

**the jazz cadence
of american culture**

Columbia University Press
New York

Columbia University Press

Publishers Since 1893

New York Chichester, West Sussex

Copyright © 1998 Robert G. O'Meally

Reprinted by permission of Columbia University Press

All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The jazz cadence of American culture / edited by Robert G.
O'Meally.

p. cm.

Thirty-five essays.

Includes bibliographical reference and index.

Contents: Part I. What is jazz—Part 2. One nation under a
groove, or, The United States of jazzocracy—Part 3. Jazz lines
and colors : the sound I saw—Part 4. Jazz is a dance : jazz art in
motion—Part 5. Tell the story : jazz, history, memory—Part 6.
Writing the blues, writing jazz.

ISBN 0-231-10448-0 (cloth : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-231-
10449-9 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Jazz—History and criticism. 2. Blues (Music)—History
and criticism. 3. Afro-Americans—Music—History and criticism.

1. O'Meally, Robert G., 1948–.

ML3508.J38 1998

781.65—DC21

98-14768

Material included in JSO by permission of Columbia University
Press.

chapter 27

HAZEL V. CARBY

It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues*

*This paper was originally a presentation to the conference on "Sexuality, Politics and Power" held at Mount Holyoke College, September 1986. It was reprinted in *Radical America* 20,4 (1986): 9–24. The power of the music can only be fully understood by listening to the songs, which should be played as the essay is read.

This essay considers the sexual politics of women's blues in the 1920's. Their story is part of a larger history of the production of Afro-American culture within the North American culture industry. My research has concentrated almost exclusively on those black women intellectuals who were part of the development of an Afro-American literature culture and reflects the privileged place that we accord to writers in Afro-American Studies (Carby, 1987). Within feminist theory, the cultural production of black women writers has been analyzed in isolation from other forms of women's culture and cultural presence and has neglected to relate particular texts and issues to a larger discourse of culture and cultural politics. I want to show how the representation of black female sexuality in black women's fiction and in women's blues is clearly different. I argue that different cultural forms negotiate and resolve very different sets of social contradictions. However, before considering the particularities of black women's sexual representation, we should consider its marginality within a white-dominated feminist discourse.

In 1982, at the Barnard conference on the politics of sexuality, Hortense Spillers condemned the serious absence of consideration of black female sexuality from various public discourses including white feminist theory. She described black women as "the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb." The sexual experiences of black women, she argued, were rarely depicted by themselves in what she referred to as "empowered texts": discursive feminist texts. Spillers complained of the relative absence of African-American women from the academy and thus from the visionary company of Anglo-American women feminists and their privileged mode of feminist expression.

The collection of the papers from the Barnard conference, the *Pleasure and Danger* (1984) anthology, has become one of these empowered feminist theoretical texts and Spillers' essay continues to stand within it as an important black feminist survey of the ways in which the sexuality of black American women has been unacknowledged in the public/critical discourse of feminist thought (Spillers, 1984). Following Spillers' lead black feminists continued to critique the neglect of issues of black female sexuality within feminist theory and, indeed, I as well as others directed many of our criticisms toward the *Pleasure and Danger* anthology itself (Carby, 1986).

As black women we have provided articulate and politically incisive criticism which is there for the feminist community at large to heed or to ignore—upon that decision lies the future possibility of forging a feminist movement that is not parochial. As the black feminist and educator Anna Julia Cooper stated in 1892, a woman's movement should not be based on the narrow concerns of white middle class women under the name of "women"; neither, she argued, should a woman's movement be formed around the exclusive concerns of either the white woman or the black woman or the red woman but should be able to address the concerns of all the poor and oppressed (Cooper, 1892).

But instead of concentrating upon the domination of a white feminist theoretical discourse which marginalizes non-white women, I focus on the production of a discourse of sexuality by black women. By analyzing the sexual and cultural politics of black women who constructed themselves as sexual subjects through

song, in particular the blues, I want to assert an empowered presence. First, I must situate the historical moment of the emergence of women-dominated blues and establish a theoretical framework of interpretation, and then I will consider some aspects of the representation of feminism, sexuality, and power in women's blues.

Movin' On

Before World War I the overwhelming majority of black people lived in the South, although the majority of black intellectuals who purported to represent the interests of "the race" lived in the North. At the turn of the century black intellectuals felt they understood and could give voice to the concerns of the black community as a whole. They were able to position themselves as spokespeople for the "race" because they were at a vast physical and metaphorical distance from the majority of those they represented. The mass migration of blacks to urban areas, especially to the cities of the North, forced these traditional intellectuals to question and revise their imaginary vision of "the people" and directly confront the actual displaced rural workers who were, in large numbers, becoming a black working class in front of their eyes. In turn the mass of black workers became aware of the range of possibilities for their representation. No longer were the "Talented Tenth," the practitioners of policies of racial uplift, the undisputed "leaders of the race." Intellectuals and their constituencies fragmented, black union organizers, Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, radical black activists, the Sanctified Churches, the National Association of Colored Women, the Harlem Creative Artists, all offered alternative forms of representation, and each strove to establish that the experience of their constituency was representative of the experience of the race.

Within the movement of the Harlem cultural renaissance, black women writers established a variety of alternative possibilities for the fictional representation of black female experience. Zora Neale Hurston chose to represent black people as the rural folk; the folk were represented as being both the source of Afro-American cultural and linguistic forms and the means for its continued existence. Hurston's exploration of sexual and power relations was embedded in this "folk" experience and avoided the cultural transitions and confrontations of the urban displacement. As Hurston is frequently situated as the foremother of contemporary black women writers, the tendency of feminist literary criticism has been to valorize black women as "folk" heroines at the expense of those texts which explored black female sexuality within the context of urban social relations. Put simply, a line of descent is drawn from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to *The Color Purple*. But to establish the black "folk" as representative of the black community at large was and still is a convenient method for ignoring the specific contradictions of an urban existence in which most of us live. The culture industry, through its valorization in print and in film of *The Color Purple*, for example, can appear to comfortably address issues of black female sexuality within a past history and rural context while completely avoiding the crucial issues of black sexual and cultural politics that stem from an urban crisis.

**“There’s no Earthly Use In Bein Too-Ga-Tha If It Don’t Put
Some Joy In Yo Life.” (Williams, 1981)**

However, two other women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, did figure an urban class confrontation in their fiction, though in distinctly different ways. Jessie Fauset became an ideologue for a new black bourgeoisie; her novels represented the manners and morals that distinguished the emergent middle class from the working class. She wanted public recognition for the existence of a black elite that was urbane, sophisticated, and civilized but her representation of this elite implicitly defined its manners against the behavior of the new black proletariat. While it must be acknowledged that Fauset did explore the limitations of a middle-class existence for women, ultimately each of her novels depicts independent women who surrender their independence to become suitable wives for the new black professional men.

Nella Larsen, on the other hand, offers us a more sophisticated dissection of the rural/urban confrontation. Larsen was extremely critical of the Harlem intellectuals who glorified the values of a black folk culture while being ashamed of and ridiculing the behavior of the new black migrant to the city. Her novel *Quicksand* (1928) contains the first explicitly sexual black heroine in black women’s fiction. Larsen explores questions of sexuality and power within both a rural and an urban landscape; in both contexts she condemns the ways in which female sexuality is confined and compromised as the object of male desire. In the city Larsen’s heroine, Helga, has to recognize the ways in which her sexuality has an exchange value within capitalist social relations while in the country Helga is trapped by the consequences of woman’s reproductive capacity. In the final pages of *Quicksand* Helga echoes the plight of the slave woman who could not escape to freedom and the cities of the North because she could not abandon her children and, at the same time, represents how a woman’s life is drained through constant childbirth.

But Larsen also reproduces in her novel the dilemma of a black woman who tries to counter the dominant white cultural definitions of her sexuality: ideologies that define black female sexuality as primitive and exotic. However, the response of Larsen’s heroine to such objectification is also the response of many black women writers: the denial of desire and the repression of sexuality. Indeed, *Quicksand* is symbolic of the tension in nineteenth and early twentieth-century black women’s fiction in which black female sexuality was frequently displaced onto the terrain of the political responsibility of the black woman. The duty of the black heroine toward the black community was made coterminous with her desire as a woman, a desire which was expressed as a dedication to uplift the race. This displacement from female desire to female duty enabled the negotiation of racist constructions of black female sexuality but denied sensuality, and in this denial lies the class character of its cultural politics.

It has been a mistake of much black feminist theory to concentrate almost exclusively on the visions of black women as represented by black women writers without indicating the limitations of their middle-class response to black women’s sexuality. These writers faced a very real contradiction, for they felt that they

would publicly compromise themselves if they acknowledged their sexuality and sensuality within a racist sexual discourse, thus providing evidence that indeed they were primitive and exotic creatures. But because black feminist theory has concentrated upon the literate forms of black women's intellectual activity the dilemma of the place of sexuality within a literary discourse has appeared as if it were the dilemma of most black women. On the other hand, what a consideration of women's blues allows us to see is an alternative form of representation, an oral and musical women's culture that explicitly addresses the contradictions of feminism, sexuality, and power. What has been called the "Classic Blues," the women's blues of the twenties and early thirties, is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women's song.

Testifyin'

Within black culture the figure of the female blues singer has been reconstructed in poetry, drama, fiction, and art and used to meditate upon conventional and unconventional sexuality. A variety of narratives, both fictional and biographical, have mythologized the woman blues singer, and these mythologies become texts about sexuality. Women blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual subjects. In Afro-American fiction and poetry, the blues singer has a strong physical and sensuous presence. Shirley Anne Williams wrote about Bessie Smith:

the thick triangular
nose wedged
in the deep brown
face nostrils
flared on a last hummmmmmmmm.

Bessie singing
just behind the beat
that sweet sweet
voice throwing
its light on me

I looked in her face
and seed the woman
I'd become. A big
boned face already
lined and the first line
in her fo'head was
black and the next line

was sex cept I didn't
know to call it that
then and the brackets
round her mouth stood fo
the chi'ren she teared
from out her womb. . . .

(WILLIAMS, 1982)

Williams has argued that the early blues singers and their songs “helped to solidify community values and heighten community morale in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” The blues singer, she says, uses song to create reflection and creates an atmosphere for analysis to take place. The blues were certainly a communal expression of black experience which had developed out of the call and response patterns of work songs from the nineteenth century and have been described as a “complex interweaving of the general and the specific” and of individual and group experience. John Coltrane has described how the audience heard “we” even if the singer said “I.” Of course the singers were entertainers, but the blues was not an entertainment of escape or fantasy and sometimes directly represented historical events (Williams, 1979).

Sterling Brown has testified to the physical presence and power of Ma Rainey, who would draw crowds from remote rural areas to see her “smilin’ gold-toofed smiles” and to feel like participants in her performance, which articulated the conditions of their social existence. Brown in his poem “Ma Rainey” remembers the emotion of her performance of “Back Water Blues,” which described the devastation of the Mississippi flood of 1927. Rainey’s original performance becomes in Brown’s text a vocalization of the popular memory of the flood, and Brown’s text constructs itself as a part of the popular memory of the “Mother of the Blues” (Brown, 1980).

Ma Rainey never recorded “Back Water Blues,” although Bessie Smith did, but local songsters would hear the blues performed in the tent shows or on record and transmit them throughout the community. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were among the first women blues singers to be recorded, and with Clara Smith, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Rosa Henderson, Victoria Spivey, and Lucille Hegamin they dominated the blues-recording industry throughout the twenties. It has often been asserted that this recording of the blues compromised and adulterated a pure folk form of the blues, but the combination of the vaudeville, carnival, and minstrel shows and the phonograph meant that the “folk-blues” and the culture industry product were inextricably mixed in the twenties. By 1928 the blues sung by blacks were only secondarily of folk origin, and the primary source for the group transmission of the blues was by phonograph, which was then joined by the radio.

Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, and the other women blues singers travelled in carnivals and vaudevilles which included acts with animals, acrobats, and other circus performers. Often the main carnival played principally for white audiences but would have black sideshows with black entertainers for black audi-

ences. In this way black entertainers reached black audiences in even the remotest rural areas. The records of the women blues singers were likewise directed at a black audience through the establishment of “race records,” a section of the recording industry which recorded both religious and secular black singers and black musicians and distributed these recordings through stores in black areas: they were rarely available in white neighborhoods.

When a Woman Gets the Blues . . .

This then is the framework within which I interpret the women blues singers of the twenties. To fully understand the ways in which their performance and their songs were part of a discourse of sexual relations within the black community, it is necessary to consider how the social conditions of black women were dramatically affected by migration, for migration had distinctly different meanings for black men and women. The music and song of the women blues singers embodied the social relations and contradictions of black displacement: of rural migration and the urban flux. In this sense, as singers these women were organic intellectuals; not only were they a part of the community that was the subject of their song but they were also a product of the rural-to-urban movement.

Migration for women often meant being left behind: “Bye Bye Baby” and “Sorry I can’t take you” were the common refrains of male blues. In women’s blues the response is complex: regret and pain expressed as “My sweet man done gone and left me dead,” or “My daddy left me standing in the door,” or “The sound of the train fills my heart with misery.” There was also an explicit recognition that if the journey were to be made by women it held particular dangers for them. It was not as easy for women as it was for men to hop freight trains, and if money was saved for tickets it was men who were usually sent. And yet the women who were singing the songs had made it North and recorded from the “promised land” of Chicago and New York. So, what the women blues singers were able to articulate were the possibilities of movement for the women who “have ramblin’ on their minds” and who intended to “ease on down the line,” for they had made it—the power of movement was theirs. The train, which had symbolized freedom and mobility for men in male blues songs became a contested symbol. The sound of the train whistle, a mournful signal of imminent desertion and future loneliness, was reclaimed as a sign that women too were on the move. In 1924, both Trixie Smith and Clara Smith recorded “Freight Train Blues.” These are the words Clara Smith sang:

I hate to hear that engine blow, boo hoo.
I hate to hear that engine blow, boo hoo.
Everytime I hear it blowin, I feel like ridin too.

That’s the freight train blues, I got box cars on my mind.
I got the freight train blues, I got box cars on my mind.
Gonna leave this town, cause my man is so unkind.

I'm goin away just to wear you off my mind.
 I'm goin away just to wear you off my mind.
 And I may be gone for a doggone long long time.

I'll ask the brakeman to let me ride the blind.
 I'll ask the brakeman to please let me ride the blind.
 The brakeman say, "Clara, you know this train ain't mine."

When a woman gets the blues she goes to her room and hides.
 When a woman gets the blues she goes to her room and hides.
 When a man gets the blues he catch the freight train and rides.

The music moves from echoing the moaning, mournful sound of the train whistle to the syncopated activity of the sound of the wheels in movement as Clara Smith determines to ride. The final opposition between women hiding and men riding is counterpointed by this musical activity and the determination in Clara Smith's voice. "Freight Train Blues" and then "Chicago Bound Blues," which was recorded by Bessie Smith and Ida Cox, were very popular, so Paramount and Victor encouraged more "railroad blues." In 1925 Trixie Smith recorded "Railroad Blues," which directly responded to the line "had the blues for Chicago and I just can't be satisfied" from "Chicago Bound Blues" with "If you ride that train it'll satisfy your mind." "Railroad Blues" encapsulated the ambivalent position of the blues singer caught between the contradictory impulses of needing to migrate North and the need to be able to return, for the "Railroad Blues" were headed not for the North but for Alabama. Being able to move both North and South the women blues singer occupied a privileged space: she could speak the desires of rural women to migrate and voice the nostalgic desires of urban women for home which was both a recognition and a warning that the city was not, in fact, the "promised land."

Men's and women's blues shared the language and experience of the railroad and migration but what that meant was different for each sex. The language of the blues carries this conflict of interests and is the cultural terrain in which these differences were fought over and redefined. Women's blues were the popular cultural embodiment of the way in which the differing interests of black men and women were a struggle of power relations. The sign of the train is one example of the way in which the blues were a struggle within language itself to define the differing material conditions of black women and black men.

Baaad Sista

The differing interests of women and men in the domestic sphere were clearly articulated by Bessie Smith in "In House Blues," a popular song from the mid-twenties which she wrote herself but didn't record until 1931. Although the man gets up and leaves, the woman remains, trapped in the house like a caged animal pacing up and down. But at the same time Bessie's voice vibrates with tremendous power which implies the eruption that is to come. The woman in the house is only

barely restrained from creating havoc; her capacity for violence has been exercised before and resulted in her arrest. The music, which provides an oppositional counterpoint to Bessie's voice, is a parody of the supposed weakness of women. A vibrating cornet contrasts with the words that ultimately cannot be contained and roll out the front door.

Sitting in the house with everything on my mind.
Sitting in the house with everything on my mind.
Looking at the clock and can't even tell the time.

Walking to my window and looking outa my door.
Walking to my window and looking outa my door.
Wishin that my man would come home once more.

Can't eat, can't sleep, so weak I can't walk my floor.
Can't eat, can't sleep, so weak I can't walk my floor.
Feel like calling "murder" let the police squad get me once more.

They woke me up before day with trouble on my mind.
They woke me up before day with trouble on my mind.
Wringing my hands and screamin, walking the floor hollerin an crying.

Hey, don't let them blues in here.
Hey, don't let them blues in here.
They shakes me in my bed and sits down in my chair.

Oh, the blues has got me on the go.
They've got me on the go.
They roll around my house, in and out of my front door.

The way in which Bessie growls "so weak" contradicts the supposed weakness and helplessness of the woman in the song and grants authority to her thoughts of "murder."

The rage of women against male infidelity and desertion is evident in many of the blues. Ma Rainey threatened violence when she sang that she was "gonna catch" her man "with his britches down," in the act of infidelity, in "Black Eye Blues." Exacting revenge against mistreatment also appears as taking another lover as in "Oh Papa Blues" or taunting a lover who has been thrown out with "I won't worry when you're gone, another brown has got your water on" in "Titanic Man Blues." But Ma Rainey is perhaps best known for the rejection of a lover in "Don't Fish in My Sea" which is also a resolution to give up men altogether. She sang:

If you don't like my ocean, don't fish in my sea,
If you don't like my ocean, don't fish in my sea,
Stay out of my valley, and let my mountain be.

Ain't had no lovin' since God knows when,
Ain't had no lovin' since God knows when,
That's the reason I'm through with these no good triflin' men.

The total rejection of men as in this blues and in other songs such as “Trust No Man” stands in direct contrast to the blues that concentrate upon the bewildered, often half-crazed, and even paralyzed response of women to male violence.

Sandra Leib (1981) has described the masochism of “Sweet Rough Man,” in which a man abuses a helpless and passive woman, and she argues that a distinction must be made between reactions to male violence against women in male and female authored blues. “Sweet Rough Man,” though recorded by Ma Rainey, was composed by a man and is the most explicit description of sexual brutality in her repertoire. The articulation of the possibility that women could leave a condition of sexual and financial dependency, reject male violence, and end sexual exploitation was embodied in Ma Rainey’s recording of “Hustlin Blues,” composed jointly by a man and a woman, which narrates the story of a prostitute who ends her brutal treatment by turning in her pimp to a judge. Ma Rainey sang:

I ain’t made no money, and he dared me to go home.
Judge, I told him he better leave me alone.

He followed me up and he grabbed me for a fight.
He followed me up and he grabbed me for a fight.
He said, “Girl, do you know you ain’t made no money tonight.”

Oh Judge, tell him I’m through.
Oh Judge, tell him I’m through.
I’m tired of this life, that’s why I brought him to you.

However, Ma Rainey’s strongest assertion of female sexual autonomy is a song she composed herself, “Prove It on Me Blues,” which isn’t technically a blues song, which she sang accompanied by a Tub Jug Washboard Band. “Prove it on Me Blues” was an assertion and an affirmation of lesbianism. Though condemned by society for her sexual preference, the singer wants the whole world to know that she chooses women rather than men. The language of “Prove It on Me Blues” engages directly in defining issues of sexual preference as a contradictory struggle of social relations. Both Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith had lesbian relationships and “Prove It on Me Blues” vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women with a public declaration of lesbianism. The words express a contempt for a society that rejected lesbians. “They say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me, They sure got to prove it on me.” But at the same time the song is a reclamation of lesbianism as long as the woman publicly names her sexual preference for herself in the repetition of lines about the friends who “must’ve been women, cause I don’t like no men” (Leib, 1981).

But most of the songs that asserted a woman’s sexual independence did so in relation to men, not women. One of the most joyous is a recording by Ethel Waters in 1925 called “No Man’s Mamma Now.” It is the celebration of a divorce that ended a marriage defined as a five-year “war.” Unlike Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters didn’t usually growl, although she could; rather her voice, which is called “sweet-toned,” gained authority from its stylistic enunciation and the way in which she almost recited the words. As Waters (1951) said, she tried to be “refined” even when she was being her most outrageous.

You may wonder what's the reason for this crazy smile,
 Say I haven't been so happy in a long while
 Got a big load off my mind, here's the paper sealed and signed,
 And the judge was nice and kind all through the trial.
 This ends a five year war, I'm sweet Miss Was once more.

I can come when I please, I can go when I please.
 I can flit, fly and flutter like the birds in the trees.
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now. Hey, hey.

I can say what I like, I can do what I like.
 I'm a girl who is on a matrimonial strike;
 Which means, I'm no man's mamma now.

I'm screaming bail
 I know how a fella feels getting out of jail
 I got twin beds, I take pleasure in announcing one for sale.

Am I making it plain, I will never again,
 Drag around another ball and chain.

I'm through, because I'm no man's mamma now.
 I can smile, I can wink, I can go take a drink,
 And I don't have to worry what my hubby will think.
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now.

I can spend if I choose, I can play and sing the blues.
 There's nobody messin with my ones and my twos.
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now.

You know there was a time,
 I used to think that men were grand.
 But no more for mine,
 I'm gonna label my apartment "No Man's Land."

I got rid of my cat cause the cat's name was Pat,
 Won't even have a male fox in my flat,
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now.

Waters' sheer exuberance is infectious. The vitality and energy of the performance celebrate the unfettered sexuality of the singer. The self-conscious and self-referential lines "I can play and sing the blues" situates the singer at the center of a subversive and liberatory activity. Many of the men who were married to blues singers disapproved of their careers, some felt threatened, others, like Edith Johnson's husband, eventually applied enough pressure to force her to stop singing. Most, like Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and Ida Cox, did not stop singing the blues, but their public presence, their stardom, their overwhelming popularity, and their insistence on doing what they wanted caused frequent conflict with the men in their personal lives.

Funky and Sinful Stuff

The figure of the woman blues singer has become a cultural embodiment of social and sexual conflict, from Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere. For these singers were gorgeous, and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as Goddesses, as the high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith, as the Empress of the blues. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire.

Bessie Smith wrote about the social criticism that women faced if they broke social convention. "Young Woman's Blues" threads together many of the issues of power and sexuality that have been addressed so far. "Young Woman's Blues" sought possibilities, possibilities that arose from women being on the move and confidently asserting their own sexual desirability.

Woke up this morning when chickens were crowing for day.
Felt on the right side of my pillow, my man had gone away.
On his pillow he left a note, reading I'm sorry you've got my goat.
No time to marry, no time to settle down.

I'm a young woman and ain't done running around.
I'm a young woman and ain't done running around.
Some people call me a hobo, some call me a bum,
Nobody know my name, nobody knows what I've done.
I'm as good as any woman in your town,
I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep killa brown.

I ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down.
I'm gonna drink good moonshine and run these browns down.
See that long lonesome road, cause you know it's got a end.
And I'm a good woman and I can get plenty men.

The women blues singers have become our cultural icons of sexual power, but what is often forgotten is that they could be great comic entertainers. In "One Hour Mama" Ida Cox used comedy to intensify an irreverent attack on male sexual prowess. The comic does not mellow the assertive voice but on the contrary undermines mythologies of phallic power and establishes a series of woman-centered heterosexual demands.

I've always heard that haste makes waste,
So, I believe in taking my time
The highest mountain can't be raced
It's something you must slowly climb.

I want a slow and easy man,
 He needn't ever take the lead,
 Cause I work on that long time plan
 And I ain't a looking for no speed.

I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa
 Ain't the kind of man for me.
 Set your alarm clock papa, one hour that's proper
 Then love me like I like to be.

I don't want no lame excuses bout my lovin being so good,
 That you couldn't wait no longer, now I hope I'm understood.
 I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa
 Ain't the kind of man for me.

I can't stand no green horn lover, like a rookie goin to war,
 With a load of big artillery, but don't know what its for.
 He's got to bring me reference with a great long pedigree
 And must prove he's got endurance, or he don't mean snap to me.

I can't stand no crowin rooster, what just likes a hit or two,
 Action is the only booster of just what my man can do.
 I don't want no imitation, my requirements ain't no joke,
 Cause I got pure indignation for a guy what's lost his stroke.

I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa
 Ain't the kind of man for me.
 Set your alarm clock papa, one hour that's proper,
 Then love me like I like to be.

I may want love for one hour, then decide to make it two.
 Takes an hour 'fore I get started, maybe three before I'm through.
 I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa,
 Ain't the kind of man for me.

But this moment of optimism, of the blues as the exercise of power and control over sexuality, was short lived. The space occupied by these blues singers was opened up by race records but race records did not survive the Depression. Some of these blues women, like Ethel Waters and Hattie McDaniels, broke through the racial boundaries of Hollywood film and were inserted into a different aspect of the culture industry where they occupied not a privileged but a subordinate space and articulated not the possibilities of black female sexual power but the “Yes, Ma’ams” of the black maid. The power of the blues singer was resurrected in a different moment of black power; re-emerging in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*; and the woman blues singer remains an important part of our 20th century black cultural reconstruction. The blues singers had assertive and demanding voices; they had no respect for sexual taboos or for breaking through the boundaries of respectability and convention, and we hear the “we” when they say “I.”

REFERENCES

- Brown, S. (1980). *Ma Rainey. The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Carby, H. V. (1986). On the threshold of woman's era: Lynching, empire and sexuality in black feminist theory. In H. L. Gates, Jr. (Ed.), *'Race,' Writing and Difference* (pp. 301–316). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carby, H. V. (1987). *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cooper, A. J. (1892). *A Voice from the South*. Xenia, oh: Aldine Publishing House.
- Cox, I. (1980). One hour mama. *Mean Mothers*. Rosetta Records, rr 1300.
- Leib, S. (1981). *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Rainey, G. (1974). *Ma Rainey*. Milestone Records, M47021.
- Smith, B. (n.d.). In house blues. *The World's Greatest Blues Singer*. Columbia Records, cg 33.
- Smith, B. (1972). Young woman's blues. *Nobody's Blues but Mine*. Columbia Records, cg 31093.
- Smith, C. (1980). Freight train blues. *Women's Railroad Blues*. Rosetta Records, rr 1301.
- Spillers, H. (1984). Interstices: A small drama of words. In C. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (pp. 73–100). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Waters, E. (1951). *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*. New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc.
- Waters, E. (1982). No man's mama. *Big Mamas*. Rosetta Records, rr 1306.
- Williams, S. A. (1979). The blues roots of contemporary Afro-American poetry. In M. S. Harper & R. B. Stepto (Eds.), *Chant of Saints* (pp. 123–135). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Williams, S. A. (1981). The house of desire. In E. Stetson (Ed.), *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746–1980*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Williams, S. A. (1982). Fifteen. *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*. New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc.