

BLUES
LEGACIES
AND
BLACK
FEMINISM

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey,
Bessie Smith,
and Billie Holiday

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MAMA'S GOT THE BLUES

RIVALS, GIRLFRIENDS, AND ADVISORS

*Trust no man, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see
I said, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see
He'll tell you that he loves you and swear it is true
The very next minute he'll turn his back on you
Ah, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see.*

— "TRUST NO MAN"¹

Classic blues comprised an important elaboration of black working-class social consciousness. Gertrude Rainey's and Bessie Smith's songs constituted historical preparation for social protest. They also foreshadowed a brand of protest that refused to privilege racism over sexism, or the conventional public realm over the private as the preeminent domain of power. Because women's blues were not ideologically structured by the assumptions that defined the prominent black women's organizations of the era as middle-class, they could issue more direct and audacious challenges to male dominance. It is important, I think, to understand women's blues as a working-class form that anticipates the politicalization of the "personal" through the dynamic of "consciousness-raising," a phenomenon associated with the women's movement of the last three decades.

Studies of feminist dimensions in African-American women's historical activism tend to focus on individuals and organizations solidly anchored in

the developing black middle class. Paula Giddings points out that while the mission of the black women's club movement was fundamentally antiracist, it shared certain class assumptions with the white women's movement it criticized:

The Black women's club movement did have a number of things in common with the White club movement. . . . [T]he membership of both organizations consisted mostly of middle-class educated women who were steeped in the Protestant ethic. Neither group questioned the superiority of middle-class values or way of life, or had any romantic notions of the inherent nobility of the poor, uneducated masses; education and material progress were values that Black and White women shared. Both also believed in the importance of the home and the woman's moral influence within it. Black and White women saw the family as a microcosm and cornerstone of society.²

When the National Association of Colored Women was founded in 1896, it chose for its motto "Lifting as We Climb." This motto called upon the most educated, most moral, and most affluent African-American women to recognize the extent to which the dominant culture's racist perceptions linked them with the least educated, most immoral, and most impoverished black women. Mary Church Terrell described this cross-class relationship as a determination "to come into the closest possible touch with the masses of our women, through whom the womanhood of our people is always judged." More explicitly, "[s]elf-preservation demands that [educated black women] go among the lowly, illiterate and even the vicious, to whom they are bound by ties of race and sex . . . to reclaim them."³ While this posture was certainly admirable and helped to produce a distinguished tradition of progressive activism among black middle-class women from the NACW to the National Council of Negro Women and similar organizations today, what was and remains problematic is the premise that middle-class women embody a standard their poorer sisters should be encouraged to emulate.

The black women's club movement was especially concerned with the

notion of "defending our name" against pervasive charges of immorality and sexual promiscuity.⁴ Given the extent to which representations of black inferiority emanating from the dominant culture were bound up with notions of racial hypersexualization—the deployment of the myth of the black rapist to justify lynching is the most obvious example—it is hard to imagine that women like Fannie Barrier Williams, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell could have been as effective as they were without defending the sexual purity of their sisters. Yet, in the process of defending black women's moral integrity and sexual purity, they almost entirely denied sexual agency. As I emphasized in the first chapter, sexuality was one of the few realms in which masses of African-American women could exercise autonomy—and thus tangibly distinguish their contemporary status from the history of enslavement. Denial of sexual agency was in an important respect the denial of freedom for working-class black women.

The women about whom Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith sing are precisely those who were perceived by the club women as in need of salvation. Yet, middle-class women were not the only black women who engaged in community-building. I want to suggest that women's blues provided a cultural space for community-building among working-class black women, and that it was a space in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and "true womanhood" were absent.

During the period following World War I, large numbers of black people left the South or moved from rural areas into southern cities and thus into new job markets. At the same time, a distinctly postslavery music culture was widely disseminated, thus accelerating and complicating the development of a postslavery working-class consciousness. Yet, blues scholars working within the discipline of musicology are rarely concerned with the ideological implications of the blues, and historians studying the African-American past rarely turn to blues history. In the few works that attempt to probe blues history for insights about the development of black cultural consciousness, masculinist bias almost inevitably leads to a failure to take seriously the efforts of women blues musicians and the female reception of their work. As a consequence, the central part played by women both in

the blues and in the history of African-American cultural consciousness is often ignored.

Perhaps women's blues history has been so readily marginalized because the most frequently recurring themes of women's blues music revolve around male lovers and the plethora of problems posed by heterosexual relationships complicated by expressions of autonomous female sexuality. As I have attempted to point out, these love themes have complex social implications. Moreover, it is usually left unremarked that these songs provide a rich and complex backdrop for working-class women's lives, reflecting how they dealt with and experienced each other. Blues lyrics often construct these intragender relationships as antagonistic, as negotiations of encounters between competitors and rivals. At the same time, there are songs that highlight friendship, sisterhood, love, and solidarity between women. These range from Gertrude Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues"⁵—and other songs recorded by women of that era celebrating sexual love between women—to songs such as Bessie Smith's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," presenting advice to women on how to conduct themselves within their heterosexual relationships.⁶

As I argued in the first chapter, the abundance of themes revolving around love and sexuality in women's blues indicate the extent to which, for African Americans during the decades following emancipation, sexual love was experienced as physical and spiritual evidence—and the blues as aesthetic evidence—of freedom. From this historical vantage point, competition and rivalry in love may be seen as evidence of the historical construction of black working-class individuality. Although sexual rivalries no doubt existed among the emergent black middle class, ideological prohibitions required women either to be silent or to engage in a "proper" way of speaking about such matters.

As slave music suggests, the conditions for physical and spiritual survival during slavery (as well as the survival of transmuted African ancestral cultures) defined the value of the individual as subordinate to the community. The abolition of slavery, while it did not bring economic and political freedom, created a backdrop for new kinds of relationships between black individuals and thus for a different valuation of the individual in general. The new African Americans—women and men alike—came to perceive

their individual selves not only as welded together within the community, but as different from and in opposition to one another as well. For working-class women and men, the blues both allowed and furnished cultural representations of this new individuality.

Blues portraits of women in competition with each other for sexual partners—as “vicious” as they may have appeared to women like Mary Church Terrell—revealed working-class women as capable of exercising some measure of agency in choosing their partners. This is not to deny the problematic aspects of blues constructions of female jealousy and rivalry, sometimes to the point of violence. On the contrary, while representations of female sexual agency no doubt played a progressive role by encouraging assertiveness and independence among black women, these representations simultaneously legitimized a tradition of real and often murderous violence between women. As African-American women forged a continuum of independent womanhood—in contradiction to the prevailing ideology of women’s place—they also affirmed, in frequently exaggerated forms, sexist models of women’s conduct. While this contradictory character of the emergence of black female working-class individuality is far from inconsequential—and I will later identify some of the ways these contradictions are manifested in blues performances—I want to emphasize, for the moment, the importance of women’s blues as a site for the independent elaboration and affirmation of subjectivity and community for women of the black working class. Through the blues, black women were able to autonomously work out—as audiences and performers—a working-class model of womanhood. This model of womanhood was based in part on a collective historical memory of what had been previously required of women to cope with slavery. But more important, it revealed that black women and men, the blues audience, could respond to the vastly different circumstances of the postslavery era with notions of gender and sexuality that were, to a certain extent, ideologically independent of the middle-class cult of “true womanhood.” In this sense, as Hazel Carby has pointed out, the blues was a privileged site in which women were free to assert themselves publicly as sexual beings.

Beginning with W. E. B. Du Bois’s essay in *Darkwater*, many studies have emphasized the extent to which black working-class women’s rela-

tive economic independence summoned various modes of female consciousness that emphasized strength, resilience, and autonomy.⁷ However, such arguments often assume a strictly causal relationship between the economic conditions of slavery—which inflicted responsibilities for production on women that were equal to those placed on men—and the gendered consciousness among working-class black women that privileged independence.⁸ I want to emphasize women’s blues as an important cultural mediator for this gendered consciousness that transformed collective memories of slavery as it worked with a new social construction of love and sexuality. The blues provided a space where women could express themselves in new ways, a space in which they sometimes affirmed the dominant middle-class ideology but also could deviate from it.

I begin with the most complicated expressions of women’s independence and assertiveness, in which an independent sense of women’s strength was interwoven with themes of female rivalry over a male lover. “Rough and Tumble Blues,” composed and recorded by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, presents a powerful, fighting, rough-and-tumble woman, who boasts about her assertiveness and power. Her boasts, however, are directed at the women—Mama Tree Top Tall and Miss Shorty Toad—who have their eyes on her man. Her power is established partly by virtue of her ability to support the man financially—evidenced by the fact that she has bought him a “struttin’ suit.” The final verse of this song proclaims:

I got rough and killed three women 'fore the police got the news
I got rough and killed three women 'fore police got the news
'Cause mama's on the warpath with those rough and tumble blues.⁹

A similar song, “Wringing and Twisting Blues,” composed by Paul Garter and also recorded by Rainey, announces the protagonist’s desire to poison the woman for whom her lover left her:

But if I know that woman that caused my heart to moan
I'd cook a special dinner, invite her to my home
.....
If she eats what's on my table, she will be graveyard bound

I'll be right there to tell her, when they put her in the ground
 "You're the cause of me having those wringin' and a-twistin' blues."¹⁰

There are comparable images of female violence directed against other women in Bessie Smith's songs:

But if I find that gal
 That tried to steal my pal
 I'll get her told, just you wait and see.¹¹

Or, in more aggressive terms:

St. Louis gal, I'm gonna handle you, I said manhandle you

.....

Your life won't be worth a dime
 You stole my pal, St. Louis gal

I'm goin' a-huntin', root-dooti-doot
 You know just what I'm gonna shoot
 You stole my pal, St. Louis gal.¹²

Such representations of jealousy and violence need not be taken literally. However, we should keep in mind the current discourse on racialized violence that merges real violence and representations of violence. Critiques of gangsta rap, for example, argue for a rather simple and mechanical relation between cultural images and material reality. Of course, the murders of rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls within six months of one another in late 1996 and early 1997 tended to affirm this. But, with respect to the role of violence in Rainey's and Smith's work, I am arguing that these performed lyrics provide a glimpse of a kind of working-class women's community-building that, rather than advocating violence, proclaims women's complexity by refusing to deny or downplay female antagonism. The jealousy and competitiveness that was so openly expressed in the blues surely also characterized middle-class women's relations with each other. Remaining unnamed and unacknowledged, these antago-

nisms must have had vast political consequences about which we could not even begin to speculate today.

Jealousy and rivalry, as they defined female blues subjects' attitudes toward other women, do not always erupt into actual or imagined violence as in the songs cited above. Often, there is simply suspicion, as in Bessie Smith's "Empty Bed Blues":

Lord, he's got that sweet somethin', and I told my gal friend Lou
 He's got that sweet somethin', and I told my gal friend Lou
 From the way she's ravin', she must have gone and tried it too.

"Empty Bed Blues, Part II" concludes with a word of advice offered to other women:

When you get good lovin', never go and spread the news
 Yeah, it will double cross you and leave you with them empty bed blues.¹³

In a similar vein, "He's Got Me Goin'"—a song replete with erotic imagery—reveals a subject so utterly captivated by her lover that she fears other women may hear about him and try to attract his attentions:

'Fraid to advertise my man, simply scared to death
 These gals'll hear about him and try him for they self.¹⁴

Unmitigated jealousy, however, is not always the posture assumed by jealous blues subjects. The blues never remain fixed on one perspective, but rather different songs—sometimes the same song—explore experiences from various vantage points. This feature of the blues, the aesthetic incorporation of several perspectives and dimensions, may be interpreted as reflective of West African philosophical outlooks and representational strategies. Beneath the apparent simplicity and straightforwardness of the blues, complex visions—reflecting the complexity with which reality is perceived—can always be uncovered. This is another way in which the blues are located on an African cultural continuum.¹⁵

Some songs describe the woman succumbing to feelings of jealousy. In other songs, jealousy is named and acknowledged—even celebrated as an important subject and a powerful blues theme. Still other songs reveal a critical attitude toward jealousy, pointing to its potential destructiveness. Within the body of Gertrude Rainey's work, all three of these attitudes are evident. In "Sleep Talking Blues," the protagonist warns her man of the disastrous consequences of calling another woman's name in his sleep:

When you talk in your sleep, be sure your mama's not awake
 When you talk in your sleep, be sure your mama's not awake
 You call another woman's name, you'll think you wake up in a earthquake.¹⁶

In "Jealous Hearted Blues"—one of Lovie Austin's compositions—jealousy is repeatedly named, as the jealous woman acknowledges the extent to which she has been overcome by this emotion. The following chorus is repeated four times:

Yes I'm jealous, jealous, jealous hearted me
 Lord, I'm just jealous, jealous as I can be.

Indeed, the protagonist is so utterly driven by her jealousy that she announces this measure:

Gonna buy me a bulldog to watch him while I sleep
 To keep my man from making his midnight creep.¹⁷

Finally, in "Jealousy Blues," an analytical and implicitly critical posture is assumed. This song focuses on the catastrophic potential of jealousy for relationships and for one's psychological well-being, as well as on its violence and its material consequences:

If all the world is evil, all the world is evil, oh jealousy is the worst of all
 It'll make you mad and lonely, your sweet love will feel so pale
 It'll steal your loving daddy, have many folks in jail.¹⁸

The most complicated evocation of jealousy can be found in "My Man Blues," a song written by Bessie Smith and performed as a duet with Clara Smith, who was known during the period as the Empress's most serious musical rival. The piece is about competition for the attentions of a man who each woman insists belongs to her. There are powerful resonances in this song: the actual competitive relationship between the two Smiths as entertainers; the rivalry in general between women; and a troubled but unmistakable reconciliation:

Bessie: Clara, who was that man I saw you with the other day?
 Clara: Bessie, that was my smooth black daddy that we call Charlie Gray.
 Bessie: Don't you know that's my man? Yes, that's a fact.
 Clara: I ain't seen your name printed up and down his back.
 Bessie: You better let him be.
 Clara: What, old gal? Because you ain't talkin' to me.
 Bessie: That's my man, I want him for my own.
 Clara: [Spoken] No! No! [Sung] He's my sweet daddy.
 You'd better leave that man alone.
 Bessie: See that suit he got on? I bought it last week.
 Clara: I been buyin' his clothes for five years, for that is my black sheik.

[CHARLIE WHISTLES]

[SPOKEN]

Bessie: Is that you, honey?
 Charlie: 'Tain't nobody but—who's back there?
 Clara: It sounds like Charlie.
 Bessie: It 'tis my man, sweet papa Charlie Gray.
 Clara: Your man? How do you git that way?
 Bessie: Now, look here, honey. I been had that man for sumpteen years.
 Clara: Child, don't you know I'll turn your damper down?
 Bessie: Yes, Clara, and I'll cut you every way but loose!
 Clara: Well, you might as well be get it fixed.
 Bessie: Well, then.

[SUNG]

Bessie: I guess we got to have him on cooperation plan.
I guess we got to have him on cooperation plan.

[SPOKEN]

Clara: Bessie!

Bessie: Clara!

[SUNG]

Both: Ain't nothin' different 'bout all those other two-time men.

[SPOKEN]

Bessie: How 'bout it?

Clara: Suits me.

Bessie: Suits me too.

Clara: Well, then.¹⁹

Edward Brooks has called this humorous song "a fascinating document . . . which completely dispels the doubts of some commentators about Bessie Smith's supremacy over her nearest rival."²⁰ With respect to the content of the song, the women apparently are equal competitors for the love of the same man. That this rivalry is presented in broadly comic terms encourages in the audience a critical attitude toward such conduct on the part of women. What is most striking about this song is its resolution: the two women agree to share the man over whom they have been engaging in a verbal duel. Bessie proposes to Clara, "I guess we got to have him on cooperation plan." Her suggestion seems to imply how futile it is for them to be so consumed by jealousy that they constantly are at loggerheads with one another. At this point in the song, their focus on the male lover is displaced by their mutual acknowledgment of each other: each calls the other's name. And, in the final moments of the song, they sing together for the first time, agreeing that, since most other men would be as unfaithful as the one over whom they have been battling, they may as well act on Bessie's suggestion. The reconciliation with which the piece concludes, as

comically as it may be formulated, alludes to a possibility of sisterhood and solidarity that is forged in and through struggles around sexuality.

The concluding posture of "My Man Blues" is especially interesting for the way it provides an imagined alternative to the notions of women's community-building on which middle-class black club women relied. From their vantage point, women could only come together in defense of sexual purity. In other words, sexuality could only play a role in community-building as an object of ideological protest and cleansing. Of course, the kind of political work the club women set out to do would have been impossible had they not denied the sexually motivated antagonisms so central in blues discourse. In light of the emergence of sexuality in recent decades as an important arena of political struggle, it is important, nevertheless, to understand the blues as a form that did allow explicit articulations and explorations of sexual politics.

There are far more songs of advice among women's blues recordings than there are songs of female competition. One of the principal modes of community-building in women's blues is that of sharing experiences for the purpose of instructing women how to conduct their lives. Many of the songs that describe the difficulties of romantic partnerships are pedagogical in character. In some instances, the instruction warns women to beware of the powers of seduction some men possess, as in the following stanza from Bessie Smith's "Lookin' for My Man Blues":

He's a red hot papa, melt hearts as cold as ice
He's a red hot papa, melt hearts as cold as ice
Girls, if he ever love you once, you bound to love him twice.²¹

Or, as in Ma Rainey's "Trust No Man," women are instructed to "[t]rust no man, no further than your eyes can see."²²

There are also songs that advise women how to avoid triangular entanglements—and how to keep other women from eyeing their men. In Bessie Smith's "Keep It to Yourself," there is an underlying perception of other women as competitors and rivals. However, the instruction seeks to avoid active rivalry over men:

If your man is nice and sweet, servin' you lots of young pigmeat
Oh, yeah, keep it to yourself
.....

If your man is full of action, givin' you a lots of satisfaction
Oh, yeah, keep it to yourself
.....

If he tries to treat you right, give you lovin' every night
Oh, yeah, keep it to yourself

He don't fall for no one, he don't call for no one
He don't give nobody his L-O-V-E, 'cause it's yours
With your man you've got the best go, don't broadcast it on nobody's radio
Oh, yeah, keep it to yourself.²³

There is an interesting dialectic here between the individual woman and the larger female community. While women are clearly perceived as antagonists—as potential intruders into others' relationships—they are also viewed as possessing common fears and common interests. They are located both outside and inside a community of women. This aesthetic community of women emerges in its most developed form when blues women share stories about abusive partners or advise their sisters how to conduct themselves in relation to such men. Daphne Duval Harrison points out in her pioneering study of the classic blues singers that “[a]dvice to other women is a staple among women’s blues themes, especially on how to handle your men.”²⁴ Much of this advice seems to accept male supremacy without overtly challenging it, but it also displays unmistakable oppositional attitudes in its rejection of sexual passivity as a defining characteristic of womanhood.

A process similar to the consciousness-raising strategies associated with the 1960s women’s liberation movement unfolds in these songs, which are conversations among women about male behavior in which the traditional call-and-response structure of West African-based music takes on a new feminist meaning. Consciousness-raising groups affirmed the most dramatic insight of the early women’s liberation movement: the personal is political. Individual women shared personal experiences with the aim of

rendering explicit the underlying politics shaping women’s lives. Because of the complicated racial politics of the 1960s, which defined the women’s movement as white, and because of its emphasis on personal micropolitics (often seen as a retreat from the macropolitics of race), black women generally found it difficult to identify with the strategy of consciousness-raising. In retrospect, however, it is possible to detect ways in which the sharing of personal relationships in blues culture prefigured consciousness-raising and its insights about the social construction of individual experience. Seen in this light, the blues women can be understood as being responsible for the dissemination of attitudes toward male supremacy that had decidedly feminist implications.

That the blues is a highly “personal” aesthetic form in no way diminishes its important social and political dimensions. Lawrence Levine has pointed out that

[t]he blues was the most highly personalized, indeed, the first almost completely personalized music that Afro-Americans developed. It was the first important form of Afro-American music in the United States to lack the kind of antiphony that had marked other black musical forms. The call and response form remained, but in blues it was the singer who responded to himself or herself either verbally or on an accompanying instrument. In all these respects blues was the most typically American music Afro-Americans had yet created and represented a major degree of acculturation to the individualized ethos of the larger society. . . .²⁵

Levine is certainly accurate in his emphasis on the personal and personalizing dimensions of the blues, but he fails to recognize a more complicated persistence of the call-and-response form. The blues in performance creates space for spontaneous audience response in a manner that is similar to religious testifying. Just as the sermon lacks vitality when no response is forthcoming from the congregation, so the blues performance falls flat without the anticipated affirmations of the audience. It was this invitation to respond that rendered women’s blues such a powerful site for the construction of working-class consciousness and one of the only arenas in

which working-class black women could become aware of the deeply social character of their personal experiences.

The contemporary blues woman Koko Taylor has pointed out that the songs she writes and performs do not always reflect her own individual experiences. Yet, as she insists, she knows that among the women in her audiences, some will certainly identify with the situation she constructs:

Now when I write a song, I'm thinking about people in general, everyday living. Just look around, you know. Say, for instance, like when I wrote this tune "Baby Please Don't Dog Me." You know what I'm saying. I'm thinking about, O.K., here is some woman begging and she's pleading, Baby please don't dog me, when you know that you're doing wrong yourself. . . . Now that shoe might not fit my feet. That shoe might not fit your feet. But that shoe do fit somebody's feet. It's some woman out there is really thinking, she really feels the way that I'm singing about, what I'm talking about in this song. It's some woman somewhere really feels this way. These are the words she would like to say.²⁶

Call-and-response persists in women's blues through the construction of fictional subjects who assert their sexuality in a variety of ways. Such subjects permit a vast array of individual women to locate themselves within a blues community without having to abstract themselves from their personal lives. Rainey and Smith sang songs about women who had numerous male lovers, women angry about male sexual behavior, and women who loved women. Moreover, individual women were able to respond to and comment on the problems of other women without having to reveal the autobiographical sources of their authority and wisdom.

"The widespread use of the call-and-response discourse mode among African-Americans," black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points out,

illustrates the importance placed on dialogue. Composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements, or "calls," are punc-

uated by expressions, or "responses," from the listener, this Black discourse mode pervades African American culture. The fundamental requirement of this interactive network is active participation of all individuals. For ideas to be tested and validated, everyone in the group must participate.²⁷

Collins defines call-and-response discourse as an essential dimension of the "Afrocentric feminist epistemology" she proposes. While she invokes black women musicians like Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin in her discussion of yet another dimension of this alternative epistemology, the ethic of caring, she does not discuss the musical roots of call-and-response discourse. Such a discussion—particularly in relation to blues women like Bessie Smith—would render her compelling argument even more powerful. Collins is concerned with the possibility of knowledge production that suppresses neither the individual at the expense of the general welfare, nor feelings at the expense of rational thought. The participatory character of the blues affirms women's community without negating individual feelings.

Without the assumption of such an imagined community, the advice song in women's blues simply could not work. Gertrude Rainey's "Trust No Man," composed by Lillian Hardaway Henderson, is one of the finest examples of the advice song:

I want all you women to listen to me
Don't trust your man no further than your eyes can see
I trusted mine with my best friend
But that was the bad part in the end

Trust no man, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see
I said trust no man, no further than your eyes can see
He'll tell you that he loves you and swear it is true
The very next minute he'll turn his back on you
Ah, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see.²⁸

Singing "I want all you women to listen to me" in the first verse of the song, Rainey constructs an audience, an imagined community of women. It

is clear on the recording that Rainey is inviting response—even to this mechanical reproduction of her live performance. Her advice is framed and delivered in such a way that any woman listening can discover a way to identify with her admonition. The appeal is so powerful that it is easy to imagine the responses that came forth during her live performances. As if to preclude any doubt as to the invitation to respond, Rainey included spoken words in the second chorus: "Say! Take Ma Rainey's advice! Don't trust *no* man. I mean, not even your own man!" She concludes this spoken session with the words: "Just don't trust nobody! You see where it got me, don't you? He sure will leave you."

Bessie Smith's "Safety Mama" is a song of advice that counsels women to take strong stands with the men with whom they are involved, and to take measures to guarantee their own economic independence:

Let me tell you how and what one no-good man done to me
He caught me pretty, young, and wild, after that he let me be

He'd taken advantage of my youth, and that you understand
So wait awhile, I'll show you, child, just how to treat a no-good man

Make him stay at home, wash and iron
Tell all the neighbors he done lost his mind

Give your house rent shake on Saturday night
Monday morning you'll hold collectors good and tight.²⁹

This song's domestic imagery—and the gender reversal—have already been discussed in the first chapter. What is also striking about "Safety Mama" is that it emphatically counsels women to find ways of supporting themselves financially. Certainly, black women were compelled to work for a living, but for many decades following the abolition of slavery, the jobs that were available to them were limited to domestic work. "Safety Mama" suggests that rather than rely on their men—and perhaps also to avoid the perpetual servitude to which so many working black women

were condemned—they organize rent parties in order to acquire funds to meet their landlords' demands. By the 1920s these "house rent shakes" had developed into a community institution in the urban North, aiding men and women alike to raise the money necessary to "hold collectors good and tight." The imagined women's community in this song is one that refuses to place women in sexual and economic subordination to men. It affirms working-class women's independence. Again, it is possible to envision the enthusiastic responses that came from Smith's female audiences.

Another advice song recorded by Bessie Smith—also previously discussed—is "Pinchback Blues." It proposes to arm women with the power to resist men who attempt to use sexual attractiveness to exploit women. As in "Safety Mama" and Rainey's "Trust No Man," "Pinchback" opens with an evocation of a female community. "Girls," Smith states in the spoken introduction, "I wanna tell you about these sweet men. These men goin' 'round here tryin' to play cute. I'm hard on you, boys, yes sir." She then proceeds to narrate an experience of having been lured into a relationship that led to marriage with a "sweet man" who then refused to get a job to support either his female partner or himself:

I fell in love with a sweet man once, he said he loved me too
He said if I'd run away with him what nice things he would do

I'd travel around from town to town, how happy I would feel
But don't you know, he would not work . . .

Universalizing the lesson drawn from these experiences, Smith offers direct advice to her female audience:

. . . girls, take this tip from me
Get a workin' man when you marry, and let all these sweet men be

There's one thing about this married life that these young girls have got to know
If a sweet man enter your front gate, turn out your lights and lock your door.³⁰

The admonition "get a working man" is even more than a sound bit of advice to a woman who wishes to acquire a measure of material security. It suggests an identification with workers—and by extension, the values and perhaps also the collective consciousness associated with the working class. Women are urged to seek out solid working men and to learn how to resist the temptations of parasitic men who try to dazzle with their good looks and smooth talk.

It is interesting that Bessie Smith's appearance in the 1929 motion picture *St. Louis Blues*³¹—the only extant recording of her image on film—was in the role of a woman who did not take the advice offered in "Pinchback Blues." In this film, which incorporates an overabundance of racist and sexist stereotypes, the character she plays is abused and exploited by a handsome, light-skinned, disloyal, crapshooting man who has obviously attached himself to her for the sole purpose of taking her money. "Bessie," the character she plays in the film, has bought clothes for "Jimmy" (played by Jimmy Mordecai), allowed him to live in the hotel room she is renting, and provided him with money. He, in turn, is involved with a thin, light-skinned woman (played by Isabel Washington) who fits a Eurocentric definition of feminine beauty.

The plot of this film, superficially constructed around Bessie Smith's performance of W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," is based on Jimmy's taunting abandonment of Bessie, who is so utterly mesmerized by him that she pleads with him to stay even as she lies on the floor after being battered by him. When the scoundrel returns—the setting for this scene is a luxurious Harlem nightclub—she experiences a momentary exhilaration. However, she is soon overcome with despair once more because, as it turns out, Jimmy's romantic invitation to dance is simply a ploy to steal the money she has hidden in her garter. The film concludes with the pinchback, Jimmy, in a posture of triumph, and the victimized woman, Bessie, in a state of paralyzing depression.

The choice of Bessie Smith for the part in the film has been attributed to W. C. Handy, who, as a collaborator on the film, suggested to the director, Dudley Murphy, that she be cast in the leading role. "She had made the definitive version of the title tune," Chris Albertson has pointed out, and her powerful voice was one of the few that could be heard over the pro-

jected accompaniment of a forty-two-voice mixed choir, jazz band, and strings.³² It is not difficult to understand Smith's decision to make this film. During the late twenties, the popularity of blues had begun to wane and many leading blues singers—Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters included—increasingly began to sing Tin Pan Alley products and to seek roles in musicals. Smith had starred in a Broadway production that had flopped, and she, like other black women entertainers, was eager to break into the revolutionary medium of talking pictures. But black singers who had been able to exercise a certain measure of autonomy and control over their music found that the new medium used and abused their talents at the whims of producers and directors.

St. Louis Blues deserves criticism not only for its exploitation of racist stereotypes but for its violation of the spirit of the blues. Its direct translation of blues images into a visual and linear narrative violates blues discourse, which is always complicated, contextualized, and informed by that which is unspoken as well as by that which is named. *St. Louis Blues*, the film, flagrantly disregards the spirit of women's blues by leaving the victimized woman with no recourse. In the film, the response is amputated from the call. Although the advice song "Pinchback Blues" evokes a male figure who bears a striking resemblance to the character of Jimmy in the film, "Pinchback" warns women to stay away from such con men. In other women's blues that allude to these men, even when the criticism is not open and direct, the female subjects are never left in a state of absolute despair. Such a posture violates the spirit of women's blues. It is precisely the presence of an imagined community of supportive women that rescues them from the existential agony that Smith portrays at the end of *St. Louis Blues*.

There are also a number of advice songs that suggest how women should conduct themselves in relationships with men who are worthy partners. A cover Bessie Smith recorded of Alberta Hunter's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a typical woman-to-woman advice blues of this kind. It eventually became a standard. This song is unique in that it does not evoke an individual's experiences but rather is directed, in its entirety, to the female audience, articulating their collective experiences with their sexual partners. The persisting problems women encounter in their relationships

are named: the unfaithful male lover whose actions provoke tumultuous feelings of jealousy in his female partner, as well as fantasies (if not realities) of violent assault. The main advice in this song is that if a woman does find a man who is loyal, respectful, and sensitive, she should know how to reciprocate:

Lord, a good man is hard to find, you always get another kind
Yes, and when you think that he's your pal
You look and find him fooling 'round some old gal
Then you rave, you are crazed, you want to see him down in his grave

So if your man is nice, take my advice
Hug him in the morning, kiss him at night
Give him plenty lovin', treat your good man right
'Cause a good man nowadays sho' is hard to find.³¹

There is a series of songs among the recordings of Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith in which the woman who is experiencing difficulties in love shares her problems and her feelings with other women. These songs implicitly emphasize the dialectical relation between the female subject and the community of women within which this individuality is imagined. In an aesthetic realm, these songs construct a women's community in which individual women are able to locate themselves on a jagged continuum of group experiences. They encourage intimacy and familiarity between women. They contextualize particular events in the personal histories of the songs' subjects—often actions by their male partners that have wrought havoc in their lives—as stories they are sharing with their girlfriends. These girlfriends console them by implicitly confirming similar events in their own histories, thus providing emotional support and enabling women to confront such disruptive moments with attitudes that move from victimization to agency. Ma Rainey, for example, begins "Jelly Bean Blues" by asking, "Did you ever wake up with your good man on your mind?"³⁴ The song then proceeds to describe the subject's state of mind in the aftermath of her lover's desertion. The initial question establishes a relationship of intimacy and familiarity with her female audience.

Bessie Smith's version of Rainey's composition "Moonshine Blues" makes a few minor but significant changes, including the substitution in one stanza of "girls" for "lord." Smith thus explicitly conjures up a supportive female community. In Rainey's rendition:

I feel like screamin', I feel like cryin'
Lord, I been mistreated, folks, and don't mind dyin'.³⁵

In Smith's version:

Girls, I feel like screamin', I feel like cryin'
I been mistreated, and I don't mind dyin'.³⁶

Of course, Rainey, following the traditional patterns of blues discourse, is announcing her plight, publicizing her private woes, and thus, in this stanza, invokes her entire community—the folks—while directing her feelings of despair to the Lord. Smith, on the other hand, seeks solace not in the Lord but rather from the girls.

In "You Don't Understand," recorded by Bessie Smith in 1929, a collective female presence is invoked in the first line. The subject realizes that it is futile to try to persuade the man she loves to return to her: "Here I am, girls of mine, pleading but it's all in vain."³⁷ The entire text, with the exception of the opening phrase, is directed to the unresponsive man. Ma Rainey's "Titanic Man Blues" begins with a similar invocation: "Everybody fall in line, going to tell you 'bout that man of mine." From the story that follows, it is obvious that she is addressing herself to women. After this opening phrase, the female figure in the song proceeds to direct her comments to a lover she plans to leave, ending each verse with this statement: "It's the last time, Titanic, fare thee well."³⁸ It is as if she invites a community of women to be present at a ritualistic shunning. Invoking the presence of sympathetic women summons up the courage the woman needs in order to eject this man from her life.

Bessie Smith's "I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama" is one of the most stunning examples of sharing among women for the purpose of summoning up the emotional strength necessary to challenge male supremacy in personal relationships:

All you women understand
 What it is to be in love with a two-time man
 The next time he calls me sweet mama in his lovin' way
 This is what I'm going to say

"I used to be your sweet mama, sweet papa
 But now I'm just as sour as can be."

Again, this song anticipates the 1960s strategy of consciousness-raising. Affirming that the women in her listening audience have a common understanding of disloyal lovers, the protagonist creates, on the basis of that collective experience, a rehearsal space. One easily can imagine the testifying that punctuated Bessie Smith's performances of this song. She must have received enthusiastic shouts of encouragement from the women in her audiences as she sang, "This is what I'm going to say," and certainly as she informed her audience what she would tell "sweet papa":

"So don't come stallin' around my way expectin' any love from me
 You had your chance and proved unfaithful
 So now I'm gonna be real mean and hateful
 I used to be your sweet mama, sweet papa
 But now I'm just as sour as can be."

I ain't gonna let no man worry me sick
 Or turn this hair of mine gray
 Soon as I catch him at his two-time tricks
 I'm gonna tell him to be on his way
 To the world I scream, "No man can treat me mean
 And expect my love all the time."
 When he roams away, he'd better stay
 If he comes back he'll find

"You've had your chance and proved unfaithful
 So now I'm gonna be real mean and hateful

I used to be your sweet mama, sweet papa
 But now I'm just as sour as can be."¹⁹

Such songs as this and Rainey's "Trust No Man," in part because they evoked enthusiastic, testifying responses from their female audiences, would have been considered distasteful by middle-class club women. Formally educated women assumed that such cultural expressions tended to confirm the dominant culture's association of black women with sexual license and immorality. As the club women went about their work of "defending our name," they disassociated themselves from working-class women's blues culture, and assumed the missionary role of introducing "true womanhood" to their less fortunate sisters. In fact, they were defending the name of the female contingent of the black bourgeoisie. It did not occur to them then—and may not be obvious to us today—that this women's blues community was in fact defending the name of its own members. And while the club women achieved great victories in the historical struggles they undertook against racism, and forcefully affirmed black women's equality in the process, the ideological terrain on which they operated was infused with assumptions about the inherent inferiority of poor—and especially sexually assertive—women. In hindsight, the production, performance, and reception of women's blues during the decade of the twenties reveal that black women's names could be defended by working-class as well as middle-class women. Women's blues also demonstrate that working-class women's names could be defended not only in the face of the dominant white culture but in the face of male assertions of dominance in black communities as well.