged in
same-sex relationships, historical researchers put them into the category of lesbian or bi-sexual. Previous researchers do this in order to show representation of LGBT identities throughout history, but this is also limiting because, by doing this, they cast these identity categories as universal and absolute. I acknowledge that queer is also a modern way to describe sexuality, but in my thesis I use it to mean that Bentley engaged in non-heterosexual relationships and both women displayed queer themes through their blues productions. It leaves readers with more open possibilities for how these women may have identified so that they are not pigeonholed into one specific category.

I use lyrical analysis to unpack their sexual realities and self-presentations. After listening to the song “Prove it on Me Blues” by Ma Rainey (edmundusrex, 2013) and looking at the lyrics, the content and meaning of her lyrics demonstrate issues of race, sexuality, and desire. Grattan’s (1993) American Women Songwriters also helps interpret what Rainey’s lyrics meant to her, and if she was their author. Grattan’s analysis helps answer the question of which techniques Rainey and Bentley used to portray non-normative sexuality through their songs and stage productions. The last method I use is ephemera analysis, which can be defined as the analysis of “the temporary, transitory, the time-bound, and the elusive” (Fisher, 2012). Ephemera analysis looks at photos and primary personal narratives in order to form an idea of what their lives consisted of. I look at photos of Rainey and Bentley and analyze visual cues that revealed their self-presentations.

One challenge I encountered with my methodology is that Rainey and Bentley left few firsthand accounts from this era. Therefore, I have almost no self-analysis from them and am speculating what they personally experienced. Because they were not part of a dominant group, there is not much information on them, especially Rainey. However, my various sources offer insights that make my analysis possible.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

My research on the lives of Bentley and Rainey showcase two different approaches successful blueswomen took in order to manage their careers and self-images. The Harlem Renaissance offered space for Black queer women and also capitalized on the mainstream public’s fascination with non-normative sexuality. I illuminate aspects of their lives that have not been fully analyzed or addressed in other research. Previous historical research has
viewed these women in terms of their sexuality while not focusing adequately on their gender performativity and what that meant for contemporary and historical interpretations of their lives. Their mannerisms, clothing, appearance, and stage personas helped craft their identities and allowed for greater gender and sexual expression. While not wholly liberating, their influence on queer culture is inspirational for the LGBTQ community today and shows evidence of a queer past.

Another significant aspect of my research is the intersectional approach I use to examine these women’s lives. I look at how their race informed and elicited perceptions of their identities, as well as how social class impacted the choices available to them. It is crucial to address these multiple social locations, because they all have an impact on the experiences these women had as they moved through the world.

Lastly, my thesis brings further contributions to queer history. The LGBTQ population is becoming more accepted in mainstream United States culture, yet queer historical figures are often obscured from the public eye or made invisible. There has been a movement to introduce queer history to schools and show that there are queer role models for LGBTQ youth and adults. LGBTQ youth who struggle with their intersectional identities can look up to Rainey and Bentley as women who fought their way to fame and recognition, in spite of being marginalized based on their race, class, sexuality, gender non-conformity, etc. Sharon Ullman (2015), a writer for “The Chronicle of Higher Education” sums up the importance of historical interpretation, "The work of historians is central to daily life, identity, and culture. Pride in community or country relies on knowledge of a cherished past. The work that historians do makes possible the very ground on which we all so casually walk."

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

This thesis has four chapters centering on the lives of Ma Rainey and Gladys Bentley. This first chapter provides a background on previous scholarship, and I begin my second chapter with an in-depth look at The Harlem Renaissance and how it was informed by race, class, gender, sexuality and the massive, urban, Black migration north. The second chapter provides a cultural context for the readers to place Rainey and Bentley. In this chapter, I investigate the atmosphere of The Harlem Renaissance and answer the major question: How
did the Harlem Renaissance facilitate their non-normative behavior and/or career choices? I also look at how class status affected their lives, and if it hindered or facilitated their behaviors and people’s perceptions of them. Moreover, I analyze the economic structures that informed business and club operations during this time in order to give readers a clear picture of how they influenced Rainey and Bentley’s songs and stage productions.

The third chapter includes song and lyrical analyses of Rainey and Bentley’s music. First, this chapter outlines a brief history of blues music and the stylistic aspects of blues songs. Then, I discuss the issue of whether or not these women wrote their own songs and lyrics, and how much freedom they had to choose which songs to perform. Furthermore, I describe the underlying meanings within the song lyrics. These meanings are then analyzed within the context of The Harlem Renaissance and I deduce how these women were perceived and what their songs supposedly meant for them.

The fourth chapter introduces the bulldagger identity and the techniques Bentley used to perform this identity both on and off stage. I discern how these women fashioned their sexual and gender performances within the space of the Harlem Renaissance. Like the last chapter, I look at people’s perceptions of their appearances and provocative stage productions. Moreover, I see how these queer actions were a mode of expression and/or resistance for these women and if they were expected/encouraged by the club industry. This chapter answers the major question: Both Rainey and Bentley were African-American. How did that impact contemporary and historical conceptions of their sexualities and gender identities? Moreover, I look at how these two successful women utilized queerness, the bulldagger identity, and performativity in order to foster their careers and self-images. After answering these questions, I conclude my thesis by summarizing my research and showcasing the legacies these women have left behind. I also suggest questions for future research.
CHAPTER 2

THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The cultural climate of the Roaring Twenties in the United States created space for the Harlem Renaissance, which spanned from the early 1920s to early 1930s (Watson, 1995, p. 8). As evidenced by previous writers, early-1900s America experienced a growth of art, entertainment, and diversity (Dumenil, 1995, p. 4) within a time of materialism, intellectualism, and change. Capitalism thrived, aided by a mass-consumer culture that defined success by one’s wealth and luxury (Murphy, 2011, p. 12). Moreover, because of technological advancements the United States economy flourished, encouraging the immigration of over eight million immigrants to the United States. (Cooper, 1990, p. 4). Harlem in particular was “in the midst of an enormous explosion of Afro-American culture” (Garber, 1988, p. 54). A mass migration of about one million southern African-Americans to the north in the 1910s and 1920s (J. P. Davis, 1966, p. 110) led to a rich culture of Black art, music, and writing dubbed “The Harlem Renaissance.” The Harlem Renaissance proved to be a unique period in United States history, because it provided opportunities for poor, women of color like Ma Rainey and Gladys Bentley while also exploiting them as sources of entertainment. The early 1900s brought conflict as well as change, and it was a time when social unrest was building because of poverty as well as race relations. Some people did not approve of the modern, urban culture of the 1920s and felt that traditional values should be enforced to bring back morality. This resulted in Prohibition and the revival of the Ku Klux Klan (Biography.com Editors, n.d.). Black Americans were deeply impacted by this, and their lived experiences established and created the Harlem Renaissance. By looking at how race, class, gender, and sexuality were involved in the Harlem Renaissance, I analyze how
the expression of Rainey and Bentley’s sexualities and gender non-conformity were facilitated by this time period.

THE “NEW ERA,” “NEW WOMAN,” AND THEIR INFLUENCE

At the turn of the century, the United States was experiencing a vast amount of change. Following the Great War, a mass culture emerged due to increased consumerism and wealth. The economy was thriving and young adults in particular were in search of a new kind of morality and fulfillment that emphasized pleasure-seeking and recreation. Technological innovations and improved efficiency benefited the middle-class, but the working poor did not prosper during this time. Wages varied significantly depending on race, ethnicity, and gender, and wages in less prestigious sectors like manufacturing or coal mining did not change significantly (Murphy, 2011, pp. 12, 16).

The Women’s Suffrage Movement (1848–1920) was a major factor in the appearance of the “New Woman.” The Suffrage Movement “sparked profound changes in traditional attitudes about sex, gender, and sexuality” (Behling, 2001, p. 1). There was a growing fear that independent women would become “masculine” because they were seen as taking on “male” attributes by entering the work place and earning an income (Behling, 2001, p. 2). However, young women were excited about this “radical break from the past” after the First World War, and wanted to experience a new, urban way of living (Horak, 2016, p. 123). American women were engaged in a cultural revolution where there was a desire to overturn repressive, Victorian morality and get in touch with one’s sexuality (Barnet, 2004, p. 1). Many women adopted the fashionable flapper style but the characteristics they expressed were dependent on race, social class, and sexuality.

During the era, actresses such as Clara Bow (1905–1965), Marion Davies (1897–1961), and Bebe Daniels (1901–1971) appeared in films in more boyish attire, sporting trousers and blazers (Horak, 2016, p. 125). Women, specifically those of white middle and upper classes, were able to dress in masculine attire and were seen as crossing over fixed labels. However, this masculine fashion and attitude of rebelliousness soon spread across social classes and racial lines, contributing to cultural anxieties of “boyish women and
effeminate men” (Doan, 1998, pp. 670–672). These outfits were connected with the emergence of women’s new physical and social freedoms in the 1920s.

The Euro-American flapper emerged as a symbol of the new age, with her cropped hair, short sparkly dresses, and modern approach to life. She went against female gender roles during the time, and engaged in a more open sexuality. This cultural phenomenon set the stage for blueswomen like Rainey and Bentley to produce music that resisted traditional gender norms while profiting from progressive audiences.

**Birth of the Harlem Renaissance**

Well-known figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) spoke extensively about the state of Black Americans during the early 1900s. During this time period, Black people were engaged in “race-building” in order to promote a positive image of Blackness in response to racist stereotypes of Black people that were common in mainstream America. Du Bois had a more radical viewpoint than Washington, calling for emancipation from white mistreatment (Du Bois, 1903, p. 4). He endorsed a civil rights agenda that protested the lynching and discrimination of Black Americans and believed social change could only happen through protests and activism (Wormser, n.d.). Washington, on the other hand, equated whiteness with proper citizenship. While he did not promote slavery, he did say that Black individuals got “certain benefits” out of it (Washington, 1907, pp. 9, 12). His viewpoint was that Black Americans had to earn their equality through self-improvement and material success. In other words, he believed Black people would win the respect of the white community if they conformed to mainstream norms and achieved economic prosperity. Du Bois and Washington were oppositional to one another because of their differing strategies. These discussions surrounding race helped form the Harlem Renaissance because it embodied a Black voice that was dedicated to race-building, progressive politics, racial integration, and musical and sexual freedom. It also encouraged an atmosphere of Black oral tradition, literature, art, and culture.

**Complexities of the Harlem Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance was located in Harlem, a predominately Black neighborhood in the borough of Manhattan in New York (Watson, 1995, p. 3). The great
urban migration brought Black Americans north, because of extreme discrimination and fewer job opportunities in the South. Over 100,000 African Americans migrated to New York from 1910–1930, making it the most sought after state in the North during that time. Harlem was one of the neighborhoods in New York that drew the largest number of poor Black Americans. Harlem was an underprivileged community because many African-American people were generally more unemployed and paid less than white citizens due to their race (J. P. Davis, 1966, pp. 110–111). This made Harlem vulnerable to exploitation by organized crime circuits such as the Mafia. Government and police administrations generally left Harlem alone because of this, making Harlem a “free zone.” This meant that there were plenty of speakeasies, dance halls, and basement dives that ignored Prohibition and served as spaces where overt queer sexualities could be displayed (Garber, 1988, p. 54).

Harlem began to serve as a safe space for Black Americans in the early twentieth century. Because of the large population of Black people in Harlem, Black-owned theaters like the Lafayette burst forth onto the scene and brought with it the finest of Black talent and music (Harrison, 1988, p. 21). This formed a sense of Black nationalism in the community and contributed to the overall growth of the Harlem Renaissance. For Black women in particular, the Harlem Renaissance opened up a plethora of opportunities and relief from discrimination. The anonymous nature of city life gave Black women a sense of open opportunity, so they moved north with their families during the Great Migration to escape discrimination from white Southerners. Moreover, many women moved in order to escape sexual and physical abuse from white and Black men. Many queer women freed themselves from family structures by migrating north, so they were able to express themselves in new ways. During the 1920s, some found jobs that afforded them financial independence from men or kin. In addition, they gained the personal liberty to fashion a non-heterosexual life/identity and create networks and communities (Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 13).

Some parts of the community in Harlem were fairly accepting of same-sex relationships during the Harlem Renaissance. Experimenting with one’s sexuality was not uncommon during this era, and the queer community flourished during this time of creative art, writing and expression. Queer is used in this context to broadly describe people who were not heterosexual. Black writers such as Angelina Weld Grimké (1880–1958), and Nella
Larsen (1891–1964) wrote about same-sex female relationships in their works. There were also salons where women would meet up to discuss race and sexuality, like Georgia Douglas Johnson’s S Street Salon in Washington D.C. “Buffet flats” and “rent parties” often catered to a queer audience, and were common meeting places for queer individuals (Faderman, 1991, p. 73; Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, pp. 13, 356). In addition, blues music was largely cultivated by queer women like Gladys Bentley, who proudly dressed in masculine attire and sang songs with queer undertones or explicitly queer lyrics. Queer male writers and singers were also popular during the Renaissance. Blues musician George Hannah’s 1930 song “Freakish Man Blues” (Ragged But Right, 2010) talked about how sexual fluidity and same-sex desire were becoming more accepted as a natural part of life when he sang, “You run around with funny people: you get a streak of it up your back/There was a time when I was alone: my freakish ways to see/But they’re so common now: you get one every day in the week.” However, non-heterosexual identities were still seen as sinful or strange by many people, including Black Americans who perceived queer, Black individuals as going against Black families and religious faith (Simms, 2001, p. 70). Black, queer people threatened the assimilationist ideal of the moral, upstanding African American that deserved respect from white society. This belief was challenged during the Harlem Renaissance when non-heterosexual Black Americans came together to build queer networks and confront mainstream ways of thinking through their very existence. However, there were downsides to this “acceptance.” Same-sex sexuality and Black bodies were seen as edgy and risqué by white audiences, so Black performers were often used by the entertainment industry to draw in crowds and increase their own profits, rather than offering genuine support.

The Harlem Renaissance cultivated a complex attitude regarding race relations. White, typically middle-class people would come to Harlem to indulge in viewing or participating in forbidden sexuality. They were excited to take a walk on the wild side and saw the Harlem scene as a source of entertainment, a chance to mix with the “lower-class” and experience “Black naturalness and exoticism” (Faderman, 1991, p. 68). Although Harlem was a place of refuge for Black queer people, it also became commodified by white, middle-class partygoers looking for a thrill. They regarded Harlem as a lower-class, “primitive” space that could teach them about sexual expression, which eluded many in
white, middle-class society. For some queer, white individuals, Harlem and the Harlem community enabled them to experience something that was forbidden in the white world, and they used Harlem to explore other sexual possibilities that differed from the mainstream heterosexual framework. However, most white partygoers treated Harlem and its Black queer community as exotic entertainment and would leave Harlem to return to their own social mores. Unfortunately, Harlem needed this tourism for economic reasons. This cultural climate showcases how race, sexuality and class intersected within the Harlem Renaissance (Faderman, 1991, pp. 68–69).

**RAINEY AND BENTLEY BEFORE AND DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

Rainey and Bentley created space for themselves and further pushed the boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance. Through their stage productions and song lyrics, they challenged mainstream notions of sexuality and gender identity. Both women came from poor, religious families (Garber, 1988, p. 53; Orr, 2003) and rose to fame during the Harlem Renaissance, where they forged lives for themselves that pushed against the norms of Black womanhood that called for respectability and morality (Simms, 2001, p. 68). It is important to recognize that the Harlem Renaissance was a time when Bentley could more openly display her bulldagger identity due to the progressive nature of the era. Rainey also benefitted from this progressiveness because she was able to gain notoriety and career success through her subversive song “Prove It on Me Blues.”

Ma Rainey, the second of five children, was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26th, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia to minstrel trouperes Thomas and Ella Allen. Minstrel trouperes during this time performed for both Black and Euro-American audiences, although Black trouperes were not paid nearly as much as the Euro-American minstrel entertainers who wore blackface (Toll, 1974, p. 223). Therefore, Rainey’s family lived in poverty even though they were musically talented. Rainey inherited this talent for music and began her career in 1900 at the age of fourteen in a local talent show called, “A Bunch of Blackberries.” She also became the leader of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, where she performed in Black variety shows (Biography.com Editors, n.d.). On February 2nd, 1904 she married William “Pa” Rainey, a singing comedian, and performed with him as Rainey and Rainey, Assassinators of the Blues.
Ma Rainey earned the nickname “Ma” because of her nurturing nature to her many employees in her shows, and she enjoyed helping young musicians like Bessie Smith (Hine et al., 1993, p. 958).

Rainey, already well-established in Black music, increased her fame during the Harlem Renaissance in the early 1920s. She divorced Pa Rainey and signed a recording contract with Chicago-based Paramount Records in 1923. She is most famous for being one of the early Black blues singers, giving her the title of, “the Mother of the Blues.” Although she was not the first Black blues recording artist, she is well-known for incorporating an authentic Deep-South sound to the blues and producing over 100 recordings of her own compositions (Hine et al., 1993, p. 958; Orr, 2003). Her recordings were unique in that she had a rough, moaning style of singing that echoed an oral tradition because her lyrics depicted the lives of rural, southern Blacks (Orr, 2003). She sang about sexuality, heart break, drinking, magic and the workplace, and these connected her with her audience. Her ability to capture the mood and essence of the Black South endeared her to Black audiences (Harrison, 1988, p. 20). Poet Sterling A. Brown (1998) showcases Rainey’s ability to deeply connect with Black audiences in his poem entitled, “Ma Rainey” by claiming, “She jes’ catch hold of us, somekindaway” (p. 736).

Some of her songs that reflect the themes listed above are: “Bo-Weevil Blues,” “See See Rider,” and “Prove it On Me” (Biography.com Editors, n.d.; Hine et al., 1993, p. 598). In particular, “Prove it On Me” referenced queer sexuality and relationships with women. The cover of the record features a drawing of a woman, who looks like a bulldagger, in a suit and tie flirting with women in front of a white police officer. Rainey’s recording company seemed to encourage the queer subtext of the record. Black newspaper the Chicago Defender ran an ad for the record in its September, 1928 article (“Display Ad 22,” 1928). Paramount Records hints at the possible autobiographical nature of the song by proclaiming, “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?” Paramount Records correctly assumed that there were plenty of buyers in the 1920s who would understand the queer implications of the image and be intrigued enough to purchase it (Faderman, 1991, p. 75). This suggests that Rainey’s queer image was encouraged by record labels at the time and perhaps even created...
by them. Looking at Rainey’s personal life suggests that she may have had same-sex relationships and love affairs. She was arrested in 1925 for being caught having an orgy with women from her chorus (Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 356). However, this is only one example so it is uncertain if she could be labeled as queer. The 1928 song “Prove It on Me Blues” (edmundusrex, 2013) was used as a spectacle to draw in audiences but also served as a form of resistance against “proper” female morality and heterosexuality.

Rainey had a successful career as a Blues musician. She lived well, although she was paid less than white entertainers with her level of talent. Like most Black musicians, she was paid a flat fee for recording sessions, and she never received royalties. However, according to Mayo Williams, an African-American producer of recorded blues music during the 1920s, she was a shrewd business woman who refused to be swindled out of her money (Biography.com Editors, n.d.). She moved up in class status and dressed in diamonds, bought a home in Georgia, and a $13,000 touring bus with a power generator to light her tent shows. Although she was discriminated against by white recording companies by not being paid the same as white performers, Rainey made a name for herself and took advantage of her fame. She composed over a third of the songs she recorded and depicting the lives of queer, Black, and Southern people through her music (Hine et al., 1993, pp. 959–960).

Gladys Bentley’s upbringing was similar to Rainey’s, although she encountered more prejudice because of her gender non-conformity. She was the oldest of four children, born on August 12th, 1907 to George L. Bentley of Philadelphia, and his Trinidadian wife, Mary C. Mote. Bentley’s family was working-poor in a time when institutionalized racism caused unemployment, overcrowding, and low living standards for Black families. Her family found emotional and spiritual support in the Christian church (Garber, 1988, p. 53). Throughout her youth, Bentley endured the conditions brought on by her race and class, but she also faced additional hardships because of her gender non-conformity and interest in other women.

From a young age, Bentley was aware she transgressed social norms. In her 1952 interview, “I Am A Woman Again” in Ebony magazine, Bentley claims, “It seems I was born different. At least, I always thought that” (p. 96). In her early years, Bentley’s gender non-conformity in particular led to her feeling ostracized from both family and peers (Garber, 1988, p. 55). She was not feminine and had no interest in wearing girls’ clothes. She was
large, stocky, and wore her brother’s suits instead of dresses or blouses. Her masculine appearance resulted in her being followed and teased mercilessly by her classmates.

In addition, she was attracted to some of her female teachers. She said, “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, p. 96). Bentley felt pressure from both her parents and peers to conform to gender norms. Her behavior was seen as deviant and “unladylike,” which was discouraged both in mainstream society and Black communities (Biography.com Editors, n.d.; Simms, 2001, p. 68). Bentley’s emerging sexuality, along with her gender non-conformity, created a tense situation at home. Her parents started sending her to doctors, trying to fix what psychiatrists would term “extreme social maladjustment.” In her interview, Bentley (1952) states that “being different,” (p. 96) and the cruel ways she was treated due to her difference, caused her to run away from home at the age of 16 to build a life in Harlem, away from her family and community.

Bentley found her new home in the progressive and accepting Renaissance culture that fostered difference and sexual freedom, and she soon began a career in music working at the Mad House, a Harlem nightclub on 133rd Street under the stage name Bobbie Minton (West & Aberjani, 2003, p. 31). Bentley’s signature white and black tuxedo and masculine stage persona immediately generated popularity and interest in her as a performing artist (Anders, n.d.). Performance artist Joana Clayton (1996), who does plays about Bentley’s life, proclaims “Wearing bowties, Eton jackets, and short straight hair, Gladys created a sensation wherever she went” (p. 51). Bentley emerged from the Harlem Renaissance as a blues powerhouse because of her masculine gender presentation and sexually charged, suggestive lyrics. According to New York Age correspondent Bill Chase, Bentley was skilled at taking a popular song and putting a naughty spin on it (Garber, 1988). Bentley explicitly called out men in her songs and was not afraid to discuss sex or intimate relationships, which was even more taboo at the time. Moreover, she proudly displayed her queerness and cross-race bonds by openly “marrying” her white female lover in one of the many same-sex ceremonies that were performed during the era (Garber, 1988, pp. 55–58; Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 13; Hine et al., 1993, p. 110).
Bentley rose in popularity by singing in buffet flats and rent parties, and then headlining at popular speakeasies, theatres, and nightclubs like the Clam House and Connie’s Inn that did business in what was known as “Jungle Alley.” She earned a cult following and her beginning salary of $35 a week quickly increased to $125 a week, a hefty amount for a Black female musician. She signed with Okeh Recording Company in August 1928, and released eight singles between 1928 and 1929. Some were her biggest hits including “Sweet Georgia Brown,” “Alice Blue Gown,” and “How Much Can I Stand?” At the height of her career, Bentley performed at the most coveted venues, The Apollo and the Cotton Club. She also had her own weekly radio program and her own establishment called “Barbara’s Exclusive Club” (West & Aberjhani, 2003, p. 31). Like Rainey, Bentley’s music career catapulted her from working-poor to upper-class and she enjoyed many accouterments of wealth during her heyday (Anders, n.d.; Garber, 1988, p. 58). Eric von Wilkinson’s (1933) article “Gallivanting About Brooklyn,” published in the Black newspaper The New York Age, documents her rise to higher status in journalist. He states, “Gladys Bentley, eminent Harlem song-bird and hip-waver, has deserted the sepia neighborhood and her Nicholas avenue apartment, for the swankier and lighter part of life…La Bentley is now residing in her exclusive 77th street and park avenoo home…Among the socially prominent…” (von Wilkinson, 1933, p. 12) Bentley’s rise to fame was aided by the commodification of her bulldagger identity by businesses as well as the general public. Overall, Bentley was a successful entertainer and reached a wide array of people with her music and stage productions. Her bold on and off-stage persona as a bulldagger during the Harlem Renaissance shed light on Black, female masculinity. She disrupted notions of Black womanhood and portrayed the ambiguity of gender and gender expression.

Rainey and Bentley’s careers thrived in the atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance. Through their stage productions, music, and personal lives, both women engaged in subversive acts that challenged gender and sexuality norms of the day. However, while it may have been liberating for them personally, they were also commodified. Queer sexualities and gender non-conformity were encouraged by their record companies to produce a shock effect to drive sales. Both women used this to build successful careers for themselves and advance to a middle or upper class status. The Harlem Renaissance facilitated their decisions
to push the boundaries by providing a space for queer sexualities and gender identities to flourish. While Rainey had a more normative self-image and did not garner much attention for her sexuality, Bentley wore masculine clothing and openly displayed her queerness both on and off-stage. Many queer Black musicians at the time held on to heterosexual public personas but Bentley in particular defied normativity (Garber, 1989, p. 320).

Through their lyrics and songs, they showcased their intersecting identities and became voices for Black, queer, working-class people. As mentioned previously, blues music and stage productions became an important outlet for Rainey, Bentley, as well as various other Black musicians because it addressed Black lived experiences. Blues resonated with Black audiences because Black singers used their voices and powerful lyrics to celebrate Black identity and depict Black culture. Sexuality and gender identity were also prominent aspects of blues music, and were common themes in Bentley and Rainey’s songs. The next chapter explores what these songs meant for both women, how the general public reacted to these songs, and how their gender identities and sexualities were conveyed through their music.
CHAPTER 3

BLUES MUSIC AND ITS LYRICAL MEANINGS

Formal blues music began to gain popularity circa 1890-early twentieth century. It was encouraged by the rise of the Harlem Renaissance. Blues was mainly attributed to Black singers who developed it in response to the racial oppression they faced in the United States during that time frame. There were numerous blues artists during the Harlem Renaissance because there was an explosion of Black culture during that time. Ma Rainey and Gladys Bentley were prime among them and their songs conveyed important meanings for Black people as well as queer individuals; blues music was and is a form of oral tradition for Black people. Blues music also contributed to wide-scale attitudes toward Blacks, queers, and gender non-conforming people (Weissman, 2005, pp. xvi, 199).

ORIGIN OF BLUES MUSIC

Upon arrival in the seventeenth century, blues music originated in the Black community through African “work songs.” These songs were transformed as African slaves began to pick up phrases, stray words, and slang from the West. The sounds attributed to these work songs, such as shouts, hollers, and yells developed into the more formal music known as blues or religious music. Blues incorporated an antiphonal approach, the alternating of musical phrases, that is commonly found in West Africa and differed from work songs in that it was usually sung for pleasure (J. P. Davis, 1966, p. 759). It split into folk blues and formal blues. Folk blues came in various types depending on geographic location, and had a more traditional sound. It was passed down through families and communities. It was usually accompanied by instruments such as banjos or guitars and was primarily located in the rural South. As Black singers migrated to the North, formal blues started to develop in urban cities. Formal blues was more refined and contained less variety than folk blues. However, both blues types usually dealt with subject matter on love and
romantic difficulties, or alluded to travel, hard economic times, racial oppression, and natural disasters. Commonly, blues songs included the use of repeated lines with spoken interjections appearing at the beginning or end of the lines. This technique emphasizes the mood and emotion of the songs (Weissman, 2005, pp. xviii, 272).

Formal blues made its appearance in the period before World War I through traveling minstrel, medicine, and vaudeville shows. Minstrel and vaudeville shows were performed for Black audiences to represent and reflect difficult areas of their lives and “ease their labors.” Medicine shows helped draw attention to powerful medicines that were sold to customers during stage productions. Soon these stage productions started to take on a degree of professionalism that elevated them to a form of entertainment (J. P. Davis, 1966, pp. xvii, 760). Historian Weissman (2005) credits artist Papa Charlie Jackson (1887–1930) as being the first popular folk blues artist who bridged the gap between the pre-blues styles of Black music and the blues. He was very successful and recorded with Rainey in the 1920s. She was one of the originals because her parents performed in minstrel shows and she mentioned that she first heard something resembling blues in 1903 when she was 16 or 17 (Weissman, 2005, pp. xvi–xviii).

Bentley was born later than Rainey, in 1907, so she entered the blues scene when it was already well-established. However, Bentley still made an impact on the blues during this era. She was a stellar entertainer who fascinated audiences with her masculine looks, piano playing, and naughty renditions of popular melodies (Garber, 1988, p. 55). Her voice resembled a trumpet at some points, incorporating a unique sound in her songs. She was 300 pounds and exerted a Black masculine energy that “drew celebrities like flies” (Faderman, 1991, p. 72).

**THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND BLUES MUSIC**

After the end of slavery, the ability to travel as well as the freedom to choose a romantic partner greatly altered Black Americans’ lives and contributed to the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance and blues music (Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 120). Black individuals had more of a choice in where to live at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some stayed in the South to farm and do sharecropping. The West was also further explored and many Blacks migrated there to farm. However, one of the most influential job
opportunities for Blacks was in the Northern factories during World War I. Recruiters were sent to the South in order to bring Blacks up North to work for cheap wages. This brought the fledgling blues music industry to the North, making it available to larger audiences. The great migration of over one million Black southerners to the North between 1910 and 1930 helped solidify the popularity of the blues. Black cities and neighborhoods like Harlem grew larger and, with the start of the Harlem Renaissance, Black entertainment started reaching mainstream, white audiences (J. P. Davis, 1966, pp. 162–163, 761).

It is important to note that social class was significant in regard to the popularity of blues music. The Renaissance was largely cultivated by elite, Black thinkers. Some of these thinkers were known as “the best people,” who subscribed to ideas of a Black bourgeoisie. They were invested in family heritage, college degrees, social connections, the latest fashions, and expensive cars (Caughie, 2013, p. 522). They were interested in increasing Black social status and blues music often went against this because of its connections with folk culture or overt sexuality. The middle-class Black community wanted to assimilate into mainstream society and gain recognition from their material success. Blues did not represent the kind of “classiness” that some Black individuals were looking for. However, some middle-class and upper-class white audiences were very interested in blues music and wanted to commodify it.

Progressive white thinkers, disillusioned by the intolerances of Victorian morality, were encouraged by the “authenticity” of Black artists and blues singers (Barnet, 2004, pp. 9–10). Author and photographer Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964) is an example of a white admirer who promoted the blues during this time frame. Vechten held extravagant parties that brought together blues artists, white critics and intellectuals. It became fashionable for these “progressive” and “avant-garde” white individuals to listen to Black blues music, and their audience presence grew (Weissman, 2005, p. 201). In addition, clubs highlighted blues singers, and the radio as well as “race records” became extremely popular. Race records were special labels produced by major recording companies that were for geared toward a Black audience. Record companies saw that there was a market for Black consumers, and their race records aimed to take hold of the Black market as well as appeal to white consumers (J. P. Davis, 1966, p. 761). They were very successful during this time frame. Recording industries
sold more than 100 million race records a year in the mid-1920s (Biography.com Editors, n.d.) The blues especially resonated with Black, working-class migrants during the early twentieth century. It depicted loneliness, homesickness, poverty, love, and good luck, all of which reflected the issues for the Black communities that had recently relocated. The blues contained countless subtleties and provided singers with a way to critique mainstream (i.e. white, heterosexual) society while connecting with their Black audiences (Garber, 1989, p. 320).

Blues flourished during the Harlem Renaissance for numerous reasons: one was the emphasis on Black pride and celebration to be free from the South. Racist hostility and economic oppression inspired the Black community to create a new Black cultural identity based in group expression and self-determination that was unavailable to them before. In 1926 critic and teacher Alain Locke declared that the movement transformed “social disillusionment to race pride” (Foner & Garraty, 1991). However, the Harlem Renaissance mainly focused on the literary, artistic, and intellectual elements of Black life. Blues was widely listened to, but did not receive as much recognition from certain Black intellectuals (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 123). In my second chapter, I discussed the divide between two different authors, W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, regarding race relations in the early-twentieth century. Both activists were interested in improving Black lives and, while they had opposing strategies to achieve this, they fueled the start of the Harlem Renaissance by creating discourses around Black improvement. The era seemed to combine aspects from both Du Bois’s liberationist and Washington’s accommodationist arguments. Going along with Du Bois’s politics of justice-owed, the Black community responded to racism by expressing pride in themselves and creating art and literature that depicted a realistic portrayal of Black life. While not explicitly political in nature, the movement did embrace Black determination and defiance, which contradicted mainstream prejudice against Black people. Washington’s viewpoint in particular, the idea that Black people should focus on self-improvement and material success, was present in the Harlem Renaissance as well. As mentioned previously, a major reason that some people of the Renaissance disapproved blues music resulted from the assumption that it was “primitive” and too representative of poor or working-class Black culture. Many artists and intellectuals believed that this poor
Black culture needed to be transcended if “great art” was to be produced by people of African descent. Even famous blues singer Bessie Smith’s sophisticated and urban blues sound was proclaimed “too raw” by Black recording companies, like Black Swan. However, a few Renaissance intellectuals like Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) and Langston Hughes (1902–1967) affirmed the blues as an integral part of Black folk culture (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 123). Both Hurston and Hughes purposefully addressed and represented the Black community in their works. Hurston used what was called “Harlemese” or Black slang during the time as an oral art form. Hughes talked openly about the creation of Black literary identity, and he opposed “the false integration into white society” (Watson, 1995, pp. 4, 70). These two writers were proud of their culture and, despite the criticism of Black traditions, they actively advocated for Black folk culture in their works.

Another reason blues music prospered during the Harlem Renaissance was because of the exploration of sexuality that occurred during that era. The influx of creativity, art, literature, and thought promoted queer life because many of the Harlem Renaissance’s key literary figures and performers were queer: such as Alain Locke, Langston Hughes (1902–1967), Alberta Hunter (1895–1984), and Ethel Waters (1896–1977). According to Richard Bruce Nugent (1906–1987), a Black writer and painter during the Renaissance, “You didn’t get on the rooftop and shout, ‘I fucked my wife last night.’ So why would you get on the roof and say ‘I loved prick.’ You didn’t. You just did what you wanted to do. Nobody was in the closet. There wasn’t a closet” (Watson, 1995, p. 134). This quote highlights the general acceptance of queerness in Harlem at this time. Moreover, it shows that modern concepts like “the closet” and the LGBT acronym did not exist in the era, which is why I do not apply these terms in my thesis. However, I do use bulldagger to describe Bentley in particular and women like her because this term was used and embraced by queer people during this time frame. In all, the queer community was at the forefront of the movement, and queer night clubs like the Clam House drew huge crowds and attracted mainly white patrons who wanted to explore their sexuality (Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 357). The blues and its suggestive lyrics fit in perfectly with this era of sexual expression and exploration. Harlem signified personal freedom for Black women in particular, a way to explore an alternative to heterosexuality and gain opportunities otherwise unavailable to them. Unfortunately, in spite
of this transformative potential, blues was still commodified by a white audience.

“Adventurous” white women comingled with Black women during this time, both rejected the confines of womanhood that had been placed on them and aimed to live and speak in the emancipated, sexually adventurous voice of the “new woman” (Barnet, 2004, pp. 6–9).

Rainey and Bentley demonstrated the complex nature of the era in their music. They portrayed transgressive attitudes toward womanhood in their music but also showed the ways in which the recording companies profited from Black people and the blues.

**Ma Rainey’s Blues Songs**

Rainey is considered one of the most significant classic blues artists and is known to come closest to embracing the folk roots of the music. She often recorded with a jug band accompaniment that included a variety of homemade instruments like kazoos, combs, and jugs that produced unique sounds (Weissman, 2005, pp. xvii–xviii). Her vocals were rougher and less articulated than other blues singers of the time, like Ethel Waters and Mamie Smith. But this added to her down-home charm and appealed her to rural, working-class Black audiences, especially in the beginning of her career. As she grew in popularity, her white audience increased. However, she still is known for her connection with Black, rural folk. According to author Virginia L. Grattan (1993), there was “a quality in [her] voice that touched the heart.” As mentioned, Rainey was known as the “Mother of the Blues.” Some scholars credit her as being the first person to give the blues public recognition and validity by performing it in her shows (Grattan, 1993, pp. 116–117).

Rainey’s songs usually conveyed strong emotions and centered on romance or unfaithful lovers. Three clear examples of this are “Moonshine Blues” (Rainey, 1923), “See See Rider Blues” (Rainey, 1924), and “Blame It on the Blues” (Rainey, 1929). The protagonists in her songs were not weak or dependent on men. Instead, she wrote lyrics about women who “celebrated their right to conduct themselves as expansively and even as undesirably as men” (A. Y. Davis, 1998, pp. 20–21). Her passionate lyrics about sex and romantic relationships show how blues music often addressed issues related to love, sexuality, and heartbreak. These topics were common themes in blues music and they expressed a collective experience of freedom for Black Americans to engage in romantic relationships following slavery. Moreover, blueswomen rejected the prevailing ideology of
domestic bliss within marriage and motherhood. They were often critical of men and marriage in their songs, and instead voiced independence, sexual promiscuity, and unorthodox sexuality. The atmosphere of the era encouraged these themes, and Rainey utilized this to improve her career.

“Moonshine Blues” (Rainey, 1923) depicts the story of a woman who is drunk because her lover left town. She sang, “And I don’t know if the river runnin’ up or down/But there’s one thing certain, Mama’s gonna leave town” (Grattan, 1993, p. 117). Rainey’s protagonist shows her agency by picking herself up after her lover leaves her and decides to leave town rather than wallow in self-pity. In another song, “See See Rider Blues” (Rainey, 1924), Rainey proclaims, “I’m gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I am tall, Lord, Lord, Lord/Gonna kill my man and catch the Cannonball/If he don’t have me, he won’t have no gal at all” (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 241). These lyrics tell the story of heartbreak and how the protagonist decides to kill her former male lover so that he will not date any other women. Rather than portraying a spurned lover who weeps for her absent man, Rainey’s lyrics depict a woman who actively threatens the man who left her. Another one of her songs, “Blame It on the Blues” (Rainey, 1929) rejects the sexual exclusivity and monogamous nature of marriage. Rainey sings, “Can’t blame my mother, can’t blame my dad/Can’t blame my brother for the trouble I’ve had/Can’t blame my lover that held my hand/Can’t blame my husband, can’t blame my man.” Rainey references a husband, lover, and man but does not privilege marriage over non- or extramarital sexual partnerships in her lyrics (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 15). Ma Rainey’s 1927 song, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” was widely popular and displayed Rainey’s comedic flair (Grattan, 1993, p. 117). In the song, Rainey sings, “Want to see the dance you call the black bottom/I wanna learn that dance/Want to see the dance you call your big black bottom/They put you in a trance.” Rainey follows this verse with, “All the boys in the neighborhood/They say your black bottom is really good/Come on and show me your black bottom/I want to learn that dance” (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 231). This song is an example of one of Rainey’s more humorous songs, and the double entendre of “black bottom” showcases Rainey’s use of sexuality in her music.

Generally, Rainey mentioned a male partner in her song lyrics, but her song “Prove It on Me Blues” (eddmundusrex, 2013) was important because it referenced relationships with
other women. Throughout the song, Rainey teases listeners by repeating the lines, “Went out last night with a crowd of my friends/They must’ve been women, ‘cause I don’t like no men” and “‘Cause they say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me/Sure got to prove it on me” (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 238). Rainey strongly hints that she has had same-sex relationships, but dares people to “prove it on [her].” Her song demonstrates a bold viewpoint of queer sexuality, where she proudly flaunts it to a knowing audience (Faderman, 1991, p. 77). As mentioned previously, the album cover showcases the type of spectacle record labels were going for.

Rainey addressed a variety of perspectives in her music, and most of her songs portrayed a female protagonist who was independent and sexual. Rainey was successful because she bolstered her career with these empowering songs and stage productions. Although her career decisions were influenced by her record company, Rainey’s overt display of queerness in “Prove It on Me Blues” serves as a queer women’s anthem even today. While her own gender identity and sexuality were displayed as more normative, her career success, the rejection of traditional gender norms, and the agency of the protagonists in her songs can be seen as acts of resistance against racism and sexism.

**Gladys Bentley’s Blues Songs**

Gladys Bentley entered the blues scene in the later stages of the Harlem Renaissance, around the mid-1920s. She was only 16 years old when she moved to Harlem from Philadelphia and she began her career by singing in buffet flats and rent parties (Garber, 1988, p. 55). However, soon she was able to make a name for herself because of her masculine attire, talent on the piano, and deep, growling style of singing (West & Aberjhani, 2003, p. 31). Bentley was particularly successful at turning popular melodies into songs with sexual double entendres. One example of this is Bentley’s rendition of two popular Broadway tunes, “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “My Alice Blue Gown”; Bentley never recorded the songs but would often perform them in bars and other venues (as cited in Garber, 1988). She combined these songs and proceeded to sing about the pleasure of anal intercourse. She sang, “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” (Garber, 1988, p. 55). This portion from the song demonstrates how the blues conveyed graphic sexual meanings. A woman being so vocal about sex and the enjoyment
she received from it went against ideals of traditional feminine morality. Bentley’s blues music created a spectacle that people were drawn to because of its rejection of societal norms and Bentley herself reveled in it. Unfortunately, Bentley’s notorious parodies were not recorded, possibly due to obscenity or copyright laws, and later recordings did not contain the same kind of sexual, queer material. However, Bentley’s blues songs that she did record demonstrated agency and resistance to gender norms.

Bentley did not start recording until 1928 when she signed with the Okeh Recording Company and released eight titles. It is unclear whether Bentley wrote and composed these songs or not, but these singles often conveyed a strong sense of sexual and emotional independence (Garber, 1988, p. 58). In her 1928 song, “Moanful Wailin’ Blues” (Gladys Bentley – Topic, 2014) Bentley sings, “Had a good daddy,/He wouldn’t treat me right./Checked him out on Thursday,/Took him back on Friday night!” Like Rainey’s music, Bentley’s songs usually featured an independent protagonist that fought back against a male lover. Romantic relationships were common topics in blues music, but both Rainey and Bentley did not portray sappy, innocent love stories. Like Rainey, one of Bentley’s most popular 1928 recordings, “How Much Can I Stand?” (Randomandrare, 2014) brings up abuse and thoughts of murder. The song builds with each verse, culminating in Bentley’s decision to never get into that type of relationship again. In one of Bentley’s more powerful verses, she sings, “Said I was an angel, he was born to treat/me right,/Who the devil heard of an angel that gets beat up/every night?/How much of that stuff can I stand?” With each phrase, Bentley repeats the line, “How much of that stuff can I stand?” This shows the protagonist’s refusal to put up with her lover’s abuse, and displays the agency and independence the woman asserts. She sends the message that she does not need or desire a man that mistreats her. She even goes so far as to consider murdering him. Bentley proclaims, “Went down to the drugstore, asked the clerk for/a dose,/But when I received the poison, I eyed it very/close,/How much of this stuff can I stand?” (Garber, 1988, p. 58) With this song, Bentley describes a woman who is in control of her life. She comes to the decision to leave the man and make sure the next man is not like him. Bentley’s songs are very similar to Rainey’s and are solid examples of the themes found in blues music. Blueswomen like Rainey and Bentley questioned traditional norms of womanhood and romantic, heterosexual
bliss. Furthermore, the female protagonists in their blues songs were active subjects rather than sexual objects.

**THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION**

Mainstream society had mixed reactions about blues music during its popularity. Black audiences, specifically working-class Black individuals, generally had favorable views towards blues music because it was relatable and based in Black culture. Black middle-class audiences, however, held more conflicted views on blues. The Black Press was “one of the most prominent institutions of class making in the early twentieth century” for the Black community (Caughie, 2013, p. 521). Therefore, news articles aimed at the Black community were often focused on issues of intellect, respectability, and materialism. Many Black newspapers and magazines catered to a Black middle class, and they found fault with blues performances. For example, Vere E. Johns’s (1934a) article “In the Name of Art” from *The New York Age* included scathing, insulting remarks about Bentley and her music. Johns exclaimed, “Persons who can find humorous entertainment in such things, I must regretfully place in the category of morons and moral imbeciles”. Johns’s article insinuates that Bentley is an affront to morality and all things correct in the world. This may have been a reaction to both Bentley’s masculine appearance and her sexual lyrics/stage productions. Some critics, however, reveled in Bentley and Rainey’s music and stage productions. Ted Yates (1944) wrote an article titled, “Swinging the News” in the *Chicago Defender* said that Gladys Bentley was “saucy-singin’ (but good!)” Roy Rob (1948) saw Bentley’s songs as important contributions to the music world. He claimed, “No one else on the scene could hold a candle to her style.” One journalist in *The New York Age* wrote about Ma Rainey in a 1924 article entitled, “Paramount’s Great *Mystery Record*.” The journalist wrote, “Paramount has a wonderful, new Blues by the famous ‘Ma’ Rainey, Mother of the Blues. A special super-Blues hit – sung by Madame Rainey upon request of thousands of her admirers! This record is so good – so unusual – that we couldn’t think of a name good enough for it” (Paramount’s great *Mystery Record*, 1924). Another article, titled “Ma Rainey’s Review” (Hayes, 1926) from the Chicago Defender describes Rainey as “one of the hottest shows that ever played here.” The journalist, Bob Hayes, claims, “ ‘Blues’ singers come and go, but the way Ma draws them in she should be called the ‘mother of packin’ ‘em in’” along with her title of
being the mother of the ‘blues.’” Jazz critic Ralph Gleason (1917–1975) spoke of Rainey as, “a singer of amazing power and capable of evoking deep, almost mystical emotion” (Grattan, 1993, p. 116). This highlights the split reaction people had to Rainey, Bentley, and Harlem in general. Rainey’s normative, feminine appearance helped her evade some of the criticism that was directed at Bentley.

Some Black and white audiences saw Harlem as a provocative, risqué place of intrigue while others were quick to denounce it as a place of sin and vice. Conceptions of race, class, gender, and sexuality are present in these depictions of Harlem. White, middle-class people saw Harlem as an adventure away from the safety of their privileged lives and a way to engage in sexual exploration. On the other hand, the sexual freedom of the Harlem Renaissance upset people like Jamaican journalist Vere E. Johns, who saw Harlem as a festering pool of immorality, which was how queer sexualities and gender non-conformity were generally viewed at the time.

Religion played a role in the disapproval of blues music. The sexuality involved in most blues music was seen as sinful by Christian audiences. While some of these Christians were white, Christianity was instilled in Black culture as well. Therefore, blues singers like Rainey and Bentley were seen as having pacts with the devil and their songs about sex and love directly opposed tenets of Christianity. Danny Barker, a historical researcher, claimed that, “some of them feared the stage. That’s the devil’s work. They stay home, married, and had a family and still died with that attitude. That’s the devil’s work, the stage. Make believe” (A. Y. Davis, 1998, pp. 123–124). Rainey and Bentley defied gender roles and explored alternate ideas of womanhood in their songs, which conflicted with conservative, Christian beliefs. Moreover, the church as an institution greatly supported homophobia. Interestingly, both Rainey and Bentley had families that were heavily involved in the church and after their blues careers, both women worked for the church and left blues music behind (A. Y. Davis, 1998, pp. 123–124; Garber, 1988, p. 60). It is crucial to mention religion when discussing Rainey and Bentley because both women were avid church-goers and had major positions in the church following the end of their blues careers. Apparently, Rainey refused to sing the blues once she was a part of the church, and fervently supported the church and its institutions (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 125). Bentley also spent her last years in the church, and
was about to become an ordained minister before her untimely death (Garber, 1988, p. 60). The church had a deep impact on Rainey and Bentley, as well as the Black community and blues music.

The blues provided Rainey and Bentley with a way to earn money during a time when Black women did not have many lucrative options. Their songs resonated with changing gender norms during the time period, which gave them attention and fame. Black and white communities found support and excitement in their music. Singing the blues during this time period facilitated fluid notions of gender and sexuality by rejecting societal expectations of normalcy. The blues held a complex meaning for Bentley and Rainey. On one hand, Rainey and Bentley defined themselves through blues music. Author Patricia Hill Collins (2000) writes about the power blues music gave Black women in her article, “The Power of Self-Definition.” She says that blues music provided Black women with a voice, and that it had the ability to influence people’s feelings. Collins says that Black blues singers were not afraid to comment on their lived experiences and show that they were mature, sexual women (p. 101). Blues music acted as an oral tradition that enabled black women like Rainey and Bentley to share their pain and build community. On the other hand, white audiences and record labels used Black culture and the blues as commodities. Although Bentley and Rainey showcased their sexuality, endurance, and lived experiences as Black women, it is difficult to know for certain if their music was truly liberating for them because of this commodification. However, Bentley and Rainey’s music is influential because it portrayed women, particularly Black women, as independent, sexual, and mature in a time when women were starting to question the traditional roles U.S. society had forced on them.

Blues music was powerful in its lyrics, but also through the stage productions that blues singers performed. Many blues patrons were drawn in by the flashy and provocative outfits and presence of singers like Rainey and Bentley. In the final chapter, I look at Rainey and Bentley’s stage productions and their impact on their careers. I examine how they fashioned their sexual and gender identities and what that signified for their careers. Most importantly, I analyze the bulldagger identity and its importance to Bentley. I also take note of the ways race and class informed the bulldagger identity. After discussing this, I conclude my thesis by describing the historical impact of both women.
CHAPTER 4

THE BULLDAGGER IDENTITY AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The bulldagger identity appeared in the 1920s and was attributed to Black, masculine women who engaged in same-sex relationships during the era. It signified a Black female masculinity that subverted traditional ideals of womanhood. For Rainey, this identity did not apply to her but she utilized it in order to build up her career. Bentley also capitalized from this identity, but she did perform the bulldagger identity in her personal life as well. This identity was performed through both blues songs and stage productions. It is crucial to explore the bulldagger identity because of the historical significance it brings to current understandings of sexuality and gender identity. As a term specifically used by/for Black women, it had racial as well as mainstream significance.

FEMALE MASULINITY IN THE 1920S

As mentioned in chapter two, changing gender norms in the 1920s allowed women to explore different gender expressions beyond those considered normative and feminine. Masculine or cross-dressed women were appearing in magazines and film at a greater rate than before. One article from a 1927 Picture-Play Magazine had an ad titled, “Girls Will Be Boys” (Horak, 2016) that highlighted, “The increasing vogue of the tom-boy on the screen” and featured various actresses in masculine clothing. Critics from The New York American and the Los Angeles Times credited the popularity of cross-dressing to the era’s “jazzy attitudes and women’s new physical and social freedoms” (Horak, 2016, p. 126). The film industry began releasing films that depicted masculine women as queer or inverted women. The idea of the invert, or a person who adopted the behavior typical of the opposite sex (“Invert,” n.d.), started to enter into American popular culture and sexual subcultures
flourished. The film *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* featured a white masculine woman in a tailcoat, top hat, and monocle with a white feminine partner (Horak, 2016). In one scene, they are framed in parallel to the male-female couple, and the women’s relationship is portrayed as queer. This relates to the ideology of inversion proposed by sexologists at the time, who claimed that masculinized, sexually assertive women would have romantic relationships with feminine, sexually passive female partners (Horak, 2016, pp. 128–129). Female masculinity was explored as something that was tied to inversion and same-sex desire during the era. The bulldagger identity is one example of a specifically Black queer masculinity during the era.

**Definition and Origin of Bulldagger**

There is not an absolute definition or origin of the word *bulldagger*, but there are multiple ways in which it could have originated. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the word *bulldagger* is an American English word that is closely related to the word “dyke.” The dictionary’s definition of dyke (“dyke,” n.d.) claims that the long forms of dyke are *bulldiker* or *bulldyking*, which were both used primarily by American Blacks in the 1920s. A second definition affirms that *bulldagger* was a racialized term (Haggerty & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 357). There are no African antecedents that have been found for the term, but it is thought that it possibly came from Southerners and is a combination of bull and dick. *Bulldagger* may be a variant of *bulldiker*. Others argue that *bulldagger* could come from historical conceptions of bull meaning false and dagger meaning penis. This would make sense considering masculine queer women were seen as “false men” during this time (Krantz, 1995, p. 219). Another definition claims that *bulldagger* is derived from the word “bull-dogging,” which referred to the act of a rodeo cowboy wrestling a steer to the ground. It was a derogatory slang word that applied to “aggressively masculine” women who were muscular and burly and usually had relationships with female partners (“bulldagger,” n.d.). Another definition explains that *bulldagger* was generally used within Black, Southern communities and that these bulldaggers were vital in the creation of working-class queer communities (Herbst, 2001, p. 37). However, *bulldagger* had been understood as an offensive term, especially when used by heterosexuals. One Harlem Renaissance writer used *bulldagger* as a pejorative expression, saying that it was used to degrade women who did not
fit into conventional standards of femininity. Claude McKay (1889–1948; 1928) wrote in *Home to Harlem*, “[Queer women are] what we calls bulldyker in Harlem. ... I don't understan' ... a bulldyking woman” (p. 128) Bulldaggers were often mocked and criticized for their masculine appearance, even by other queer Renaissance individuals such as McKay. Women who self-identified as bulldaggers were bold because they outwardly rejected societal norms by taking on the label. Performing a bulldagger identity allowed Rainey, and particularly Bentley, to challenge conceptions of femininity and sexuality. This relates to a similar definition, which suggests that the word alludes to the swordlike implement said to have been used by priestesses in sacrificing bulls in religious ceremonies. This denotes an empowering aspect to the word *bulldagger* and implies “strength and a willingness to fight to defend one’s way of life and community” (Herbst, 2001, p. 38). Recently, there have been efforts to reclaim the word bulldagger for present-day usage (Belge, 2015). For example, white lesbian folk-singer Phranc sang a song called, “Bulldagger Swagger,” which contained lyrics such as “No now, I’m not tryin’ to be a man/I’m just bein’ who I am/And that’s a very very very butch lesbian/Do the bulldagger bulldagger swagger” (GrrlBandGeek, 2009). Phranc does not allude to the racial connotation of *bulldagger* in her song, even though it was only used by Black queer women. It is not a current part of mainstream LGBTQ jargon, although for some queer people during the early twenty-first century it played a crucial role (Herbst, 2001, p. 38).

**ATTITUDES TOWARD BULLDAGGERS**

White singer Irving Kaufman’s song from 1926, “Masculine Women! Feminine Men!” (Aaron1912, 2010) shows how gender was viewed during the 1920s. Kaufman sings, “Masculine women, feminine men/Which is the rooster?/Which is the hen?/It’s hard to tell ‘em apart today” (Aaron1912, 2010). The bulldagger identity, specifically, served as a powerful, complex label that received mixed reactions from people within and outside of the Renaissance. Some Black individuals from the era appreciated the bulldagger identity. For example, poet Langston Hughes, wrote, “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” (Garber, 1988, p. 56). A Renaissance blues singer, Lucille Bogan (1897–1948), released a song called “B. D. Woman’s Blues” in 1935 that also addressed the
bulldagger identity (centurion0192, 2011). She sang, “Comin’ a time, B.D. women they ain’t going to need no men/Cause the way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin.” The lyrics also said, “B. D. women, you sure can’t understand/They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man.” There is no evidence that Bogan had relationships with women, but her song seems to come from the perspective of one who appreciates bulldaggers and sees them as misunderstood. Her lyrics warned that bulldaggers’ masculinity was a lure for femme women to leave their male lovers. Others saw bulldaggers as odd women who wanted to be men, and often viewed them as fascinating or immoral spectacles.

As shown, the Black press had a split reaction to bulldaggers. In Vere E. Johns’s (1934a) article, “In the Name of Art” from The New York Age, he disapproved of Bentley’s stage productions and viewed people who enjoyed them as “moral imbeciles.” Johns (1934b) also wrote an article, “Lafayette Theatre” in The New York Age that directly targeted Bentley’s appearance. He wrote, “A large and ungainly woman (if I must say so), who cuts her hair and dresses in tuxedos and calls herself Gladys Bentley...is supposed to be the headline attraction at the Lafayette this week.” Throughout the article, Johns discussed gender and how it should be performed. He said “if these boys [in Bentley’s show] were put into dresses they would be indistinguishable from the [chorus girls]” and “the high spot of the show is cute little Consuelo Harris who sings and dances very cleverly especially in her number with a male partner.” Johns quite clearly supported normative gender performances and alluded to “proper” sexuality when he applauded Consuelo dancing with her male partner. In regard to Bentley, he stated, “I, personally, could not enjoy their part of the show as I had a burning desire to rush out and get an ambulance backed up against the stage door to take them all to Bellevue for the alienists to work on.” At the end of his article, he wrote, “P.S. Won’t someone please chase Gladys Bentley off the stage when Consuelo and partner are doing their dance?” Johns’s reaction to Bentley was a common reaction toward female masculinity during that time period because of fears over the independent, masculinized woman in the U.S. and its connection to same-sex desire (Behling, 2001, p. 6). Other Black journalists, however, such as Roy Rob (1948), a journalist for the Chicago Defender, enjoyed Bentley’s stage presence and thought she had a unique style.
Although Black magazines were created later in the 1940s and 1950s and not during the Renaissance, their attitudes toward the Black community strongly resonated with Booker T. Washington’s model of the successful, upstanding Black person. These publications show why the middle-class Black community and press may have rejected bulldaggers. Magazines like *Ebony* (e.g., Bentley, 1952) and *Jet* (especially in 1951) featured African-Americans who were economically and socially successful as well as those who had overcome adversities. They catered to a largely middle-class audience, reflecting values regarding self-help, material consumption, and social status (Simms, 2001, pp. 385–386). In addition, they portrayed same-sex sexuality as perverted or unnatural, and articles about queer people equated sexual orientation with gender nonconformity. *Ebony* discussed Gladys Bentley’s bulldagger persona as a problem that needed fixing, placing Bentley’s (1952) “I am a Woman Again” article in the discourse of Black self-improvement. Although these magazines appeared in the mid-twentieth century, they echoed previous ideas regarding how the Black community should be morally respectable and successful in order to gain equality. Bulldaggers clearly did not fit in with this ideal.

During the Renaissance, Bulldaggers were also found in numerous books and novels and were often depicted as immoral, interesting, or bizarre. Black authors Claude McKay (1928) and Wallace Thurman (1929) depicted bulldaggers negatively in their works. A character in McKay’s *Home to Harlem* said, “Them’s all ugly womens” as well as “Harlem is too savage about some things” in reference to bulldaggers. In Thurman’s (1929) novel *The Blacker the Berry*, he paints queer characters as unsavory scoundrels. His character, Miss Carrington, assertively flirts with the main heroine and owns a house where queer women live (Faderman, 1991, pp. 69–70). Her actions were viewed as unsettling.

White writers Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964) and Blair Niles (1880–1959) also utilized bulldaggers as spectacles in their works, *Nigger Heaven* (Van Vechten, 1926) and *Strange Brother* (Niles, 1931), respectively. Vechten knew Bentley personally and wrote *Parties* (Van Vechten, 1930), which explored non-heterosexual sexualities and featured a bulldagger character probably based on Bentley. He wrote, “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” (Jones, 2012, p. 7). This highlights the fascination
people had with bulldaggers and with the talented Bentley in particular. However, his controversial book *Nigger Heaven* (1926) claimed that heterosexual patrons would sometimes quit a club when they perceived “too many bulldikers” (p. 12) were taking over. Niles’ (1931) *Strange Brother* focuses on a queer man, Mark, and his heterosexual female friend, June, during the era. A character named Sybil closely resembled Gladys Bentley. When Mark and June went to a club and saw Sybil playing the piano, they were intrigued by her female masculinity and attire. According to the main character, June, “[Sybil] looks like the heart of Africa…the heart of darkness! And the way she’s dressed!” (Jones, 2012, p. 6). June was fascinated by Sybil’s masculine appearance, which echoed common reactions to bulldaggers during the era. In addition, Sybil was an entertainer at the fictional “Lobster Pot” which was most likely a reference to Bentley’s hangout The Clam House (Garber, 1988, p. 56). These white writers fueled white voyeurism in Harlem and it became avant-garde for white sophisticates to attend Bentley’s stage productions and dance with the crowds of Blacks and queers. It was trendy for white people to go to Bentley’s shows but bulldaggers were still largely avoided in everyday life.

Bulldaggers, however, had some freedom and congregated socially, enjoyed sexually liberating music and dances, and tried to ignore the attitudes of curious onlookers. Many individuals did not pay any mind to bulldaggers and easily com mingled with them. Mabel Hampton (1902–1989) was a lesbian dancer who spoke about her experiences at rent parties. For a small fee, working-class, generally Black, people would attend these house parties. This helped the home-owner make more money before rent was due. Rent parties largely occurred in Black communities and showed solidarity between working-class Black people. Rent parties could have served as safe spaces where attendees could explore their sexuality. Sexual experimentation was quite popular at the parties, and bulldaggers often attended because they were generally working-class and wanted to mingle with the queer crowd. Some of these parties were open to women only, and according to Hampton:

The bulldykers would come and bring their women with them. And you wasn’t supposed to jive with them, you know. They danced up a breeze. They did the Charleston, they did a little bit of everything. They were all colored women. Sometimes we ran into someone who had a white woman with them. But me, I’d venture out with any of them. I just had a ball. (Wilson, 2010, p. 14)
This was a common sentiment people had toward bulldaggers, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance when alternative sexualities were widely accepted or tolerated. It is crucial to note the differing reactions to the bulldagger identity because it shows how society perceived Black queer masculinity during the Renaissance. Based on the aforementioned examples from the era, I conclude that the bulldagger identity served as an authentic label for women such as Bentley. However, it was also a complicated label because it was marketed by record labels in order to sell more records and create intrigue that would boost Bentley’s career and Rainey’s song, “Prove It on Me Blues.” It also was a more visible identity, which could lead to more risk. I develop this through my analysis of Gladys Bentley.

**Rainey’s Use of the Bulldagger Identity**

Rainey did not embody the bulldagger identity. One description of her stage productions was, “Ma would sashay out in all her feathers and finery, wearing a sequined black dress and beaded headband, all the while fanning herself with ostrich plumes, her gold-capped teeth sparkling through her smile” (Grattan, 1993, p. 116). Based on this description it seems that Rainey’s self-image and the appearance she performed on stage were not masculine. There are limited images and videos of Rainey available but the inserted images below showcase her more feminine look. However, a depiction of herself as a bulldagger was on her album cover of her song, “Prove It On Me Blues” (Bibliore, n.d.), which is also pictured.

Rainey’s major performance of bulldagger lyrics was in “Prove It on Me Blues” (edmundusrex, 2013). Rainey had a feminine, normative gender identity in her personal life as well as in her career. However, the presence of a bulldagger identity and intrigue around non-normative gender expressions during the era influenced Rainey and her record company to have Rainey temporarily perform lyrics associated with the bulldagger identity in “Prove It on Me Blues.” The song’s portrayal of a bulldagger identity highlights the ways in which culture can produce gender (Butler, 2006, p. 11). There was intrigue surrounding Gladys Bentley and the bulldagger identity as well as a culture of tolerance in regard to queer communities during the era. These factors influenced Paramount Records and Ma Rainey to capitalize on it. A feminine woman, Rainey sang about life as if she was a masculine bulldagger. Her record company peaked the interest of listeners with phrases such as,
“What’s all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn’t have thought it of ‘Ma’ Rainey. But look at that cop watching her!” (“Display Ad 22,” 1928). Rainey was known as a normative blueswoman, but because she tinkered with this theme in her album, she gained more notoriety and interest. It seems like audiences perceived songs like “Prove It on Me Blues” in numerous ways. “To the heterosexual male they were provocative. To the potentially bisexual female they were suggestive and encouraging. To the lesbian they could be affirming” (Faderman, 1991, p. 78). As shown in chapter 3, Rainey’s lyrics about bulldaggers displayed pride and confidence. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if Rainey’s song commodified the bulldagger identity or if it served as a liberatory display of subversive queerness, but, based on my analysis, it seemed to do both. In any case, her feminine visual display of spangled dresses, furs, and gold teeth juxtaposed with her provocative lyrics “projected a bold, new paradigm of what a black woman could be: assertive, complex, sensuous, and indomitable” (Barnet, 2004, p. 11).
Bentley openly expressed her bulldagger identity in both her onstage and offstage lives. She proudly self-identified as one and sold it on stage and in her productions. She was labeled “The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues” by one biographer and her memorable appearance allowed her some freedom to engage in a masculine self-image and queer sexuality that were previously unavailable to her (Garber, 1988, p. 52). She often appeared in “tailor-made clothes, top hat and tails, with a cane to match each costume, stiff-bosomed shirt, wing collar tie and matching shoes” (Bentley, 1952, p. 94). Her public audiences did not always know how to place her. Some saw her as an invert while others called her a bulldagger (Jones, 2012, p. 6). Bentley’s stage productions and personal life encouraged these perceptions and she continued to wear masculine attire and flirt with women throughout her career. In her personal life, Bentley married a white woman in a highly publicized civil ceremony in New Jersey in 1928 and wore masculine clothes out in broad daylight (Jones, 2012, p. 7; Wilson, 2010, p. 156). Queer marriage ceremonies were commonplace in Harlem during the Renaissance. “Real marriage licenses were obtained by
masculinizing a first name or having a gay male surrogate apply for a license for the lesbian couple. Those licenses were actually placed on file in the New York City Marriage Bureau” (Faderman, 1991, p. 73). Bentley openly told people about her marriage and seemed to live an out life (Garber, 1988, p. 58).

Figure 6. Gladys Bentley in more masculine attire. 
black lesbian and bi women in history. Retrieved from 
http://www.afterellen.com/people/99158-honoring-
black-lesbian-and-bi-women-in-history.
Decades later Bentley unveiled her “reformed” feminine, heterosexual self in her 1952 autobiographical piece titled, “I Am a Woman Again” that appeared in *Ebony* Magazine. In this article, Bentley described her experiences growing up as having a major effect on her gender non-conformity and sexual orientation during the Renaissance. Bentley explained how difficult it was being a member of an ostracized community, and how she suffered from terrible self-condemnation. Bentley claimed she encountered a “miracle” when she met an African-American man named Don and married him. Bentley mentioned God in her decision to live a “normal” life. She wanted a closer relationship with Him and was encouraged through her faith to marry Don. She later mentioned that she divorced Don and married a columnist, J. T. Gipson. She stated that she had “infantile sex organs” (Bentley, 1952, p. 98) which contributed to her queer, bulldagger identity, and she was treated with female hormones in order to offset the predominant male hormones she had in her body. This infers that perhaps she was intersex. Or, she may have said this to explain away her earlier life. Bentley (1952) illustrated that these “miracles” are what helped her embrace the lifestyle of a heterosexual, domestic housewife. She equated queerness to a drug addiction, proclaiming that she could finally leave that “strange” (p. 93) part of herself behind.
Figure 8. Gladys Bentley’s “I am a woman again” (1952) photoshoot. Source: Bentley, G. (1952, August). I am a woman again. *Ebony Magazine*, 7(10), 92–98.

During the McCarthy Era of the 1950s, queer people were accused of being communist sympathizers and there was an all-out witch hunt against them. In two images from the *Ebony* magazine article, Bentley is seen making the bed and washing dishes. One caption reads, “Taste-testing dinner she has prepared for husband J. T. Gipson, Miss Bentley enjoys domestic role which she shunned for years” (Bentley, 1952). Bentley wore a dress while doing these domestic tasks. Interestingly, “Don’s” last name was not given, so there are no records of who he might have been. There was also an article, “‘Never Married to Gladys Bentley’ Last Words of Columnist J. T.,” written by Harry Levette (1952) of the *Associated Negro Press*, that proclaimed that J. T. Gipson vehemently denied that he married Bentley. Before his death, he said, “I am not, and have never been married to Gladys Bentley.” Based on these findings, it seems Bentley created this storyline to prove her heterosexual femininity when in fact it did not exist. She also chose to reform her image so as not to get targeted during this time period. Bentley’s decision to recant her bulldagger identity and completely conform to gender norms follows Butler’s (2006) theory that “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance” (p. 185). Bentley performed normative activities such as cleaning, cooking, and wearing a dress in order to emphasize a feminine gender persona and distance her from her bulldagger identity. Bentley
was encouraged to portray a more normative, feminine self-image because of the intolerable culture of the time. Gender is performative, according to Butler, and this theory is clearly shown when comparing Bentley’s bulldagger identity from the 1920s with her “I Am A Woman Again” normative look from the 1950s. Images of Bentley demonstrate this change.

Bentley’s Black queer masculinity and later rejection of it in favor of a more feminine, normative appearance shows the danger that was present in being gender non-conforming as well as queer. Even during the tolerant time of the Harlem Renaissance, Bentley still faced some cultural backlash. The era enabled Bentley to perform a bulldagger identity and profit from it, but she was still targeted by police and judged by others. One news article, “New York Cops Hit Vulgar Dance in Cafes: New York Police Launch Drive on Harlem Cafes” from the March 17, 1934, issue of the Chicago Defender documented the “secret police campaign to clean up the night life and cabaret entertainment.” It described how police heard complaints of “lewd entertainment” about Gladys Bentley. The journalist proclaimed that Bentley sang dirty songs to the audience, and “a chorus of eight liberally painted male sepians with effeminate voices and gestures assisted the singer in throwing this piece of filth at a blushing audience.” The journalist stated, “The chief and filthiest offering of the evening, is a personal tour of the tables by Miss Bentley. At each table she stopped to sing one or more verses of a seemingly endless song in which every word known to vulgar profanity is used.” The April 7 issue of the Chicago Defender (“New York police's war on cafes ends," 1934) described Bentley’s evasion of the police. According to the article, “...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.” The report claimed that after she mysteriously left the club, the New York police padlocked the nightspot. The journalist stated, “It...showed that the police war against indecency, nudity, and obscenity seemed to be on for fair.” Although the bulldagger identity brought attention to Bentley and her career, it also made her a target of repression and scorn (Wilson, 2010, pp. 177, 188).

**HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND RELATION TO QUEER**

The historical significance of the bulldagger identity is crucial when studying queer women from this era. Bulldagger was a variant of the words bulldiker or bulldyking, and was
mainly attributed to Black, queer women during the Renaissance. Interestingly, recent uses of bulldagger cover multiple races, an example being white musician Phranc’s 1994 song “Bulldagger Swagger” (GrrlBandGeek, 2009). However, the significance of bulldagger as a unique identity remains. A bulldagger is more specific than lesbian or bi-sexual because it represents a very masculine, queer woman. Like queer, it expresses a broader range of non-normative sexualities: both identifiers reflect Bentley’s life. In addition, it is important to situate bulldagger historically because previous researchers have labeled Bentley as a lesbian. This erases the term she used to describe her. It is crucial to explore queer identities and names from the past in order to have a more encompassing knowledge of the numerous ways queer individuals defined themselves and their actions. The bulldagger identity is especially influential because of its use by women of color, particularly Black women, during the era. It also suggests a specific kind of female masculinity that lesbian or bi-sexual do not denote.

**Bentley and Rainey’s Legacies/Conclusion**

Bentley and Rainey’s lives have been researched but few are aware of how influential their decisions and performances were for queer history. In this thesis, I looked at their careers as Black blueswomen who sang songs about women with agency during the complex time of the Harlem Renaissance, even if it was influenced by white record labels. Regardless of why they presented a certain way, Bentley and Rainey’s experiences provide the present-day LGBTQ community with examples of queerness and gender non-conformity from the past. It is vital for queer youth to have proof that non-normative sexualities have existed throughout time, and that is what makes Bentley and Rainey’s song lyrics, stage, productions, and gender performances valuable. It is especially important for queer women of color because they are often excluded from historical texts or studies. Rainey and Bentley arguably used queerness and the bulldagger identity for their profit, but in doing so they left evidence of non-normative sexualities and gender identities, which imparts knowledge of queer history for future generations.

A major research question for my thesis was to explore the time period of the Harlem Renaissance and analyze whether it was helpful in developing Rainey and Bentley’s sexual and gender identities. Through historical scholarship, I believe the era created space for them to express queer performances/identities in a complex time period rife with racism,
discrimination, changing gender norms, and unemployment. At the same time, both women faced commodification and had to navigate their successful careers as blueswomen. By analyzing their song lyrics and stage productions, I redefined previous understandings of Bentley’s sexuality and gender expression while also outlining the ways in which both utilized a bulldagger identity/queerness to foster a more lucrative career. I did not label them as lesbian or bi-sexual because I felt that queer and bulldagger were more suitable identities for Bentley, and there was not enough historical evidence to place Rainey as queer. Multiple sexualities exist outside of the current labels we use and sexualities are historically situated. I included public perceptions of them to portray the views of their peers.

Future researchers could study Rainey and Bentley’s lives following this era. I mentioned that Bentley made a surprising decision to recant her queerness and bulldagger identity, and decided to marry a man in the 1950s. Based on research I have done, Bentley’s confusing decision to dismiss her bulldagger identity were due to the McCarthy era’s witch hunt against LGBTQ people. This would be an excellent topic to explore more fully. Further research could be done on Ma Rainey as well. For example, although there was some mention of her possible same-sex relationships, it was not enough to view her as queer. It would be interesting to learn about feminine queer women and their experiences during this time period, especially whether they were more invisible because they passed as heterosexual. Lastly, I had considered including Renaissance blues singer Bessie Smith (1894–1937) in my thesis but later decided to exclude her from my work because she did not display a bulldagger identity or produce queer music. However, her life and story are also worth telling, and it would be beneficial to explore her possible queer identity and outlaw behavior in future research.
REFERENCES


Bibliore. (n.d.). Ma Rainey’s “Prove it on me.” Retrieved from https://bibliolore.org/2016/04/26/ma-raineys-prove-it-on-me/


Johns, V. E. (1934a, January 27). In the name of art. *New York Age*, p. 6.


New York police’s war on cafes ends. (1934, April 7). *Chicago Defender*, p. 8.


