

Gladys Bentley and the Shaping of an Intersectional Community of LGBT Pride in the Music

Industry

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Paper: 2495 words

Process Paper: 496 words

## Process Paper

Coming into this class, I had an idea that I wanted to research women or other marginalized groups. I felt that I could benefit the most from this project by researching something that I would not learn in a standard history class. I started by thinking about women's rights, but as I did preliminary research on the women's suffrage movement, I found that most sources were whitewashed. I wanted to learn more about women of color, and when I came across Gladys Bentley in my investigations, I was hooked. I decided to focus my project on Bentley and how her musical influence affected debates around LGBTQ+ rights and the place in society for queer people of color.

Since my preliminary research was focused on the broad topic of women's rights, I had a lot of initial sources on the women's suffrage movement and the early 1900s. As my topic evolved, however, I had to retreat and find more background information on issues of the early 1900s that I did not know a lot about. Once I settled on Gladys Bentley as my historical figure of interest, I had to find more information on the history of gay rights, the Harlem Renaissance, music, and civil rights. This was very helpful to me later on in my research when I started looking into primary sources like song lyrics, newspaper articles, and images. The historical context was crucial to my research because I came into this project with limited knowledge on the topic and had to be able to analyze primary sources using all new information.

I knew all along that I wanted to write a paper, so I strategically took notes so that they could be incorporated into my drafts. Once I had a solid foundation of knowledge on my topic, I made a narrative timeline, including "before, during, and after" sections of my topic. This helped me organize my thoughts concisely and figure out which areas of my topic were lacking information. Next, I prepared and presented a conference-style presentation focusing on my

historical argument, from which I learned to present my knowledge to people that were not familiar with my topic. Finally, I put my research together into my final paper, which was revised multiple times after peer review and individual edits.

My historical argument is that the Harlem Renaissance gave LGBTQ musicians of color a platform to express their sexualities safely, which led to a cultural revolution in the music industry and beyond.

My topic is significant in history because it covers a range of important societal issues that have caused conflict and debate throughout history. The question of how gender, sexuality, and race play into social class and how discrimination against marginalized groups has affected American society is an extremely relevant idea even today. I used Gladys Bentley as a lens to investigate how LGBTQ+ people, people of color, and women can use creative outlets like music to shape debates and diplomacy in history.

## Historical Paper

“Mighty hard for you women to keep a real good man nowadays / Ain't little chippy gal got so many doggone different ways.”<sup>1</sup> The growling voice of Gladys Bentley engulfs the dazzled crowd of Harlem, New York’s Clam House. Bentley’s fingers rush across the piano, her prominent figure accentuated by her signature white tuxedo and top hat<sup>2</sup> (see image in appendix). Bentley’s 1928 version of “Worried Blues” was one of many songs that Bentley performed in her years at the Clam House, nicknamed “Gladys’s Clam House” because of the control she had over its audiences<sup>3</sup>. Gladys Bentley was the queen of Harlem nightlife, captivating audiences with her gender-bending costumes and raunchy performances. Bentley moved to Harlem as a young woman at the start of the Harlem Renaissance. Leaving her family’s judgment and homophobia behind in Philadelphia, Bentley escaped to Harlem at the age of 16 and never looked back<sup>4</sup>. Gladys Bentley used music and performances to portray a message of pride and unashamed individuality that gave a voice to future LGBTQ artists of color and introduced LGBTQ culture to the music industry.

Black LGBTQ+ musicians in the Harlem Renaissance changed the debate around gender and sexuality by openly expressing themselves without fear of judgment. Before the Harlem Renaissance, Black and LGBTQ+ individuals lived lives ruled by fear of violence and discrimination from an unaccepting American society<sup>5</sup>. During the Harlem Renaissance, however, an era of racial and sexual pride was born because of artists like Gladys Bentley, who broke barriers in music by introducing Black, gay voices into the music industry. Gladys Bentley

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<sup>1</sup>Gladys Bentley. “Worried Blues,” (Okeh Records, 1928).

<sup>2</sup> *Portrait of Gladys Bentley (2)*, Digital Public Records (1925-1939).

<sup>3</sup> E. Simms Campbell. “Nightclub Map of Harlem,” (Dell Publishing Company, New York, 1932).

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Russonello. “Gladys Bentley,” *New York Times*, (2019).

<sup>5</sup> George Chauncey. *Gay New York*, Basic Books (1994)

can be used as a lens to investigate how LGBTQ+ people, people of color, and women have used creative outlets like music to shape debates and diplomacy in history.

With World War I beginning in 1914, international tensions heightened as conflicts arose overseas, leading to the United States joining the war. Due to the high demand for soldiers, Black men could join the United States Army. While they faced discrimination from military leaders, many Black divisions received praise and commendations for their bravery and success in battles. When Black soldiers returned home after the war, they expected celebration and praise, but they were instead met with violence. White Americans worried that Black men, especially veterans, would steal their jobs and ruin their livelihoods after the war, so they resorted to violence towards Black people. Anti-Black riots erupted in 26 American cities and there were 97 lynchings recorded in 1919 alone<sup>6</sup>. In the summer of 1919, violence against Black people culminated into a bloody few months of lynching, riots, and massacres known as the Red Summer<sup>7</sup>. After gaining a sense of freedom during the war, Black people migrated towards cities to escape this sudden increase in violence.

Harlem Renaissance ideals were especially prominent in American cities, which had been populated by Black people during the Great Migration. The Great Migration began in 1916 and spanned through the 20th-century<sup>8</sup>. During the Great Migration, African American workers from the South migrated North, where they found higher pay and refuge from the Jim Crow-ruled South. At the start of the Great Migration, African American factory workers in the North earned about \$4 per day, compared to the \$0.75 per day that African Americans made working on farms in the South. By 1920, there were 1.5 million African American workers in the North, and

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<sup>6</sup> Jami Brian. "Fighting for Respect: African-American Soldiers in WW1," *National Museum of the United States Army*.

<sup>7</sup> Olivia Waxman. "'It Just Goes On and On': How the Race Riots of 1919's 'Red Summer' Helped Shape a Century of American History." *Time Magazine* (July 29, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Isabel Wilkerson. "The African American Exodus North," *NPR* (September 13, 2010).

although the racism in the North was not as outright as it was in the South, African Americans still faced discrimination<sup>9</sup>. In order to escape this discrimination, urban communities like Harlem became cultural hubs and safe spaces for African Americans to connect, express themselves creatively, and display racial pride. This led to a large cultural movement for African Americans that became the Harlem Renaissance.

From the 1920s to the 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance birthed new forms of self-expression for Black Americans through music, art, and literature. The movement culminated in Harlem, NY, where Black people found a community of racial pride through creative expression. Literary scholars wrote compelling texts that highlighted the highs and lows, the normalities, of Black life in America. Performers and musicians created music that spoke to their broader communities, causing the nightlife and social scenes in cities to flourish. Artists documented everyday life as well as historical aspects of black culture<sup>10</sup>.

The addition of black creativity into urban America introduced white and black people alike to aspects of African heritage and black culture that had been long misunderstood and misrepresented in the media. Black culture's introduction into the mainstream media led to a rearranging of American culture and identity, and the idea of ethnic pluralism was introduced as a way to celebrate the diversity of America<sup>11</sup>. White Americans flooded to Harlem to view performances at popular clubs like the Cotton Club, the Clam House, and the Ubangi Club<sup>12</sup>. The popularity of these clubs was mainly due to prohibition when Americans could only buy alcohol at speakeasies and clubs, which gave Americans more of a desire to go out to have a good time<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> "The Great Migration," *Smithsonian American Art Museum*.

<sup>10</sup> William A. Darity. "Harlem Renaissance," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Detroit, MI, Macmillan Reference, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Darity, "Harlem Renaissance."

<sup>12</sup> "Gladys Bentley," *Queer Music Heritage*.

<sup>13</sup> Darity, "Harlem Renaissance."

During the Harlem Renaissance, LGBTQ+ individuals found a new form of freedom in their sexualities, which was no more prominent than in Harlem nightlife. Speakeasies advertised alcohol and stellar performances to attract large, diverse audiences. Some speakeasies even targeted LGBTQ audiences by throwing cross-dressing parties and contests, allowing for the celebration of LGBTQ pride. As Henry Louis Gates stated, the Harlem Renaissance was “as gay as it was black,” and although gay pride is often seen as something that did not arise until Stonewall, it was a key element of American culture in the 1920s as well<sup>14</sup>.

The bustling nightlife scene led to a growing appreciation of Black-created music like jazz and the blues, but this cultural shift was not without conflict. Many nightclubs that played jazz and the blues excluded black people from the audience, and those that had mixed audiences were often subjected to police raids that targeted the black members of the audience. One of these raids occurred during a performance by Gladys Bentley towards the end of her career<sup>15</sup>.

In 1925, 16-year-old Bentley moved from Philadelphia to Harlem, where she began her career as many aspiring stars did at the time: by performing at rent parties, which charged people for entry and alcohol to pay rent for the venue<sup>16</sup>. Bentley’s masculine clothing - her signature white top hat and tuxedo - paired with her backup singers and dancers dressed in drag soon created a name for her as a raunchy, rule-breaking performer in ways that nobody had seen before. Bentley’s first paid gig was at a club called the “Mad House.” The club had been looking for a male pianist, but Bentley’s fiery performance led them to hire her instead. Her talent spoke for itself, and she even was recognized by Langston Hughes as one of the best pianists of her time. As she became more popular, larger venues like the Ubangi Club, the Cotton Club, and the

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<sup>14</sup> Khalil Sullivan. “The Proud Queer Influence of the Harlem Renaissance.” *Cassius Life*. (June 18, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Dugan. “The Harlem Renaissance: The Movement that Changed Jazz.” *NYS Music*. (October 3, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Russonello. “Gladys Bentley.” *New York Times*.

Clam House hired Bentley to perform<sup>17</sup>. Bentley brought crowds with her wherever she went, for the American public was fascinated by her act. A newspaper article about Bentley's act at the Ubangi Club says, "the drawing card of the Ubangi Club is the buxom, mannishly dressed Gladys Bentley, who has been a fixture there for years and still draws a crowd with her double-edged ditties which have made her one of the most notorious entertainers in all of Manhattan." The Ubangi Club advertised as a "rendezvous for pleasure seekers," which it was because of Bentley's ravishing act and captivating charm<sup>18</sup>. The Clam House also became a staple of Bentley's career and was even noted as "Gladys' Clam House" in a 1932 artistic map of Harlem<sup>19</sup>. In the 1930s, Gladys Bentley ruled Harlem nightlife, introducing gay culture into the definition of the Harlem Renaissance.

While other gay performers like Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters did attract media attention, no one was more fascinating to the American public than Gladys Bentley. She was swarmed by gossip columnists with questions about her performances, raunchy lyrics, and, most of all, her sexuality. In one remarkable instance, Bentley told a columnist that she was married, and when asked who the man was, she replied, "Man? It's a woman." Bentley also stated that her wife was a white woman, which stirred up more shock and public interest. While this statement was never proven true, this is a perfect example of how loud and proud Bentley was about her sexuality<sup>20</sup>. Bentley was not afraid of media attention, and she reveled in the glory of having a platform to express her authentic self to the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Haleema Shah. "The Great Blues Singer Gladys Bentley Broke all the Rules." *Smithsonian*. (March 14, 2019)

<sup>18</sup> "Gladys Bentley at the Ubangi Club," *Here's What Happens at Harlem's Famous Ubangi Club*. *Queer Music Heritage*. (New York, N.Y. February 8, 1936).

<sup>19</sup> E. Simms Campbell. "A Nightclub Map of Harlem." *Dell Publishing Company*. (New York, N.Y. 1932).

<sup>20</sup> Haleema Shah. "The Great Blues Singer Gladys Bentley Broke all the Rules." *Smithsonian*. (March 14, 2019)



By the late 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance was over, and public fascination over a black, lesbian, gender-bending performer had turned to disgust and fear. By the 1950s, the red scare made Americans rethink their values, and soon all the progress towards acceptance that had been made by African Americans and the LGBTQ+ community was thwarted by the fear of communism. White conservatives saw anyone different from them as a threat, making America an unsafe place for people like Gladys Bentley to openly express themselves<sup>21</sup>. As the Harlem Renaissance ended, Bentley moved to California, where she continued to perform and record as a toned-down version of herself<sup>22</sup>. Although she had to change her personality to avoid the violence and discrimination that she faced in the 1940s and 50s, Bentley's voice stayed the same, just as warbling and raspy as it had been in the clubs of Harlem in the 1930s. In one of her last songs, "Lay it on the Line," released in 1945, Bentley sings, "I'm livin' up in heaven / And I'm livin' mighty fine / Since I laid it on the line."<sup>23</sup> This song was released during America's transition to an increasingly conservative society, and the lyrics are a stark contrast to the heavier and more controversial messages in Bentley's earlier songs. Not only did Bentley have to change her music to maintain her celebrity, but she also had to abandon her signature gender-bending clothing when she lived in California. California had a ban against cross-dressing, for people worried that cross-dressing implied queerness or prostitution. In San Francisco, this ban remained in effect until 1974.<sup>24</sup>

In 1952, Bentley wrote an article about her life for *Ebony Magazine*. In this article, entitled, "I Am a Woman Again," Bentley stated that she had gotten a medical procedure that

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<sup>21</sup> Suyin Haynes. "History You Didn't Learn about the Anti-Gay Lavender Scare." *Time Magazine*. (December 22, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Haleema Shah. "The Great Blues Singer Gladys Bentley Broke all the Rules." *Smithsonian*. (March 14, 2019)

<sup>23</sup> Gladys Bentley. "Lay it on the Line," (Excelsior Records, 1945).

<sup>24</sup> PBS News Desk. "Arresting Dress: A Timeline of Anti-Cross-Dressing Laws in the United States." *PBS NewsHour*. (May 31, 2015).

cured her “strange affliction” of being lesbian and gender fluid. She stated that she had married a man, and published photos of herself in feminine clothing<sup>25</sup>. After performing for years in more and more toned-down shows, Bentley began to study to become a minister, but shortly before she was officially ordained, she fell ill and died on January 18th, 1960, at the age of 52<sup>26</sup>.

While Bentley’s career ended on a note that was opposite of how it began, she was still remembered by many for her rule-breaking performances and pride in her sexuality. Others, however, chose to eliminate her sexuality from her story. For example, Bentley’s obituary notably did not contain anything about her sexuality. An obituary published in the *Alabama Tribune* solely referred to Bentley as a “buxom entertainer,” omitting all information about her gender-bending performances, queer pride, and extravagant personality<sup>27</sup>. It also completely skips over her time in Harlem, only speaking about her early life in Philadelphia and her later life in Los Angeles. American society in the 1950s and early 1960s was so conservative that it blocked Bentley’s life and music from making a short-term impact, but by the mid-60s, a movement of protest and rejection of conformity allowed for Bentley’s impact to be seen greatly.

The long-term impact of Gladys Bentley is the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement, which is an intersectional movement based on openness and equality for all queer people, including people of color. The most well-known debates in the gay rights movement are the Stonewall Protest, a protest against police and societal violence towards LGBTQ+ people, which was led by Black individuals<sup>28</sup>, and, more recently, the 2015 legalization of gay marriage. The legalization of gay marriage led to celebratory parades, which bore a striking resemblance to the protests and marches of the Stonewall era, across the country<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, in recent decades, the

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<sup>25</sup> Gladys Bentley. “I am a Woman Again.” *Ebony Magazine*. (1952).

<sup>26</sup> “Gladys Bentley, Entertainer, Dies.” *Alabama Tribune*. (February 12, 1960).

<sup>27</sup> “Gladys Bentley, Entertainer, Dies.” *Alabama Tribune*. (February 12, 1960).

<sup>28</sup> Kristen Broady. “The Black and Brown Activists Who Started Pride.” *Brookings*. (June 29, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> “Milestones in the American Gay Rights Movement.” *American Experience*. (PBS).

LGBTQ+ movement has been spreading into realms outside of politics. The music industry, once led by white musicians, is beginning to reflect on its roots in the Harlem Renaissance, where Black and LGBTQ+ creativity created the basis of popular music today: blues, jazz, and soul.

Gladys Bentley was unapologetic and open about her sexuality, creating a path for later LGBTQ people to feel free through musical expression<sup>30</sup>. Modern Black LGBTQ artists like Lil Nas X, Frank Ocean, Kehlani, and Janelle Monáe have Gladys Bentley to thank for creating the stage that they stand on today. Bentley's impact can be seen today in Black LGBTQ+ musicians who are now open and celebratory of their sexualities. Black LGBTQ musicians reject the cultural norms forced upon them, portraying their sexualities honestly and encouraging others to do the same.

Lil Nas X, a Black, gay rapper, is one of the most popular artists in the music industry currently, and he came out as gay after his career had already taken off. Lil Nas X used his song "c7osure" to come out, using heartfelt lyrics to express his struggles grappling with telling the truth of his sexuality<sup>31</sup>. In a more recent song "Sun Goes Down" from his album, *Montero*, he raps, "Since ten, I been feelin' lonely/ Had friends, but they was pickin' on me/ Always thinkin', Why my lips so big?/ Was I too dark? Can they sense my fears?/ These gay thoughts would always haunt me."<sup>32</sup> These lyrics reflect the ideas that characterized Gladys Bentley during the Harlem Renaissance, showing that the sentiments within her music had an impact that surpassed her time. This willingness of artists to vulnerably share themselves with the world comes from a feeling of safety, built upon a community of support. Today's intersectional community of

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<sup>30</sup> Greggor Mattson. "The Stonewall Riots Didn't Start the Gay Rights Movement." *JSTOR Daily*. (June 12, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Evan Minsker. "Lil Nas X Comes Out as Gay." (Pitchfork. June 30, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Lil Nas X. "Sun Goes Down," *Montero*. (Columbia Records, 2021).

LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies is built from Gladys Bentley's message of pride and unashamed individuality.

Gladys Bentley's expressions of pride in her sexuality and race forged a path for Black queer people to create an intersectional pride movement in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, allowing future Black LGBTQ+ musicians to come out and express their sexualities openly through music. She carved a path for the open existence of Black queer musicians in the LGBTQ+ pride movement, using her music to change the debates around gender and sexuality in the United States long after the Harlem Renaissance.

## Appendix



Gladys Bentley in her signature top hat and white suit during the Harlem Renaissance. Bentley defied gender norms when she wore this outfit in front of large audiences during her musical performances. The female dancer in the background shows what a traditional woman would wear during performances, her short dress and feminine hairstyle a stark contrast to Bentley.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Secondary Sources

Articles:

Britannica School, s.v. "Harlem Renaissance." Accessed November 7, 2021.

<https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Harlem-Renaissance/39283>.

This article on the Harlem Renaissance helped me understand how the revitalization of black culture through art and literature changed the societal structure in urban America during the 1920s. It also introduced me to important female figures of the Harlem Renaissance like Josephine Baker and Florence Mills. I used this source to strengthen my knowledge of the historical context of my topic.

Broady, Kristen, and Carl Romer. "The Black and Brown Activists Who Started Pride."

Brookings. Last modified June 29, 2021. Accessed January 7, 2022.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/06/29/the-black-and-brown-activists-who-started-pride/>.

This article on BIPOC's involvement in the pride movement helped me understand how much Black LGBTQ+ individuals have contributed to the gay rights movement, and how interconnected the racial and LGBTQ+ equality movements have become. This source will be used to explain how Gladys Bentley helped create an intersectional movement for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people to express themselves safely and proudly.

Bryan, Jami. "Fighting for Respect: African-American Soldiers in WW1." National Museum of the United States Army. Accessed November 15, 2021.

<https://armyhistory.org/fighting-for-respect-african-american-soldiers-in-wwi/>.

This article from the National Museum of the United States Army explains the role of African Americans in World War 1. This source helped me understand the racial tensions during and after World War 1, leading up to the Harlem Renaissance. I used this source as part of my historical context.

Carey, Miya. "Black Girlhood in 20th-Century America." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. 31 Aug. 2021; Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

<https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-852>.

This source from Oxford Research Encyclopedia was used to explain the struggles of Black women before, during, and after Gladys Bentley's popularity. This information helped me

understand my topic by demonstrating a broader perspective of the struggles faced by a large demographic of which Gladys Bentley was part.

Cumo, Christopher Martin. "Women of the Harlem Renaissance." In *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience*, ABC-CLIO, 2021. Accessed November 10, 2021.  
<https://africanamerican.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/2148210>.

This article on women authors in the Harlem Renaissance gave me more specific information on the roles of black women in the Harlem Renaissance, and especially how they used literature to form a community around shared experiences with sexism and racism. I used this source to gain more historical context on the discrimination faced by black women during the Harlem Renaissance and how they fought against it using literary art.

Dugan, Joseph. "The Harlem Renaissance: The Movement That Changed Jazz." NYS Music. Last modified October 3, 2020. Accessed December 1, 2021.  
<https://nysmusic.com/2020/10/03/the-harlem-renaissance-the-movement-that-changed-jazz/>.

This source on jazz in the Harlem Renaissance helped me to understand more about the role of music in African American society during the 1920s. The information from this source will be used as background on how Gladys Bentley became popular, as well as context on the Harlem Renaissance as a whole.

Mattson, Greggor. "The Stonewall Riots Didn't Start the Gay Rights Movement." *JSTOR Daily*, June 12, 2019.  
<https://daily.jstor.org/the-stonewall-riots-didnt-start-the-gay-rights-movement/>.

This article about the start of the LGBTQ+ rights movement helped me to understand the common misconceptions around the movement, introducing me to the lesser-known origins of the movement. The information from this source will be used when I explain the legacies and influences of Gladys Bentley on the LGBTQ+ community.

Russonello, Giovanni. "Gladys Bentley." *New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/obituaries/gladys-bentley-overlooked.html>

This article on Gladys Bentley taught me about the timeline of Bentley's life and gave me more details about her early life and childhood. The information from this source will be used in description of the life of Gladys Bentley, which is the main section of my project.

"Harlem Renaissance." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., edited by William A. Darity, Jr., 424-426. Vol. 3. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. Gale

In Context: Global Issues. Accessed November 7, 2021.

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3045300994/GIC?u=mlic\\_bancsch&sid=bookmark-GIC&xid=0d383939](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3045300994/GIC?u=mlic_bancsch&sid=bookmark-GIC&xid=0d383939).

This article on the Harlem Renaissance taught me about how black people were represented in the media during the 1920s. It introduced me to the glamorization of the “primitive” aspects of black life, as well as the concept of the Negro vogue. I used this source to strengthen my knowledge of the historical context of my topic.

Haynes, Suyin. "History You Didn't Learn about the Anti-Gay Lavender Scare." Time Magazine. Last modified December 22, 2020. <https://time.com/5922679/lavender-scare-history/>.

This source helped me understand what impact the Red and Lavender Scares of the 1950s had on urban society after the Harlem Renaissance. I used this source to explain what happened after the Harlem Renaissance and how this affected the end of Gladys Bentley’s life.

Little, Becky. "How Early Suffragists Left Black Women out of Their Fight." History.com. Last modified January 29, 2021. Accessed November 7, 2021. <https://www.history.com/news/suffragists-vote-black-women>.

This source is about racism within the early women’s suffrage movement. I used this source to understand the background behind the legal and societal discrimination that black women faced before the Harlem Renaissance.

Minsker, Evan. "Lil Nas X Comes Out as Gay." Pitchfork. Last modified June 30, 2019. <https://pitchfork.com/news/lil-nas-x-comes-out-as-gay/>.

This article helped me to understand how modern musicians of color have used their musical platforms to express their sexualities. The story from this source is used when I talk about Lil Nas X as a lens to view Gladys Bentley’s legacy.

PBS. "Milestones in the American Gay Rights Movement." American Experience. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/stonewall-milestones-american-gay-rights-movement/>.

This source helped me understand the timeline of the gay rights movement in America. This information is used in my paper when I talk about the legalization of gay marriage and the Stonewall protests.



PBS News Desk. "Arresting Dress: A Timeline of Anti-Cross-Dressing Laws in the United States." PBS NewsHour. Last modified May 31, 2015.  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/arresting-dress-timeline-anti-cross-dressing-laws-u-s>.

This article helped me understand the anti-gay legislation that ruled the United States after the Harlem Renaissance. Since Gladys Bentley's act was built on her cross-dressing, I used the information from this source to explain why she had to change her act so drastically as America progressed to a more conservative society.

Shah, Haleema. "The Great Blues Singer Gladys Bentley Broke All the Rules." *Smithsonian*, March 14, 2019. Accessed November 21, 2021.  
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/great-blues-singer-gladys-bentley-broke-rules-180971708/>.

This article on the life of Gladys Bentley helped me understand the boundaries that Bentley pushed as a gay black woman in Prohibition-Era America. I will use the information from this source to strengthen my historical argument and to add to my description of who Gladys Bentley was.

"The Great Migration." *Smithsonian American Art Museum*.  
<https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/The-Great-Migration.pdf>.

This article on the Great Migration helped me understand how African Americans ended up in American cities leading up to the Harlem Renaissance. This source was used to add to my historical context of what was happening in America before the Harlem Renaissance.

Waxman, Olivia B. "'It Just Goes On and On': How the Race Riots of 1919's 'Red Summer' Helped Shape a Century of American History." *Time Magazine*, July 29, 2019. Accessed January 12, 2022. <https://time.com/5636454/what-is-red-summer/>.

This article on the Red Summer of 1919 helped me understand the post-war racial tensions and how they led up to the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance. This information will be used in my historical context to explain the events leading up to the Harlem Renaissance and the political climate of the United States in the early 1920s.

Waxman, Olivia B. "The Overlooked LGBTQ+ History of the Harlem Renaissance." *Time*, October 11, 2021. Accessed November 29, 2021.  
<https://time.com/6104381/lgbtq-history-harlem-renaissance/>.

This article on the LGBTQ+ experience during the Harlem Renaissance helped me to understand the triumphs of Black LGBTQ+ individuals during the 1920s-30s, as well as the struggles they faced during the Great Depression. The information in this source will be used as context for how LGBTQ artists (like Bentley) affected the debates around gender and sexuality in the 1900s.

#### Interviews:

Sullivan, Khalil. "The Proud Queer Influence of the Harlem Renaissance." Interview by Steven Underwood, Jr. *Cassius Life*. Last modified June 18, 2020. Accessed January 6, 2022. <https://cassiuslife.com/249313/queer-influence-harlem-renaissance/>.

This interview with Steven Underwood and Khalil Sullivan explains how Black LGBTQ+ pride began long before the Stonewall era, and actually began during the Harlem Renaissance, when gay performers like Gladys Bentley were popular. The information from this source will be used in my argument that the pride movement was a direct result of the Harlem Renaissance.

Wilkerson, Isabel. "The African American Exodus North." Interview by Terry Gross. NPR. Last modified September 13, 2010. Accessed November 8, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129827444>.

This source is about the Great Migration, which is a crucial part of my historical context. This particular source did not provide me with a lot of concrete details about the Great Migration, but it did show the perspective of the granddaughter of people who were part of the Great Migration, which can be helpful in my understanding of the legacies of my topic.

#### Primary Sources

##### Newspaper Articles:

*Alabama Tribune*. "Gladys Bentley, Entertainer, Dies." February 12, 1960. <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/60580198/1960-gladys-bentley-dies/>.

This newspaper clipping of an obituary for Gladys Bentley helped me to understand her immediate legacy, especially in regards to the decline in public recognition of her sexuality. This source will be used to analyze the short-term successes and failures of Bentley.

Bentley, Gladys. "I Am A Woman Again." Clipping. 1952. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/xs55mc356> (accessed January 07, 2022).

This article was written by Gladys Bentley for Ebony Magazine to publicize the procedure that she had gotten to revert her to a heterosexual, cisgender woman. This source showed me Bentley's harsh transition out of the spotlight after facing hatred and discrimination for her sexuality, which I will highlight when explaining the different perspectives about sexuality and this time as well as when I explain the short-term legacy of Gladys Bentley.

Jet Magazine. "Gladys Bentley Marries Calif. Cook." Clipping. 1952. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/n296wz37g> (accessed January 04, 2022).

This article shows the public opinions and perspectives on Gladys Bentley's controversial marriage to a man. I will use this information when explaining the end of Bentley's life, especially when talking about how societal pressures forced her to change her core values.

Songs:

Bentley, Gladys. "How Much Can I Stand?" Audio. YouTube. February 1929. Accessed January 6, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIvnVYLvqFY>.

This song by Gladys Bentley is about the struggles that she faced as a Black, lesbian woman in a time of extreme discrimination. I will use this source to show that while Bentley was open and unapologetic about who she was, she also faced many personal struggles that she expressed through her music.

Bentley, Gladys. "Lay it on the Line" Audio. YouTube. 1945. Accessed January 30, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1ZccLiEsmg>.

This is one of Gladys Bentley's later songs, and it shows me how she progressed as a musician while still maintaining her signature raspy voice and identity as a lesbian musician at the end of the Harlem Renaissance. This song was used to help my understanding of who Bentley was as a musician and how she used music to relate to the greater public, as well as my understanding of the political transition from a liberal to conservative society in the 1940s.

Bentley, Gladys. "Worried Blues" Audio recording. 1928. Accessed January 30, 2022. <http://nyfos.org/gladys-bentley-worried-blues/>

This song by Gladys Bentley helped me understand how Bentley integrated humor and compelling messages into her music in ways that captivated her audiences. The lyrics from

this song are used to introduce who Bentley was and how she used music as a form of expression.

Lil Nas X, "Sun Goes Down," track 9 on *Montero*, Columbia Records, 2021.  
<https://genius.com/Lil-nas-x-sun-goes-down-lyrics>

The lyrics to this song by Lil Nas X show the modern applications of Gladys Bentley's message into popular music. I will use this source to demonstrate Bentley's long-term impact on LGBTQ musicians of color at the end of my paper.

#### Images/Maps:

Campbell, E. Simms, Cartographer, and Publisher Dell Publishing Company. A night-club map of Harlem. [New York, N.Y.: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., ©, 1932] Map.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2016585261/>.

This map shows the importance and popularity of nightlife in the Harlem Renaissance and displays all of the most important locations to the Harlem Renaissance in the city. This source will be used to emphasize Gladys Bentley's musical impact on the Harlem Renaissance in the "during" section of my timeline.

*Portrait of Gladys Bentley (2)*. 1925-1939. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <http://www.queermusicheritage.com/BENTLEY/Garber%20Article/bentley%20in%20suit.jpg>. (Accessed February 10, 2022.)

This image of Gladys Bentley in her signature white tuxedo and top hat provides a visual demonstration of how Gladys Bentley dressed and carried herself. This image is referred to when Gladys Bentley is described in the introduction of the paper.

#### Collections:

"Gladys Bentley." Collection of photographs, articles, and songs. Queer Music Heritage.  
<https://www.queermusicheritage.com/bentley1.html>

This collection of articles, songs, and images of Gladys Bentley helped me to understand how Bentley was portrayed to the public throughout her life. I used images, articles, and advertisements from this source in my paper to show how clubs used Bentley to gain popularity and audiences.

“Gladys Bentley at the Ubangi Club.” Collection of photographs, articles, and advertisements. Queer Music Heritage. <https://www.queermusichaeritage.com/bentley-ubangi.html>

This collection of advertisements, articles, and images from Gladys Bentley’s time at the Ubangi club helped me to understand the impact that Bentley had on Harlem nightlife and clubs. I used quotes from this collection to demonstrate how Bentley was portrayed to the public.