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INTRODUCTION

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism is an examination of the work of three women artists who played decisive roles in shaping the history of popular music culture in the United States. It is an inquiry into the ways their recorded performances divulge unacknowledged traditions of feminist consciousness in working-class black communities. The connection I attempt to make between blues legacies and black feminism is not without its contradictions and discontinuities; to attempt to impute a feminist consciousness as we define it today to Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday would be preposterous, and not very interesting at that. What is most interesting—and provocative—about the bodies of work each of these women left behind is the ways in which hints of feminist attitudes emerge from their music through fissures of patriarchal discourses. While I try to situate their recorded performances, the primary material with which I work, in relation to historical developments of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, I am most concerned with how these women's performances appear through the prism of the present, and with what these interpretations can tell us about past and present forms of social consciousness.

Given the long histories of slavery and segregation in the United States, it is understandable that black social consciousness has been overdetermined by race. This one-dimensionality is also often reflected in works that attempt to recapitulate those histories. While an impressive body of literature establishing historical antecedents for contemporary black feminism has been produced during the last two decades, there remains a paucity of research on the class-inflected character of historical black feminism. As the works of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black women writers have been made increasingly available through projects such as the Schomburg Library Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series, efforts to reconstruct black feminist historical traditions tend to focus on texts such as these.¹ To a large extent, therefore, what are constituted as black feminist traditions tend to exclude ideas produced by and within poor and working-class communities, where women historically have not

had the means or access to publish written texts. But some poor black women did have access to publishers of oral texts. In fact, in the 1920s, many black women were sought after—and often exploited by—burgeoning recording companies.

Black women were the first to record the blues. In 1920, Mamie Smith's version of Perry Bradford's "Crazy Blues," her second recording on Columbia's Okeh label, was so popular that 75,000 copies of the record were sold within the first month of its release. One dollar, the cost of each record, was a small fortune then for the mostly poor black people who bought "Crazy Blues." The song's runaway sales marked the successful debut of a black woman blues singer, which in turn opened the door for scores of other black women artists, who were sought after by representatives of the recording industry as entrees into a previously ignored and untapped black market. Women like Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Ethel Waters, Lucille Hegamin, Edith Wilson, Victoria Spivey, Rosa Henderson, Clara Smith, Trixie Smith, Sippie Wallace, and many other less-known artists could be heard during the 1920s not only in theaters and clubs but also on labels such as Paramount and Columbia—both of which launched "race records" campaigns—and Black Swan, the only black-owned recording company of the period. At the peak of the classic blues era, which loosely spanned the decade of the twenties, hundreds of women had the opportunity to record their work.

That women were given priority over men as recording artists attests to the reductive marketing strategies of the then-embryonic recording industry, strategies we still see reflected today in the industry's efforts to categorize—or, in effect, to segregate culturally—different genres of music that in fact claim an increasingly diverse listening public. The companies' attempts to construct and tap a new black market were elaborated around the assumption that because the initial successes were with women's blues, only women could be successful recording artists. Between 1923 and 1926—when Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey respectively recorded their first songs—few men, aside from Papa Charlie Jackson (who also did duets with Rainey), were signed up by Paramount and Columbia, the two major companies of that period.² However, when male country

blues caught on in 1926, their growing popularity initiated a pattern that eventually marginalized women blues singers after the classic blues era began to decline with the stock market crash of 1929. The 1930s became an era of widespread exploitation of black men blues singers, who were sought out aggressively by profit-hungry recording companies that paid them paltry sums for their recorded performances, some of which continue to be published on compact discs today. The story of Robert Johnson is only the most dramatic example of this phenomenon. At the same time, many once highly commodified black women blues singers—including Bessie Smith, the "Empress of the Blues"—were struggling to find work in other genres such as theater and the emergent motion picture industry.

Even though the period of ascendancy of black women blues singers was relatively short, these women nonetheless managed to produce a vast body of musical texts and a rich cultural legacy. One might expect that because the classic blues era coincided with the Harlem Renaissance, this musical articulation of African-American culture would have been treated extensively by the writers and intellectuals of the day. However, because women like Bessie Smith and Ida Cox presented and embodied sexualities associated with working-class black life—which, fatally, was seen by some Renaissance strategists as antithetical to the aims of their cultural movement—their music was designated as "low" culture, in contrast, for example, to endeavors such as sculpture, painting, literature, and classical music (through which the spirituals could be reformed). Consequently, few writers—with the notable exception of Langston Hughes, who often found himself at odds with his contemporaries—were willing to consider seriously the contributions blues performers made to black cultural politics. In her examination of Hughes's 1930 novel, *Not Without Laughter*, Cheryl Wall argues that Hughes was not only "the first writer to represent the figure of the blues woman in literature, [but] no comparable representation would appear in the fiction of black women for decades to come."³ Indeed, in the early works of first-generation contemporary black women writers, fictionalized portraits of blues women were created by Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Shirley Anne Williams, and Alice Walker. Mary

Helen Washington entitled her second collection of black women's short stories *Any Woman's Blues*, and Toni Morrison's Sula, "an artist without an art form," might well have been a blues woman had she only found her voice. Alexis De Veaux wrote a poetic biography of Billie Holiday, and Jessica Hagedorn wrote an extended poem, "Sometimes You Look Like Lady Day."

These were some of the women of color writers who helped to shape my gender consciousness, whose works piqued my curiosity about the figures that had inspired such marvelously irreverent characters and moving portraits. I wondered how these "foremothers" might differ from the black women we were beginning to claim as ancestors in the gender struggles we encountered as we mounted our radical opposition to racism. What can we learn from women like Gettrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday that we may not be able to learn from Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell? If we were beginning to appreciate the blasphemies⁴ of fictionalized blues women—especially their outrageous politics of sexuality—and the knowledge that might be gleaned from their lives about the possibilities of transforming gender relations within black communities, perhaps we also could benefit from a look at the artistic contributions of the original blues women.

When I first began researching the literature on blues and jazz women I discovered that, with some significant exceptions, the vast majority comprised either biographies or technical studies within the disciplines of music and musicology. I am not suggesting that investigations of these artists' lives and music are not interesting. However, what I wanted to know more about was the way their work addressed urgent social issues and helped to shape collective modes of black consciousness. Because most studies of the blues have tended to be gendered implicitly as male, those that have engaged with the social implications of this music have overlooked or marginalized women.

When I decided to look closely at the music produced by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, what I expected to find was a strong consciousness of race against a backdrop of prevailing patriarchal constructions of gender. This is certainly the impression one gets from the bio-

graphical material on the three singers. In fact, the original title of my study was *Gettrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday: Black Women's Music and Social Consciousness*. However, the more I listened to their recorded performances—of songs composed both by the artists themselves and by others—the more I realized that their music could serve as a rich terrain for examining a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities. That their aesthetic representations of the politics of gender and sexuality are informed by and interwoven with their representations of race and class makes their work all the more provocative.

What gives the blues such fascinating possibilities of sustaining emergent feminist consciousness is the way they often construct seemingly antagonistic relationships as noncontradictory oppositions. A female narrator in a women's blues song who represents herself as entirely subservient to male desire might simultaneously express autonomous desire and a refusal to allow her mistreating lover to drive her to psychic despair. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith both recorded versions of Herbert and Russell's "Oh Papa Blues."⁵ These are the lyrics Rainey sings:

Just like a rainbow I am faded away
 My daddy leaves me 'most every day
 But he don't mean me no good, why?
 Because I only wish he would
 I've almost gone insane
 I'm forever tryin' to call his name

 Oh, papa, think when you away from home
 You just don't want me now, wait and see
 You'll find some other man makin' love to me, now
 Papa, papa, you ain't got no mama now.⁶

Bessie Smith's recording is entitled "Oh Daddy Blues" and these are her first and last stanzas:

Just like a flower I'm fading away
 The doctor calls to see me most every day
 But he don't do me no good
 Why? Because I'm lonesome for you
 And if you care for me, then you will listen to my plea

 Oh, daddy, think when you all alone
 You know that you are getting old
 You'll miss the way I baked your jelly roll
 Then, daddy, daddy, you won't have no mama at all.⁷

I should point out here that these transcriptions are my own. A large part of the project of producing this study has been the transcription of the entire bodies of Rainey's and Smith's available recordings, 252 songs in all, some of which are very difficult to hear. When I began this aspect of my research, compact discs had not yet begun to be mass-marketed, and I was working strictly from vinyl reproductions. When their work was reissued on CD,⁸ the transcription work became considerably easier, yet many of the original recordings that are reproduced on CD have deteriorated so much as to render them nearly inaudible in places. The second section of this study, following my critical examination of Rainey's, Smith's, and Holiday's work, contains my transcriptions of all of Rainey's and Smith's extant recordings. The transcriptions are included here because both blues women frequently improvised even as they sang precomposed lyrics that were not always their own. This process of revision obviously had a significant impact on the recordings to which we have access today, and it is on the basis of these recordings—these often revised renditions of the lyrics that appeared on the lead sheets from which Rainey and Smith worked—that I have worked out my own analyses of the songs as they were performed. Thus, while other transcriptions exist in numerous studies of the music and of the artists themselves, my own listenings have revealed numerous inaccuracies in those transcriptions. For this reason, I have chosen to work with firsthand transcriptions, which no doubt contain their own inaccuracies, and for which I take complete responsibility. As the

complete lyrics of Rainey's and Smith's songs are not available elsewhere, I have included them in this book in order to facilitate further research on this material. I have not included transcriptions of Billie Holiday's recordings because the popular material that constitutes her body of work remains readily available in print today. Moreover, her originality consists not so much in what she sang, but rather in how she sang the popular songs of her era.

In the contemporary period, which is marked by a popular recognition of the politicization of sexuality, the blues constitute an exceptionally rich site for feminist investigation. The overarching sexual themes that define the content of the blues form point the way toward a consideration of the historical politics of black sexuality. Considering the stringent taboos on representations of sexuality that characterized most dominant discourses of the time, the blues constitute a privileged discursive site.

In this book, I attempt to explore the feminist implications of the recorded performances of three women: one who stands at the beginning of the classic blues tradition, another who pushes the blues form to its very limits and begins to use popular song as a blues vehicle, and yet another who, in moving away from the blues and establishing jazz vocals with a genius and originality that has yet to be surpassed, remains solidly anchored in the blues tradition. All of their performances illuminate the politics of gender and sexuality in working-class black communities.

Whether we listen to these musicians today primarily for pleasure or for purposes of research—which is not to suggest that pleasure is without its critical dimensions or that research is without its pleasures—there is a great deal to be learned from their bodies of work about quotidian expressions of feminist consciousness. These quotidian expressions of feminist consciousness are what I attempt to accentuate in this book. In this sense, my study is far less ambitious than a work like Daphne Duval Harrison's *Black Pearls*. Whereas Harrison's fine investigation comprehensively takes up the classic blues tradition, mine is confined to three artists, two of whom—Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith—decisively defined the classic blues era, and one of

whom—Billie Holiday—ushered in the period of modern jazz, recording her first song shortly after Bessie Smith recorded her last. Harrison's work examines the blues women of the 1920s

as pivotal figures in the assertion of black women's ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor. It reveals their dynamic role as spokespersons and interpreters of the dreams, harsh realities, and tragicomedies of the black experience in the first three decades of this century; their role in the continuation and development of black music in America; their contributions to blues poetry and performance. Further, it expands the base of knowledge about the role of black women in the creation and development of American popular culture; illustrates their modes and means for coping successfully with gender-related discrimination and exploitation; and demonstrates an emerging model for the working woman—one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, and trend-setting.⁹

I hope my study will complement Harrison's in the sense that it attempts to accentuate the feminist contributions of two pivotal women of the classic blues era, as well as those of the most significant jazz woman, the story of whose troubled life has persistently overshadowed the important contributions she made as an artist.

Contemporary blues and jazz women come from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, and certainly the audience for this music resides not only within but far beyond the borders of black culture. With the globalization of music distribution—indeed, with such developments as unauthorized CD production in some countries—the scope of black music and its historically broad cultural implications can no longer be confined to African-American communities. In this context, feminist interpretations of blues and jazz women's legacies can contribute to an understanding of feminist consciousness that crosses racial and class borders.¹⁰ I hope that readers of this book will also read, for example, Maria Herrera-Sobek's feminist interpretations of *corridos*, Mexican folk ballads.¹¹ Moreover, beyond the realm of musical culture, many feminists of color are rethinking main-

stream feminist historiographies, not simply to carve out a place for women of color, but rather to contest the very validity of the discourses employed in those works.¹² At the same time that I see my own work as connected with these various projects, I hope the arguments I propose in this book will make a specific intervention into current popular debates regarding the legitimacy of women of color feminisms, and of black feminisms in particular.

Twenty-five years after the second-wave debates on what counts as feminism, popular assumptions that the historical origins of feminism are white stubbornly persist in many black communities, despite significant feminist (and womanist) activism and research. The tendency to construct women like Anita Hill as race traitors is a dramatic by-product of the recalcitrant idea that black women who speak out against black men are following in the footsteps of white feminists. The fact that a productive debate about the problematic gender politics (and indeed the overarching conservatism) of the Million Man March failed to emerge—and that feminists like Kimberle Crenshaw, Luke Harris, Marcia Gillespie, Paula Giddings, Jewel Jackson McCabe, Gina Dent, and I were harshly criticized for even desiring to initiate such a debate—are yet further examples of widespread views in black communities that race must always take precedence, and that race is implicitly gendered as male.

A book like *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* will not popularize feminism in black communities. However, I do hope it will demonstrate that there are multiple African-American feminist traditions. I hope it will demonstrate that feminist traditions are not only written, they are oral, and that these oralities reveal not only rewrought African cultural traces, but also the genius with which former slaves forged new traditions that simultaneously contested the slave past and preserved some of the rich cultural products of slavery. According to cultural critic Stuart Hall, black popular culture

[i]n its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary . . . has