I USED TO BE YOUR SWEET MAMA

Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity

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.

—"I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama"[1]

Like most forms of popular music, African-American blues lyrics talk about love. What is distinctive about the blues, however, particularly in relation to other American popular musical forms of the 1920s and 1930s, is their intellectual independence and representational freedom. One of the most obvious ways in which blues lyrics deviated from that era's established popular musical culture was their provocative and pervasive sexual—including homosexual—imagery.[2]

By contrast, the popular song formulas of the period demanded saccharine and idealized nonsexual depictions of heterosexual love relationships.[3] Those aspects of lived love relationships that were not compatible with the dominant, etherealized ideology of love—such as extramarital relationships, domestic violence, and the ephemerality of many sexual partnerships—were largely banished from the established popular musical culture. Yet these very themes pervade the blues. What is even more strik-

ing is the fact that initially the professional performers of this music—the most widely heard individual purveyors of the blues—were women. Bessie Smith earned the title "Empress of the Blues" not least through the sale of three-quarters of a million copies of her first record.[4]

The historical context within which the blues developed a tradition of openly addressing both female and male sexuality reveals an ideological framework that was specifically African-American.[5] Emerging during the decades following the abolition of slavery, the blues gave musical expression to the new social and sexual realities encountered by African Americans as free women and men. The former slaves' economic status had not undergone a radical transformation—they were no less impoverished than they had been during slavery.[6] It was the status of their personal relationships that was revolutionalized. For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered.[7] Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation.

Themes of individual sexual love rarely appear in the musical forms produced during slavery. Whatever the reasons for this—and it may have been due to the slave system's economic management of procreation, which did not tolerate and often severely punished the public exhibition of self-initiated sexual relationships—I am interested here in the disparity between the individualistic, "private" nature of sexuality and the collective forms and nature of the music that was produced and performed during slavery. Sexuality after emancipation could not be adequately expressed or addressed through the musical forms existing under slavery. The spirituals and the work songs confirm that the individual concerns of black people expressed through music during slavery centered on a collective desire for an end to the system that enslaved them. This does not mean there was an absence of sexual meanings in the music produced by African-American slaves.[8] It means that slave music—both religious and secular—was quintessentially collective music. It was collectively performed and it gave expression to the community's yearning for freedom.[9]

The blues, on the other hand, the predominant postslavery African-American musical form, articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires. The birth of the blues was aesthetic evidence of new psychosocial realities within the black population. This music was presented by individuals singing alone, accompanying themselves on such instruments as the banjo or guitar. The blues therefore marked the advent of a popular culture of performance, with the borders of performer and audience becoming increasingly differentiated.[10] Through the emergence of the professional blues singer—a predominantly female figure accompanied by small and large instrumental ensembles—as part of the rise of the black entertainment industry, this individualized mode of presenting popular music crystallized into a performance culture that has had an enduring influence on African-American music.

The spirituals, as they survived and were transformed during the postslavery era, were both intensely religious and the aesthetic bearers of the slaves' collective aspirations for worldly freedom.[11] Under changed historical circumstances in which former slaves had closer contact with the religious practices and ideologies of the dominant culture, sacred music began to be increasingly enclosed within institutionalized religious spaces. Slave religious practices were inseparable from other aspects of everyday life—work, family, sabotage, escape. Postslavery religion gradually lost some of this fluidity and came to be dependent on the church. As sacred music evolved from spirituals to gospel, it increasingly concentrated on the hereafter. Historian Lawrence Levine characterizes the nature of this development succinctly. "The overriding thrust of the gospel songs," he writes,

> was otherworldly. Emphasis was almost wholly upon God with whom Man's relationship was one of total dependence. . . . Jesus rather than the Hebrew children dominated the gospel songs. And it was not the warrior Jesus of the spirituals but a benevolent spirit who promised His children rest and peace and justice in the hereafter.[12]

The blues rose to become the most prominent secular genre in early twentieth-century black American music. As it came to displace sacred

music in the everyday lives of black people, it both reflected and helped to construct a new black consciousness. This consciousness interpreted God as the opposite of the Devil, religion as the not-secular, and the secular as largely sexual. With the blues came the designations "God's music" and "the Devil's music." The former was performed in church—although it could also accompany work[13]—while the latter was performed in jook joints, circuses, and traveling shows.[14] Despite the new salience of this binary opposition in the everyday lives of black people, it is important to underscore the close relationship between the old music and the new. The new music had old roots, and the old music reflected a new ideological grounding of black religion. Both were deeply rooted in a shared history and culture.

God and the Devil had cohabited the same universe during slavery, not as polar opposites but rather as complex characters who had different powers and who both entered into relationships with human beings. They also sometimes engaged with each other on fairly equal terms. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others have argued, the Devil was often associated with the trickster orisha Legba, or Elegua, in Yoruba religions.[15] Some of the folktales Zora Neale Hurston presents in *Mules and Men* portray the Devil not as evil incarnate but as a character with whom it was possible to identify in humorous situations.[16]

In describing the religious household in which she was reared, veteran blues woman Ida Goodson emphasizes that the blues were banned from her childhood home. Nevertheless, she and her playmates often played and sang the blues when her parents were away. On those occasions when her parents showed up unexpectedly, they easily made the transition to gospel music without missing a beat:

> My mother and father were religious persons. And they liked music, but they liked church music. They didn't like jazz like we do. And of course we could not even play jazz in our home while they were there. But just the moment they would turn their back, go to their society or church somewhere or another, we'd get our neighborhood children to come in there and we'd get to playing the blues and having a good time. But still we'd have one girl on the door watching to see when Mr. Goodson's coming back home or Mrs. Goodson. Because I knew if they came and caught us what we would get. . . . Whenever we'd see my father or my mother coming back home, the girl be saying, "There come Mr. Goodson 'nem." And they'd be so close up on us, we'd change the blues, singing "Jesus keep me near the cross." After that my mother and father would join us and we'd all get to singing church songs.[17]

As if reconciling the two positions—that of herself as a young musician and that of her religious parents—Goodson later explains that "the Devil got his work and God got his work."

During slavery, the sacred universe was virtually all-embracing. Spirituals helped to construct community among the slaves and infused this imagined community with hope for a better life. They retold Old Testament narratives about the Hebrew people's struggle against Pharaoh's oppression, and thereby established a community narrative of African people enslaved in North America that simultaneously transcended the slave system and encouraged its abolition. Under the conditions of U.S. slavery, the sacred—and especially sacred music—was an important means of preserving African cultural memory. Karl Marx's comments on religion as the "opium of the people"[18] notwithstanding, the spirituals attest to the fact that religious consciousness can itself play a transformative role. As Sojourner Truth and other abolitionists demonstrated—as well as insurrectionary leaders Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and the Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman—religion was far more than Marx's "illusory sun." Spirituals were embedded in and gave expression to a powerful yearning for freedom.[19] Religion was indeed, in Marx's words, the "soul" of "soulless conditions."[20]

The spirituals articulated the hopes of black slaves in religious terms. In the vast disappointment that followed emancipation—when economic and political liberation must have seemed more unattainable than ever—blues created a discourse[21] that represented freedom in more immediate and accessible terms. While the material conditions for the freedom about which the slaves had sung in their spirituals seemed no closer after slavery than they had seemed before, there were nevertheless distinct differences

between the slaves' personal status under slavery and during the post–Civil War period. In three major respects, emancipation radically transformed their personal lives: (1) there was no longer a proscription on free individual travel; (2) education was now a realizable goal for individual men and women; (3) sexuality could be explored freely by individuals who now could enter into autonomously chosen personal relationships. The new blues consciousness was shaped by and gave expression to at least two of these three transformations: travel and sexuality. In both male and female blues, travel and sexuality are ubiquitous themes, handled both separately and together. But what finally is most striking is the way the blues registered sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom; it was this dimension that most profoundly marked and defined the secularity of the blues.

