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The Politics of Black Sexuality in Classic Blues



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The sensual image of a black woman singing the blues on a stage has attracted enormous popular and scholarly attention since the 1920s. Her performances invite both fans and detractors to analyze the motives and thoughts behind her sexual lyrics and provocative performance. Feminist scholars Hazel Carby and Angela Davis describe the blues queens as feminists, women who expressed their sexuality as a mode of liberation. Ann duCille is critical of this limiting perspective, pointing to the history of white perception of black women as a complicating factor. This history, which includes the American minstrel show tradition that nurtured the female blues singers of the 1920s, sheds light on the politics behind the sexuality attributed to black women. While an incipient feminism can be identified in the genre, sexual expression in blues songs should not be simply equated with the politics of female liberation.

White society, particularly men, have had a fascination with the ‘exotic’ black female body, particularly since Europeans intensified exploration of the African continent during the nineteenth century and came into contact with tribes such as the

⁴¹ This paper was written for Dr. Francesca Brittan’s Music History Seminar on Blues Cultures at Case Western Reserve University, Spring 2011.

Bushman or the Hottentot. After observing the Hottentots in southwest Africa, scientists associated the body of all black females with the voluptuous Hottentot woman, and with promiscuity. Sander Gilman explains that white men believed that the sexual appetite of the African was “apelike,” to the point where it was believed that “black women copulate[d] with apes.” To Darwinian Europeans the Hottentot female was the “lowest rung on the great chain of being.” The black woman stood for the “antithesis of European sexual mores” as she was considered primitive and sexually abrasive, with no control over a raging sexual appetite.⁴²

Scientists observed the tribal behaviors of the Hottentots as further proof of immoral character. The body of Saartjie Baartman, known as Sarah Bartmann, became the icon of the black woman when she was exhibited in 1810 in London. This African, the “Hottentot Venus,” was presented in the nude to white observers who were confounded by her foreign and ‘disproportionate’ body. Her protruding buttocks were fascinating to the white Europeans, a clear sign—according to spectators—of extreme sensuality. After dying in 1815 at the age of twenty-five, Bartmann was dissected and her genitalia put on display; she was “reduced to her sexual parts.”⁴³ Her enlarged sexual organs amazed spectators and came to define the sexuality of all black women. Studies of Bartmann’s genitalia served as evidence to explain the promiscuity, immorality, and hypersexuality of the black female as inherent and biological.⁴⁴

⁴² Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies, Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 225-231.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

The European view of the ‘primitive’ African was that of a “debased, abject, and thoroughly irredeemable” creature.

The white European fascination with the biology of the black female body became an obsession with the primitivism of Josephine Baker (1906-1975), a major star on Paris stages during the 1920s. In France she emerged as the embodiment of the ‘primitive’ figure, where she took advantage of the Negrophiles’ obsessions and made herself a performing attraction. Brought up in the minstrel show tradition in St. Louis, Missouri, the dark-skinned Baker learned to make a “parody of the explicit sexual spectacle” reserved for the more sexually desirable light-skinned girls. She left for France in 1925, although she had already gained fame and fortune in New York and elsewhere in the United States. In Europe she was able to “both overcome and subvert the role of the sexually over-determined black woman” with her antics.⁴⁵ Baker was not opposed to the commodification of the black female body; rather, she exploited “white eroticization.” She based her shows on racial stereotypes, knowing that the black body was “only interesting to white society ‘when it [was] sexually deviant.’”⁴⁶ While Baker was in vogue in Paris, blues queens were making their mark performing in America. Parallels in their modes of self-representation and self-commodification are striking.

The established white European view of the black female body also underpinned white American beliefs. As early as Africans slaves were crossing the Atlantic during the Middle Passage, white men were already abusing black women’s sexuality. While the black men were crammed into the bottom of the slave ships, the women were placed on the quarterdeck unshackled. They were thus accessible to the “criminal whims

⁴⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

and sexual desires of seamen,” crewmen barely prevented from molesting the women.⁴⁷ Once in the New World, slave owners discovered that marketing the procreative potential of female slaves was lucrative and began to manipulate their slaves’ sexual relations.⁴⁸ The exploitation and abuse was acceptable to white society, Deborah White has argued, because of the “conventional wisdom that black women were promiscuous Jezebels.”⁴⁹

Many white Americans, particularly in the years before emancipation, characterized black women as Jezebels: female figures “governed almost entirely by [their] libido.”⁵⁰ Using this image to justify the white men’s abuse of female slaves for their own sexual gratification, society reasoned that these hypersexual slaves tempted the otherwise superior white men, practically forcing the men to have sexual relations with them. They argued that the appetites of the black women were so great that they had to go beyond their own race and satisfy themselves with their white owners.⁵¹ After emancipation, white belief in the lax morality of black women was not eradicated. Some freed black women chose to live with men out of wedlock because they would lose their military pension from husbands who perished in the war if they remarried. White society took this as a sign of promiscuity and lack of morality. Even when black women were married, blacks tended to be economically codependent with both partners working outside the home, a concept whites could not understand. Whites still believed that black women were objects and Jezebels who “coveted relations with white men.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Deborah White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1999), 63.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 185-186.

The engrained image of black women translated into sensual portrayals in the American minstrel show tradition. Originally performed by whites in blackface, black performers, also darkened by cork, took up the act, playing the degrading stereotypical roles. Black “coon shouters” sang ragtime songs in Negro dialect, which in the 1890s became known as “coon songs.”⁵³ These songs fed white desire to objectify blacks and eradicate their individuality with titles such as Ernest Hogan’s 1896 hit, “All Coons Look Alike to Me.” White audiences demanded the humorous mockery, bringing blacks to the mainstream stage.⁵⁴ These shows, in which blacks were portrayed as clownish characters of much lower intellect, allowed whites to justify slavery and racist post-Emancipation laws, such as the Jim Crow laws. The sexualized black female was represented in the soubrette character, the most important figure in the show. Like the figure of the Hottentot Venus, the soubrette had large, protruding buttocks.⁵⁵ She was an attractive female, relatively light-skinned, who danced and sang and was the star of the minstrel show. It was this “coon shouter” role that “became signally associated with the coming generation of black female blues singers, including Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith.”⁵⁶

Born Gertrude Pridgett, the “Godmother of the Blues” was the daughter of minstrel show performers and was dancing, singing and acting in shows throughout the South by the age of fourteen. In 1904 she married William Rainey and together they became “Pa” and “Ma” Rainey, known as the “Assassins of the Blues,” as a part of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. The

⁵³ Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, 'Coon Songs,' and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵ See Figure 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

“Assassinator” title reveals “[Rainey’s] influential style as a blueswoman: tough, aggressive, and powerful.”⁵⁷ Ma Rainey, who was famous for her many affairs and affection for both young men and women, had many songs written for her with the theme of the sexually aggressive woman.⁵⁸ She nurtured the archetype of female blues singers as a “bad” and “wild” woman.⁵⁹ It reinforced an archetype already established in the minds of white society.

Rainey’s life included “wild performances offstage” which “enhanced” her stage persona.⁶⁰ The black woman she portrayed in songs, often written by white men, fit the Jezebel character imagined by white America. Her black woman in “Farewell Daddy Blues,” from 1924, is wanton: she is “wild about [her] daddy” and “want[s] him all the time.” Since he “mistreated” her, however, she decides to leave him, and thus is “gone with the farewell blues,” an act which shows a strong female, unwilling to succumb to abuse, whether physical or emotional. The image of the black woman here is a complicated one. She also complains that “since [her] man left [her], others can’t be found” and makes an interesting remark which points to an image of promiscuity: “but before he left me, the other men were hanging around.”

In 1912 Ma Rainey was about to reach the height of her career; she was the lead performer at the Moses Stokes Company when the company hired eighteen-year-old Bessie Smith as a tap dancer.⁶¹ Smith left the tour a few months later, but undoubtedly adopted much of Rainey’s singing and performing style, as well

⁵⁷ Buzzy Jackson, *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2005), 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

as her lyrical focus on relationships between men and women. Smith, raised in the South and influenced greatly by minstrel shows, took her Southern heritage north in 1920. She moved beyond the tent shows in which Rainey thrived, developing the blues and bringing the genre to a wider audience, but always retaining an element of the South and minstrel show style.⁶² She “fused blues with the popular songs of vaudeville and with a newly emerging idiom known as jazz.”⁶³

Bessie Smith, the “Empress,” like Rainey sang of the sensual black woman. “Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl” (1931) was written by her first manager, the African American Clarence Williams. It portrays black women as purely sexual creatures: Smith sings longingly for a man, using the sexual innuendo that she needs “sugar” in her “bowl.” The black woman’s “whole world’s wrong” because she has no man to put “a little hot dog on [her] roll.” The image Williams presents, and Smith vocally brings to life, is that of a woman desperate for a man and sex. She insists to her “hard papa” to “save [his] mamma’s soul.” A black woman, she suggests, would be lifeless if she could not satisfy her hypersexual appetite.⁶⁴

Rainey and Smith went on to great fame and financial success, covering themselves with diamonds and luxury. They allowed themselves to be exploited as a stereotype, in a sense selling themselves, but by doing so they gained money and power and were able to express some truths about themselves and their sexuality. Nevertheless, at times, through the blues, singers could defy the stereotype and commodification of their bodies. In

⁶² Ibid., 43.

⁶³ Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*, (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000), 42.

⁶⁴ “You’ve Got to Give Me Some” and “Empty Bed Blues” also exemplify this.

1928, Bessie Smith recorded “Thinking Blues,” which she authored herself. In a stark contrast to “Put a Little Sugar in My Bowl” and other male-composed songs, Smith presents an image of a woman who thinks not just about her sexual desires but about old letters from former lovers and the Bible. According to musicologist Susan McClary, Smith “articulates a vision of female subjectivity that balances self-possessed dignity with flashes of humor and a powerfully embodied sense of the erotic.”⁶⁵ She asks her audience if they “ever sit thinking with a thousand things on your mind,” explaining that she has “got the blues so bad” as she reads an “old letter.” She then asks her lover if he’s “got the nerve to say that [he] don’t want [her] no more,” reminding him that “the good book said you got to reap what you sow.” This woman has the blues because of love loss, not a repressed sexual appetite.

Controversial black feminist scholars Hazel Carby and Angela Davis have focused their analyses of the blues phenomenon on the “female sexual autonomy” expressed by Rainey and Smith.⁶⁶ Carby believes that because of their “physical presence,” the singers had “reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire.”⁶⁷ Davis does not see Rainey and Smith as bending down to the black female image created by men and white society, but as singing “of female aspirations for happiness and frequently associating these aspirations with sexual desire.”⁶⁸ In accordance, historian Buzzy Jackson has stated that although Smith “was not a political person (nor did she call herself a

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶ Hazel Carby. “The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*, (New York: Verso, 1999), 16.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁸ Angela Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, (New York: Vintage, 1998), 23.

feminist), Bessie Smith nevertheless lived politics in the way few people do: by acting according to her principles.”⁶⁹ She explained that Smith made her personal life public, therefore expressing her own political view on female sexuality.

Though Davis and Carby have argued that “Thinking Blues” confirm the blues as a mode of female liberation, the many sexually provocative songs of Bessie Smith and Gertrude Rainey — many written by men, both white and black—how the context of this genre to be far more complex. Clearly, powerful European and American stereotypes of the hypersexual, primitive black woman were in play. Ann duCille aptly argues that those who “champion the sexual “self-invention” and “authenticity” of blues queens such as Bessie Smith do so without examining the reflexive nature of the invention, without interrogating the role of ideology in shaping the period, its artists, and its attention both to the folk and to black female sexuality.”⁷⁰

The black female body as an object, originally in slavery and then on minstrel, vaudeville, and Blues shows, must be kept in mind when considering how black performers succeeded on the national stage. Audiences desired a sensual image—a reinforcement of the comfortable stereotypes that had come down from the nineteenth century—and Classic blues singers were happy to sell it to them. But while doing so, the singers also expressed their inner thoughts and own sexuality, all while acquiring fame and fortune and immortalizing themselves as the great blues queens.

⁶⁹ Jackson, 48.

⁷⁰ Ann duCille, “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality,” *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 69.

Appendix



Figure 1: Sarah Bartmann, “The Hottentot Venus”⁷¹

⁷¹ Georges Cuvier, “Extraits d’observations faites sur le cadaver d’une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Vénus Hottentote,” 1817, accessed March 3, 2011, <<http://quigleyscabinet.blogspot.com/2009/07/hottentot-venus.html>>



Figure 2: Miss Bessie L. Gilman, Soubrette⁷²

⁷² *Indianapolis Freeman*, 1898, Abbott and Seroff, 22.

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