Theologian James Cone offers the following definition of the blues, agreeing with C. Eric Lincoln's succinct characterization of them as "secular spirituals." Cone writes:

> They are secular in the same sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.[22]

It is not necessary to accede to Cone's essentialist invocation of a single metaphysical "truth" of black experience to gain from his description a key insight into why the blues were condemned as the Devil's music: it was because they drew upon and incorporated sacred consciousness and thereby posed a serious threat to religious attitudes.

Levine emphasizes the blurring of the sacred and the secular in both gospel music and the blues. It may not have been the secularity of the blues that produced such castigation by the church, he argues, but rather precisely their sacred nature. He writes:

> The blues was threatening not primarily because it was secular; other forms of secular music were objected to less strenuously and often not at all. Blues was threatening because its spokesmen and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of religion in the past.[23]

Although both Cone and Levine make references to Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and other women who composed and performed blues songs, they, like most scholars, tend to view women as marginal to the production of the blues. Note that in the passage quoted above, Levine refers quite explicitly to the "spokesmen" of the blues. With the simple substitution of "spokeswomen," his argument would become more compelling and more revealing of the new religious consciousness about which he writes.

Blues practices, as Levine asserts, did tend to appropriate previously religious channels of expression, and this appropriation was associated with women's voices. Women summoned sacred responses to their messages about sexuality.[24] During this period, religious consciousness came increasingly under the control of institutionalized churches, and male dominance over the religious process came to be taken for granted. At the same time that male ministers were becoming a professional caste, women blues singers were performing as professional artists and attracting large audiences at revival-like gatherings. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith were the most widely known of these women. They preached about sexual love, and in so doing they articulated a collective experience of freedom, giving voice to the most powerful evidence there was for many black people that slavery no longer existed.

The expression of socially unfulfilled dreams in the language and imagery of individual sexual love is, of course, not peculiar to the African-American experience. As part of the capitalist schism between the public and private realms within European-derived American popular culture, however, themes of romantic love had quite different ideological implications from themes of sexuality within postslavery African-American cultural expression. In the context of the consolidation of industrial capitalism, the sphere of personal love and domestic life in mainstream American culture came to be increasingly idealized as the arena in which happiness was to be sought.[25] This held a special significance for women, since love and domesticity were supposed to constitute the outermost lim-

its of their lives. Full membership in the public community was the exclusive domain of men. Therefore, European-American popular songs have to be interpreted within this context and as contributing to patriarchal hegemony.

The blues did not entirely escape the influences that shaped the role of romantic love in the popular songs of the dominant culture. Nevertheless, the incorporation of personal relationships into the blues has its own historical meanings and social and political resonances. Love was not represented as an idealized realm to which unfulfilled dreams of happiness were relegated. The historical African-American vision of individual sexual love linked it inextricably with possibilities of social freedom in the economic and political realms. Unfreedom during slavery involved, among other things, a prohibition of freely chosen, enduring family relationships. Because slaves were legally defined as commodities, women of childbearing age were valued in accordance with their breeding potential and were often forced to copulate with men—viewed as "bucks"—chosen by their owners for the sole purpose of producing valuable progeny.[26] Moreover, direct sexual exploitation of African women by their white masters was a constant feature of slavery.[27] What tenuous permanence in familial relationships the slaves did manage to construct was always subject to the whim of their masters and the potential profits to be reaped from sale. The suffering caused by forced ruptures of slave families has been abundantly documented.[28]

Given this context, it is understandable that the personal and sexual dimensions of freedom acquired an expansive importance, especially since the economic and political components of freedom were largely denied to black people in the aftermath of slavery. The focus on sexual love in blues music was thus quite different in meaning from the prevailing idealization of romantic love in mainstream popular music. For recently emancipated slaves, freely chosen sexual love became a mediator between historical disappointment and the new social realities of an evolving African-American community. Ralph Ellison alludes to this dimension of the blues, I think, when he notes "their mysteriousness . . . their ability to imply far more than they state outright and their capacity to make the details of sex convey meanings which touch on the metaphysical."[29]

Sexuality was central in both men's and women's blues. During the earliest phases of their history, blues were essentially a male phenomenon. The archetypal blues singer was a solitary wandering man accompanied by his banjo or guitar, and, in the words of blues scholar Giles Oakley, his principal theme "is the sexual relationship. Almost all other themes, leaving town, train rides, work trouble, general dissatisfaction, sooner or later revert to the central concern."[30] In women's blues, which became a crucial element of the rising black entertainment industry, there was an even more pronounced emphasis on love and sexuality.

The representations of love and sexuality in women's blues often blatantly contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women and being in love. They also challenged the notion that women's "place" was in the domestic sphere. Such notions were based on the social realities of middle-class white women's lives, but were incongruously applied to all women, regardless of race or class.[31] This led to inevitable contradictions between prevailing social expectations and black women's social realities. Women of that era were expected to seek fulfillment within the confines of marriage, with their husbands functioning as providers and their children as evidence of their worth as human beings. The sparsity of allusions to marriage and domesticity in women's blues therefore becomes highly significant.

In Bessie Smith's rendition of "Sam Jones Blues," which contains one of the few commentaries on marriage to be found in her body of work, the subject is acknowledged only in relation to its dissolution. Her performance of this song satirically accentuates the contrast between the dominant cultural construction of marriage and the stance of economic independence black women were compelled to assume for their sheer survival:

Sam Jones left his lovely wife just to step around
Came back home 'bout a year, lookin' for his high brown

Went to his accustomed door and he knocked his knuckles sore
His wife she came, but to his shame, she knew his face no more

Sam said, "I'm your husband, dear."
But she said, "Dear, that's strange to hear
You ain't talking to Mrs. Jones, you speakin' to Miss Wilson now

"I used to be your lofty mate
But the judge done changed my fate

"Was a time you could have walked right in and called this place your home sweet home
But now it's all mine for all time, I'm free and livin' all alone
. . . . . .
"Say, hand me the key that unlocks my front door
Because that bell don't read 'Sam Jones' no more, no
You ain't talkin' to Mrs. Jones, you speakin' to Miss Wilson now."[32]

Although the written lyrics reveal a conversation between "proper" English and black working-class English, only by listening to the song do we experience the full impact of Smith's manipulation of language in her recording. References to marriage as perceived by the dominant white culture are couched in irony. She mocks the notion of eternal matrimony—"I used to be your lofty mate"—singing genteel words with a teasing intonation to evoke white cultural conceptions. On the other hand, when she indicates the perspective of the black woman, Miss Wilson—who "used to be Mrs. Jones"—she sings in a comfortable, bluesy black English. This song is remarkable for the way Smith translates into musical contrast and contention the clash between two cultures' perceptions of marriage, and particularly women's place within the institution. It is easy to imagine the testifying responses Smith no doubt evoked in her female audiences, responses that affirmed working-class black women's sense of themselves as relatively emancipated, if not from marriage itself, then at least from some of its most confining ideological constraints.

The protagonists in women's blues are seldom wives and almost never mothers. One explanation for the absence of direct allusions to marriage

may be the different words mainstream and African-American cultures use to signify "male spouse." African-American working-class argot refers to both husbands and male lovers—and even in some cases female lovers—as "my man" or "my daddy." But these different linguistic practices cannot be considered in isolation from the social realities they represent, for they point to divergent perspectives regarding the institution of marriage.

During Bessie Smith's era, most black heterosexual couples—married or not—had children. However, blues women rarely sang about mothers, fathers, and children. In the subject index to her book *Black Pearls*, black studies scholar Daphne Duval Harrison lists the following themes: advice to other women; alcohol; betrayal or abandonment; broken or failed love affairs; death; departure; dilemma of staying with man or returning to family; disease and afflictions; erotica; hell; homosexuality; infidelity; injustice; jail and serving time; loss of lover; love; men; mistreatment; murder; other woman; poverty; promiscuity; sadness; sex; suicide; supernatural; trains; traveling; unfaithfulness; vengeance; weariness, depression, and disillusionment; weight loss.[33] It is revealing that she does not include children, domestic life, husband, and marriage.

The absence of the mother figure in the blues does not imply a rejection of motherhood as such, but rather suggests that blues women found the mainstream cult of motherhood irrelevant to the realities of their lives.[34] The female figures evoked in women's blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed.

In 252 songs recorded by Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, there are only four—all by Bessie Smith—that refer to marriage within a relatively neutral context or in a way that takes the marital relationship for granted. In "Poor Man's Blues," mention is made of the gross disparities between the economic conditions of the working man's wife and the rich man's wife: "Poor working man's wife is starvin', your wife's livin' like a queen."[35] In "Pinchback Blues," advice is offered to women with respect to the foremost quality they should seek in a husband—namely, that he be a working man. Bessie Smith sings the following phrases in a way that demands she be taken seriously:

. . . 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.[36]

Even though this song assumes that most women listeners will get married, it does not evoke the romantic expectations usually associated with marriage. Instead, it warns women not to enter into marriages in which they will end up supporting an exploitative man—a "sweet man" or a "pinchback."

"Take Me for a Buggy Ride," a popular song filled with sexual innuendo and recorded in 1933 during the very last session of Bessie Smith's career, contains a passing uncritical reference to marriage:

Daddy, you as sweet as you can be when you take me for a buggy ride
When you set me down upon your knee and ask me to be your bride.[37]

Even these explicit references to marriage may be attributed to the fact that Smith was seeking ways to cross over into mainstream musical culture. She herself decided to record no blues during what would be her final recording session. She wanted to sing only popular songs, all of which were composed by the husband-and-wife team of Leola B. Wilson and Wesley "Socks" Wilson.[38] Her producer, John Hammond, may also have had something to do with this decision to exclude blues songs. After a hiatus in her recording career—occasioned both by the anticipated obsolescence of the blues and the 1929 stock market crash that left the recording industry in shambles—there were obvious economic reasons for wanting to appeal to as broad an audience as possible.

The sexual allusions in these songs, along with songs recorded earlier in the thirties, have caused them to be labeled quasi-pornographic. While sexual metaphors abound in these songs, the female characters are clearly in control of their sexuality in ways that exploit neither their partners nor

themselves. It is misleading, I think, to refer to songs such as "Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl" as pornographic. Nevertheless, Hammond is probably correct in his contention that, given their superficial approach to sexuality, "they do not compare with Bessie's own material of the twenties."[39] The reference to marriage in "Take Me for a Buggy Ride" may very well be a result of Bessie Smith's attempt to cross over into a cultural space that required her to position herself in greater ideological proximity to white audiences, while maintaining her connection with black fans. Having put together a swing accompaniment for this last session consisting of black and white musicians—Buck Washington, Jack Teagarden, Chu Berry, Frankie Newton, Billy Taylor, and Bobby Johnson, with Benny Goodman playing on one number—John Hammond certainly was expecting to see these records distributed outside the "race records" market.

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, a pioneer on the black entertainment circuit and the person responsible for shaping women's blues for many generations of blues women, received her title "Mother of the Blues" before she made her first recording. In the songs she recorded, the institution of monogamous marriage often was cavalierly repudiated with the kind of attitude that is usually gendered as male. "Blame It on the Blues," for example, implicitly rejects the sexual exclusivity of marriage. Reflecting on the source of her distress, the protagonist finds that she can blame it neither on her "husband," her "man," nor her "lover." The lyrics of this song—and the tragicomic way Rainey sings them—refuse to privilege marriage over non- or extramarital sexual partnerships:

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.[40]

In "Shave 'Em Dry," a song rich in provocative sexual metaphors, Rainey sings about a woman involved with a married man.[41] "When your

wife comes," she sings with unflappable seriousness, "tell her I don't mean no harm." And in the spoken introduction to "Gone Daddy Blues," the woman who has left her husband for another man seems to play with the notion of convincing him to take her back:

Unknown man: Who's that knocking on that door?
Rainey: It's me, baby.
Man: Me who?
Rainey: Don't you know I'm your wife?
Man: What?! Wife?!
Rainey: Yeah!
Man: Ain't that awful? I don't let no woman quit me but one time.
Rainey: But I just quit one li'l old time, just one time!
Man: You left here with that other man, why didn't you stay?[42]

"Misery Blues" is the only one of Rainey's songs in which the woman appears truly oppressed by the expectations associated with the institution of marriage. She is singing the "misery blues" because she has allowed herself to be deceived by a man who promised to marry her, that is, to support her in the traditional patriarchal way. She expected marriage to free her from her daily toil. The husband-to-be in this song not only reneges on his promise of marriage, but absconds with all her money:

I love my brownskin, indeed I do
Folks I know used to me being a fool
I'm going to tell you what I went and done
I give him all my money just to have some fun

He told me that he loved me, loved me so
If I would marry him, I needn't to work no mo'
Now I'm grievin', almost dyin'
Just because I didn't know that he was lyin'.[43]

While Rainey's performance mournfully emphasizes the woman's grief, "Misery Blues" can be construed as an "advice" song that cautions women

who might similarly be deceived by the romantic expectations associated with the bourgeois, patriarchal institution of marriage.

Bessie Smith's work poses more explicit challenges to the male dominance that ideologically inheres in this institution. In "Money Blues," for example, the wife makes life unbearable for her husband with her incessant demands for money and high living.[44] The husband, Samuel Brown, has "beer money," but his wife demands champagne. (As is often the case, the "blues" in the title notwithstanding, this is a popular song, not a twelve-bar blues.) In "Young Woman's Blues," one of Smith's own compositions, the protagonist is simply not interested in marriage. Smith's performance of the following verse exudes a self-confident sense of female independence and unabashed embrace of sexual pleasure:

No time to marry, no time to settle down
I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round.

The same sentiment is definitively restated in the closing lines of the song:

I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep killer brown
I ain't gonna marry, ain't gon' settle down
I'm gon' drink good moonshine and run these browns down
See that long lonesome road, Lord, you know it's gotta end
And I'm a good woman and I can get plenty men.[45]

In what is undoubtedly the most disturbing reference to marriage in Bessie Smith's work, the narrator of "Hateful Blues" threatens to use the butcher knife she received as a wedding present to carve up her fickle husband.[46]

Early women's blues contain few uninflected references to marriage. Evocations of traditional female domesticity, whether associated with marriage or not, are equally rare. When women are portrayed as having fulfilled the domestic requirements socially expected of women in relationships with men, it is often to make the point that the women have been abused or abandoned. In Bessie Smith's "Weeping Willow Blues," the narrator proclaims:

Folks, I love my man, I kiss him mornin', noon, and night
I wash his clothes and keep him clean and try to treat him right
Now he's gone and left me after all I've tried to do.[47]

Smith sings these lines with convincing sincerity, thus debunking the notion that the fulfillment of conventional female domestic responsibilities is the basis for happiness in marriage. On the other hand, "Yes, Indeed He Do" is full of irony in its references to domesticity, implicitly criticizing the stultifying household work women are compelled to do for their men:

I don't have to do no work except to wash his clothes
And darn his socks and press his pants and scrub the kitchen floor.[48]

The sardonic "Safety Mama," another Smith composition, humorously critiques the sexual division of labor that confines women to the household. The song contains an inverted image of domesticity, in which the man is compelled by the woman to take on what are assumed to be female household chores as punishment for his sexist behavior in the relationship:

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.[49]

The manner in which Bessie Smith creates this musical caricature of domesticity reveals the beginnings of an oppositional attitude toward patriarchal ideology.

There are important historical reasons that romanticized images of marriage—and the permanency in personal relationships implied by this social institution—are absent from women's blues. Normative representations of marriage as the defining goal of women's lives blatantly contradicted black social realities during the half-century following emancipation. A poor black woman of the era who found herself deserted or rejected by a male lover was not merely experiencing private troubles; she also was caught in a complex web of historical circumstances. However

smoothly a personal relationship may have been progressing, a recently emancipated black man was compelled to find work, and even if he found a job near the neighborhood where he and his partner had settled, he nevertheless might be seduced by new possibilities of travel. In search of work—and also in search of the perpetually elusive guarantees of security and happiness—men jumped freight trains and wandered from town to town, from state to state, from region to region. There were imperative economic reasons for undertaking journeys away from home, yet even when jobs were not to be found and available employment was backbreaking and poorly compensated, the very process of traveling must have generated a feeling of exhilaration and freedom in individuals whose ancestors had been chained for centuries to geographical sites dictated by slave masters.[50] This impulse to travel would infect great numbers of black men as a sociohistorically initiated compulsion, and would later be rendered in song in Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail":

I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving
Blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail
I can't keep no money, hellhound on my trail
Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail.[51]

Many of the absconding and unfaithful lovers memorialized by blues women were in pursuit of that fleeting glimpse of freedom offered by the new historical possibility of self-initiated travel. Most women, on the other hand, were denied the option of taking to the road. In his "C. & A. Blues," Peetie Wheatstraw offered one of the many blues versions of this disparity between the male and female conditions. He portrayed the man assuaging his pain through travel and the woman assuaging hers with tears:

When a woman gets the blues, she hangs her head and cries
When a man gets the blues, he flags a freight train and rides.[52]

A few songs recorded by Bessie Smith—"Chicago Bound Blues" is one[53]—support the masculinist view of men's and women's divergent

responses to new forms of emotional pain in the postslavery era. In general, however, blues women did not acquiesce to the idea—which appears in various forms in male country blues—that men take to the road and women resort to tears. The women who sang the blues did not typically affirm female resignation and powerlessness, nor did they accept the relegation of women to private and interior spaces.

Although women generally were not socially entitled to travel on as wide a scale as men, significantly, blues women overcame this restriction.[54] Likewise, in their music, they found ways to express themselves that were at variance with the prevailing standards of femininity. Even as they may have shed tears, they found the courage to lift their heads and fight back, asserting their right to be respected not as appendages or victims of men but as truly independent human beings with vividly articulated sexual desires. Blues women provided emphatic examples of black female independence.

A significant number of songs in Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's recorded legacy suggest ways in which the structures of gender politics in black communities deviated from those of the dominant culture. In the call-and-response tradition, many of her love- and sex-oriented songs mirror or furnish responses to songs associated with the male country blues tradition. Male blues deal with a wider range of experiences, many accumulated on the job or on the road. But those that revolve around sexuality or include observations on love relationships are not radically different from their female counterparts in the behavior they describe and the images they evoke. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, as Sandra Lieb, author of *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, has observed, relatively few of Rainey's songs evoke women so incapacitated by their lover's infidelity, desertion, or mistreatment that they are bereft of agency or driven to the brink of self-destruction. "Only thirteen of her [ninety-two recorded] songs describe a woman in abject sorrow, lying in bed and weeping for her absent man."[55] Far more typical are songs in which women explicitly celebrate their right to conduct themselves as expansively and even as undesirably as men. The protagonists in Ma Rainey's blues often abandon their men and routinely and cavalierly threaten them, even to the point of violence.

While the overwhelming majority of Bessie Smith's 160[56] available recorded songs allude to rejection, abuse, desertion, and unfaithful lovers, the preponderant emotional stance of the singer-protagonist—also true of Ma Rainey—is far from resignation and despair. On the contrary, the most frequent stance assumed by the women in these songs is independence and assertiveness—indeed defiance—bordering on and sometimes erupting into violence. The first song Bessie Smith recorded, a cover of Alberta Hunter's popular "Down Hearted Blues," portrays a heartbroken woman whose love for a man was answered with mistreatment and rejection. But her bout with the blues does not result in her dejectedly "hanging her head and crying." Smith represents this woman as proud and even contemptuous of the man who has mistreated her, accentuating, in the following lines, the woman's self-respect:

> It may be a week, it may be a month or two
> It may be a week, it may be a month or two
> But the day you quit me, honey, it's comin' home to you.[57]

It may be true, as Paul Garon has observed, that "[t]he blues is . . . a self-centered music, highly personalized, wherein the effects of everyday life are recounted in terms of the singers' reactions."[58] At the same time, however, the blues give expression to larger considerations reflecting worldviews specific to black working-class communities. Thus, "Down Hearted Blues" does not conclude with the implicit threat made against the man who has mistreated and deserted the female protagonist. Instead, it ends with an address to men in general—a bold, perhaps implicitly feminist contestation of patriarchal rule:

> I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand
> I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand
> I'm gonna hold it until you men come under my command.[59]

An equally bold challenge can be found in Ma Rainey's wonderfully humorous "Barrel House Blues," which celebrates women's desires for alcohol and good times and their prerogative as the equals of men to engage in acts of infidelity:

> Papa likes his sherry, mama likes her port
> Papa likes to shimmy, mama likes to sport
> Papa likes his bourbon, mama likes her gin
> Papa likes his outside women, mama like her outside men.[60]

This signifying blues, in drawing parallels between male and female desire, between their similar inclinations toward intoxication, dance, and sex, launches a brazen challenge to dominant notions of women's subordination. "Barrel House Blues" sketches a portrait of a good-time "mama" no less at ease with her body and her sexuality than her "papa." Such glimpses of women who assert their sexual equality with men recur again and again in the work of the classic blues singers.[61] Indeed, some of these fictional portraits probably reflect actual experiences of black women who traveled the professional entertainment circuits. Ma Rainey was notorious for being able to outshine any man with her amazing sexual voracity—and Bessie Smith was known for being able to trounce any man who challenged her to a drinking duel.

In Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's and Bessie Smith's times, women's blues bore witness to the contradictory historical demands made of black American women. On the one hand, by virtue of their femaleness, they faced ideological expectations of domesticity and subordination emanating from the dominant culture. On the other hand, given the political, economic, and emotional transformations occasioned by the disestablishment of slavery, their lived experiences rendered such ideological assumptions flagrantly incongruous. In the blues, therefore, gender relationships are stretched to their limits and beyond. A typical example is one of Bessie Smith's early songs, "Mistreatin' Daddy," which opens with an address to an abusive and insensitive lover:

> Daddy, mama's got the blues, the kind of blues that's hard to lose.
> 'Cause you mistreated me and drove me from your door.

Smith sings these lines as if to convince us that this woman has attempted to make the relationship work, and is utterly despondent about having been abused by a man she may have loved. Before long, however, she menacingly informs him,

> If you see me setting on another daddy's knee
> Don't bother me, I'm as mean as can be
> I'm like the butcher right down the street
> I can cut you all to pieces like I would a piece of meat.[62]

Fearless, unadorned realism is a distinctive feature of the blues. Their representations of sexual relationships are not constructed in accordance with the sentimentality of the American popular song tradition. Romantic love is seldom romanticized in the blues. No authentic blues woman could, in good faith, sing with conviction about a dashing prince whisking her into the "happily-ever-after." Only a few songs among Bessie Smith's recorded performances—and none in Rainey's—situate love relationships and sexual desire within a strictly masculinist discursive framework. The classic blues women sang of female aspirations for happiness and frequently associated these aspirations with sexual desire, but they rarely ignored the attendant ambiguities and contradictions. In "Honey, Where You Been So Long?" for example, Ma Rainey evokes a woman who is overjoyed that her man is returning:

> He'll soon be returning and glad tidings he will bring
> Then I'll throw my arms around him, then begin to sing.

But she does not attempt to pretend that this man is a paragon of perfection:

> Honey, where you been so long?
> Never thought you would treat me wrong
> Look how you have dragged me down.[63]

Note a language that mocks the dominant white culture with down-home black English. Bessie Smith's "Sam Jones Blues" uses the same technique to highlight cultural contradictions black women experienced when comparing their own attitudes toward love and sex with the idealizations of the dominant culture.

The woman in Ma Rainey's "Lawd, Send Me a Man Blues" harbors no illusions about the relationship she desires with a man. She is lonely and wonders "who gonna pay my board bill now." Appealing for any man she can get, she pleads with a bluesy zeal:

> Send me a Zulu, a voodoo, any old man
> I'm not particular, boys, I'll take what I can.[64]

Bessie Smith's "Baby Doll" conveys a similar message:

> I wanna be somebody's baby doll so I can get my lovin' all the time
> I wanna be somebody's baby doll to ease my mind
> He can be ugly, he can be black, so long as he can eagle rock and ball the jack.[65]

These blues women had no qualms about announcing female desire. Their songs express women's intention to "get their loving." Such affirmations of sexual autonomy and open expressions of female sexual desire give historical voice to possibilities of equality not articulated elsewhere. Women's blues and the cultural politics lived out in the careers of the blues queens put these new possibilities on the historical agenda.

The realism of the blues does not confine us to literal interpretations. On the contrary, blues contain many layers of meanings and are often astounding in their complexity and profundity. Precisely because the blues confront raw emotional and sexual matters associated with a very specific historical reality, they make complex statements that transcend the particularities of their origins. There is a core of meaning in the texts of the classic blues women that, although prefeminist in a historical sense, reveals that black women of that era were acknowledging and addressing issues central to contemporary feminist discourse.

By focusing on the issue of misogynist violence, the first activist moments of the second-wave twentieth-century women's movement exposed the centrality of the ideological separation of the public and private spheres to the structure of male domination. In the early 1970s, women began to speak publicly about their experiences of rape, battery, and the violation of their reproductive rights. Obscured by a shroud of silence, these assaults against women traditionally had been regarded as a fact of private life to be shielded at all costs from scrutiny in the public sphere. That this cover-up would no longer be tolerated was the explosive meaning behind feminists' defiant notion that "the personal is political."[66]

The performances of the classic blues women—especially Bessie Smith—were one of the few cultural spaces in which a tradition of public discourse on male violence had been previously established. One explanation for the fact that the blues women of the 1920s—and the texts they present—fail to respect the taboo on speaking publicly about domestic violence is that the blues as a genre never acknowledges the discursive and ideological boundaries separating the private sphere from the public. Historically, there has been no great body of literature on battering because well-to-do white women who were in a position to write about their experiences in abusive relationships only recently have been convinced that such privately executed violence is a suitable subject of public discourse.

There is, however, a body of preserved oral culture—or "orature," to use a term employed by some scholars[67]—about domestic abuse in the songs of blues women like Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith. Violence against women was always an appropriate topic of women's blues. The contemporary urge to break the silence surrounding misogynist violence and the organized political movement challenging violence against women has an aesthetic precursor in the work of the classic blues singers.

Women's blues have been accused of promoting acquiescent and therefore antifeminist responses to misogynist abuse. It is true that some of the songs recorded by Rainey and Smith seem to exemplify acceptance of male violence—and sometimes even masochistic delight in being the target of lovers' beatings. Such claims do not take into account the extent to which blues meaning is manipulated and transformed—sometimes even

into its opposite—in blues performance. Blues make abundant use of humor, satire, and irony, revealing their historic roots in slave music, wherein indirect methods of expression were the only means by which the oppression of slavery could be denounced. In this sense, the blues genre is a direct descendant of work songs, which often relied on indirection and irony to highlight the inhumanity of slave owners so that their targets were sure to misunderstand the intended meaning.[68]

Bessie Smith sings a number of songs whose lyrics may be interpreted as accepting emotional and physical abuse as attendant hazards for women involved in sexual partnerships. But close attention to her musical presentation of these songs persuades the listener that they contain implicit critiques of male abuse. In "Yes, Indeed He Do," Smith's sarcastic presentation of the lyrics transforms observations on an unfaithful, abusive, and exploitative lover into a scathing critique of male violence:

> Is he true as stars above me? What kind of fool is you?
> He don't stay from home all night more than six times a week
> No, I know that I'm his Sheba, and I know that he's my sheik
> And when I ask him where he's been, he grabs a rocking chair
> Then he knocks me down and says, "It's just a little love lick, dear."
> . . . . . .
> If he beats me or mistreats me, what is that to you?
> I don't have to do no work except to wash his clothes
> And darn his socks and press his pants and scrub the kitchen floor
> I wouldn't take a million for my sweet, sweet daddy Jim
> And I wouldn't give a quarter for another man like him
>
> Gee, ain't it great to have a man that's crazy over you?
> Oh, do my sweet, sweet daddy love me? Yes, indeed he do.[69]

Edward Brooks, in *The Bessie Smith Companion*, makes the following comment about this song:

> Bessie delivers the song with growling gusto, as if it were really a panegyric to an exemplary lover; she relates his wrongs with the approval of virtues and it comes as a jolt when the exultation in her voice is compared with her actual words.[70]

Brooks's analysis assumes that Smith was unselfconscious in her performance of this song. He therefore misses its intentional ambiguity and complexity. Smith was an accomplished performer, actor, and comedian and was therefore well acquainted with the uses of humor and irony. It is much more plausible to characterize her decision to sing "Yes, Indeed He Do" with mock praise and elation as a conscious effort to highlight, in the most effective way possible, the inhumanity and misogyny of male batterers.

"Yes, Indeed He Do" was recorded in 1928, five years after Smith began her career as a recording artist. In 1923, she recorded "Outside of That," a song about a man who was regularly abusive, but also a superb lover. The sarcasm in "Yes, Indeed He Do" is far more conspicuous than in the earlier song, but "Outside of That" also deserves a close examination. The protagonist enthusiastically proclaims her love for a man who batters her, and who becomes especially violent in response to her announcement—in jest, claims the narrator—that she no longer loves him:

> I love him as true as stars above
> He beats me up but how he can love
> I never loved like that since the day I was born.
>
> I said for fun I don't want you no more
> And when I said that I made sweet papa sore
> He blacked my eye, I couldn't see
> Then he pawned the things he gave to me
> But outside of that, he's all right with me.
>
> I said for fun I don't want you no more
> And when I said that I made sweet papa sore
> When he pawned my things, I said you dirty old thief
> Child, then he turned around and knocked out both of my teeth
> Outside of that, he's all right with me.[71]

At first glance, this song appears to embrace—and even glorify—male violence. It is often interpreted as overtly condoning sadomasochistic relationships. But when one considers the lyrics carefully—even apart from Smith's interpretation—there is no convincing evidence that the woman derives pleasure from the beatings she receives. On the contrary, she lauds her lover for his sexual expertise and proclaims that she loves him despite the brutality he inflicts upon her. Smith's presentation of "Outside of That" is somewhat more subtle than in "Yes, Indeed He Do," but a close listening does confirm that she uses her voice to ironize and criticize the woman—even if she herself happens to be that woman—who would embrace with such enthusiasm a partnership so injurious to her physical and emotional well-being.

The historically omnipresent secrecy and silence regarding male violence is linked to its social construction as a private problem sequestered behind impermeable domestic walls, rather than a social problem deserving political attention. Until very recently, it was so effectively confined to the private sphere that habitually police officers would intervene in "domestic disputes" only in "life and death" situations. Even in the 1990s, police intervention, when it does occur, is still accompanied by a serious reluctance to insert the public force of the state into the private affairs of individuals.[72] "Outside of That" effectively presents violence against women as a problem to be reckoned with publicly. The song names the problem in the voice of the woman who is the target of the battering: "He beats me up . . . He blacked my eye, I couldn't see . . . he turned around and knocked out both of my teeth." It names domestic violence in the collective context of blues performance and therefore defines it as a problem worthy of public discourse. Hearing this song, women who were victims of such abuse consequently could perceive it as a shared and thus social condition.

Whether individual women in Bessie Smith's audience were able to use her performance as a basis for developing more critical attitudes toward the violence they suffered is a matter for speculation. Certainly, the organized campaign to eradicate domestic violence did not emerge in the United States until the 1970s. Women involved in these early efforts borrowed a "consciousness-raising" strategy from the Chinese women's

movement referred to as "speak bitterness," or "speak pains to recall pains."[73] This strategy resonates strikingly with blues practices. Among black working-class women, the blues made oppositional stances to male violence culturally possible, at least at the level of individual experience. The lyrics indicate resistance by the victim: "I said for fun I don't want you no more . . . When he pawned my things, I said you dirty old thief." Though these comments are offered in a humorous vein, they nevertheless imply that the victim does not cower before the batterer but rather challenges his right to assault her with impunity. In Bessie Smith's rendering of this song, the recurring phrase "outside of that, he's all right with me" is sung with a satirical edge, implying that its significance may be precisely the opposite of its literal meaning.

Ma Rainey's "Black Eye Blues," a comic presentation of the issue of domestic violence, describes a woman named Miss Nancy who assumes a posture of defiance toward her abusive partner:

I went down the alley, other night
Nancy and her man had just had a fight
He beat Miss Nancy 'cross the head
When she rose to her feet, she said

"You low down alligator, just watch me
Sooner or later gonna catch you with your britches down
You 'buse me and you cheat me, you dog around and beat me
Still I'm gonna hang around

"Take all my money, blacken both of my eyes
Give it to another woman, come home and tell me lies
You low down alligator, just watch me
Sooner or later gonna catch you with your britches down
I mean, gonna catch you with your britches down."[74]

Women's blues suggest emergent feminist insurgency in that they unabashedly name the problem of male violence and so usher it out of the shadows of domestic life where society had kept it hidden and beyond pub-

lic or political scrutiny. Even when she does not offer a critical perspective, Bessie Smith names the problem and the ambivalence it occasions. In "Please Help Me Get Him off My Mind," for example, the protagonist consults a Gypsy about her emotional entanglement with a violent man, whose influence she wishes to exorcise.[75]

Other explicit references to physical abuse in Smith's work can be found in "It Won't Be You,"[76] "Slow and Easy Man,"[77] "Eavesdropper's Blues,"[78] "Love Me Daddy Blues,"[79] "Hard Driving Papa,"[80] and "'Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do."[81] In the first song, the protagonist sardonically celebrates her decision to leave her man by informing him that if in fact her next partner "beats me and breaks my heart," at least "it won't be you." "Slow and Easy Man" presents a woman who presumably delights in the sexual pleasures offered her by a partner, but there is a casual reference to the fact that this man "curses and fights."

We can assume that the woman in "Eavesdropper's Blues" is the target of verbal and physical abuse since the man turns her "eyes all blue" if she has no money to offer him. In "Love Me Daddy Blues," as in "Please Help Get Him off My Mind," the woman experiences the dilemma typical of battered wives who continue to love their abusers.

Edward Brooks describes the last lines of "Hard Driving Papa" as "a celebration of masochism."[82] But when Bessie Smith sings "Because I love him, 'cause there's no one can beat me like he do," it is clear from her performance that far from relishing the beatings she has received, she is expressing utter desperation about her predicament. The penultimate line, "I'm going to the river feelin' so sad and blue" is delivered with such melancholy that we are all but certain the protagonist is intent upon suicide. This is a rare moment of unmitigated despair in Smith's work. To interpret the reference to battering as a celebration of masochism ignores the larger truth-telling and complexity in the song.

Bessie Smith's recorded performance of Porter Grainger's "'Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do"—a song also associated with Billie Holiday—is one of Smith's most widely known recordings. Like "Outside of That," it has been interpreted as sanctioning female masochism. It is indeed extremely painful to hear Smith and Holiday sing the following verse so convincingly:

Well, I'd rather my man would hit me than to jump right up and quit me
'Taint nobody's bizness if I do, do, do, do
I swear I won't call no copper if I'm beat up by my papa
'Tain't nobody's bizness if I do, if I do.[83]

The lyrics of this song touched a chord in black women's lives that cannot be ignored. While it contradicts the prevailing stance in most of Bessie Smith's work, which emphasizes women's strength and equality, it certainly does not annul the latter's sincerity and authenticity. Moreover, the song's seeming acquiescence to battering occurs within a larger affirmation of women's right as individuals to conduct themselves however they wish—however idiosyncratic their behavior might seem and regardless of the possible consequences. The song begins:

There ain't nothin' I can do or nothin' I can say
That folks don't criticize me
But I'm going to do just as I want to anyway
And don't care if they all despise me.[84]

Violence against women remains pandemic. Almost equally pandemic—although fortunately less so today than during previous eras—is women's inability to extricate themselves from this web of violence. The conduct defended by the woman in this male-authored song is not so unconventional after all. "'Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do" may well have been a catalyst for introspective criticism on the part of many women in Bessie Smith's listening audience who found themselves entrapped in similar situations. To name that situation so directly and openly may itself have made misogynist violence available for criticism.

Gertrude Rainey's "Sweet Rough Man"[85] has been described as a "classic expression of the 'hit me, I love you' tradition of masochistic women's songs." In her analysis, Sandra Lieb argues that this song is an exception within the body of Rainey's work for its presentation of "a cruel, virile man abusing a helpless, passive woman."[86] Feminist literary critic Hazel Carby calls it "the most explicit description of sexual brutality in [Rainey's] repertoire," emphasizing that it was composed by a man and reiterating Lieb's

argument that there are differing responses to male violence in female- and male-authored blues.[87] The lyrics to "Sweet Rough Man" include the following lines:

I woke up this mornin', my head was sore as a boil
I woke up this mornin', my head was sore as a boil
My man beat me last night with five feet of copper coil

He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet
He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet
But the way he love me makes me soon forget

Every night for five years, I've got a beatin' from my man
Every night for five years, I've got a beatin' from my man
People says I'm crazy, I'll explain and you'll understand
. . . . . .
Lord, it ain't no maybe 'bout my man bein' rough
Lord, it ain't no maybe 'bout my man bein' rough
But when it comes to lovin', he sure can strut his stuff.[88]

Of all the songs recorded by Bessie Smith and Gertrude Rainey, this one is the most graphic in its evocation of domestic violence and goes farthest in revealing women's contradictory attitudes toward violent relationships. Though it was composed by a man, Rainey chose to sing it enthusiastically. We should recognize that to sing the song at all was to rescue the issue of men's violence toward women from the silent realm of the private sphere and reconstruct it as a public problem. The woman in the song assumes a stance which is at once "normal" and pathological. It is pathological to desire to continue a relationship in which one is being systematically abused, but given the prevailing presumptions of female acquiescence to male superiority, it is "normal" for women to harbor self-deprecatory ideas. Rainey's rendering of "Sweet Rough Man" does not challenge sexist conduct in any obvious way, but it does present the issue as a problem women

confront. The female character acknowledges that "people says I'm crazy" for loving such a brutal man, and the song very clearly states the dilemma facing women who tolerate violence for the sake of feeling loved.

Naming issues that pose a threat to the physical or psychological well-being of the individual is a central function of the blues. Indeed, the musical genre is called the "blues" not only because it employs a musical scale containing "blue notes" but also because it names, in myriad ways, the social and psychic afflictions and aspirations of African Americans. The blues preserve and transform the West African philosophical centrality of the naming process. In the Dogon, Yoruba, and other West African cultural traditions, the process of nommo—naming things, forces, and modes—is a means of establishing magical (or, in the case of the blues, aesthetic) control over the object of the naming process.[89] Through the blues, menacing problems are ferreted out from the isolated individual experience and restructured as problems shared by the community. As shared problems, threats can be met and addressed within a public and collective context.

In Ma Rainey's and especially in Bessie Smith's blues, the problem of male violence is named, and varied patterns of implied or explicit criticism and resistance are woven into the artists' performance of them. Lacking, however, is a naming or analysis of the social forces responsible for black men's propensity (and indeed the male propensity in general) to inflict violence on their female partners. The blues accomplish what they can within the confines of their form. The political analysis must be developed elsewhere.

There are no references to sexual assault in either Rainey's or Smith's music. Certainly, black women of that era suffered sexual abuse—both by strangers and acquaintances. It is tempting to speculate why the blues do not name this particular problem. One possibility, of course, is that "rape" was still an unacknowledged and unarticulated dimension of domestic violence, and that black public discourse on rape was firmly linked to the campaign against racist violence. The birth of the blues coincided with a period of militant activism by middle-class black women directed at white racists for whom rape was a weapon of terror, and at white employers who

routinely used sexual violence as a racialized means of asserting power over their female domestic help. Leaders like Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells, who were instrumental in the creation of the black women's club movement,[90] linked the rape of black women by white men to the manipulative use of false rape charges against black men as a justification for the widespread lynchings of the period.[91] Black men were habitually represented as savage, sex-crazed rapists, bent on violating the physical and spiritual purity of white womanhood.[92] It may well be that the discourse on rape was so thoroughly influenced by the prevailing racism that intraracial rape could not be named. The difficult and delayed emergence of the beginnings of a collective consciousness around sexual harassment, rape, and incest within the black community is indicative of how hard it has been to acknowledge abuse perpetrated by the abused.[93]

Another explanation for the absence of allusions to rape within women's blues may be the very nature of female blues discourse. Even in their most despairing moods, the female characters memorialized in women's blues songs do not fit the mold of the typical victim of abuse. The independent women of blues lore do not think twice about wielding weapons against men who they feel have mistreated them. They frequently brandish their razors and guns, and dare men to cross the lines they draw. While acknowledging the physical mistreatment they have received at the hands of their male lovers, they do not perceive or define themselves as powerless in face of such violence. Indeed, they fight back passionately. In many songs Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith pay tribute to fearless women who attempt to avenge themselves when their lovers have been unfaithful. In "Black Mountain Blues," Bessie Smith sings:

> Had a man in Black Mountain, sweetest man in town
> Had a man in Black Mountain, the sweetest man in town
> He met a city gal, and he throwed me down
>
> I'm bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun
> Lord, I'm bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun
> I'm gonna shoot him if he stands still, and cut him if he run.[94]

In Smith's "Sinful Blues," a woman's rage also turns into violence:

> I got my opinion and my man won't act right
> So I'm gonna get hard on him right from this very night
> Gonna gét me a gun long as my right arm
> Shoot that man because he done me wrong.
> Lord, now I've got them sinful blues.[95]

In Ma Rainey's "See See Rider Blues," the protagonist who has discovered that her man has another woman friend announces her intention to buy herself a pistol and to "kill my man and catch the Cannonball."[96] Her concluding resolution is: "If he don't have me, he won't have no gal at all." In Rainey's "Rough and Tumble Blues," the woman attacks not the man, but the women who have attempted to seduce him:

> I got rough and killed three women 'fore the police got the news
> 'Cause mama's on the warpath with those rough and tumble blues.[97]

In Rainey's "Sleep Talking Blues," the woman threatens to kill her man if he mentions another woman's name in his sleep. The woman in Smith's "Them's Graveyard Words" responds to her lover's confession that he has acquired a new woman friend with the murderous threat "them's graveyard words":

> I done polished up my pistol, my razor's sharpened too
> He'll think the world done fell on him when my dirty work is through.[98]

In some songs, the woman actually does kill her partner and is condemned to prison—or to death. Frequently, she kills out of jealousy, but sometimes, as in Rainey's "Cell Bound Blues," she kills in self-defense, protecting herself from her man's violent blows.[99] In two of Bessie Smith's songs—"Sing Sing Prison Blues" and "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair"—when she comes before the criminal justice system, the woman is ready

and willing to pay the consequences for having killed her man. In the former, directing her words to the judge, the woman says:

> You can send me up the river or send me to that mean old jail
> You can send me up the river or send me to that mean old jail
> I killed my man and I don't need no bail.[100]

In "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair," the woman pleads with the judge to give her the death penalty. She is not prepared to spend the rest of her life in prison and she is willing to accept the punishment she deserves for having "cut her good man's throat." The striking postures assumed by these women offer not even a hint of repentance for having taken their lovers' lives. In "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair," the woman sardonically describes the details of her crime:

> I cut him with my barlow, I kicked him in the side
> I stood there laughing over him while he wallowed 'round and died.[101]

These rowdy and hardened women are not simply female incarnations of stereotypical male aggressiveness. Women's blues cannot be understood apart from their role in the molding of an emotional community based on the affirmation of black people's—and in particular black women's—absolute and irreducible humanity. The blues woman challenges in her own way the imposition of gender-based inferiority. When she paints blues portraits of tough women, she offers psychic defenses and interrupts and discredits the routine internalization of male dominance. In Bessie Smith's "Hateful Blues" the woman is responding to a male partner who has skipped out on her. She is feeling "low down," but she does not hesitate to inform us that "nothin' ever worries me long." Although she has cried and cried, she persuades herself to stop: "I ain't gonna cry no more." And, with increased determination, she announces that "if he can stand to leave me, I can stand to see him go." Finally, she entertains thoughts of violent revenge:

> If I see him I'm gon' beat him, gon' kick and bite him, too
> Gonna take my weddin' butcher, gonna cut him two in two.[102]

This rough-and-tumble, sexually aware woman is capable of issuing intimidating threats to men who have mistreated her, and she is more than willing to follow through on them; she is a spiritual descendant of Harriet Tubman, who, it is said, always warned her passengers on the Underground Railroad that no one would be permitted to turn back, that they would all forge onward or die at her hands. This was the only way to guarantee confidentiality regarding their route of escape. The female portraits created by the early blues women served as reminders of African-American women's tradition of womanhood, a tradition that directly challenged prevailing notions of femininity.

The lives of many of the blues women of the twenties resembled those of the fearless women memorialized in their songs. We know that at times Bessie Smith was a victim of male violence and also that she would not hesitate to hurl violent threats—which she sometimes carried out—at the men who betrayed her. Nor was she afraid to confront the most feared embodiments of white racist terror. One evening in July of 1927, robed and hooded Ku Klux Klansmen attempted to disrupt her tent performance by pulling up the tent stakes and collapsing the entire structure. When Smith was informed of the trouble, she immediately left the tent and, according to her biographer,

> ran toward the intruders, stopped within ten feet of them, placed one hand on her hip, and shook a clenched fist at the Klansmen. "What the fuck you think you're doin'," she shouted above the sound of the band. "I'll get the whole damn tent out here if I have to. You just pick up them sheets and run!"
>
> The Klansmen, apparently too surprised to move, just stood there and gawked. Bessie hurled obscenities at them until they finally turned and disappeared quietly into the darkness. . . .
>
> Then she went back into the tent as if she had just settled a routine matter.[103]

Daphne Duval Harrison has noted that women's blues in the 1920s "introduced a new, different model of black women—more assertive, sexy, sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive." Her explication of

the blues' importance for redefining black women's self-understanding deserves extensive quotation:

> The blues women of Ida Cox's era brought to their lyrics and performances new meaning as they interpreted and reformulated the black experience from their unique perspective in American society as black females. They saw a world that did not protect the sanctity of black womanhood, as espoused in the bourgeois ideology; only white middle- or upper-class women were protected by it. They saw and experienced injustice as jobs they held were snatched away when white women refused to work with them or white men returned from war to reclaim them. They pointed out the pain of sexual and physical abuse and abandonment.[104]

Blues women were expected to deviate from the norms defining orthodox female behavior, which is why they were revered by both men and women in black working-class communities. Ida Cox's "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues" became the most famous portrait of the nonconforming, independent woman, and her "wild woman" has become virtually synonymous with the blues queen herself:

> I've got a disposition and a way of my own
> When my man starts kicking, I let him find another home
> I get full of good liquor and walk the street all night
> Go home and put my man out if he don't treat me right
> Wild women don't worry, wild women don't have the blues
>
> You never get nothing by being an angel child
> You'd better change your ways and get real wild
> I want to tell you something, I wouldn't tell you no lie
> Wild women are the only kind that really get by
> 'Cause wild women don't worry, wild women don't have the blues.[105]

In "Easy Come, Easy Go Blues," Bessie Smith also explored the theme of the "wild woman"—the woman who consciously rejects mainstream

values, especially those prescribing passivity in relations with men. This song is about a woman who refuses to allow the mistreatment she has suffered at the hands of a man to plunge her into depression. She refuses to take love so seriously that its loss threatens her very essence:

> If my sweet man trifles, or if he don't
> I'll get someone to love me anytime he won't.

She concludes with a summary statement of her bold position:

> This world owe me a plenty lovin', hear what I say
> Believe me, I go out collectin' 'most every day
> I'm overflowing with those easy come, easy go blues.[106]

"Prove It on Me Blues," composed by Gertrude Rainey, portrays just such a "wild woman," who affirms her independence from the orthodox norms of womanhood by boldly flaunting her lesbianism. Rainey's sexual involvement with women was no secret among her colleagues and her audiences. The advertisement for the release of "Prove It on Me Blues" showed the blues woman sporting a man's hat, jacket, and tie and, while a policeman looked on, obviously attempting to seduce two women on a street corner. The song's lyrics include the following:

> They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me
> Sure got to prove it on me
> Went out last night with a crowd of my friends
> They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men
>
> It's true I wear a collar and a tie
> Make the wind blow all the while
> 'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me
> They sure got to prove it on me
> . . . . . .
> Wear my clothes just like a fan
> Talk to the gals just like any old man

'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me.[107]

Sandra Lieb has described this song as a "powerful statement of lesbian defiance and self-worth."[108] "Prove It on Me Blues" is a cultural precursor to the lesbian cultural movement of the 1970s, which began to crystallize around the performance and recording of lesbian-affirming songs. In fact, in 1977 Teresa Trull recorded a cover of Ma Rainey's song for an album entitled *Lesbian Concentrate*.[109]

Hazel Carby has insightfully observed that "Prove It on Me Blues"

> vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women [and] a public declaration of lesbianism. The words express a contempt for a society that rejected lesbians. . . . But at the same time the song is a reclamation of lesbianism as long as the woman publicly names her sexual preference for herself. . . .

Carby argues that this song "engag[es] directly in defining issues of sexual preference as a contradictory struggle of social relations."[110]

"Prove It on Me Blues" suggests how the iconoclastic blues women of the twenties were pioneers for later historical developments. The response to this song also suggests that homophobia within the black community did not prevent blues women from challenging stereotypical conceptions of women's lives. They did not allow themselves to be enshrined by the silence imposed by mainstream society.

Memphis Willie B. (Borum)'s song "Bad Girl Blues" is one example of how lesbianism was addressed by blues men. The lyrics lack any hint of moral condemnation:

Women loving each other, man, they don't think about no man
Women loving each other and they don't think about no man
They ain't playing no secret no more, these women playing it a wide open hand.[111]

Ma Rainey's "Sissy Blues" similarly recognizes the existence of male homosexuality in the black community without betraying any moral disapprobation. As is generally the case with the blues, the issue is simply named:

I dreamed last night I was far from harm
Woke up and found my man in a sissy's arms
. . . . . .
My man's got a sissy, his name is Miss Kate
He shook that thing like jelly on a plate
. . . . . .
Now all the people ask me why I'm all alone
A sissy shook that thing and took my man from home.[112]

The blues songs recorded by Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith offer us a privileged glimpse of the prevailing perceptions of love and sexuality in postslavery black communities in the United States. Both women were role models for untold thousands of their sisters to whom they delivered messages that defied the male dominance encouraged by mainstream culture. The blues women openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love relationships. Refusing, in the blues tradition of raw realism, to romanticize romantic relationships, they instead exposed the stereotypes and explored the contradictions of those relationships. By so doing, they redefined women's "place." They forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings.