

LOCATING LUCILLE BOGAN: BLACK MUSIC, THE ARTS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL  
OPPOSITION IN EARLY 1900s AMERICA

LINDA MOROZIUK

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## ABSTRACT

This study identifies the previously overlooked catalogue of music by Lucille Bogan as part of the landscape navigated by black entertainers in post slavery America. The classic blues artists, like playwrights and musicians in the theatre industry, used their respective platforms to disseminate socio-political narratives opposing gender and racial bias to audiences both black and white. Methods used to unearth these narratives include lyric analyses of Bogan and her contemporaries, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith. Subject matter of theatrical plays and the music used therein is also examined, revealing content that subverts white efforts to silence black protest in post-Emancipation America. Turn-of-the-century public protest was an occurrence not tolerated in society. Activists learned that speaking out could subject them to punishment and result in terrifying repercussions (Cherry 1998, 225). In the songs of Bogan and the classic blues women and on the stages in urban theatres, however, black artists found the freedom to articulate socio-economic realities, gender and racial injustices and everyday struggles of life faced by their community.

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is inspired by my interest in racial politics in America and my comprehensive examinations which brought my attention to important social factors in black music. My first comprehensive sought to describe and understand how the production of blackness, beyond ontology, might manifest within the context of American hip-hop, focusing my examination on the outspoken rap group, Public Enemy. What factors come under consideration when constructing the image, words, movements and dress for a group that combines politics of the economically and socially disadvantaged with sound? The exploration of this question revealed parallels between hip-hop and minstrelsy, aspects of cultural and racial appropriation, as well as cultural and racial capital that can be used to confirm or deny equity and social position.

My second comprehensive looked at a history of black women's issues and key black feminist activities in America spanning from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, while also examining two of the main theories that distinguish black feminism from the broader, and one might argue, white feminist movement. By exploring the ideologies of womanism and intersectionality, I took into consideration how these might be usefully applied to the study of black music in America. Looking back to pre-World War II blues as a salient post-slavery genre that encouraged forms of social consciousness and challenged hegemonic ideologies, I discovered a mirroring of contemporary feminist theory. Examining the works of key classic blues artists specifically, I found a source that valorized black working-class life while, at the same time, contested patriarchal assumptions about a woman's place both in the dominant culture and within African American communities (Davis 1999, 120-121). Black political activist, scholar and author Angela Davis suggests that there is a core meaning in the texts of classic blues women, such as those of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, that are

pre-feminist in a sense and also reveal that black women of the early twentieth century were addressing issues central to recent [black] feminist discourse (Davis 1999, 24).

A classic blues woman I discovered along the way, about whom very little is written but whose catalogue of recorded works routinely redefines the sexual rhetoric of the genre, is Lucille Bogan. Later in her career Bogan recorded under the pseudonym Bessie Jackson. Her tenure as an artist earned her the recognition of German anthropologist, ethnomusicologist and jazz critic, Ernest Borneman, who grouped Bogan together with Rainey and Smith as one of the “big three” of the classic blues singers (Borneman 1946, 39). These artists not only articulated counter-hegemonic opinions about patriarchy but also expressed socio-economic realities and described methods of employment. Some of these earning methods were bootlegging and prostitution that bucked all legal norms but were, in reality, ways of earning a living in the Jim Crow era (and beyond) other than back-breaking physical labour or domestic service to middle and upper-class whites.

If one were to search Bogan on the internet, her song, “Shave ‘em Dry” – the adults only version – would be what pops up in connection with her. Although Bogan is scantily written about in popular or scholarly arenas, when she is a topic for discussion, it is because of this song’s lyrical shock value and blatant characterization of sexual activity (heterosexual and non-normative) as well as prostitution. The following is the first verse from “Shave ‘em Dry,” the adults only version, which includes only some of the above noted content (the lyrics in full can be found on pages 188-189):

I got nipples on my titties big as the end of my thumb  
I got somethin’ ‘tween my legs’ll make a dead man come  
Ooh daddy, baby won’t you shave ‘em dry  
Want you to grind me baby, grind me till I cry



I have chosen to remove the novelty attitude associated with Bogan in connection with this song's notoriety. In this study, my lyric typology examines the sixty-six songs found in her collection of recorded works, uncovering a wide range of expressions and articulations in this artist's catalogue.

Several books and journal publications include the name Lucille Bogan. Daphne Duvall Harrison briefly locates Bogan alongside Rainey in the tent circuit in her 1988 monograph, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. Greg Watson mentions her name in his 2006 article, "The Bedroom Blues," as does Debra DeSalvo in *Language of the Blues* published the same year. Michael Taft mentions Bogan at the very end of his book from 2006, *The Blues Lyric Formula*, in reference to one song, the adults only version of "Shave 'em Dry." Similarly, Robert Springer makes a one-line reference to Bogan with regards to the same song in *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Comes From* (2006), also at the very end of the book. Blues scholars whose works were published in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, also cite Lucille Bogan as a member of the group of women who sang classic blues. There is no investigation into her work.

Other scholars of the blues do not even include a mention of Lucille Bogan. Angela Davis, author of *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999), ignores someone who, I suggest, is at the forefront of the connection between black feminism and classic blues music. LeRoi Jones, also known as Amiri Baraka, does not include Lucille Bogan in his influential 1963 book, reissued in 1999, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*.

Those who have published investigatory work on Bogan have written journal articles. These writers include Lorna Wheeler, Jeffrey B. Ferguson and Steven C. Tracy, for example.

They all center on the adults only version of “Shave ‘em Dry” simply because, I would argue, of its jaw-dropping imagery.

While this study does not provide a comprehensive list of authors who either include or avoid Lucille Bogan, those that are referenced serve as an example demonstrating her inconsistent presence in blues writings. There is little to no examination of the impact that her ten-year-plus recording career had on the genre, whether at the time or in retrospect.

There exists enough material on Rainey and Smith to build a case about classic blues music and the intersection of the development, structure and functioning of black working-class women and society post emancipation. My goal is to emphasize an artist about whom little is known or written about and who’s material supersedes her contemporaries’ in this regard. There are limits on my research of Bogan due to minimal information about her life and whereabouts in the classic blues era, but by revealing her entire repertoire I am able to integrate her alongside and at the forefront of her peers with regards to how the genre mirrors a pre-feminist discourse.

This study identifies the catalogue of music by Lucille Bogan as part of the landscape navigated by black entertainers in post slavery America. Beginning with what information exists on the life of Lucille Bogan, chapter one provides an overview of my lyric typology of Lucille Bogan’s sixty-six recordings made between June 1923 to March 1935. The six categories include domestic and culinary images that were used as a reference to sex and sexual activity, labour and economy, relationships and self-determined sexuality, rejection, alcohol use and dependency and death. When considering the musical aspects of Bogan’s songs, I categorize her repertoire according to tempo, establishing two groups. Then I identify vocal elements employed – dynamics, vibrato and pitch inflection. Tessitura is also examined. Musical analysis is used to carve out Bogan’s place alongside classic blues artists Rainey and Smith. This might be one

aspect that helps to understand why, despite Borneman's important iteration citing all three women as seminal to the genre, it is Rainey and Smith who have received significant attention in both scholarly and popular texts, and Bogan is excluded.

Chapter two begins with input from several sources as to what factors, definitions or descriptions characterize this group of women (and their contemporaries) as classic blues singers. Some cultural historians maintain that what is commonly called classic blues would be more appropriately labelled vaudeville blues to emphasize the degree to which the genre was influenced by the American music hall and the vaudeville stage (DuCille 1993, 73). Although there are many differing opinions on the nature of what is called classic blues, this chapter will explore the genre labelled as such and include Bogan's work with an emphasis on the life and seminal works of contemporaries Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith. Over the last few decades, classic blues artists have been resurrected as heroines by black feminist writers who regard [some of] them as bold resisters of gender, race and class persecution. Hazel Carby suggests that classic blues women had an empowered presence and that they were pioneers who claimed their sexual subjectivity through the songs they wrote and sung, producing a black woman's discourse on black sexuality (Carby 1986, 18-19). Carby's perception reflects the efforts of contemporary feminist criticism to accredit black women as active agents in their history instead of victims in a post-slavery landscape. By examining the repertoire of Rainey and Smith, along with my inclusion of Bogan, this chapter seeks to support the idea that women of the pre-world war two era in the Southern United States were laying the ground work for black feminism.

Classic blues developed and was first disseminated to the public, along with other genres of black music, in the travelling minstrel shows at the turn of the twentieth century, as discussed

in chapter three. Contextualizing the performance space which provided an alternative to back-breaking physical labour is an important part in understanding where and how black artists were discovered by record labels. Jazz musician and radio host Humphrey Lyttelton points out, “Few ‘classic’ blues singers of note became famous without serving a tough apprenticeship in the tent shows, barn-storming from settlement to township to plantation” (Lyttelton 1978, 69). Not only were performers afforded new opportunities with the travelling shows but African American entrepreneurs established themselves as successful managers and owners of the touring companies, a socio-economic first in the post Emancipation Southern United States. This chapter also follows the appearance of the term blues first appearing in black journalism in connection with the tent circuit shows.

Chapter four examines the theatre landscape in urban American cities as a performance context that provided a platform to disseminate socio-political narratives opposing racial bias and injustice. Turn-of-the-century public acts of protest were not tolerated in society and were often hazardous for the people involved. Activists learned that speaking out could subject them to punishment and result in terrifying repercussions (Cherry 1998, 225). Theatre, however, provided a scenario to culturally produce socio-political narratives that stood in opposition to racial injustices, subverting efforts to silence black Americans. This chapter includes the seminal work of black women writers who were key in influencing shifts in societal awareness with regards to lynching. These playwrights serve to demonstrate how blacks used theatre not only as a way to challenge racial discrimination in America, but also as a method of survival by promoting and preserving a sense of identity within the black community.

Chapter five investigates the rapid stratification of black social structure post- Emancipation as seen with the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance. The most prolific years for the classic blues

women coincided with this historical era yet these working-class artists and the African American literary elite had an uneasy relationship. On the specifics of the rapport between members of the Renaissance and the classic blues women, Angela Davis writes, “Because women like Bessie Smith 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” (Davis 1999, xiii). Two writers who did consider the contributions of classic blues women as pertinent to the evolution of black cultural politics were African American poet, playwright and social activist Langston Hughes and black professor and literary critic Sterling Allen Brown. In chapter six, I delve into the history of feminism and black women’s issues within the movement. It is necessary to distinguish black feminism from the broader white feminist movement in America because African American women experienced inequality on two counts – gender and race. I also identify black feminist activities in America and the ideologies of womanism and intersectionality. A term first coined by Alice Walker, womanism is a social ideology rooted in the racial and gender oppression of black women (Phillips 2006, 56). The second ideology, intersectionality, is described by Kimberlé Crenshaw as “the complex of reciprocal attachments and sometimes polarizing conflicts that confront both individuals and movements as they seek to navigate the raced, gendered, and class-based dimensions of social and political life” (Crenshaw 2004, 2). Both theories can be connected to the music of Bogan, Rainey and Smith whose material serves as rich terrain for locating protofeminist material.

#### *Literature*

The literature referenced in this study includes a text devoted to Rainey, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* by Sandra R. Lieb (1981), as well as those dedicated to Smith, a seminal one

of which is *Bessie* by Chris Albertson (1972, 2003). A book about the life and work of Bogan does not exist, however, there are some publications that are referenced in this dissertation such as, “From Righteous to Roguish: Queer Desire in Black Women’s Writings, 1850-1940,” a dissertation by Lorna Raven Wheeler that includes a chapter about Bogan (2006). An essay, also by Wheeler, titled, “‘Shave ‘em Dry’: Lucille Bogan’s Queer Blues,” in *Transgression and Taboo: Critical Essays* (2005) is also looked at. A rare resource exists of a 1974 interview conducted by blues journalist, Bob Eagle, with Nazareth Bogan Jr., Lucille Bogan’s biological son. It appears in the music journal *Living Blues* (published 1979). I refer to this document to help locate Bogan in the music scene based on Nazareth’s recollections of his mother and her career.

My dissertation teems with the work of black feminist authors including Angela Davis and Hazel Carby who have written competently about black women in connection with blues music and sexuality. I am critical, however, of their exclusion and/or dismissal of Lucille Bogan and her impact on the genre of classic blues. Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1999) is referred to for its in-depth look at how the works of Rainey and Smith established an historical precursor for contemporary black feminism. I would suggest, however, that at the vanguard of blues works from women in the twenties and thirties that points blatantly to the politics of black sexuality and socio-economic status in post slavery America is Lucille Bogan. In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), Hazel Carby importantly suggests that the classic blues women proclaimed their sexual subjectivity through their works, producing a black women’s discourse on black sexuality – a bold and thought-provoking notion that does not include Lucille Bogan as a contributor to this idea. Another relevant source is Daphne Duvall Harrison who makes a brief mention of Lucille Bogan in *Black*

*Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (1988). Harrison rightly cites Bogan's "Tired as I Can Be" as an example of how classic blues women used lyrics to break away from sexual and racial oppression.

An important text used from the field of black feminism is Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant's *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (2009). Beauboeuf-Lafontant offers a description of womanism, stating that the ideology focuses on, "the experiences and knowledge bases of black women which recognizes and interrogates the social realities of slavery, segregation, sexism, and economic exploitation this group has experienced during its history in the United States" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009, 43).

A significant source is Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff's *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (2007). Having spent many years scouring turn-of-the-century black newspapers, Abbot and Seroff are able to provide a history of four of the major black-tented travelling minstrel shows: Allen's New Orleans Minstrels, the Rabbit's Foot Company, the Florida Blossom Minstrels and Silas Green from New Orleans.

I also examine the performance context of black entertainment in urban theatres. An important text on the topic of lynching plays is Koritha Mitchell's *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (2011). An associate professor of African American studies at Ohio State University, Mitchell exacts a meticulous examination of how blacks used theatre as one avenue to survive decades of racial anxiety. While mainstream white society produced stories and images that justified and even exalted the grotesque killing of African Americans, black playwrights, the majority of whom were women,

wrote plays about lynching that offered an entirely different perspective and will be discussed in this study.

*Black Manhattan* is a book by civil rights activist and teacher James Weldon Johnson, brother to African American playwright J. Rosamond Johnson. This book was first published in 1930. Johnson provides insight into how theatre was used by black writers to agitate or oppose white stereotypes. Scenes depicting romantic love between black characters, for example, presented a very real challenge for African American playwrights. Johnson used the word taboo to summarize the cultural environment of his time writing, “if anything approaching a love duet was introduced in a musical comedy, it had to be broadly burlesqued.” He further states, “a love scene between two Negroes could not strike a white audience as anything except as ridiculous” (Johnson 1930, 171). Johnson suggested that brother J. Rosamond and Bob Cole had come the closest to shattering this form of censorship in their influential theatre plays, *Shoo-Fly Regiment* and *Red Moon*, seen by black and white audiences.

Using these and other sources, this dissertation seeks to contribute to the conversation about socio-political opposition in black music and the arts in the first few decades of the twentieth century in America.



## Chapter 1

### LUCILLE BOGAN

In my effort to recognize Lucille Bogan as a seminal force from the classic blues era, I begin this chapter by discussing the impetus to focus on this previously overlooked artist as well as some of the ways she differs from her widely acknowledged contemporaries Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Next, I bring to light biographic details about Bogan's life and career path. Little is known about her formative years, however, her recording career is documented and situates her in Atlanta, New York and Chicago studios between 1923 and 1935. This chapter includes an overview of my lyric typology of sixty-six recordings made by Bogan. I also provide a musical analysis. Elements examined are tempo, ornamentation, pitch inflection and tessitura. I have chosen to explore these musical aspects for two reasons. First, Bogan's catalogue has not been investigated in any regard before. Collecting tempo data provides a skeletal framework for grouping the sixty-six songs. Second, I look at ornamentation, pitch inflection and tessitura to identify Lucille Bogan's stylistic markers as a singer. This data assists in discovering whether she fits in with, or stands apart from her contemporaries as a classic blues vocalist.

The impulse to recover fragments of Lucille Bogan's life and her repertoire is not simply because of the flagrant counter-hegemonic portrayals of sexual and employment practices in her music but also because Bogan's stark depictions of abject life for African Americans post-Emancipation is unlike any of her contemporaries. She was not the only classic blues singer to express non-normative behaviour in her works. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith both sing about, for example, lesbian and sex-for-hire themes in their music. Neither Rainey or Smith, however, challenge the social order where we find heterosexuality planted firmly in the center (Wheeler 2006, 139). Instead, their allusions to topics such as lesbianism and prostitution simply

stimulate the listeners' bisexual curiosity and pique their interest in non-normative practices rather than affirm and even venerate homosexual acts and non-traditional employment opportunities as realities for many members of society.

With regards to the topic of homosexuality, prominent novelist of post-Stonewall gay literature Eric Garber suggests that flirting with lesbianism was a distinguishing construct: Performers such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Josephine Baker all cultivated a bisexual image. For female jazz and blues singers, being attracted to other women was chic (Garber 1998, 53).

Unlike blues luminary Lucille Bogan, her contemporaries don't venture past the heteronormative boundary nor do they challenge audience demand for veiled sexual imagery that characterizes black women as hyper-sexual (Wheeler 2006, 139-140).

Daughter of Wylie and Gussie Anderson, Lucille Bogan was born in Armory, Mississippi on April 1, 1897 (Eagle and LeBlanc 2013, 43-44). While she was still young, it is not certain her exact age, she moved to Birmingham, Alabama where she eventually married Nazareth Lee Bogan. Lucille was herself a teenager (the actual age of her husband at the time of marriage is not documented) and the pair had a son, Nazareth Lee Bogan Jr., in 1916. The couple also had a stepdaughter, Ira Betty, born 1911, who was the biological daughter of the late Estelle Ward Bogan (Delta Haze Corporation 2012).

Bogan's first appearance in the recording studio came in 1923, when she was twenty-six years old, for Okeh Records in Atlanta, Georgia. Accompanied by pianist Henry C. Callens, Bogan recorded "Don't Mean You No Good Blues." Later that same year she recorded a vaudeville-styled blues song for the same label, "Pawn Shop Blues," backed by Eddie Heywood, Sr., on piano. This was the first "territory" recording, that is to say, one made outside New York

City or Chicago by a black blues singer (Williamson 2007). The story behind Bogan's entry into the music business involves two legendary American music industry figureheads: Ralph Peer, a talent scout and record producer active in the 1920s and 1930s and Polk Brockman, an Artist and Repertoire agent, song publisher and producer. In 1923 Brockman was the wholesale distributor for Okeh and persuaded Peer to bring his recording equipment to Atlanta to record time-honoured country artist Fiddlin' John Carson. An advertisement announcing Peer's visit appeared in the June 15th edition of the *Atlanta Journal* and by the time a makeshift recording studio was set up in an empty loft on Nassau Street, a group of local talent had gathered in hopes of catching a break (Dixon and Godrich 1970, 27). Amongst those present was Lucille Bogan. Robert Dixon and John Godrich's *Recording the Blues* (1970) contains a description of what transpired and how this important moment in her life led to her discovery and ultimately her career:

The *Chicago Defender* gave news of the trip, saying that Peer had made a record by Lucille Bogan, a popular blues singer from dear old Birmingham, Alabama, and an original blues by Fannie Goosby, amongst others. Okeh 8079 coupled Lucille Bogan's Pawn Shop Blues with Grievous Blues by Fannie Goosby, the first race record to have been recorded outside the main centres of New York and Chicago. Lucille Bogan was called to New York almost immediately to record four more titles, and Miss Goosby followed a month or two later. (Dixon and Godrich 1970, 27)

Four years later, in 1927, Bogan recorded for Paramount Records joined by pianist Will Ezell and banjo/guitar player Papa Charlie Jackson. It is of note that her recorded material, from her first song to her last, were originals. When Bob Eagle interviewed her son, Nazareth Jr., in 1974, he could only recall one of his mother's accompanists by name and it was Will Ezell whom Bogan allegedly had an affair with. Paramount talent scout Harry Charles reported that, as a result of the affair, Bogan was involved in divorce proceedings initiated by her husband, but her step-daughter Ira Betty said that Bogan and Nazareth were still together as late as 1941 (Delta

Haze Corp. 2012).

Bogan recorded for the Brunswick label in 1928 and again in 1930. Eagle suggests that “the Brunswick period produced Lucille’s most influential recordings” (Eagle 1979, 25). Many of the songs from these sessions have subsequently been covered by well-known artists such as B.B. King, Buddy Guy and Sonny Boy Williamson.

In the early thirties, Bogan teamed up with pianist Walter Roland with whom she collaborated extensively. It was around this time that she began to record and release material under the pseudonym Bessie Jackson. According to Eugene Chadbourne, a contributor to *Allmusic*, Bogan’s name change was due to the fact she wanted substantial change, not only in name but in performance style as well (*Allmusic* 2017). The most successful tracks from these sessions issued by the American Record Corporation label were “Seaboard Blues,” “Troubled Mind,” “Groceries on the Shelf” and “Superstitious Blues” (Delta Haze Corp. 2012). A further group of sessions, with backing by Roland and in collaboration with singer and guitarist Bob Campbell, began in the summer of 1933. Recordings were released by Conqueror Records, a U.S. label active from 1928 to 1942. Conqueror Records was originally owned by the Plaza Music Company but eventually became part of the American Record Corporation family of labels (Sutton 2007).

Finally, a group of sessions featuring Walter Roland and musician Josh White were held in 1935 producing “That’s What My Baby Likes,” “Man Stealer Blues” as well as both versions of “Shave ‘em Dry.”

In Daphne Duvall Harrison’s 1988 monograph, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, she makes a brief reference to Lucille Bogan being alongside Ma Rainey in the tent circuit at some unknown point in time. I was excited by this as a potential lead to her whereabouts on the

music scene and I concur with Harrison that Bogan likely toured with her contemporaries. Further investigation, however, lead to more information on this very topic that raises some questions. As part of his 1974 interview with Bogan's biological son Nazareth Bogan Jr., blues journalist Bob Eagle asked him, "She [Lucille Bogan] wasn't travelling around in vaudeville shows, like some of the other singers?" Nazareth Jr. replied:

No, no. Most of her writing, she would do it at home and the different piano players would rehearse with her and when she got to what she wanted then we would go back to Chicago. Now this Brunswick deal, I think his name was Mr. Calaway. He was coming through, and wanted some blues, you know. He just wanted talent, period, but she remembered him from, it could have been Okeh or one of those labels, so he corresponded and told her what day he would be through to look up talent, you know, blues singers. (Eagle 1979, 27)

It is important to keep in mind, after reading Nazareth Jr.'s words, that he was a young boy for many of the years Lucille was active in her career. His recollections are therefore sometimes vague. Still, it is fascinating to read the words of someone so close to Bogan. Whether his recollection about his mother's performance past is accurate or blurred by the many years that transpired between the height of Bogan's career and the time of the interview (he was fifty-eight years old when he met with Eagle), Nazareth Jr. is the closest thing to a primary source on Lucille Bogan that anyone has ever had contact with.

Acknowledging Harrison's statement that Bogan appeared alongside Rainey in the tent circuit shows and Nazareth Jr.'s memory that she did her music at home, I suggest that it is probable that Bogan did tour. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

By 1935, when she was thirty-eight years of age, Bogan had relocated back to Birmingham, Alabama and was living with her husband. Nazareth Jr., reported that his mother had made recordings in Birmingham in 1937 but no trace of them has been found in the American Record Corporation files (now Sony/Columbia) after careful inspection of the

recording ledgers (Delta Haze Corp. 2012). Whether or not there is validity to these particular claims, Bogan did eventually put her own recording career on the back-burner, or suspended it altogether, but remained active in the music business by managing her son's band, Bogan's Birmingham Busters.

In the liner notes of the Document Records compilation release of Bogan's material, Keith Briggs writes that Bogan moved to Los Angeles after her husband died, some time in the mid to late forties. She married James Spencer, changing her last name to his (Briggs 1993). In California she continued to write songs. Her last composition was called, rather prophetically, "Gonna Leave Town" and it was recorded by black artist Andrew "Smokey" Hogg, but not in time for her to see it cut. Bogan (or Mrs. Spencer) died on August 10, 1948 from coronary sclerosis and it was one year later that Hogg recorded her final composition (*Allmusic* 2016). The address listed on Lucille Spencer's death certificate was 1913 E. 114<sup>th</sup> Street, Los Angeles, California. Her occupation was noted as housewife and she was buried at Lincoln Memorial Park (Eagle 1979, 26).

### *Typology Overview*

Kenneth D. Bailey in, *Typology and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques*, posits that every typology is the result of a grouping process: a subject is divided in some groups or types with the help of one or more attributes (Bailey 1994, 1). The attribute used to group my typology is lyric themes. I have constructed a lyric typology based on thematic articulations found in sixty-six recordings made between June 1923 to March 1935. The categorical, song-by-song breakdown can be viewed in the appendix section of the dissertation.

In this chapter I list the six groups and offer lyric examples from each, connecting them to socio-economic realities faced by black women in 1920s and 1930s America. This summary

further examines Bogan's work through a theoretical lens of black feminism, focusing on two of the main theories found in black feminist thought in particular, womanism and intersectionality.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant describes womanism as an approach recognizing the social realities of slavery, segregation, sexism, and economic exploitation experienced by black women in America (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009, 43). Examining Bogan's lyrics through this frame connects her work more closely to socio-economic realities faced by black women of the twenties and thirties instead of blanketing black communal experience as a whole.

Regarding intersectionality, Crenshaw asserts that any serious comparative historical view suggests that demands for solidarity across race, class, or gender lines are as likely to compete as they are to coalesce (Crenshaw 2004, 2). Investigating Bogan's material through the lens of intersectionality not only narrows the focus on the female experience but also takes into consideration the effects of intersecting prejudice.

Lucille Bogan's overlooked catalogue contains multiple examples of women who buck social and economic norms and address gender politics, suggesting Bogan's songs reflect a pre-feminist discourse. For this reason, I have included my complete lyric typology in the appendix of this study. This portion of the dissertation focuses on a synopsis of my findings.

The six typological categories are 1) domestic and culinary images used as a reference to sex and sexual activity, 2) labour and economy, 3) relationships and self-determined sexuality, 4) rejection, 5) alcohol use and dependency, 6) death.

In *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, Daphne Duval Harrison lists the wide array of themes that appear in the classic blues: advice to other women; alcohol; betrayal or abandonment; broken or failed love affairs; death; departure; depression; the dilemma of staying with a man or returning to the family; disease and afflictions; disillusionment; erotica; hell;

homosexuality; infidelity; injustice; jail and serving time; loss of a lover; love; men; mistreatment; murder; the other woman; poverty; promiscuity; sadness; sex; suicide; the supernatural; trains and travel; unfaithfulness; vengeance; weariness; weight loss (Harrison 1988, 287). Bogan's catalogue, thematically, fits into Duvall's list. I narrowed the themes in my typology down to the six categories listed above based on the content I found in the body of Bogan's work.

The first category is domestic and culinary images used in reference to sex and/or sexual activity. In the sexual language found in the blues, there are metaphoric and symbolic expressions often used. As an example of culinary imagery as sexual implication, I examine Bogan's "Pot Hound Blues" (1929) where she refers to stew and beans as the pretense for sex:

You come home every day lookin' for your stew and beans  
You come home every day lookin' for your stew and beans  
And you have got more nerve than any pot hound I've ever seen

Now you take your money you have your fun  
You don't have nothin' when house rent come  
And I'm through cooking your stew and beans

In addition to the use of edible items as sexual innuendo, (e.g., stew and beans) the second stanza asserts that the woman's partner offers nothing to his female counterpart in return for his eats.

Importantly, the last line of stanza two states that the woman is finished with the domestic relationship due to the imbalance in the partnership.

The significance of this is that Bogan's character here challenges prevailing societal expectations that a woman's place is in the home. Black feminist scholar Angela Davis points to these social suppositions:

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... Women of that era were expected to seek fulfillment within the confines of marriage.  
(Davis 1999, 11)



Acknowledging that the couple in “Pot Hound Blues” is not necessarily married, they are, however, in a domestic partnership. The female character defies acceptable norms, declaring she is finished with her male partner.

It is applicable to read Bogan’s lyric as within the frame of the feminist theory of womanism. First coined by African American author Alice Walker in 1979, womanism is a social change perspective based upon the everyday problems and experiences of black women and women of minority demographics (Phillips 2006, 56). Aspects of social change include the effect of class, race, gender and sexuality on the individual and collective perspective when considering the power imbalance that has been used to oppress African Americans and their communities. In this instance, Bogan’s character challenges the socially acceptable norm of domestic complacency due to one of many everyday problems for all blacks in post-slavery America, economic instability.

Historian Douglas A. Blackmon examines African American employment difficulties in his 2009 book, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*:

Vagrancy, the offense of a person not being able to prove at a given moment that he or she is employed, was a new and flimsy concoction dredged up from legal obscurity at the end of the nineteenth century by the state legislatures of Alabama and other southern states. It was capriciously enforced by local sheriffs and constables, adjudicated by mayors and notaries public, recorded haphazardly or not at all in court records, and, most tellingly in a time of massive unemployment of all southern men, was reserved almost exclusively for black men. (Blackmon 2009, 1)

The deceptively simple lyrics in “Pot Hound Blues” do not rest on the use of culinary imagery as sexual reference. They also point to the epidemic of unemployment faced by black Americans, as described by Blackmon, and the rejection of society’s expectation that a woman find her place in

a domestic situation. The second category in my typology of Lucille Bogan's repertoire is labour and economy. Whether Bogan sings about prostitution, bootlegging or gambling, her choices of financial income for her characters never include typical or safe methods of employment. This is due largely to the fact that the methods of earning she sings about were the most readily available to blacks in the post slavery Jim Crow era.

Late author and arts activist Garth Tate wrote that blacks during this period ran numbers, were active in bootlegging, rent parties [speakeasies]... prostitution, cocaine and more, creating an underground economy (Tate 2017).

An example of Bogan's lyrics characterizing the woman in the song as a prostitute in charge of her profession is "Alley Boogie." Historians of turn-of-the-century sex-trade work have often associated black women with the industry's run-down confines and most dangerous sectors. This concentration in streets and alleyways demonstrates their degradation in the urban sex economy (Hobson 1987, 35-36).

"Alley Boogie" is a title that upholds an historical perspective that black prostitutes worked in run-down areas. She sings:

My alley boogie, only thing I choose  
And it's the only thing I do to drive away my blues

I boogied all night, all the night before  
When I woke up this morning I wanted to boogie some more  
Oh, alley boogie, only thing I crave

I can do my alley boogie so many different ways  
I got a bed in my bedroom, had it on my floor  
Got to do my alley boogie everywhere I go

'Cause I'm wild about my boogie, only thing I crave  
Alley boogie will carry me to my grave

The singer's alley boogie does not just describe a specific urban location where she works but also indicates an attitude that she adopts about prostitution. While the singer states that her alley boogie serves to drive away her worries, she also acknowledges that her position in the sex-trade will likely be the end of her.

Cynthia M. Blair writes about the reality of the black sex-trade as employment in the urban economy in *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago*:

That so many black women engaged in transactions that were sometimes economically unprofitable and always ideologically fraught underscores the failure of the urban economy to fully incorporate black women into modern, industrial prosperity. (Blair 2010, 237)

Considering Blair's statement about the stark realities associated with illegal methods of employment, such as prostitution, in turn-of-the-century American landscape, I suggest that when the character sings, "Alley boogie will carry me to my grave," she might be referring to the possibility of being harmed or killed while working. Another interpretation is that disease could be her end due to the high-risk nature of her work.

Looking at "Alley Boogie" through the lens of intersectionality provides a relevant reading in the frame of black feminist theory. Intersectionality suggests that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity (Collins 1990, 42).

In the post-slavery socio-economic environment in America, Bogan's prostitute is situated in a nebulous urban alley and contends with intersecting systems and attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality and class in the underground economy.

The third category is relationships and self-determined sexuality. Here I provide details on a song dealing with self-determined sexuality. Some of Bogan's songs involve females with

males and others describe the singer's appreciation of same-sex company and gender-bending.

"Till the Cows Come Home" identifies the female singer in heterosexual relationships with two men. This song is lyrically graphic and sets a stage similar to that of a buffet flat party. Buffet flat parties, or speak-easies, were rowdy events involving heterosexual as well as non-heteronormative activity. In Eric Garber's "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," he includes a depiction of wild buffet flat parties comparable to the content and context Bogan articulates in the lyrics of "Till the Cows Come Home." Garber writes:

Some were raucous establishments where illegal activities such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution were available. Others offered a variety of sexual pleasures cafeteria-style. A Detroit buffet flat of the latter sort, which Ruby Smith remembered visiting with her aunt, Bessie Smith, catered to all variety of sexual tastes. It was "an open house, everything goes on in that house." Smith continues explaining that "[T]hey had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was that great. He'd give a tongue bath and everything. By the time he got to the front of that guy he was shaking like a leaf. People used to pay good just to go in there and see him do his act[...]. That same house had a woman that used to [...] take a cigarette, light it, and puff it with her pussy. A real educated pussy. (Garber 2017)

The scenario described by Garber, like the lyrics to "Till the Cows Come Home," emphasizes the sexual aspects of the buffet flat parties as opposed to the use of prohibited substances.

Bogan's colourful lyrics merit being pointed to in full:

I got a man I love, got a man I like  
Every time I fuck him I give him the doggone clap  
Oh baby give him the doggone clap  
But that's the kind of pussy that they really like

I told them I've got a good cock  
It's got four damn good names  
Rough top  
Rough cock  
Tough cock  
Cock without a bone

You can fuck my cock, suck my cock  
Or leave my cock alone  
Oh baby I've been at this all night long  
You can fuck my cock or suck my cock  
Baby till the cows come home

You know both my men they are tight like that  
They got a great big dick just like a baseball bat  
Oh fuck 'em do it to me all night long  
I want you to do it to me baby till the cows come home

They know a bitch from Baltimore  
I got hairs on my cock that'll sweep the floor  
I got spunk from them hairs that would shut the door  
And I look over your [words unclear]  
I'm a bitch from Baltimore

Oh talking 'bout a bitch from Baltimore  
And I got hairs on my cock that'll sweep anybody's floor  
I got a big fat belly I got a big broad ass  
I can fuck any man with real good class

Talkin' bout fuckin' talkin' bout grinding  
Baby all night long  
And I can do it to you honey 'til the cows come home.

If you suck my pussy baby I'll suck your dick  
I do it to you honey till I make you shit  
Oh baby honey do it all night long  
Do it to me papa  
Break me in 'til tomorrow comes

Debra DeSalvo, author of *The Language of the Blues: From Alcorub to Zuzu*, provides an explanation of the word cock that problematizes the contemporary understanding of what it represents. She writes, "Cock was slang for female genitalia among Southern country African American speakers during the early-to-mid 1900s" (DeSalvo 2006, 39). Although she carefully suggests that cock was used to reference the female sex organ among black speakers at the turn-of-the-century, the examples she provides of those who used the word in that context were male, except for one. DeSalvo cites blues legend Muddy Waters and jazz artist Charles Mingus as

having used cock to reference vagina and then points to Louise Johnson, a blues artist who recorded but four tracks in her life, citing her original song “On the Wall.”

I suggest that an uncertainty exists as to whether the slang was adopted the same way by women as it was, supposedly, by men. Bogan’s use of the word cock, then, is open to interpretation. She uses cock as well as pussy. The latter word, to the best of my knowledge, does not have an historical dual meaning. Is she using cock synonymously with pussy or is she using the term to toy with gender role-play and/or homosexuality?

Queer studies scholar, Lorna Wheeler, embraces the possibility that Bogan’s use of the word cock in this instance is suggestive of non-normative sexual behavior:

Bogan intends again to repossess the phallus. Indeed, Bogan swerves so far from the traditional Harlem Renaissance fare, again she attempts to dethrone the blues. While many of the classic blues singers use double entendre, broach uncomfortable themes tentatively and edge toward the risqué, in “Till the Cows Come Home,” and “Shave ‘Em Dry,” Bogan plays the exhibitionist, and clearly delights in using shocking, even offensive language and imagery. (Wheeler 2006, 173)

I concur with Wheeler’s statement that Bogan reclaims the phallus in “Till the Cows Come Home.” The singer states that she has a total of four pet names for her cock. She also brags about her sexual stamina, singing that she can do it “till the cows come home.” This song widens the scope of heterosexual relations, assuming various gender/role-play identities.

Experiences of class, gender and sexuality cannot be adequately understood unless the influences of [historical] racialization are carefully considered. Sociologically, racialization is characterized as the process of ascribing ethnic or racial identities to a relationship, social practice, or group that did not identify itself as such (Omi and Winant 1986, 21). While it is often born out of domination, the racialized group is prone to gradually identify with, and even embrace, the ascribed identity and thus becomes a self-ascribed race or ethnicity.

In her 1981 publication, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, scholar and feminist bell hooks highlights instances of racialization that occurred during slavery. She writes, “A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of rape, and sexual exploitation of black women [by white owners] during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years” (hooks 1981, 53). Seen not as victims but accomplices, these women were then perceived to have lost any value or worth because of their humiliations. Consequently, these women attempted to shift the focus of attention away from sex and sexuality by emphasizing their commitment to motherhood (hooks 1981, 70-73).

Considering the quote from hooks, I suggest that, in opposition to this instance of degradation and racialization, Bogan sang pointedly about enjoying normative and non-normative sexual acts and assuming control of the role of prostitute.

Moving onto my fourth typological category of Lucille Bogan songs we see lyrics about rejection. Two selections that deal differently with the feeling of being left behind are “Walkin’ Blues” and “Troubled Mind.” In “Walkin’ Blues” the singer blames herself for the misfortune of being abandoned:

My baby put me out, put me out for somebody else  
My baby put me out for somebody else  
But that’s alright I brought it on myself

Bogan’s character goes from blaming herself for being rejected in “Walkin’ Blues” to being filled with worry and insecurity about her place in the world without her man in “Troubled Mind.” She sings:

I had a good man and now my man is gone  
I had a good man and now my man is gone  
And I pray to the Lord that my man will come back home

Now I don’t feel so good, Lord, in this world alone  
And I been had the blues, Lord, ever since my man been gone

In “The Bedroom Blues: Love and Lust in the Lyrics of Early Female Blues Artists,” author Greg Watson suggests that fear of rejection is a theme in early women’s blues. He writes:

These songs might deal with a situation where the relationship is about to end, or is in the process of doing so, or where the woman is worried about losing her man... The level of expression in this category can be quite desperate at stages, varying from where the woman begs the man to stay, as in Ida Cox’s *Booze Crazy Man Blues*, where she sings: ‘Daddy oh sweet daddy, please don’t drive me away, I love you sweet papa, please let your mama stay’ to where another contemplates murder rather than face rejection and mistreatment, in *Take Him Off My Mind*: ‘It’s all about my man, who’s always kicked and dogged me around, I’ve tried my best to kill him, but when I do my love come down.’ (Watson 2006, 343)

Bogan’s “Walkin’ Blues” and “Troubled Mind” address the theme of rejection, as described by Watson. In the two examples looked at here, the singer deals with some of the varying emotional consequences of being rejected, abandoned or left behind.

The fifth category deals with alcohol use and dependency. For many, part of dealing with life’s ups and downs involves the numbing effects of alcohol and the classic blues women were no different. Bessie Smith repeatedly had long exhibited an inordinate taste for alcohol, preferring white lightning, a homemade liquor (Albertson 2003, 17). While there does not exist information about Bogan in this regard, she sings about alcohol as though it was a part of her life. I will include, briefly, all three of the songs found in this category.

In “Cravin’ Whiskey Blues” the female character sings matter-of-factly, “Whiskey is my habit... Ain’t but one thing keep a good woman down in life.” The one thing this woman is remorseful about is her dependence on liquor, suggesting that, although she is susceptible to alcohol’s grip on her life, she realizes it’s not an ideal situation. This perspective is replaced in “Sloppy Drunk Blues” with that of one wherein booze is a priority in the singer’s life:



I love my moonshine whiskey better than I do my man  
I love my moonshine whiskey better than I do my man  
You can have your beer in your bottle, give me my cool kind can

The female character is not only relaying to the listener that she is not ashamed of drinking, but that, unlike her man, at least she can count on her moonshine whiskey.

The last song in the category is “Drinking Blues.” The lyrics reflect a more mature attitude about a woman’s alcohol dependency:

Blues has got me drinkin’, trouble’s got me thinkin’  
And it’s going to carry me to my grave  
I said blues has got me drinkin’, trouble’s got me thinkin’  
And it’s going to carry me to my grave  
And I’m going to keep on drinkin’ the rest of my worried days

Don’t a woman look real funny when she wakes up cold in hand  
And the broad ain’t got a dollar to give the house-rent man  
Don’t a woman feel real funny when the broad wakes up cold in hand  
And she ain’t got a dollar, oh, to meet the house-rent man

The harsh reality of what happens after the buzz wears off is brought to the forefront in this song. Even though the singer does not plan on changing her ways, despite the fact that her drinking drains her of money, the insolent attitude reflected in “Sloppy Drunk Blues” is gone. The woman in this song is cynical about her addiction and, perhaps, has some regret.

The last category in my typology of Lucille Bogan’s lyrics is death. There are two songs from her repertoire that address this subject and I will include both here. In the first song, “Roll and Rattler,” the female character sings, “I love my man head down to his toes / Say I love my man head down to his toes / But he put me in bad luck, doggone as bad luck goes.” These lines simply state the singer’s affection for her partner. If we look further, however, we see a darker turn:

I follow my man down to the croak of day  
I follow my man down to the croak of day  
And I watch the pall bearer put him in his lonesome grave

I'm going to follow him to the burying ground  
Say I'm going to follow him to the burying ground  
Then I'll catch a rolling mailer and I'll leave this ground

For causes unknown, the singer's man has been lowered into the ground. The woman pays her respects visiting the burial site and her sense of sorrow is only hinted at when she describes his lonesome grave.

The second song in this category is "Mean Twister" which takes a different take on death and loss. As the title suggests, the twister (or tornado) is the cause of demise in this song unlike the unexplained reason for the death in "Roll and Rattler." The woman sings:

I'm gon' tell everybody what that mean old twister done  
I'm gon' tell everybody what that mean old twister done  
It tore down my house and hardly left a one

Fell down on my knees and I raised my hands to God above  
Fell down on my knees, raised my hands to God above  
Say you tore down my house and you killed the man I love

While the twister coming down is the reason that the singer's house was ruined and her lover killed, she places responsibility for the crisis on God. In disastrous situations that cause loss and emotional pain, people often turn to God, or religion, for comfort and sometimes for someone/thing to hold accountable. "Mean Twister" exemplifies this sentiment.

In the six categories discussed, Bogan's lyrics cover a range of themes. We see the use of culinary terms as representative of sex or sexual innuendo, scenarios of illegal employment in labour and economy and iterations of normative and non-normative sexual behaviour in relationships and self-determined sexuality. Bogan also sings about rejection, alcohol use and dependency and death.

As a post-script, I have decided to include the lyrics to Lucille Bogan's final composition, "Gonna Leave Town," as sung by Smokey Hogg. The impetus to include this piece outside of the

overview of my typology is two-fold. First, this song was written in California towards the end of Bogan's life, not in a northern urban center during the height of her recording career. Second, it was never recorded by her. The only vocalist to articulate these words in the studio was Smokey Hogg. Bogan died before this happened and never heard the recording. The lyrics she wrote are below:

The woman I was loving, all my love for her is gone  
The woman I was loving, all my love for her is gone  
She drove my love away when she stayed out all alone

It won't be long my baby before I will be gone  
It won't be long my baby before I will be gone  
I called you last night, lady no one's home

I'm going to catch me a grey hound  
And ride him till his tongue drag the ground  
I'm going to catch me a grey hound  
And ride him till his tongue drag the ground  
'Cause I got another good woman  
And I know where she can be found

It is undocumented if this lyric is as the writer intended or if the gender pronoun was changed by the recording artist. In this analysis, it is read as if the writer's female lover was the intended audience.

Foremost is the idea that the writer is reaching out romantically to another woman which, in this song, is a gentle reminder of the fact that in her past works, Bogan wrote explicitly about same-sex desire. She toys with rejection in the third and sixth lines writing, "She drove my love away when she stayed out all alone" and "I called you last night, lady no one's home." True to her fighting spirit, however, the last stanza characterizes Bogan's determination and finds her on a bus going to seek out another good woman.

I suggest that this song is representative of the fact that Bogan was in a quieter time in life, having purged all of her feisty rebellion in the recordings between 1923 and 1935.

My lyric typology of Lucille Bogan's catalogue reveals certain common elements found in blues material like the use of domestic and culinary imagery to represent sex and sexual acts. Her lyrics also include instances of the intersection of race, class and gender. Bogan demonstrates a knowledge and understanding of herself as a black working-class American facing racial and socio-economic biases. She is not afraid to express her needs – normative or otherwise – her wants and her longings. Bogan is also confident in communicating her desire for retribution against an unworthy partner, usually male, and she fearlessly shares detailed consequences associated with illegal forms of employment.

An examination of the repertoire of Lucille Bogan provides some of what is missing from her biography. The categories in my typology can also serve to connect Bogan and her work to other black women's lives in the 1920s and 1930s.

Daphne Duval Harrison suggests that women's blues in the 1920s "introduced a new, different model of black women – more assertive, sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive" (Harrison 1988, 111). Her articulation that early women's blues were a part of redefining black women's self-perception warrants further quotation:

The blues women of Ida Cox's era [twenties and thirties] brought 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. (Harrison 1988, 64)

Harrison suggests that blues women effectively portrayed black experience in their music because they lived what they sang about. The working-class women and men who listened to Lucille Bogan found their experiences reflected in her music. Bogan was part of a group of

artists who articulated an emotional niche for her community and affirmed their humanity through song. As seen in her lyrics, this humanity had both grim and celebratory aspects to contend with. Bogan's determination and sexual awareness showed that she was ready to dish out threats to mistreating men, work in whatever trade earned her money and admit that she sometimes missed her lover, when he or she strays from home. In doing so, Bogan challenged the hegemony of gender-based inferiority and provided a space where working-class women could respond to the rapidly changing social and sexual developments of the Emancipation era.

Angela Davis bridges the classic blues artists to their community by suggesting that, "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" (Davis 1999, 37). Popular blues sung by Bogan and her contemporaries "emphasize the public expression of private pain" (Lieb 1981, 61). While late historian Lawrence Levine doesn't point to classic blues or women in particular, he importantly suggests that the blues is "the most typically American music Afro-Americans had yet created and represented a major degree of acculturation to the individualized ethos of the larger society" (Levine 1975, 221). Here, Levine supports the connectivity of the music of the blues to the wider society's mentality, attitude and focus on individuality.

Finally, in an effort to support and solidify the idea that Lucille Bogan's music mirrored the life of her community, I provide a quote from LeRoi Jones' *Blues People*:

The most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time. Who he thinks he is and what he thinks America or the world to be, given the circumstances, prejudices, and the delights of that particular America. Negro music and Negro life in America were always the result of a reaction to, and an adaptation of, whatever America Negroes were given or could secure for themselves. (Jones 1963, 3)

For every “he” articulated by Jones, I include “she.” There is little doubt that the classic blues songs were aimed directly at the women who came to see them. These people came to hear the music and to experience the connection between audience and singer.

### *Music Analysis*

Elements examined in my analysis are tempo, ornamentation, pitch inflection and tessitura. I have chosen to analyze tempo as the collection of this data provides an organizational framework to group the sixty-six songs. I look at ornamentation, pitch inflection and tessitura to identify Lucille Bogan’s stylistic markers as a singer. Beyond sonic description, this portion of the study also serves to determine how Bogan fits alongside her contemporaries as a singer. Comparing how musical elements are manipulated differently (or similarly) by Bogan, Rainey and Smith is one way to situate Bogan with her peers; was she gesticularly simpler, more complex or typical in relation to other classic blues women?

To begin examining the large number of songs in this study I have first organized them into two groups based on tempo. The first group includes songs that fall between 42 and 50 beats per minute (bpm), forty-four in total. Group two consists of songs falling between 52 and 69 bpm, twenty-two in total.

Breaking down group one, there are four songs at 42 bpm, ten at 44 bpm, thirteen at 46 bpm, eleven at 48 bpm and six at 50 bpm. Group two has seven songs recorded at 52 bpm, five at 54 bpm, five at 56 bpm, three at 60 bpm and one song each at 62, 64 and 69 bpm. Two songs from group one and one song from group two have been selected to use in an examination of the vocal stylistics of Bogan.

Group 1: 42-50 BPM

1923	“Pawn Shop Blues,” “Lonesome Daddy Blues”
1927	“Women Won’t Need No Men,” “War Time Man,” “New Way Blues,” “Levee Blues,” “Pay Roll Blues,” “Cravin’ Whiskey,” “Kind Stella Blues”
1929	“Pot Hound Blues”
1930	“Tricks Ain’t Walking No More,” “My Georgia Grind,” “Black Angel Blues,” “Crawlin’ Lizard Blues,” “Sloppy Drunk Blues”
1933	“Roll and Rattler,” “Mean Twister,” “Forty-Two Hundred Blues,” “Red Cross Blues,” “Superstitious Blues,” “My Baby Come Back,” “T&N O Blues,” “New Muscle Shoals Blues,” “Troubled Mind,” “Seabord Blues,” “Groceries on the Shelf,” “House Top Blues,” “Walkin’ Blues”
1934	“Tired as I Can Be,” “Reckless Woman,” “Drinking Blues,” “Pig Iron Sally,” “My Man is Boogan Me,” “Down in Boogie Alley,” “Sweet Man, Sweet Man,” “I Hate That Train Called the M. and O.,” “Boogan Ways,” “Changed Way Blues,” “Lonesome Midnight Blues,” “You Got to Die Someday”
1935	“Skin Game Blues,” “Man Stealer Blues,” “Jump Steady Daddy,” “Bo Easy Blues”

Group 2: 52-69 BPM

1927	“Nice and Kind Blues,” “Jim Tampa Blues,” “Doggone Wicked Blues”
1929	“Coffee Grindin’ Blues”
1930	They Ain’t Walking No More,” “Dirty Treatin’ Blues,” “Till the Cows Come Home,” “Struttin’ My Stuff,” “Alley Boogie,” “Whiskey Selling Woman”
1933	“Baking Powder Blues”
1935	“That’s What My Baby Likes,” “Barbeque Bess,” “Shave ‘em Dry” (both versions), “Stew Meat Blues”

Figure 1: Tempo Categories

## Vocal Analysis

### Legend

- ◆◆◆ rapid, loud ornamentation, 1 syllable, 1 note
- ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup> rapid, loud ornamentation, 1 syllable, 2 or more notes
- ◆/◆/◆ rapid, loud ornamentation, 2 or more syllables, 1 note
- ◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup> rapid, loud ornamentation, 2 or more syllables, 2 or more notes
- rapid, quiet ornamentation, 1 syllable, 1 note
- <sup>2</sup> rapid, quiet ornamentation, 1 syllable, 2 or more notes
- /●/● rapid, quiet ornamentation, 2 or more syllables, 1 note
- /●/●<sup>2</sup> rapid, quiet ornamentation, 2 or more syllables, 2 or more notes
- [◆◆◆] rapid, loud ornamentation on front *or* back half of word only
- ][●●● rapid, quiet ornamentation on front *or* back half of word only
- P.I.<sup>1</sup> pitch inflection, no ornamentation, 1 syllable, 2 or more notes
- P.I.<sup>2</sup> pitch inflection, no ornamentation, 2 syllables, 2 or more notes
- ◇◇◇ slow, loud ornamentation, 1 syllable, 1 note

The legend was formulated by myself, using the available character set to identify each element I am examining. Components explored in all three of the following analyses are dynamics, tempo, syllable(s) and pitch inflection on vocal ornamentation and pitch inflection on parts with no ornamentation. Tessitura, or the comfortable melodic range within which Bogan sings, is also discussed.

The first song I have selected to analyze is Bogan's 1934 recording of "Reckless Woman" (46 bpm).

◆/◆/◆      ◆◆◆      ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup>      ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup>      ●●●  
A woman gets tired of one man all the time Lord, Lord, Lord  
◆/◆/◆      P.I.<sup>1</sup>      ◆◆◆      ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup>      ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup>      ●●●  
A woman gets tired of one man all the time Lord, Lord, Lord  
◆◆◆      ◆◆◆      ◆/◆/◆] P.I.      ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
And don't care what you give her you can't change her ramblin' mind  
●●●      ◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup>      ◆◆◆      P.I.<sup>2</sup>[◆/◆/◆      ●●●  
Don't never think you got a whole woman by yourself Lord, Lord, Lord  
◆◆◆      ◆◆◆      ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>2</sup>[◆/◆/◆ P.I.<sup>1</sup>      ●●●  
Don't never think you got a whole woman by yourself Lord, Lord, Lord  
◆/◆/◆      ●/●/●      ◆◆◆      P.I.<sup>2</sup>      ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
'Cause there never was a woman didn't love somebody else



*Spoken*

*Mmm Mmm Mmm did y'all hear what that woman said? But she sure is tellin' the truth 'bout some women. 'Course, I ain't like that myself*

◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ◆◆◆     ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ●●●  
I ain't never loved just one man in my life Lord, Lord, Lord  
◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup>     ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ●●●  
I ain't never loved just one man in my life Lord, Lord, Lord  
●●●     ●●●     P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ●●●  
'Cause this kinda love I got I can't love the same way twice  
◆◆◆     P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup>     ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ●●●  
Some womens like two mens some womens they like three Lord, Lord, Lord  
◆/◆/◆     P.I.<sup>2</sup>     ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ●●●     P.I.<sup>1</sup>     ●●●  
Some women like two mens some womens they like three Lord, Lord, Lord  
◆◆◆     ◆◆◆     ●●●     P.I.<sup>1</sup>  
But I like as many men I see is good to me

There are two dynamic variances of Bogan's vocal ornamentation in "Reckless Woman," 1) loud and 2) quiet. The speed of vibrato is consistent throughout the song. In lines 1, 2 and 4, ornamentation is loud. On the last word of each of these lines a quiet vibrato is used, and in these instances, the word is also the same: "Lord." The last word of each of the first six lines are sung with the same ornamentation as described for "Lord" whether the word is one syllable or more and whether it is pitch inflected or not. The consistent vocal nuances on "Lord" emphasize the singer's surrender and perhaps lament about her ways. She characterizes a woman's "ramblin' mind" with regards to sexual restlessness as a curse instead of a freedom.

Ornamental variances *within* the lines first appear in lines 3, 4, 5 and 6. "Ramblin'" in line 3 is broken up into part loud vibrato and part straight note. "Don't" at the start of the fourth line employs a quiet vibrato and "yourself" is broken up into part straight note and part loud vibrato in lines 4 and 5. In line 6 "woman" is pulled back dynamically using quiet ornamentation.

In each of the first six lines Bogan employs multiple pitch inflections in each line.

Moving to the last six lines of "Reckless Woman," the first five end with quiet vibrato on

one syllable words, using one note on each. In this stanza, Bogan uses pitch inflection more than once on each line with the exception of lines 3 and 6 where only one word is inflected in each, “same” and “me” respectively.

Tessitura for this song is within the range of one half tone outside of an octave; the highest sung note is G above middle C and the lowest sung note is F below middle C.

For the second song, I have chosen Bogan’s 1930 recording of “Sloppy Drunk Blues” (48 bpm) to analyze vocally.

[♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      P.I.<sup>2</sup>                      ●●●<sup>2</sup>

I’d rather be sloppy drunk than anything I know

[♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      P.I.<sup>2</sup>                      P.I.<sup>1</sup>

I’d rather be sloppy drunk than anything I know

P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      ●●●                      P.I.<sup>1</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      ●●●                      ●●●<sup>2</sup>

And I know a half a pint will see me go

[♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>2</sup>    P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      P.I.<sup>1</sup>

I love my moonshine whiskey better than I do my man

●●●                      [♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>2</sup>    P.I.<sup>1</sup>

I love my moonshine whiskey better than I do my man

♦♦♦    P.I.<sup>2</sup>    ●●● P.I.<sup>1</sup>

You can have your beer in your bottle, give me my cool kind can

[♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      P.I.<sup>2</sup>    P.I.<sup>1</sup>

I’d rather be sloppy drunk sittin’ in the can

[♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      P.I.<sup>2</sup>    P.I.<sup>1</sup>

I’d rather be sloppy drunk sittin’ in the can

P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      P.I.<sup>1</sup>                      P.I.<sup>2</sup>    P.I.<sup>1</sup>

Than to be at home rollin’ with my man

P.I.<sup>1</sup>    ●●●    P.I.<sup>1</sup>

Mmm bring me another two-bit pint

P.I.<sup>1</sup>    ●●●    P.I.<sup>1</sup>

Mmm bring me another two-bit pint

P.I.<sup>1</sup>    P.I.<sup>2</sup>                      P.I.<sup>1</sup>    P.I.<sup>1</sup>

‘Cause I got my habits down, I’m going to wreck this joint

[♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>1</sup>    ●/●/●<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>

I been on this sloppy drunk for a solid year

[♦/♦/♦ P.I.<sup>1</sup>    ●/●/●<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>

I been on this sloppy drunk for a solid year

●●●    P.I.<sup>2</sup>    ●●●                      ●●●<sup>2</sup>

And when I can’t get my whiskey bring me my cool canned beer

◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>  
 My good man quit me for somebody else  
 ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup>  
 My good man quit me for somebody else  
 ●●● ●/●/●<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup> P.I.<sup>2</sup> [●/●/●<sup>2</sup>  
 And now I'm sloppy drunk drinkin' by myself

Akin to “Reckless Woman,” there are two dynamic variances of the vibrato in “Sloppy Drunk” and the momentum of vibrato in these loud and quiet articulations are the same in both songs. The word “sloppy” is broken up into part straight note and part loud vibrato in every single instance in this song except for the very last use of the word in the last line where Bogan uses a quiet vibrato and a quiet, two-note pitch inflection. Looking at the meaning of the lyric in connection with the change of emphasis on the word “sloppy” in the last line, here the singer is resigned, almost regretfully so, to being “sloppy drunk” and drinking by herself. “Moonshine” is the only other word broken up into part straight note and part loud vibrato in both instances looking at lines 4 and 5. Pitch inflection is employed a bit more densely in this song when compared to the first, with melodic inflections occurring multiple times on every line of the song. The tessitura in “Sloppy Drunk” is one and a half tones greater than an octave ranging from G above middle C to E flat below middle C.

The final song I have selected to analyze is Bogan’s 1927 recording of “Jim Tampa Blues” (56 bpm).

◇◇◇ P.I.<sup>1</sup> P.I.<sup>2</sup> ◇◇◇ P.I.<sup>1</sup> P.I.<sup>2</sup>  
 Hey Jim Tampa, hey Jim Tampa  
 ◇◇◇ P.I.<sup>2</sup> ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>2</sup> ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
 Hey Jim Tampa, you treat your woman so mean  
 ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>2</sup> ◆◆◆<sup>2</sup> P.I.<sup>2</sup> ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
 You treat your tommies like a woman you ain't ever seen  
 ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>1</sup> ●/●/● P.I.<sup>1</sup> ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
 Womens all know my man, call him Mister Tampa Long

(Why shouldn't they call me? They know my name) – spoken, male

◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>1</sup> ●/●/● P.I.<sup>2</sup> ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
Womens all know my man, call him Mister Tampa Long  
◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ ◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup> ◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup> ●●● ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
He made so much money, women, when the weather was warm

(Ah no I ain't made no money in my life) – spoken, male

◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>2</sup> ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
My mans got five womens I can call them by their natural names  
●●● P.I.<sup>1</sup> P.I.<sup>2</sup> ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>2</sup> ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
He's got five women, call them by their natural names

(I'm tired, don't know how they do it) – spoken, male

[◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup> ◆◆◆ ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
And all them repeaters sound just the same

(I ain't just the same though no, no) – spoken, male

P.I.<sup>1</sup> P.I.<sup>1</sup> ◆◆◆ ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
It must be a black cat bone jomo can't work that hard

(Oh what is a jomo anyhow? Tell me) – spoken, male

◆◆◆ ●●●<sup>2</sup> ◆◆◆ ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
It must be a black cat bone jomo can't work that hard

(What kind of a thing is it you think?) – spoken, male

◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>1</sup> ◆/◆/◆<sup>2</sup> ●●● ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
Every time I wake up Jim Tampa's in my yard  
◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>1</sup> ◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
I can stand right here five miles down the road  
◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ P.I.<sup>1</sup> ◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
I can stand right here five miles down the road  
◆◆◆ ◆/◆/◆ ●●●<sup>2</sup>  
Yeah lookin' the way Jim Tampa used to go

In addition to the vibrato variances that appeared in the above two songs, is the appearance of a slow ornamentation that appears briefly in the beginning of “Jim Tampa Blues.” This slow vibrato lands on the first three “Hey” words in the first two lines. Bogan shifts to the rapid vibrato employed in the first two songs discussed by the end of the second line, using loud, rapid

ornamentation on “your” and quiet on “mean.” These rapid vibratos underscore the singer’s accusatory claims about Jim Tampa. When Bogan sings about how many women Tampa has and how much money he makes (seemingly from pimping these women) her ornamentations are consistently loud and rapid, punctuating her disapproval. Pitch inflection is used quite densely in this song with multiple note variations used in every line except for the last line where pitch inflection appears only once, on the very last word, identically matching every last word of each line in the song with a slight exception of the first line’s last word, “Tampa,” which does use pitch inflection, however, it is not ornamented. The tessitura in “Jim Tampa” covers an octave ranging from the A above middle C to the A below middle C.

All three of the recordings examined, spanning from 1927 to 1934, employ identical vibrato (speed and volume) and have tessitura that vary only by a matter of two whole tones. There is a two-note pitch inflection on the last word of every line in both “Jim Tampa Blues” and “Sloppy Drunk Blues.” In “Reckless Woman” there is pitch inflection on the last word of lines 3, 6 and 12 only. Despite this difference and the addition in “Jim Tampa Blues” of a slow ornamentation on the first three “Hey” words, these songs, recorded over a period of seven years, have a remarkable amount of similarity. It could be suggested that Bogan’s style as a singer is steady and consistent. She vacillates between loud and quiet vibrato at the same speed most of the time and stays within the same vocal range.

### *Contemporaries*

After analyzing the music of Lucille Bogan, I thought it important to discuss some of the musical attributes of her contemporaries to see where Bogan might fit stylistically in the context of her contemporaries. Ma Rainey made ninety-two recordings from 1923 to 1928 and it is also suggested that four additional unissued recordings are likely hers as well (Godrich and Dixon

1969, 15, 27). Her catalogue has been typologized, thematically, by Sandra R. Lieb, author of *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, into two categories: the first group contains songs about love which comprise approximately three-quarters of Rainey's recordings. The second group is more of a catch-all category including comic songs as well as those that are grim and/or about resignation (Lieb 1981, 129). Rainey's voice can be characterized as rugged and her use of vibrato is extremely limited. In a short description of her vocal style, Lieb writes, "Her slurs and glissandos recall the earliest formation of the blues and sung speech, sweeping in between notes, eliminating the classical sense of pitch or absolute distinction between one note and the next" (Lieb 1981, 67). Since the term glissando appears for the first time in this study, I should note that it is similar and/or akin to pitch inflection, indicating an upwards or downwards slide between notes. As noted in the Bogan analyses, a glissando or pitch inflection can be used over one or multiple syllables.

Of the three artists in this study, Bessie Smith has the largest recorded catalogue of music with a total of one hundred and fifty-nine songs recorded from 1923 to 1933 (Brooks 1982, 189-225). She is also the most discussed, analyzed and written about in scholarly and popular texts. For the purposes of this portion of the study, I will provide a sketch of Smith's vocal style, citing some of the sources that delve into her work. An interesting point is that Smith's popularity has been attributed to, in part, her clarity of diction. When singing, she enjoys "the enunciation of every word" (Oliver 1961, 19). Late author of *The Bessie Smith Companion: A Critical and Detailed Appreciation of the Recordings*, Edward Brooks writes that few of her contemporaries could reach Smith's limpidity without sacrificing the emotional expression of the music (Brooks 1982, 2). Smith also has notable control over her vocal intonation and ornamentation and she uses a variety of vibratos over the tenure of her career. African American music professor

Samuel A. Floyd Jr. writes in his book *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* that, “Bessie was dominant, her weighty voice, superb intonation, powerful emotional delivery, and subtle bending of blue notes were compelling and inimitable, setting her clearly apart from the other blues stylists of the period” (Floyd 1995, 108-109). These comments cover a significant amount of terrain, however, they do factor in important features of Smith’s vocal work such as pitch and emotional delivery. Her lyric themes, as far as I have been able to see, have not been typologized. Summarily, topics covered in Smith’s catalogue are largely about love with reference to good and bad times, vengeance and hard times.

I include another contemporary of Bogan’s, namely Ida Cox. While she is not one of the classic blues artists focused on in this study, she was, according to Bogan’s son, Nazareth Jr. Bogan, his mother’s friend. In the interview with Bob Eagle, Eagle asked him, “Did your mother ever say who inspired her to start singing?” Nazareth replied, “She was along with Bessie Smith, Ida Cox and that bunch.” Eagle followed up with another question that attempts to dig a little deeper into Bogan’s musical background. He asked, “She came up with them but was there someone earlier she liked?” Affirming his earlier response with a slight nuance Nazareth said, “Not that I know of, no more than Bessie Smith and Ida Cox. You know, they were friends of hers” (Eagle 1979, 26).

Due to this bit of information from someone so close to a woman about whose personal life little is otherwise known, I deem it important to discuss some of the stylistic markers of the classic blues singer and friend to Lucille Bogan, Ida Cox. Some scholars suggest that Cox worked in the shadow of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, however, her studio recording debut was in fact six months earlier than Rainey, the “Mother of the Blues” herself, in June of 1923 for Paramount Records (Stewart-Baxter 1970, 53.) Cox garnered a title of her own, the “Uncrowned

Queen of the Blues,” given to her by Paramount, and she recorded eighty-seven songs with them for seven years, until 1929. Cox recorded another eleven songs for Vocalion and Okeh Records from 1939 to 1940, recording ninety-eight songs in total under her name over the course of her studio career (Davenport 2003, 92). Like Rainey and Smith, Cox cut her teeth in the tent circuit shows performing with The Rabbits Foot Minstrels and other touring companies. Her songs deal mainly with love, both in good times and bad, the ideas of moving on and staying put and death. Her voice is smooth and her delivery precise with, in many instances, a humourous intonation that is subtle and sophisticated. Even when singing about a mistreating man, “her tone stays light, rarely angry or seriously vindictive” (Davenport 2003, 99).

Bogan does not use a wide variety of vibrato like Smith, however, both employ ornamentation throughout their works, unlike Rainey. Cox uses vibrato in much of her material, typically varying between loud and quiet. Bogan, Rainey, Smith and Cox all employ pitch inflection in their music. Even though it is suggested that Cox has a precise delivery, she frequently employs pitch inflection and/or glissandos that are part of her stylistic marker. Smith and Cox appear to have an attribute in common with regard to their vocal precision, something I suggest neither Bogan nor Rainey use to any noteworthy degree. Smith is known specifically for her clarity of diction and while this is not something, to my knowledge, noted by other authors, there is an exactness and intelligibility to Cox’s delivery.

It appears that these four classic blues artists share some norms. Thematically, their songs deal with love, love gone awry, travel and or movement and darker subjects like death and revenge. All four women assert a strong, autonomous female personality in their songs with regards to domesticity, love, marriage and/or sexual identity and action. Vocally, all four singers use pitch inflection. Three of the four use vibrato (Rainey excluded) and three of the four



developed their talent in the tent show circuit (Bogan excluded). Cox, like Bogan, Rainey and Smith, was a mother. She had a biological child, Helen, in the early twenties. Cox differs from all of these women, in that she made her last studio recording at the age of 65, in 1961. By then, her voice had lost its quality and “she retired from performing thereafter” (Oliver 1998, 252).

The late Iris Marion Young, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago whose research included contemporary political theory and feminist social theory, discussed her vision of a democracy that rests on social differentiation without exclusion – a politics of difference founded on bilateral recognition and acceptance of difference. This ultimately “links the particular with the universal” (Young 1990, 251). I suggest that there is a connection between Young’s theory and the question of Bogan’s position in blues scholarship because it identifies the need to include varying social perspectives, or in Bogan’s case, varied social expression, that has otherwise been excluded.

I argue that the politics of difference is a key factor responsible for Bogan’s lack of consideration as a seminal part of blues music. It is possible that she is bypassed as a source to be examined in blues scholarship because she does not easily assimilate into the tropes that nearly all of her contemporaries followed in two ways. The first is that she was not part of the tent circuit shows. Ethel Waters, Sippie Wallace, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Memphis Minnie, Lizzie Miles, Sara Martin, Viola McCoy, Bertha “Chippie” Hill, Lucille Hegamin, Ida Cox and Esther Bigeou all began their careers touring in the travelling minstrel or tent circuit shows. Some of Bogan’s contemporaries who did not begin in the tent shows, are Sister Rosetta Tharpe who toured the country but as part of a travelling evangelical group, Victoria Spivey, Alberta Hunter and Gladys Bentley. Bentley did tour the country but in urban venues.

Of the women who started their careers in the travelling minstrel shows, all have been written about by blues scholars, some to a greater extent than others, with entire books dedicated to their lives as blues singers. Of the women who did not tour in the tent shows, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Gladys Bentley are both widely discussed in academic and popular writings. A book about Alberta Hunter has been published, *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues*, along with a musical about her life written by Elyse Sommer, *Cookin' at the Cookery: The Music and Times of Alberta Hunter* (Sommer 2017). Victoria Spivey appears in blues writings but to a lesser extent than the other women mentioned. In support of this suggestion, I cite jazz musician and radio host Humphrey Lyttelton who points out in *The Best of Jazz: Basin Street to Harlem: Jazz Masters and Masterpieces, 1917-1930*, “Few ‘classic’ blues singers of note became famous without serving a tough apprenticeship in the tent shows, barn-storming from settlement to township to plantation” (Lyttelton 1978, 66).

The second way that Bogan differs from her contemporaries is the degree to which she employs explicit language and imagery. “Shave ‘em Dry” and “Till the Cows Come Home” top the list in terms of sheer profanity and are songs that would, arguably, make a young Mick Jagger blush. This could account, in part, for the surprising absence of critical commentary on Bogan. Queer studies scholar Katherine Wheeler writes, “Female erotic space is necessarily revolutionary and as such it is no accident that Bogan’s exploration into this socially and culturally outlawed realm has veritably expelled her from blues scholarship” (Wheeler 2006, 139-140).

In summary, this chapter looked at the recordings of Lucille Bogan made between 1923 and 1935 in an effort to situate this overlooked artist as part of the seminal group of women who defined the genre classic blues. By looking at contributions of Bogan’s contemporaries, I

connected her to the group as well as articulated ways in which she stood apart from them, offering potential reasons as to why she has been excluded from blues scholarship.

The next chapter delves deeper into the lives and works of two noted contemporaries, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith. I position Lucille Bogan’s work alongside theirs when considering how Rainey and Smith’s works articulate socio-political contention and panegyricize non-normative behaviours.

## Chapter 2

### LUCILLE BOGAN, GERTRUDE “MA” RAINEY, BESSIE SMITH AND THE CLASSIC BLUES

This chapter begins with an examination of the term classic blues, offering insight from various sources as to what factors characterize this genre of the blues. Providing generic context for the artists considered in this chapter aides in the discussion of the song material which includes iterations of social consciousness that challenge the intersection of racism, gender, sexuality/sexual-orientation and equality. I briefly review biographic material on Rainey and Smith and include an examination of some of their most celebrated songs. Next, I break down areas of lyric analyses into thematic groupings: family, travel and alcohol and protest.

The importance of this chapter with regards to Lucille Bogan is that, by identifying themes articulated by Rainey and Smith, the context is created to insert the works of Lucille Bogan alongside them. The inclusion of her catalogue in company with celebrated artists situates Bogan as an important contributor in the study of classic blues.

In the blues of the pre-world war two era there existed a group of black women singers whose work is not simple to categorize but has been described, according to blues archivist Keith Briggs, as falling “somewhere between the rural sounds of, say, Bertha Lee and those of the so-called ‘classic’ singers” (Briggs 1993). This particular manifestation of the blues was, arguably, an art form that blended the material and techniques of traditional African American music with the presentational modes of popular white American musical theatre, specifically minstrelsy and vaudeville. Some cultural historians maintain that what is commonly called classic blues would be more appropriately labelled vaudeville blues to emphasize the degree to which the genre was influenced by the American music hall and the vaudeville stage (DuCille 1993, 73).

In *Blues People*, political activist, poet, scholar and author LeRoi Jones makes an interesting distinction between classic and other forms of blues:

It has been said, for instance, that a great many of the blues singers from Missouri, St. Louis especially, sing through their noses. A woman like Ida Cox, who certainly does sing through her nose, would, in the pre-vaudeville, pre-phonograph era only have influenced people in her immediate vicinity. But when Ida began to work with the traveling shows, her style was heard and copied by a great many more people. And in one sense... this was why the so-called classic blues singers were classic. Not only because their styles were a kind of beautiful balance between the urban and country styles of blues, but because these classic singers were heard by more people and were widely imitated. (Jones 1963, 102)

Further, Jones distinguishes between classic blues as public entertainment and traditional blues as folklore. Literary critic and writer Ralph Ellison suggests that Jones' distinction is incorrect, insisting that classic blues were both entertainment and folklore. He writes, "When they were sung professionally in theatres, they were entertainment, when danced to in the form of recordings or used as a means of transmitting the traditional verses and their wisdom, they were folklore" (Ellison 1964, 256-257).

A contemporary of the classic blues singers provides another insight into the meaning of this branch of the blues. John Wesley Work, best known as a composer and folksong collector, described the classic blues as being solo, individual, worldly, unprintable and springing from everyday life (Work 1940, 19-20).

Record companies scouting for talent discovered a group of singers, women whom I shall henceforth refer to as classic blues singers, who were prepared to record their music. Many of the women were tough, some were themselves prostitutes, who recognized the shady circuit in which they travelled and were not afraid to sing about aspects of life as a black working-class woman in post-slavery America. Author, public radio host and producer Sally Placksin points out that classic blues singers were far more forthright in their lyrics than most, if not all female

vocalists who followed them:

In their songs, the blues women told of a wide range of subjects and feelings, and, with their candor, broke many of the sexual and social taboos of the day. They sang of love, unrequited love, murderous revenge, anger, prostitution, jail, abandonment, loneliness, disease, alcohol, floods, travel, home, humour, trains, sex, ships, superstition, hard luck, death, dreams, voodoo, graveyards, lesbianism, male homosexuality, sadomasochism, violence and even aching feet. (Placksin 1982, 10)

Another perspective, from noted blues scholar Paul Garon, addresses the challenges facing this particular group of women and how they used their stage as an outlet:

The woman blues singer exemplifies the specific fate of woman at the hands of a society ruled by the white male bourgeoisie, wherein the female is subject to a seemingly endless variety of forms of subjugation. This subjugation, as we have seen to some extent, is reflected in her songs. One of the most characteristic degradations of the lower class black woman is her frequent necessity to resort to prostitution, either as a means of economic sustenance or as a method of fulfilling the expectations (and exploitations) of her male partner or pimp. (Garon 1975, 108)

As for patron reaction, demanding and highly critical audiences lauded artists like Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (Lyttelton 1978, 69). Subsequently, when the classic blues singers were captured on record and disseminated throughout the United States, both women and men sang their praises. According to African American professor of English at Wesleyan University Ann DuCille, the blues, whether folk blues or classic blues, were a significant art form that grew out of and spoke to the psycho-social, emotional and cultural dimensions of both Southern rural and Northern urban black American historical experiences (DuCille 1993, 66). For black poet Robert Hayden, who grew up in the slums of Detroit in the twenties, the blues represented black truth and artists like Bessie Smith, whom he memorialized in a poem, were “lifelines reaching back through Northern ghettos into the rural reaches of the Deep South,” especially for those who had not been out of the South very long and held a sort of nostalgia for it (ibid).

Like all musicians, actors and show people in the early 1900s, the classic blues women

were considered by many, even in the black community, to be the lowest of the low. As black feminist writer Angela Davis notes, “because women like Bessie Smith...embodied sexualities associated with working-class black life...their music was designated as ‘low’ culture” (Davis 1999, xiii).

Still, they brandished their bejewelled, elaborate costumes and sang their bawdy songs as they toured the Southern and Mid-Western United States. They assumed the role of diva, never played instruments and always exhibited a show-biz presentation of their music. Years later when fans and historians emphasized the guitar approach in blues music, they studied specific chord progressions such as twelve bar blues (and variations of this form such as thirteen bar blues) and a common AAB pattern, a phase of the genre that featured almost all male musicians. Even though classic blues music sometimes used these same forms, the classic blues women receded into near invisibility. Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, classic blues women have been resurrected as heroines by black feminist writers such as Angela Davis and Hazel Carby, who regard [some of] them as bold resisters of gender, race and class persecution. Carby’s perception that [some] classic blues women had an empowered presence and claimed their sexual subjectivity through the songs they wrote and sung, produced a black women’s discourse on black sexuality that reflects the efforts of contemporary feminist criticism to accredit black women as active agents in their history instead of helpless victims in a post-slavery landscape.

Ducille problematizes the idea that the classic blues women were responsible for designing themselves as sexual subjects, stating that the boldness they exhibited “spoke to the racial and sexual iconography that cast the African woman as a hypersexual primitive” (Ducille 1993, 74). Ducille’s words call for caution in over-assigning agency to the blues singer’s self-

invention while also examining what made the invention of the explicitly sexual black female possible in the first place. In her monograph *The Coupling Convention* Ducille writes:

I argue that much of the discourse that champions the sexual “self-invention” of blues queens such as Bessie Smith and signifying sisters such as [literary author] Zora Neale Hurston does 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. (Ducille 1993, 69)

As pointed out by Davis, while there exists an impressive body of literature establishing historical antecedents for contemporary black feminism, there remains a gap in research on the class-inflected aspect of historical black feminism (Davis 1999, xi). As works of nineteenth and early twentieth-century black women authors have been made increasingly available through initiatives such as the Schomburg Library Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series, endeavours to reconstruct black feminist traditions lean on and towards texts produced by literate, educated authors. To a degree, at least, what comprises black feminist traditions have excluded ideas produced by women from poor and working-class communities who historically have not had the means or access to publish written texts (Davis 1999, xi-xii). Ironically, this truism is an instance of history repeating itself in the sense that this occurred with black literati in the Harlem Renaissance as well. Yet the women that this dissertation is concerned with did have an avenue in which to establish their history. It was captured on record in the 1920s by the burgeoning recording industry of America.

The classic blues as a positive form of retaliation represents an instance of a feminist tradition not derived from written text but from a practice used by African and Afro-Caribbean women who wanted to embarrass men who had either abused or neglected them (Harrison 1988, 89). According to anthropologist Roger D. Abrahams, when black women would go public with their domestic problems it was/is a way of negotiating respect. One situation in which smart talk



develops in female-male relationships happens when two participants are deeply involved and the woman uses this opportunity to produce strategic advantages, hopefully modifying the man's behavior (Abrahams 1975, 76). This is the goal implicit in many of the classic blues lyrics wherein the silent, suffering woman is replaced with a big-mouthed mama singing with one hand on her hip and the other shaking a finger at the male subject she sings about. As Daphne Duval Harrison suggests, blues of this nature announced to women listeners that they were members of a sisterhood that did not have to endure or accept mistreatment (Harrison 1988, 89).

The way in which classic blues singers articulated and nuanced their performances, vocally in particular, is part of what characterizes this phase of the blues. Prominent blues scholar Paul Garon writes:

The humour in blues does not always reside entirely in the lyrics, however. Just as it is the way in which a song is sung that determines whether or not it is a blues, it is also the way certain lyrics are delivered that provides the humour with a means to its most subtlest realisations. As in nearly every facet of the blues, it must be heard to be appreciated. (Garon 1975, 86)

Delivery played a large part of this music, as Garon suggests, creating poignancy for listeners and establishing the singer's persona during her performance. As many of the classic blues songs were written by people other than the singers (usually men), it was important for the artists to express their personal connection to the lyrics by using various inflections and emphases.

### *Country Blues*

Classic or vaudeville-style blues dominated the blues recording industry from the early-to-mid 1920s. In the latter half of the twenties, country blues began to appear in record company catalogues (Garon 2014, 30). While classic blues singers were considered to have had a level of sophistication, country blues artists tended to be unrefined male musicians who accompanied

themselves on acoustic guitars (Titon 1977, xiv-xv).

A highly regarded country blues guitarist and singer was Blind Lemon Jefferson. At the height of his career, he was roughly the same age as Bessie Smith and ten years younger than Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, but “he sounded like their country grandfather” (Wald 2010, 33).

Although a few other blues guitarists recorded music before Jefferson, it is he who is noted as the first popular star of country blues:

[Jefferson’s] rival for this distinction (i.e., his predecessors in the recording studio) either had brief or commercially unsuccessful recording careers, were accompanists to more famous vocalists, were not solo guitarists but worked instead in combinations with other instruments, or were professional stage entertainers and thus did not fit easily into the model of a folk/country-blues singer-guitarist. (Evans 2000, 83)

Jefferson’s exceptional sales heralded a brief golden age, of sorts, of rural blues recording.

Record companies were encouraged to explore other “street, medicine show and ‘juke joint’ entertainers” (Wald 2010, 33).

Most female blues singers (in all sub-categories of the genre) were accompanied by record company house bands or solo pianists. Exceptions were classic blues artists Bernice Edwards and Victoria Spivey who played piano and sang on a few of their titles. Mattie Delaney, a Delta blues artist, accompanied herself singing as well as playing guitar on some of her recordings.

Memphis Minnie, who has been recognized as “the most popular female country blues singer of all time” (LaVere and Garon 1973, 5), was a pioneer whose fame was found in the gap created by the success of classic singers on one side and male country blues stylists on the other:

Guitar-playing women like Minnie (yes, there were others) constituted an effective link that served to give female blues singing a continuity in its leanest years. (Garon 2014, 33)

Minnie served as someone who connected music styles or genres because, when she started out, she played a variety of venues, from white parties to black community events such as picnics, as

well as in juke joints. Minnie's musical contributions would be nuanced to suit the atmosphere of each setting, widening the scope of her generic articulations. She was her own manager, the writer of the majority of her songs and played lead guitar in her collaborative projects with male musicians. Minnie also released more single records than her collaborators. All of these factors culminated in her musical identity that had previously been achieved mainly by men (Garon 2014, 34).

A salient connection between Minnie's career and this study is that two years after her recording debut (1929), she recorded "Lucille Bogan's famous 'Tricks Ain't Walking No More,' one of the few songs Minnie sang that was identified with, and written by, another singer" (Garon 2014, 56). Bogan's original song was recorded in 1930, and in only one year, it was covered by Minnie.

Another connection between Minnie and one of the three artists central to this dissertation is a song she wrote titled, "Ma Rainey." It was recorded roughly six months after Rainey's death and was "a direct response to the news of the death of the 'Mother of the Blues'" (Garon 2014, 224). Below is an excerpt from the lyrics to "Ma Rainey," recorded in 1940:

I was thinking about Ma Rainey, wonder where could Ma Rainey be  
I was thinking about Ma Rainey, wonder where could Ma Rainey be  
I been looking for her, even been [in] old Tennessee

She was born in Georgia, traveled all over this world  
She was born in Georgia, traveled all over this world  
And she's the best blues singer, peoples, I ever heard

It appears that Minnie felt connected to the music of the classic blues singers. She covered a song by Bogan and wrote a sincere tribute to Rainey after her passing. There is no known affiliation between Minnie and/or her catalogue and Bessie Smith.

By looking briefly at country blues artist Memphis Minnie who is part of a genre located in

the gap between classic blues singers and male country blues stylists, a connection is found between Minnie and two of the three artists examined in this study.

### *Gertrude “Ma” Rainey*

“Ma” Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia, and was the second of five children including two brothers, Thomas Jr. and Essie, and a younger sister Malissa and another child whose name has never been identified (Lieb 1981, 2). Gertrude has sometimes been mistaken for her sister Malissa who lived in Chicago, resulting in several accounts which inaccurately claim that Rainey’s full name was Gertrude Malissa (or Melissa) (ibid). Baptized at a young age into the First African Baptist Church, Rainey began performing in black minstrel show tents around the age of fourteen, adding what she called blues to her repertoire as early as 1902. Musicologist and Fisk University professor John Wesley Work Jr. interviewed Rainey in 1930 after watching her perform in Nashville writing:

The song [not named] elicited such a response from the audience that it won a special place in her act. Many times she was asked what kind of song it was, and one day she replied, in a moment of inspiration, “It’s the *Blues*...” She added, however, that after she began to sing the blues, although they were not so named then, she frequently heard similar songs in the course of her travels. (Work 1940, 32-33)

On February 2, 1904 at the age of eighteen, Gertrude married William “Pa” Rainey, himself a singer, dancer and comedian that she most likely met when he came through her town with a travelling show (Lieb 1981, 4). In 1906, they joined Pat Chappelle’s popular Rabbit’s Foot Company where they were billed together as Black Face Song and Dance Comedians, Jubilee Singers [and] Cake Walkers (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 261). During her tent show performances, which had segregated seating, Rainey would come out with greasepaint and powder on her face donning an elaborate rhinestone gown and cheap gold necklaces, flashing her mouthful of diamond and gold teeth. Her shows were lengthy, and like other classic blues performers, she

didn't just stand up there and sing but she danced, shimmied suggestively and was wildly flamboyant, setting the trend for classic blues women. Her audiences would get so worked up that often the show would turn into a call-and-response number between the singer and the audience (Kay 1997, 36). LeRoi Jones writes specifically about Rainey in connection with the classic blues:

Just as the wandering primitive blues singers had spread a certain style of blues-singing, the performers of classic blues served as models and helped standardize certain styles. Singers like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey were responsible for creating the classic blues style. She was one of the most imitated and influential classic blues singers, and perhaps the one who can be called the link between the earlier, less polished blues styles and the smoother theatrical style of most of the later urban blues singers. Ma Rainey's singing can be placed squarely between the harsher, more spontaneous country styles and the somewhat calculated emotionalism of the performers. (Jones 1963, 89)

As mentioned above, the fact that Rainey's shows were integrated with half of the tent reserved for whites and the other half for blacks, is a testimony to her crowd-drawing powers in the South. When whites outnumbered blacks, which was not an uncommon occurrence, the overflow sat peacefully in the black section (Obrecht 2015). Rainey's storytelling lyrics often presented an unflinching view of life from the perspective of a woman in turmoil. Unable to read or write, Rainey reportedly showed up at sessions with drawings she'd made to remind her of lyrics (ibid).

Blues writer Jackie Kay asserts that Rainey was "the earliest link between the male country blues artists who wandered the streets of the South and the 'classic blues' women singers. Bessie [Smith], Clara [Smith, no relation], Mamie [Smith, no relation] and Laura Smith, Ida Cox, Victoria Spivey, Alberta Hunter, Sippie Wallace, Lizzie Miles, Bertha 'Chippie' Hill, Memphis Minnie Douglas – all owed a debt to Ma" (Kay 1997, 32). Furthermore, Lyttelton asserts, "whether or not she was first in the field, Ma Rainey was the one who defined the 'classic' style by which we judge the work of her eminent rivals" (Lyttelton 1978, 67). If Rainey was indeed as pervasive a figure in this phase of the blues as Kay suggests, it is likely that Bogan also was

indebted to Rainey.

Rainey, as well as Smith, achieved a high enough level of success to be able to obtain her own railroad car, alleviating the stinging racism often faced on the road. Author Jackie Kay writes:

In the 1920s, no black person, not even a superstar, could stay at even a third-rate hotel, never mind a decent one. Only bed and breakfast places and rooming houses would take in black people. . . America might be proud of its blues tradition now, but it certainly did not help blues performers when they needed it. Touring the racist South was a nightmare for the blues performer. The Ku Klux Klan were at their height in the 1920s, exactly the same time as the hey day of the classic blues women. . . But in the Pullman [Bessie Smith's private railroad car], there was privacy, autonomy and plenty of space. (Kay 1997, 82)

After years of touring in the tent shows, Ma Rainey was discovered by Paramount Records producer J. Mayo Williams in 1923 and signed a recording contract with the label. In December of that year she made her first eight recordings in Chicago including, "Bad Luck Blues," "Bo-Weevil Blues" and "Moonshine Blues." Paramount marketed her extensively, calling her the "Mother of the Blues," the "Songbird of the South," the "Gold-Neck Woman of the Blues" and the "Paramount Wildcat" (Lieb 1981, 22-25).

Singers often shared repertoire, recording different versions of the same songs. One such song recorded in 1935 by Bogan under the pseudonym Bessie Jackson was "Shave 'em Dry;" a term that refers to an aggressive action like literally shaving with no lubricant and can also be a sexually suggestive term for intercourse without foreplay. Bogan cut it twice, the first version being much tamer than the explicit adults only second recording. This same song, with a slightly altered title of "Shave 'em Dry Blues," was recorded by Rainey more than a decade earlier in 1924. Both artists flirt with themes of sexuality and prostitution but Bogan, especially in the second of her two recordings, takes the song to a highly explicit level.

"Shave 'em Dry Blues" was likely in Rainey's repertoire since her earliest professional

years. British architectural historian and blues writer Paul Oliver suggests that the song itself had an independent life, preceding the blues. He writes, “‘Shave ‘em Dry,’ by any tweak of the lyric or title, was one of the many songs well-liked by blues singers that contained blues sentiments but was not strictly blues in itself” (Oliver 1968, 225).

Looking at Rainey’s recording of “Shave ‘em Dry Blues,” accompanied in the studio by what sounds like a banjo, the lyrics are as follows:

There’s one thing I don’t understand  
Why a good-lookin’ woman likes a workin’ man  
Eh hey hey, daddy won’t you shave ‘em dry

Goin’ away to wear you off my mind  
You keeps me hungry, broke daddy all the time  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave ‘em dry

Don’t see how you hungry women can sleep  
Shimmies all day without a bite to eat  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave ‘em dry

Goin’ down town to spread the news  
State Street women wearing brogan shoes  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave ‘em dry

If it wasn’t for their powder and the sto’ bought hair  
State Street gals couldn’t go nowhere  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave ‘em dry

There’s one thing I can’t understand  
Some women walkin’ State Street like a man  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave ‘em dry

Went to the show the other night  
Everybody on State Street tryin’ to fight  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave ‘em dry

Ain’t crazy ‘bout my yeller, I ain’t wild about my brown  
Makes no difference when the sun goes down  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave ‘em dry

When you see two women runnin’ hand in han’  
You can bet your life they got the other one’s man

Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave 'em dry

Don't let that man come in my home  
If his wife comes here I don't mean no harm  
Eh hey hey, daddy let me shave 'em dry.

Although the singer stays at a distance as voyeur of sexual acts occurring in this recording of “Shave 'em Dry Blues,” Rainey does point to unconventional sexual practices. In this instance, Rainey goes against the grain by singing about exotic dancers who “shimmy all day,” prostitutes who rely on “powder and...sto' bought hair” to sell themselves, as well as making reference to butch women who “wear brogan [masculine] shoes” and who are “walkin' State Street just like a man.” As Angela Davis notes in Rainey's version of this song, she treats sex outside of marriage like it's no big deal when she sings “[w]hen your wife comes, tell her I don't mean no harm” (Davis 1999, 241-242).

Rainey has a low register. Contemporaries have said that her voice was as deep as a man's (Evans and Brooks 2008, 33). Rainey's performance of “Shave 'em Dry Blues” has a sobering effect. She is not lively or playful but is seemingly conscious of her surroundings in the isolation of the recording studio. Rainey had recorded seventeen tracks prior to the 1924 “Shave 'em Dry Blues” so, one might suppose her to be used to and comfortable in the recording environment. Interestingly, those seventeen songs previously recorded had Rainey accompanied by a small orchestra fifteen times, and twice by Miles and Milas Pruitt, guitar playing twins. On “Shave 'em Dry Blues” she is accompanied by a single banjo potentially causing her to be more self-conscious. Rainey relies on ornamentation, using it consistently and in a lengthy way on “hey” and “dry” when she sings “hey, hey, hey daddy let me shave 'em dry.” There is not a lot of conviction on this recording and Rainey is tentative in her exploration of non-hegemonic gender expressions and sexual practices.



Two different songs that have the same title, Rainey and Bogan's versions of "Shave 'em Dry Blues" and "Shave 'em Dry," show varying perspectives of prostitution. Both recordings made by Bogan are aggressive in a way that Rainey's is not. The tame version of "Shave 'em Dry" iterates a vengeful anti-male narrative, "If you meet your man and he tell you a lie / Just pull out your razor and shave him dry / Talkin' 'bout shave 'em, mama's going to shave him dry / 'Cause I don't want no man to tell me no dirty lie." The pseudo-pornographic "Shave 'em Dry" by Bogan is jaw-dropping throughout, a sample verse below serves as a reminder:

Now your nuts hang down like a damn bell-sapper  
And your stick stands up like a steeple  
Your goddamn asshole stands open like a church door  
And the crabs walks in like the people  
[Woops and hollers from both Bogan and Roland]  
Baby won't you shave 'em dry

In this recording the listener is privy to the singer's chuckles, outright laughter, shifts in tone and running commentary with the pianist.

An influential and important song by Rainey (there are many that won't be covered in this study) is one that is concertedly less tentative in its approach to non-normative sexual practice.

Her own composition, "Prove it on Me Blues," flaunts lesbianism as well as cross-dressing:

Went out last night, had a great big fight  
Everything seemed to go on wrong  
I looked up to my surprise  
The gal I was with was gone

Where she went I don't know  
I mean to follow everywhere she goes  
Folks say I'm crooked I didn't know where she took it  
I want the whole world to know

They say 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

Say I do it ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me  
I went out last night with a crowd of my friends  
They must've been women 'cause I don't like no men

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

Challenging gender politics at a time when conservative representations of marriage and heterosexual relations remained uncontested in the mainstream is a bold move. Interestingly, at the same time in history, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was being suppressed in the United States (and other parts of the world) as an obscene piece of work. Marguerite Radclyffe Hall, born in 1880, was an English poet and author best known for her novel *The Well of Loneliness*, a book that became a groundbreaking work in lesbian literature (Simkin 2015).

Black as well as white audiences could appreciate a performer flirting with lesbianism in a song. Author of *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, Sandra Lieb writes, "Songs of unconventional sexuality were not unusual in the blues and in live black entertainment nor were raunchy songs of conventional sex" (Lieb 1981, 119).

Many of the songs in this study involve unconventional sexuality and Rainey's repertoire is no exception. I would suggest, however, that in her case the use of reputable language helps to ease non-normative scenarios into the blues realm and into audience and scholarly reception. Bogan's use of explicit and foul language might well have enticed her listeners but is likely to have signaled to blues writers that she was a novelty act.

### *Bessie Smith*

Bessie Smith was born on April 15, 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee according to the date on her marriage certificate. However, as jazz writer and Smith biographer Chris Albertson tells us, “Southern bureaucracy made little distinction between its black population and its dogs; such official records as a birth certificate were not always considered necessary” (Albertson 1972, 7). Biographer Jackie Kay asserts that while the date is indeed questionable, the town of her birth was certainly Chattanooga (Kay 1997, 17). By the age of seven Smith was singing on street corners for money, often with her brother Clarence accompanying her on guitar and she had travel in her bones, joining her first tent show in 1912 and it was there that she met Rainey. Kay suggests that Rainey groomed Smith for a life on the road, teaching her dance steps and the importance of not just singing her songs, but emphasizing the performative aspect as well (Kay 1997, 33). Bessie stayed with the Moses Stokes traveling troupe for just over a month before she and the Raineys joined first the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, then the Florida Cotton Blossoms, and Silas Green Minstrel Shows, all between 1912 and 1921.

Although Smith was celebrated primarily as a singer, she also performed a song and dance routine, “high-stepping vigorously in her colored stockings and strapped, pointed shoes, doing the ‘bumps and grinds’ with spirit” (Oliver 1961, 10). She usually had a long chain of beads around her neck and reportedly favoured a kimono-style dress with Oriental flower patterns and fur trim at the cuffs and hemline. Keeping in mind this was all taking place before 1920, it is interesting to learn that on occasion Smith would change into a tuxedo as part of her act doing male impersonations (Oliver 1961, 11).

In 1920 Smith married her first husband, Earl Love, who died a year later. Dabbling in musical theatre along the way and eventually film, Smith approached the recording industry in

1923 (or 1922; reports are conflicting). Her long-time collaborator Clarence Williams arranged a test recording session for Smith with the Okeh Record company in New York, which was by now enjoying a remarkable jump in sales by black artists such as Mamie Smith. Williams suggested a hit song he had published back in 1915, “I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate,” as her test piece. According to Paul Oliver, this session produced what Williams called, “the greatest [recording] she had ever made” (Oliver 1961, 14).

Coming from the tent circuit as she did, Smith developed a style that was much more aggressive and perhaps less polished than Mamie Smith. Okeh turned her down immediately saying she was too rough. Shortly thereafter, Smith had another opportunity when she secured an audition with Harry Pace who formed Black Swan Records. Yet again, she was rejected due to her coarse vaudevillian sensibilities. These record companies maintained that Smith’s sound, which mesmerized her live audiences, was too harsh to record and feared that her folk sound would not be marketable to urban blacks nor cross over to the white audience (Davis 1999, 152). Not only was she considered by white record men as abrasive, nearly ten years earlier in 1912 while touring the tent show circuit, Smith was fired by white Southerner Irving C. Miller. He threw her out of his chorus line for being too black (Kay 1997, 28). Biographer Jackie Kay writes that dark-skinned girls were considered less attractive than brown, or lighter-skinned ones. Too black, too rough; Smith’s road was by no means an easy one.

Even though the recording industry was not yet ready to accept Smith, she still was wildly popular in the South where audiences had come to love her shows and it was ultimately her live performance abilities that landed her first record deal. In 1922 Smith traveled to Philadelphia where she gigged locally for some time and was eventually invited to do a residency at the distinguished Standard Theatre. It was there that Frank Walker, the newly appointed man in

charge of the African American (then called Negro) artists at Columbia Records, saw her perform (Oliver 1961, 14-15). He knew of Smith and had seen her sing eight years prior, but this time around he didn't hesitate in his decision to ask Clarence Williams to "go down there and find her; bring her back to me" (ibid). Later that same year Smith recorded "Downhearted Blues" with Walker and Columbia Records and it sold a then record-breaking 780,000 copies in less than six months (Albertson 2003, 38).

In 1922, Smith married her second husband Jack Gee. The two had a stormy relationship and Gee reportedly reacted to Smith's wild tendencies of drinking binges and affairs with women whilst on the road by being physically violent with her. The few people who came to her defense were beat up in turn, and when she traveled with the tent shows everyone feared Gee's sudden appearances (Kay 1997, 45).

Looking at the lyrics of her first ever recording, "Downhearted Blues," accompanied by Clarence Williams on piano and written by Lovie Austin and Alberta Hunter, they clearly reflect the tumultuous nature of Smith's relationship with Gee:

Gee, but it's hard to love someone  
When that someone don't love you  
I'm so disgusted, heartbroken too  
I've got those down hearted blues

Once I was crazy 'bout a man  
He mistreated me all the time  
The next man I get has got  
To promise me to be mine all mine

Trouble, trouble I've had it all my days  
Trouble, trouble I've had it all my days  
It seems that trouble's going to follow me to my grave

I ain't never loved but three mens in my life  
I ain't never loved but three men in my life  
My father, my brother, the man that wrecked my life

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 coming home to you

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 going to hold it until you didn't come under my command

The majority of Smith's songs concerned that 'doggone man of mine,' and even though she didn't write most of them, they were likely all about the same man, Gee, with whom she was in a relationship for at least six years. The now famous lines, "I've got the world in a jug / The stopper's in my hand," are part plain talk, part enigma. According to Kay, those two lines became popular because people could identify with them, and her audiences would sing along with those lines as if they had captured some truth about their own lives. Kay writes, "All the conflicts, wars and sorrows, the pains and the troubles of the world are in Bessie's jug, but the stopper is in her hand. She has some power over it then. Or is she just singing about the world of men...has she cast herself as Every woman?" (Kay 1997, 49). This blues song, like others, is open to multiple interpretations. Is it the words, or the way Smith sings them that adds irony and changes the meaning? I would suggest the words and Smith's performance are symbiotic.

Despite the drama in her marital relationship, Smith went on to become the highest paid African American entertainer of her day. She continued to tour in a custom-made railroad car and headlined her own shows, in part to distance herself from her controlling husband Gee. Smith eventually separated from Gee in 1929 and took up with common-law husband and Chicago bootlegger Richard Morgan two years later. The pair died together in a car crash September 26, 1937 on Route 61 in Clarksdale, Mississippi (Kay 1997, 147).

### *Family as a Theme*

During the classic blues era most African American heterosexual couples, regardless of whether or not they were married, had families, yet classic blues women rarely, if ever, sang about their own mothers and fathers or children/child-rearing.

Davis suggests that the absence of a mother figure in 1920s blues infers that the classic blues women rejected the mainstream cult of motherhood, but not necessarily motherhood itself. Instead, they projected an image of black women as independent and free of “the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed” (Davis 1999, 13). I here take the opportunity to consider the state of the nuclear families during the formative years in the lives of the classic blues singers to determine if there are circumstances that might lead to their own mother figures not appearing in their music.

Bessie Smith’s father was a Baptist minister and a labourer who died soon after she was born. Smith’s mother and two of her brothers died by the time she was eight or nine years of age, leaving an unmarried aunt to raise her and what remained of her siblings (*Notable Biographies* 2015). No doubt it would have been traumatic to be orphaned at such an early age and this would have likely had an impact on her emotional development and influenced the types of relationships she entered. Despite this, the subject of a mother figure never made it into any of her self-penned songs.

Rainey was the second of five children and one report indicates her parents were themselves minstrel show performers (Pearson Education 2013). Another source reports that it was one of her grandmothers who performed on stage in the years following Emancipation and that Rainey likely inherited *her* talent and love of show business (Stewart-Baxter 1970, 36). As in Smith’s case, the figure of the mother, nor even of an influential grandmother, is ever

mentioned in any scenario in any of Rainey's self-penned songs. I should note that while there are plenty of Papa, Daddy and Mama references in classic blues material, none of them refer to mother or father as actual parents.

What about Bogan? We know the least about Bogan's formative years with her nuclear family. Yet she, in the last verse of her 1933 "Walkin' Blues," includes a reference to the one figure that Harrison and Davis insist is not to be found in the classic blues. Bogan sings, "Lord Lord Lord baby you know you done me wrong / Lord Lord Lord daddy you done me wrong / Now I'm a poor motherless girl and I ain't got no happy home." It is not just the word mother, or motherless in this case, but it is the description of the feeling of being without one – unprotected and vulnerable – that resonates pointedly in this instance. In a recording from the same year, "Groceries on the Shelf," Bogan identifies both parental figures, "Now my mama told me, papa told me too / Say my mama told me, papa he told me too / That that Piggly Wiggly store is going to be the ruin of you." In this instance it is clear that the mama and papa named by the singer are playing the role of protectors, warning the singer about potential dangers in her life. Bogan's 1927 "Levee Blues" also identifies nuclear family members, "Now my mama got them, my papa got them too / My sister got them, brother got them too / We got the rickets and the rackets, we all got the Levee blues."

I understand that Bogan's inclusions of parental figures and siblings in these songs are the exception, not the rule, and do not categorically negate what Davis and Harrison have articulated on the subject of the mother and/or father, children etc. figures in classic blues. It is of interest to note that this is another example of how Bogan does not easily fit into the category of the classic blues singer.

Lucille Bogan was also a mother, both to a biological son as well as to a step-daughter.



Among the three women focused on in this study, Bogan was alone in this role in the sense that she was the only one who birthed a child. In embracing the role of motherhood, she was not alone. “Ma” Rainey was mother to son Danny Rainey, a boy she adopted while married to William Rainey. It is reported that adoption was the only way the two could be parents (Albertson 2003, 115). Danny was part of the Rainey’s live act, billed as The World’s Greatest Juvenile Stepper. Bessie Smith was also a mother to an adopted son, Jack Junior. She was on tour when she first met her son-to-be in Macon, Georgia. Each time she traveled through the city she would spend time with the boy she lovingly nick-named “Snooks” whose mother was the niece of one of Smith’s chorus girls, Margaret Warren. In 1926, the boy, then six years old, came along with Smith and her crew and finished out the tour with them. By the end of that stint, Smith had named the boy Jack Junior and he remained with her as her adopted son.

Looking into the legitimacy of the adoption, I discovered this detail, as described by Chris Albertson:

Forty-five years later, Jack Gee Jr., remained under the impression that he had been legally adopted, but when he sued Columbia Records for back royalties on Bessie’s recordings, no official adoption papers could be found, and it was largely for that reason that he lost the case. (Albertson 2003, 125)

Albertson also wrote that to Smith, “Snooks” was her son, “and whether or not the adoption had ever been legal, she treated him as such” (ibid).

Smith is one of only three artists examined in Davis’ text *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* and yet nowhere does she make mention that Smith was a mother. Davis even goes so far as to say:

These women disengaged themselves from the usual confines of domesticity. Although most of them did marry, few actually bore children and built families as the center of their lives. While women who operated in this tradition some-times expressed regrets that they were unable to establish “normal” family lives – Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, for example – there is often an emancipatory quality about their music that almost certainly

would not have been present had their lives been fundamentally anchored in family pursuits. (Davis 1999, 72)

This would have been an ideal opportunity for Davis to include the fact that while Smith articulated regret over not establishing a normal family life, she had a son whom she loved very much. Surely this is an important fact to articulate in a monograph dedicated to only three historical figures.

Not only did Smith have a son, there was in fact considerable drama surrounding the eventual loss of his custody. Several biographers recount how Jack Gee (then Smith's estranged husband) arrived at Smith's house one day when she was not there and told his ten-year-old son to get in the car (Feinstein 1985, 73). Gee drove the boy to the Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) where he reported that the child was neglected by Smith and refused to attend school, an egregious act that sent Smith into a furious state. While it is unclear if there was any validity to these statements, when the case eventually reached the court, the judge decided that the boy be returned to his mother (Feinstein 1985, 73-74). As much as the boy loved his mother, it is written that he disliked being left alone during Smith's absence when she travelled and consequently tried to make his way from Philadelphia to New York City alone. Being a ten-year old boy, he quickly caught the attention of police in Newark, New Jersey who released him to his father's care (Feinstein 1985, 74). The boy's father, Jack Gee, was then living with his mistress Gertie Saunders who allegedly hated the boy and sent him to live in the basement where her brother also resided. Without food or attention of any kind, Saunders' brother took pity on the boy and gave him some money to go out and buy something to eat at which point Jack Jr. used the opportunity to escape. Again, this young boy was but a decade on this planet when his attempt to escape his own father landed him in the hands of the SPCC again who eventually sent him to live with a family in Valhalla, New York State (ibid).

Gee knew where the boy was sent, but Smith was not informed as to his whereabouts and Gee cruelly made no efforts to ease her anxiety. Eventually, the boy sent her a letter to let her know he was okay, but the entire incident completely broke Smith and it is said that she would stare off into space for days at a time (Feinstein 1985, 75). She eventually picked up her career again and kept going, but I cannot even imagine the lasting psychological and emotional trauma this event would have on her as she went on with her life. After she died, a story rich with details on how race may have been the determining factor in whether she survived a car crash or not, Jack Gee claimed all of Smith's estate and made sure Jack Jr. received nothing and that his name was never mentioned, subsequently no one even knew of his existence. Not until Chris Albertson's 1972 book simply titled *Bessie* did the rest of the world come to learn that Bessie Smith, "Empress of the Blues," had a son.

Jackie Kay writes that having a son to look after gave Smith a sense of purpose in life and that she took motherhood seriously. Smith allegedly wanted Jack Jr. to get a good education and promised to buy him anything his heart desired if he became a lawyer (Kay 1997, 52). Kay writes, "Having Jack Junior gave Bessie Smith another identity. She was proud of being a mother" (ibid).

While I concur with Davis' claim in part that classic blues women rejected the mainstream cult of motherhood in the sense that Rainey, Smith and Bogan spent ample time away from home and recording raucous blues and touring widely, in a study of black feminist ideologies it is important for the author to point out that two of the main subjects in her work also played the role only a woman can, that of a mother.

Even though more attention has been paid to Rainey and Smith, there is information enough to state that all three of these artists had things in common. For instance, despite the

shockingly explicit lyrical contents of their songs and their wild personal lifestyles in and around alcohol abuse, possible prostitution and non-normative sexual activities, Bogan, Rainey and Smith all chose to enter into the sacred, legal and hegemonic institution of matrimony – another aspect of family.

Davis writes that of the two hundred and fifty-two songs recorded by Rainey and Smith there are but four, all sung by and/or written by Smith, that refer to marriage within a neutral context or that are non-critical of marriage as an institution (Davis 1999, 13-15). I agree, in part, with Davis' assertion. Three of the four songs she lists do, in fact, address marriage in a neutral context. The fourth song she describes does not.

The first of three songs that includes the topic of marriage in a neutral context is "Pinchback Blues," recorded in 1924 and written by Smith and Irving John. Here Smith offers advice to women, suggesting they seek a working man, "Girls take this tip from me / Get a workin' man when you marry / And let all these sweet men be." The lyric assumes that all women will marry a man, but it does not evoke any rosy or romantic expectations typically associated with marriage. Smith advises not to enter into a binding situation in which the woman will end up having to support a bum, or as the title suggests, a pinchback.

The second song, a composition of Smith's, is "Poor Man's Blues" recorded in 1928. The lyrics describes the unfairness in the lifestyles of the working man's wife compared to that enjoyed by the rich man's wife, "Poor workin' man's wife is starvin' / Your wife's livin' like a queen."

The third is "Take Me for a Buggy Ride," recorded in 1933 and written by Leola Peddigrew Wilson and Wesley A. Wilson (perhaps a married couple). In this song there is a passing 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.”

The fourth song that Davis includes in this grouping is “Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl,” recorded in 1931 and written by Clarence Williams, Tim J. Brymm and Dally Small. I argue that this song does not allude to marriage in any context, neutral or otherwise. To solidify my claim, the lyrics are below in full:

Tired of bein’ lonely, tired of bein’ blue  
I wished I had some good man to tell my troubles to  
Seem like the whole world’s wrong  
Since my man’s been gone

I need a little sugar in my bowl  
I need a little hot dog on my roll  
I can stand a bit of lovin’ oh so bad  
I feel so funny, I feel so sad

I need a little steam-heat on my floor  
Maybe I can fix things up so they’ll go  
What’s the matter hard papa  
Come on and save your mama’s soul  
‘Cause I need a little sugar in my bowl, doggone it  
I need some sugar in my bowl

I need a little sugar in my bowl  
I need a little hot dog between my rolls  
You gettin’ different I’ve been told  
Move your finger, drop something in my bowl

I need a little steam-heat on my floor  
Maybe I can fix things up so they’ll go  
Get off your knees I can’t see what you’re drivin’ at  
It’s dark down there, looks like a snake  
C’mon here and drop somethin’ here in my bowl  
Stop your foolin’ and drop somethin’ in my bowl

The singer is in a relationship with a man. Smith uses culinary images to refer to sex when she sings, “need a little hot dog between my rolls.” Other than sexual innuendo, there is no reference or allusion to the institution of marriage.

Considering, then, three of the above four songs, Davis insists that these non-critical references to marriage were increasing instances of Smith attempting to re-position herself in greater ideological proximity to white audiences in the latter part of her career (Davis 1999, 15). The 1929 stock market crash was an obvious reason to want to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, aspiring to attract sales from outside of the race records market. The classic blues as a genre became a victim of the economic downturn, many live music theatres closed down and others replaced music performance with moving picture shows. Smith biographer, Jackie Kay, writes about this time and its effect on the blues:

A couple of years after the Crash, even live audiences were sorely affected. People queued for bread, not blues. Money was tight and blues started to go out of fashion, to be replaced by jazz. The tastes...of the audiences changed dramatically: they wanted faster, more sophisticated voices, voices that could swing. (Kay 1997, 54)

From a business perspective, Smith was savvy and by eventually pandering to a larger, whiter audience she created for herself a long and lucrative career, more so than most of the classic blues singers. Confirming Davis' insistence that Smith was repositioning herself in the *latter* part of her career are earlier recordings wherein marriage was regarded with decidedly less neutrality. Pre-dating the four banal references to marriage in Smith's songs we see a rather brutal reference in her 1924 "Hateful Blues" written by American blues singer Edith North Johnson whom, based on what information I can find, was also African American. In this song the narrator threatens to use a butcher knife given to the couple as a wedding present to carve up her temperamental husband. I include the full song lyrics here because I see these as more faithful to the gender politics of the genre and thus the theme of my dissertation.

Woke up this mornin' hateful and blue  
'Cause my daddy treated me wrong  
He's got his satchel, packed his clothes upon his back

He's gone I say he's gone

Yes I'm low down, nothing ever worries me long I said long  
I cried last night and I cried all night before  
Cried the blues  
And I said that I ain't gonna cry no more, no more  
If he can stand to leave me I can stand to see him go, I said go

Yes I'm hateful cause he treats me so unkind  
If I find that man when hurt is on my mind  
If I see him I'm gonna beat him, gonna kick and bite him too  
Gonna take my weddin' butcher gonna cut him two and two

The ambulance is waitin' the undertaker too  
A suit in doctor's office, all kinds of money for you  
Ain't gonna sell him gonna keep him for myself  
Gonna cut him on him until a piece this big is left

'Cause my love has been abused  
Now I've got the hateful blues

The particular brand of macabre in this lyric prompted me to look into the background of the author. There is a little bit of biographical information on Johnson, mostly about her adult life. Born in St. Louis Missouri on January 2, 1903, the trail of her life picks up in 1928 when she married Jesse Johnson, a record producer from St. Louis (*Allmusic* 2015). For a short while she worked at her husband's record shop, Deluxe Music, as a sales person and even though she was not a professional singer or musician, Johnson cut a whopping eighteen songs between 1928 and 1929 (Wyman 2001, 95). During the second world-war she managed a taxicab company in St. Louis, also later running Johnson's Deluxe Café after her husband's death in 1946 (Owsley 2006, 40-41). By 1961, she had returned to recording when Samuel Charters tracked her down. In an apparently stable marriage with a successful career in business, the impetus to write these lyrics is not evident on the surface.

Accompanied by a piano and violin, Smith fully embraces the lyric in a mid to slow tempo moan nuancing first the word "wrong," placing four notes on the word in a downward arc. Her

lament continues and Smith sustains “gone” for four counts on its second iteration and the melody goes in a downward arc on “Lord,” sung with a sense of resignation. Looking at the next verse, Smith holds “Yes” for three counts and stretches out the word “hateful,” both words heavily ornamented. When she gets to “unkind” it is sung with the same downward arc she used on “wrong.” The rhythm of the melody changes when she sings the part about beating him. She sharply places a one note emphasis on “see,” “beat,” “kick,” “take,” “butcher,” “cut,” the second “through” and this pattern of emphasizing (roughly) every other word appears consistently only in these two lines. In the remaining lines, it appears in addition to broader melodic phrasing.

Smith’s material, like that of each classic blues woman discussed in this paper, was defined in large part by her phrasing, feel and style. She would slide between and slur the notes, working closely around what jazz writer Richard Hadlock calls center tones that worked well for her in terms of intensity and projection as she sang without amplification. He writes:

Her constant return to, elongation of, and emphasis upon these strong center tones tended to create the illusion of a kind of modern plainsong with almost spiritual intimations. Under this attack, the most trite popular song could be transformed into a fine blues as Bessie reshaped its melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic configurations to match her simple but moving style. (Hadlock 1965, 223-224)

Hadlock’s articulation of Smith’s vocal styling affirms how an artist’s song delivery, on the stage or in the recording studio, established their persona and unique contributions to the genre.

Going back to the twenties again to look at Smith’s own composition “Young Woman’s Blues,” recorded in 1926 for Columbia Records, the singer declares that she won’t settle down, but only after her lover breaks up with her via a handwritten note:

Woke up this mornin’  
When chickens was crowin’ for day  
Felt on the right side of my pilla’  
My man had gone away

By this pilla’



He left a note readin'  
"I'm sorry Jane, you got my goat  
No time to marry, no time to settle down"

I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round  
I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round

Some people call me a hobo  
Some call me a bum  
Nobody knows my name  
Nobody knows what I've done

I'm as good as any woman  
In your town  
I ain't no high yeller  
I'm a deep killer of brown

I ain't gonna marry  
Ain't gonna settle down  
I'm gonna drink good moonshine  
And rub these browns down

See that long lonesome road  
Lord you know it's gotta  
And I'm a good woman  
And I can get plenty men

The second last verse is distinctly aggressive in resistance to the institution of marriage, evoking the toughness that is more characteristic of classic blues women. Smith articulates, this time in her own words, that she "ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down" and that she's "gonna drink good moonshine and rub these browns down." This highlights the shift in attitude with regards to marriage in her later material.

Looking at some of Rainey's material that repudiates the institution of marriage is the 1928 recording of "Blame it on Me Blues," written by Thomas Dorsey, which emphasizes a blatant disregard of monogamy. The female character in "Blame it on Me Blues" realizes she cannot blame her husband, her man or her lover as the source of her distress. I point here to the fact that Rainey sings about having all three relationships within the song; the marital, the extra-marital

and the casual sexual encounter, pointing to the elasticity of the boundaries of marriage.

Rainey's own composition, "Misery Blues," is arguably an outright condemnation of the institution of marriage as fraudulent, at least in terms of how it was proposed to the singer by her man in the first place; that is, in the traditional sense wherein the man financially provides for his wife. Rainey sings:

I love my brown skin, 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 work no more  
Now I'm grievin' almost dyin'  
Just because I didn't know that he was lyin'

I've got the blues I've got the blues  
I've got those misery blues  
Love my brown skin he's done left town  
Goodbye dearie you used to be so cheery  
Hold on honey, took all my money  
I worry, worry so

Lead to believe her future husband's role would relieve her of daily labours, the man does not only ditch his promise to marry, he leaves with the singer's money. More than a story about love and a promise gone wrong, Rainey's "Misery Blues" is a warning to women who might be likewise duped by assurances traditionally associated with matrimony.

Lucille Bogan, as seen in my lyric typology, has many songs about relationships with men wherein the female character loves her partner as well as songs wherein the female character is going to curtail his cheating ways. There are not, however, incidents referring specifically to matrimony, whether in a positive or negative light.

In this small sampling of songs from Smith and Rainey, it is easy to see the dark nuances associated with marriage instead of sentimental visions of a life happily-ever-after. In post-

slavery America the notion that a woman's place was in the home was a social reality of the white middle-class. Black women lived in a world that did not protect or appreciate their womanhood as espoused in bourgeois ideology (Harrison 1988, 64). Hazel Carby suggests that, because of this reality, the blues women occupied a position that placed them outside of domestic boundaries enabling them to bring normative and non-normative sexual representations out of the private sphere into the public (Carby 1999, 18).

Davis points out that there are important historical reasons that romanticized images of the social institution of marriage and the permanency in personal relationships implied therein are missing in 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. (Davis 1999, 18)

Although Bogan, Rainey and Smith all sought out and entered into the institution of matrimony, at least two of them (in Bogan's case it is not clear) cheated on their husbands and were bound in no way by the sanctity or legal bindings of the agreement. Not only did the music of the classic blues women often characterize matrimony in an unseemly light, the reality of their own marriages matched the content of their songs. White popular music of the time did not address marital and other relationship problems but it is reasonable to assume that they too experienced these kinds of difficulties. It is possible that, for this reason along with a variety of others, many of the classic blues women's shows were overflowing with white audience members.

### *Travel and Alcohol Themes*

The Great Migration refers to the movement of approximately six million African Americans from the rural South to cities in the North, Midwest and West from the turn of the twentieth century to 1970. Driven from their homes by racism, limited economic opportunities and harsh segregationist laws, many blacks migrated so that they could take advantage of the need for industrial workers in the North and West coast that initially arose during the first World War. While segregation was not legalized in the North and West as it was in the South, racial prejudice was still prevalent. Even after the United States Supreme Court declared racially-based housing ordinances unconstitutional in 1917, some neighborhoods enacted stipulations that required white property owners to agree not to sell to blacks. This situation would remain legal until the courts finally struck it down in 1948 (History 2017). During this period African Americans built communities for themselves to live in peace and confront together the economic, political and social challenges they faced, creating a black urban culture that would exert enormous influence in the decades to come.

African American Pulitzer prize winning author and professor of English, James Alan McPherson, writes that travel was an economic necessity in post slavery America. Even though the jobs found by black men in particular involved back-breaking labour with poor compensation, the very process of travel likely generated an exhilaration and feeling of spontaneity in individuals who came from a long line of ancestors chained to designated regions for centuries as dictated by slave owners (McPherson 1976, 9).

The national edition of the *Chicago Defender* played an active role in the push for migration and published a broad range of news about the black community as a whole, serving as a vehicle for education, progress and social change (Lieb 1981, 168).

The Chicago-based newspaper was founded by Robert S. Abbott in 1905 and published primarily for African American readers. Abbott increased his readership in two ways: first, by promulgating the horrors of lynching and, second, by encouraging black people whom Southerners relied upon for cheap labor to move North in the exodus later known as the Great Migration (*New York Times* 2016). It has been suggested that one of the first steps Abbott and his staff took to achieve the goal of moving blacks Northward was to write about the oppression and the sense of discontentment in Southern life and this was done by publishing details of gruesome crimes against blacks. The *Defender* consistently printed articles describing lynchings in the South with vivid, gory descriptions of the victims' deaths (Grossman 1985, 85). With nationwide coverage of these Southern atrocities that affected all African Americans regardless of their age, gender or class, the *Defender* demonstrated to its readers that it was virtually impossible for blacks to escape Southern white oppression, highlighting the need to leave the region to obtain the freedom they were legally entitled to.

Looking at the years leading up to the classic blues era, a typical black girl left home at the age of fifteen or sixteen seeking any opportunity, believing that good money was to be had by anyone who dared to venture out (Harrison 1988, 64). Alberta Hunter washed dishes in a brothel when she arrived in Chicago at the tender age of twelve; classic blues singer, Lizzie Miles, before she left her hometown of New Orleans around the age of fifteen, was a bar maid (Harrison 1988, 69).

Hazel Carby suggests that the social conditions for black women were dramatically affected by migration and that this movement had distinctly different meanings for black women and men (Carby 1999, 13). For women, it often meant being left behind, especially if they had child-rearing responsibilities. Whilst raising their own children, women also worked as domestic

help for white families in their vicinity. It was not as easy for a woman to hop a freight train on her own, and, if travel money had been saved up, it was typically used to buy a ticket for a man (ibid).

In songs by female and male blues artists, travel was frequently presented in this way. In his “C. & A. Blues,” author unknown, African American Peetie Wheatstraw offered one of many versions of the disparity in travel between everyday men and women singing, “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.” Wheatstraw portrayed the man easing his pain via travel and the woman nursing herself with tears. Similarly, Clara Smith (no relation to Bessie) sings in “Freight Train Blues,” written by Kentucky native John Lair, “When a woman gets the blues she goes to her room and hides / When a man gets the blues he catches a freight train and rides.” Lucille Bogan’s original song “T & N O Blues” is about a man who likes to ride the rails, minus a travel itinerary provided to those he is connected to. She sings, “I fall down on my knees, pray to the Lord above / Please send me back the only man that I love.” Another song written by Bogan is “I Hate That Train Called the M. and O.” In this instance the singer resentfully declares, “I hate that train that they all call the M. and O. / I hate that train that they call call the M. and O. / It took my baby away and he ain’t coming back no more.”

Interrupting the characterization of a man long gone on the rails and a saddened woman at home is a song written by Bessie Smith and “Ma” Rainey, performed by Rainey, called “Weeping Woman Blues.” Verse two, three and four are as follows:

Lord this mean old engineer cruel as he could be  
This mean old engineer cruel as he could be  
Took my man away and blowed the smoke back at me

I’m going down South won’t be back ‘till fall  
I’m going down South won’t be back ‘till fall

If I don't find my easy rider ain't comin' back at all

I'd rather be in the river driftin' like a log  
I'd rather be in the river driftin' like a log  
Than to be in this town treated like a dog

The woman in this song has a heavy heart because her man has left her, like the women in the songs noted above. She does, however, in this case, refuse to stay behind.

The image of a travelling blues man is a familiar one. That of a travelling blues woman is not. Although women were not usually afforded the social privilege of travel on as wide a scale as men, blues women defied this restriction, providing assertive examples of black female self-determination. This autonomy, whether related to travel or otherwise, is alive in their music as they express themselves in ways that were at odds with prevailing standards of femininity.

Davis writes that travel themes are pervasive in early women's blues and that travel, wherever they might have been going, was associated with the exercise of self-reliance in the sexual lives of the classic blues women (Davis 1999, 66-67). She posits:

For people of African descent who were emerging from a long history of enslavement and oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sexuality and travel provided the most tangible evidence of freedom. (Davis 1999, 67)

Along with providing a sense of freedom, travel was also a manifestation of the restlessness experienced by a community seeking relief from abject poverty, societal alienation and discrimination that was ubiquitous post slavery. Northward migration to major cities was an attempt to alleviate these symptoms, however, as Harrison points out, what black people endured in the cities they travelled to was usually not a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow:

Cities, especially in the North, were not only symbols of hope; they were quagmires of human decay. As disease, alcoholism, drugs and vice encroached on the black community, women introduced blues addressing these social concerns...alcohol and dope and the diseases and afflictions that accompanied their use were just as destructive to women as to men. (Harrison 1988, 96-97)

An example of a song that describes a dark side of migration is Smith's "Gin House Blues." Recorded in 1926 and written by African American Fletcher Henderson and Henry Troy (unclear if he was white or black), "Gin House Blues" reflects the dependency on alcohol, its band aid effect, as well as the desire to dry up those very gin house blues. The lyrics are pointed to in full:

I've got a sad, sad story today  
I've got a sad, sad story today  
I'm goin' to the gin house when the whistle blows  
My troubles come like rain that starts then pours and pours

My man keeps me cryin' all night  
My man keeps me cryin' all night  
I'm goin' to the gin house set out by myself  
I mean to drown my sorrows, my sweet somebody else

I've got those worried kind of gin house blues  
I've got those worried kind of gin house blues  
I'll make one trip there to see can I ease my mind  
And if I do I'm gonna make it my last time

It takes a good smart woman these days  
It takes a good smart woman these days  
To hold her man when these gals have got so many different ways  
I mean to watch my man don't care what these other gals say

I've got to see the conjure man soon  
I've got to see the conjure man soon  
Because these gin house blues is campin' 'round my door  
I want to dry them up so they won't come back no more

Harrison characterizes songs such as this as alcohol blues, wherein alcohol is the tonic as well as the problem. With every drink, mistreatment, lost love or a lost job fades into the background, at least for the time being. In this song, the singer alludes to gin as her "sweet somebody else."

Incidentally, there is a slightly tangled history in connection with this song. In *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, Harrison incorrectly identifies "Gin House Blues," in connection with Bessie Smith, referring to it instead as "Gin Mill Blues." It is important to note



that “Gin House Blues” is in fact the title of two different blues songs, both recorded first by Bessie Smith. The song originally titled “Gin House Blues” written in 1925 by Fletcher Henderson and and Henry Troy that Harrison refers to as “Gin Mill Blues,” has the opening lines, “I’ve got a sad sad story today / I’ve got a sad sad story today / I’m goin’ to the gin house when the whistle blows,” as noted in the lyrics above in Smith’s 1926 recording. The other song, recorded by Smith in 1928, is sometimes called “Gin House” but more commonly referred to as “Gin House Blues” and contains very different opening lines, “Stay away from me ‘cause I’m in my sin / If this place gets raided it’s just me and my gin.” This song, recorded in 1928, was written by African American composer and pianist Jay Cee Johnson (or J.C. Johnson) who sometimes wrote under the pseudonym Henry Burke. It was originally known by yet another title, “Me and My Gin” (Red Hot Jazz 2016). To reiterate, the three titles that have been used in connection with Smith’s 1928 recording are, “Gin House,” “Gin House Blues” and “Me and My Gin.” The lyrics are as follows:

Stay away from me ‘cause I’m in my sin  
Stay away from me ‘cause I’m in my sin  
If this place gets raided it’s just me and my gin

Don’t try me nobody, oh you’ll never win  
Don’t try me nobody ‘cause you’ll never win  
I’ll fight the army and navy just me and my gin

Any bootlegger sure is a pal of mine  
Any bootlegger sure is a pal of mine  
‘Cause a good ol’ bottle o’ gin will get it all the time

When I’m feeling high ain’t nothing I won’t do  
When I’m feeling high ain’t nothing I won’t do  
Get me full of liquor and I’ll sure be nice to you

I don’t want no pork and I don’t need no beer  
I don’t want no pork and I don’t need no beer  
I don’t want no pork chop just give me gin instead

I see why Harrison did not include this version by Smith as characteristic of what she calls alcohol blues because, in this instance, gin is not the solution and the problem, just the temporary fix. It would have been more thorough for Harrison to make note of the fact that Smith recorded two different versions of a song about being dependent upon gin.

Bogan's "Drinking Blues" fits into Harrison's category of alcohol blues. Being down or worried makes the singer drink and while she admits to looking like a fool when she sobers up and doesn't have enough money to pay the rent, the singer surrenders to the drink despite this:

Blues has got me drinkin' trouble's got me thinkin'  
It's goin' to carry me to my grave  
I said blues has got me drinkin' trouble's got me thinkin'  
It's goin' to carry me to my grave  
And I'm goin' to keep on drinkin' the rest of my worried days

Don't a woman look real funny when she wakes up cold in hand  
And the broad ain't got a dollar to give the house-rent man  
Don't a woman feel real funny when the broad wakes up cold in hand  
And she ain't got a dollar oh to meet the house-rent man

Troubles got me thinkin' and I just can't keep from drinkin'  
I'm tryin' to drive my worried blues away  
Trouble's got me thinkin' and I just can't keep from drinkin'  
Tryin' to drive my worried blues away  
How I been worried each and every lonesome day

Now my heart is achin' and whiskey's all it's takin'  
Just to drive these blues away  
Now my heart is achin' and whiskey's all it's takin'  
Just to drive these blues away  
And I stay drunk each and every worried day

Harrison also places a song co-authored and performed by Rainey in the alcohol blues genre.

"Leavin' This Mornin,'" written with Selma Davis (I was unable to learn more about her), was recorded in 1928:

See me reelin' and rockin' drunk as I can be  
Man I love tryin' to make a fool of me  
I'm leavin' this mornin' I'm leavin' this mornin'

I'm leavin' tryin' to find a man of my own

When I get through drinkin' gon' buy a Gatlin gun  
Find my man he better hitch up and run  
'Cause I'm leavin' this mornin' I'm leavin' this mornin'  
I'm going to Kansas City to bring Jim Jackson home

I give him all my money treat him nice as I can  
Got another woman wait 'til I find my man  
Lord I'm leavin' this mornin' I'm leavin' this mornin'  
I'm leavin' tryin' to find a man of my own

I went up Eighteenth Street found out where the other woman stays  
Cure my man of his triflin' ways  
'Cause I'm leavin' this mornin' honey I'm leavin' this mornin'  
I'm going to Kansas City to bring Jim Jackson home

I walked down the street didn't have on no hat  
Askin' everybody I see where my daddy's at  
I'm leavin' this mornin' honey I'm leavin' this mornin'  
I'm leavin' tryin' to find a man of my own

The character in this song starts off drinking because her man is cheating on her. Her plot for revenge, however, is set to begin once she's out of the alcohol haze and stone cold sober. Rainey sings, "When I get through drinkin' gon' buy a Gatlin gun." Harrison quotes only the first line of the song, "Reeling and rocking drunk as I can be," connecting it with the category of alcohol blues. She neglects, however, to factor in other lines like, "When I get through drinkin' gon' buy a Gatlin gun" as well as lines from the remaining stanzas in which the singer is on the sober side of the story.

While I concur with Harrison's qualifying factors that make certain songs alcohol blues, I do not agree that this latter song by Rainey and Davis meets the criteria when examined in its entirety.

It might be said that the turbulent lives of these three women, along with others like them, symbolize the intersection of blacks in the post emancipation South with the changes that came

about with industrialization, travel, re-location and mass dissemination of not only their voices but their identities via the recording industry. The classic blues boom of the twenties marked a burst of black popular culture into the American mainstream reifying many aspects of the black experience and making their lives and aspirations visible. They did this by exorcising demons of alienation, loneliness, sex and sexual deviance in the public arena.

### *Protest Themes*

It is not uncommon for blues scholars and critics to note that the blues is not in sync with social commentary or political protest. In his 1963 monograph *The Poetry of the Blues* American music historian Samuel Charters writes:

There is little social protest in the blues. There is often a note of anger and frustration; sometimes the poverty and the rootlessness in which the singer has lived his life is evident in a word or a phrase, but there is little open protest at the social conditions under which a Negro in the United States is forced to live. There is complaint but protest has been stifled...it is almost impossible for the white American to realize how tightly he has united against his black fellow citizens. The oppressive weight of prejudice is so constricting that it is not surprising to find little protest in the blues. It is surprising to find even an indirect protest. (Charters 1963, 152)

I would suggest two things that contradict Charters' statement: first, that the performative and personal lives of the three artists in this paper were ripe with social protest as they flaunted images of non-hegemonic acts of sex, prostitution, revenge and more. Secondly, Charter suggests that the reason he finds no protest in the blues is because of black fear of looming white oppression. While he is correct in identifying the real presence of white oppression, he ignores the feisty song catalogues covering bootlegging, incarceration, homosexuality, homelessness and alcoholism, to name a few topics. I would argue that publicly pointing to working-class black realities is a form of social resistance and psychological survival. In fairness to Charters, he was pointing to country blues when discussing the lack of protest in blues music, yet from the

perspective of a blues historian I might suggest that he was remiss in the narrow focus of his comments when connected to a topic as big as protest.

Another prominent scholar, British architectural historian and writer on the blues Paul Oliver, suggests in his 1960 book *The Meaning of the Blues* that the lack of protest in blues music is due to the fact that black people are simply a product of their situational circumstances:

That the number of protests is small is in part the result of the Negro's acceptance of the stereotypes that have been cut for him... They are primarily concerned with the business of living from day to day, of "getting along" with the Whites, of conforming and making the best of their circumstances. As surely as the Southern White intends them to "keep their place" the majority of Negroes are prepared to accept it... An apathy develops which the racial leaders find exasperatingly hard to break, and even when aggravation reaches the point where the spirit of revolt against the system arises, this is often soon dissolved in minor personal disruptions and eventual disregard. (Oliver 1960, 322-323)

I realize that the blues is a broad term covering many styles, but the classic blues does fall into this category, making Oliver's words subject to critique. How does Oliver define protest and what, in his opinion, is worthy of protest? This music was not blackface and did not pander to the appeasement of white audience members.

His comment about how "the majority of Negroes" felt in the post-slavery American South surprised me. As mentioned earlier, Oliver is British, and admits he is culturally removed from the blues. Regardless of this I do not understand his decision to characterize Southern blacks as apathetic or politically inept or inactive. In fact, his book was written only a few years after the seminal Montgomery Bus Boycott, an event in the American Civil Rights Movement that was a political and social protest campaign against the policy of racial segregation on the public transit system of Montgomery, Alabama. The campaign lasted from December 1, 1955 when Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to relinquish her seat to a white person until December 20, 1956 when a federal ruling took effect and led to a United States Supreme Court decision

rendering segregated buses unconstitutional (Biography 2017). An instance of protest, these black Americans challenged one of the racist social structures of the United States of America. Is physical action against whites the only way to demonstrate protestations against the quality of life as a black American? Surely not. In *Women, Culture and Politics* Angela Davis suggests, “Black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom” (Davis 1989, 201). Professor of black popular culture at Duke University, Mark Anthony Neal, suggests that music is a political act in the sense that it has the “power to stir the masses; it has a language of its own and that music was a force that both contained the stories of a people and offered them the forum to express their ideas with one another and the world” (Neal 1999, 31).

If we look at the classic blues women, Charters, Oliver as well as other more recent scholars tended to treat them marginally. Even American blues writer Paul Garon, whose important 1975 monograph *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* focuses on psychoanalytic analyses of desire, examines only a handful of women artists. Although his consideration of women does appear in a section of the book following the portion highlighting men’s supremacy in blues music, it is impressive but short. Quoting lyrics from classic blues women Ida Cox, Victoria Spivey, Sarah Martin and country blues artist Memphis Minnie, Garon writes:

If there is implicit in the blues a “feminist” critique of society, linked to this is a broader critique of repressive civilization, based not on any sex-specificity, nor even on the peculiar position of the black in American culture, although this characteristic is very likely the major force from which blues draws its unique perspective. (Garon 1975, 109)

The author dodges the idea of feminist content in the blues, but rightly suggests that the genre reflects commentary on the repression of white society toward African Americans.

Bessie Smith is not considered to be an artist who highlights social protest in her repertoire, yet her 1928 self-penned song, “Poor Man’s Blues,” can unhesitatingly be categorized as doing

just that:

Mister Rich Man, Rich Man  
Open up your heart and mind  
Mister Rich Man, Rich Man  
Open up your heart and mind  
Give the poor man a chance  
Help stop these hard, hard times

While you livin' in your mansion  
You don't know what hard times means  
While you livin' in your mansion  
You don't know what hard times means  
Poor workin' man's wife is starvin'  
Your wife's livin' like a queen

Please, listen to my pleadin'  
'Cause I can't stand these hard times long  
Oh, listen to my pleadin'  
Can't stand these hard times long  
They'll make an honest man do things  
That you know is wrong

Poor man fought all the battles  
Poor man would fight again today  
He would do anything you ask him  
In the name of the U.S.A

Now the war is over  
Poor man must live the same as you  
Now the war is over  
Poor man must live the same as you  
If it wasn't for the poor man  
Mister Rich Man what would you do?

Smith biographer, Chris Albertson, describes “Poor Man Blues” as “a poignant song of social protest” and cheekily calls it “Black Man’s Blues” (Albertson 1972, 148). Looking at the lyrics, they defy the popular notion that Smith was politically apathetic. Recorded one year before the onset of the Great Depression, this song’s historical reference is to the era after the first world war when African Americans were living in a web of painful economic circumstances leading up to the depression (Davis 1999, 97). In this song, Smith does a smart job of painting a picture of

class relations, which infer race when discussing the rich and the poor, using realism and humour while openly incriminating white America for the way things were. She growls while singing the verse that begins with “while you livin’ in your mansion” and again in the stanza that begins with “poor man fought all the battles,” eagerly expressing the conviction of her words. In the latter verse, Smith correctly articulates the working-class background of black soldiers. Of this same verse, Davis writes:

The complexity of the statement “He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A” points to both gullibility and serious commitment, and she sings it with the appropriate irony. There are many reasons black people and working people of other ethnic backgrounds would take seriously the quest for freedom and democracy. After all, black people fought in the American Revolution, in the Civil War and not only served as combatants in the two world wars, but militantly challenged the racist discrimination practiced by the military establishment. (ibid)

Davis’ use of the word irony in the above passage is accurate in this instance. Perhaps black people were dedicated to America while America was not, and in some ways is still not, committed to them. Clearly then, this early blues song is evidence that protest songs and protest themes exist, particularly in the classic blues arena, and while this song is not typical of Smith it was not her only recording that engaged in social commentary.

Recorded during the same session as “Poor Man’s Blues,” but not an original composition, is “Washwoman’s Blues.” Written by African American jazz and popular music composer Spencer Williams, this song is an emphatic offering recorded by Smith announcing her identification with many black women who had domestic service as their only option of employment. Like “Poor Man’s Blues” this song can be taken literally; most black women did have to work for a living and the jobs available to them involved cooking, house cleaning and laundry for well-to-do whites (Davis 1999, 98). The lyrics for “Washwoman’s Blues” are as follows:



All day long I'm slavin'  
All day long I'm bustin' suds  
All day long I'm slavin'  
All day long I'm bustin' suds  
Gee my hands are tired washin' out these dirty duds

Lord I do more work  
Than forty-'leven Gold Dust Twins  
Lord I do more work  
Than forty-'leven Gold Dust Twins  
Got myself a achin' from my head down to my shins

Sorry I do washin'  
Just to make my livelihood  
Sorry I do washin'  
Just to make my livelihood  
Oh the washwoman's life it ain't a bit of good

Rather be a scullion  
Cookin' in some white folks' yard  
Rather be a scullion  
Cookin' in some white folks' yard  
I could eat a plenty wouldn't have to work so hard

Me and my ol' washboard  
Sure do have some cares and woes  
Me and my ol' washboard  
Sure do have some cares and woes  
In the muddy water wringin' out these dirty clothes

In her ardent interpretation of these lyrics Smith makes her connection to the subject matter clear. In the first verse she draws out the word “all” in “all day long” reifying the image of a black woman scrubbing piles of someone else’s laundry, and exacting the same vocal dynamic on “tired” when singing about the state of the washer’s hands. In the next stanza, Smith makes mention of “Gold Dust Twins,” a reference to the brand of wash powder used during this era that was packaged in a box with two pickanninies pictured on it, or two small black children (*Oxford Dictionaries* 2016). It is believable that it existed in the first place, but the fact that Smith calls out in a song that black children are used to market laundry detergent is a form of protest in my

opinion. Author of *The Bessie Smith Companion*, Edward Brooks, states in his biographic account of Smith's life that "Washwoman's Blues" is "a mild social protest against the type of work blacks are forced into" (Brooks 1982, 144). While his book is mostly concerned with examining her musical technique, some of his comments like the one above reveal that Brooks, like Charters, Oliver and others, has not considered what is worthy of constituting as social protest. A pointed lyric is articulated when Smith sings:

Rather be a scullion cookin' in some white folks' yard  
Rather be a scullion cookin' in some white folks' yard  
I could eat aplenty, wouldn't have to work so hard

While the singer considers the merits of being a cook for whites by saying she could eat a-plenty and wouldn't have to work so hard, the word scullion is a reminder of her station. According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, scullion is a servant assigned the most menial kitchen tasks. I suggest that this is a remonstrance of the limited jobs available to blacks, all of which are in service to whites (*Oxford Dictionaries* 2017).

Brooks ignores some crucial nuances characteristic of the blues and the classic blues such as irony and humour. There is no overtone of resignation in Smith's delivery. Instead the washerwoman acknowledges her circumstances while recognizing her unhappiness but despite being cornered into this work, she never surrenders to the position. Furthermore, Smith's recording of "Washwoman's Blues" is an example of a song addressing not just social issues but gendered social issues that were scarcely formally recognized otherwise. Charters might insist that this song is still just a complaint, but as Davis suggests, a public articulation of complaint must be regarded as a form of contestation of oppressive conditions (Davis 1999, 101).

Throughout slavery women worked the cotton fields alongside men, had their own domestic jobs and many women were also charged with keeping the master's house in order,

preparing meals, washing clothes and scrubbing floors. In post slavery decades paid work most available to black women was cleaning house, clothes washing, cooking and child care. In fact, until the late fifties, the majority of black women who worked outside their own homes were washerwomen and maids (Jackson 1973, 236). This song then, ennobles these women while concurrently pointing to the culture that instituted this kind of work for blacks, even after Emancipation.

Other oppressive social circumstances that defined life in the black community post-Emancipation were incarceration and the convict lease system. The latter was a penal labour system practiced in the South providing prison workers to private parties. As early as 1844 in the state of Louisiana prisoners were leased out but the movement actually grew throughout the South with the event of emancipation. In his 1996 monograph *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1886-1928*, author Matthew J. Mancini writes that corruption, lack of accountability and racial violence in the convict lease system resulted in “one of the harshest and most exploitative labor systems known in American history” (Mancini 1996, 1-2). The compromise of 1877 which afforded Republican Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency over Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, was signed under the agreement that Hayes would remove federal troops from the South sent there to enforce and invigorate Reconstruction. This lead directly to the institutionalization of convict leasing.

The following year in the state of Georgia 1,124 blacks were leased out and 115 whites also suffered the same fate. It is reported that the average price for a prisoner was \$25,000.00 (Green 1949, 112).

During the classic blues era, the convict lease system was still in place and was reported to be worse than slavery. Son of freed slaves, African American educator and writer William

Pickens, described Georgia's convict lease system in a 1921 pamphlet issued by the American Civil Liberties Union:

It can be readily understood why this system is so much more vicious than was the old slave system. In a regular slave system, the owner might have such selfish interest in the slave as any man may have in the preservation of valuable property. But in the convict lease system of Georgia, it is to the landlord's advantage to put the least into the Negro and get the most out of him whom he owns for a limited time only. (Aptheker 1973, 323-324)

Williams points to the clear difference of the owners' attitude about the black body in each situation, slavery and the lease system. In her 1981 book *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis writes that slavery bestialized black labour and that women and men were assigned to much of the same work regardless of the gendered division of labour recognized in the bigger picture of normal society. This practice was perpetuated in the convict lease system (Davis 1981, 5-6).

The late Herbert Aptheker was a Caucasian Marxist historian and political activist who wrote many books on African American history and he articulated what black women endured in the Southern United States in the climate of slavery, pre- and post-Emancipation:

It is one of the greatest horrors of our history that colored women have been thus farmed out to work and live in the stockades under the absolute control of brutal men. The multiple lynchings in Brooks and Lowndes Counties, Georgia, which were caused by this system in May, 1918, are among the most savage of such occurrences. The unspeakable vivisection of Mary Turner, a colored woman whose baby was to be born about four weeks later, was one in this carnival. (Aptheker 1973, 324)

The horrific occurrences described by Aptheker were indeed sung about by two of the classic blues women discussed in this study. On the topic of imprisonment Smith recorded several songs including "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair," "Work House Blues," "Jail House Blues" and "Sing Sing Prison Blues." Rainey recorded a song called "Chain Gang Blues" which surpasses Smith's recordings in terms of how it addresses this ubiquitous reality in black America. Written by African American songwriters Charles J. Parker and Thomas Dorsey, this song was recorded in 1925:

The judge found me guilty, the clerk he wrote it down  
The judge found me guilty, the clerk he wrote it down  
Just a poor gal in trouble, I know I'm county road bound

Many days of sorrow, many nights of woe  
Many days of sorrow, many nights of woe  
And a ball and chain everywhere I go

Chains on my feet, padlock on my hand  
Chains on my feet, padlock on my hand  
It's all on account of stealing a woman's man

It was early this mornin' that I had my trial  
It was early this mornin' that I had my trial  
Ninety days on the county road and judge didn't even smile

In *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, Sandra R. Lieb points to an interesting fact about this song. On the original lead sheet there was a verse that never made it onto the 1925 recorded version of this song:

Ain't robbed no train, ain't done no hanging crime  
Ain't robbed no train, ain't done no haning crime  
But the judge said I'd be on the county road a long long time

Lieb suggests that this woman's crime was clearly a minor offence (Lieb 1981, 153) but admittedly the point of "Chain Gang Blues" is not the character's guilt or innocence but instead it is about imprisonment, chain gangs in particular, as well as the convict lease system. It is important to note that black women were not absolved of this destiny just because of their gender.

American historian Robert Perkinson suggests that the creation of the chain gang in the early twentieth century was lauded as a humanitarian advance. In his 2010 monograph *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire* he quotes Joseph Hyde Pratt, a convict labour advocate from North Carolina who provided a rationale for the chain gang:

Life in the convict road camp...is more conducive to maintaining and building up the general health and manhood of the convict than when he is confined behind prison walls.

(Perkinson 2010, 151)

This less restrictive penal system is said to have been better for black prisoners in particular. According to the assistant director of the U.S. Office of Public Roads, “The negro is accustomed to outdoor occupations...[and is] experienced in manual labor and does not possess the same aversion to working in public...as is characteristic of the white race” (ibid). This attitude is deeply rooted in the racism that kept slavery alive for so many centuries. Perkinson explains why chain gangs gained favour in the South:

Politicians rallied to the chain gang because it provided public works on the cheap. Between 1904, when state felons first began working on its roads, and 1915, convicts were primarily responsible for expanding Georgia’s surfaced road grid from two thousand to thirteen thousand miles, making its state highway system the most advanced in the South...Just as leasing had jump-started postbellum railroad construction, sugar milling, and coal mining, chain gangs helped lay the infrastructure for twentieth-century rural development. The American South was built not only by slaves but by convicts. (Perkinson 2010, 152)

It is important to address the fact that the turn-of-the-century black convict wasn’t necessarily a corrupt or evil individual deserving of a chain gang sentence. At the end of Reconstruction in Mississippi, Redeemer legislators, the new fiscally-conservative leaders of a one-party state, were not interested in reforming prisoners. In *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1997), American historian David Oshinsky notes that legislators knew white taxpayers would never fund an expensive penitentiary whatever their worries about crime might be. Instead, like their counterparts in Georgia, they believed that convicts could provide at least a partial solution to the needs of Mississippi’s labour-starved employers and they assumed the profits generated by leasing would quiet any moral rumblings about the treatment of black criminals, who were considered the dregs of an inferior race.

First came the infamous Pig Law which made the theft of any farm animal or commodity

worth more than ten dollars a grand larceny offense punishable by up to five years of prison, sending incarcerations through the roof. Next came the Leasing Act which, Oshinsky notes, was aimed directly at African Americans. Thanks to the injustices of segregation and a white-controlled legal system, white Mississippians rarely toiled as convict labourers. Instead, in the era before the Parchman prison was built, they were safely segregated into the state penitentiary at Jackson.

White supremacy in Mississippi meant all-white juries. Furthermore, blacks were rarely represented by counsel and their testimony was often restricted to cases in which whites were not directly involved. Court fees were exorbitant and non-payment, whether a person was found guilty or not, was tantamount to a prison term. Oshinsky makes clear the connections between political disenfranchisement, the onset of segregation, and the system of criminal justice for African Americans.

This chapter looked at the lives and a selection of music from “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith with inclusions of Lucille Bogan’s work. I examined the pre-feminist content of their material as well as content addressing social realities faced by black working-class Americans. As discussed, their repertoire reflects songs depicting the rigors of family life, employment, travel, the influences of alcohol as well as songs of protest which pointed to the gross bias in the Southern legal system and black incarceration. Through the content of their material, these artists reify their position in music history as far more than entertainers.

The next chapter explores travelling minstrel shows; the performance context where classic blues singers cut their teeth, were discovered by the burgeoning recording industry and where blues music was first identified in the black press and disseminated to the public.

## Chapter 3

### TRAVELLING MINSTREL SHOWS

This chapter begins with an investigation of the touring avenue that spurred the circulation of blues music. Travelling minstrel shows are identified as the breeding ground for classic blues performers in particular who were discovered in this setting by record label scouts from the North. Next, I include a discussion about the role of the press in publicizing artists who appeared on this circuit and pinpoint when the term blues first appeared in publication. I also consider the role of the black entrepreneur in managing the business of the travelling minstrel show circuits.

It is unknown if Lucille Bogan participated in the travelling minstrel shows. There is no documentation indicating where she did perform or where she did not. Bob Eagle's interview with her biological son, Nazareth Bogan Jr., does not provide sufficient information to determine this aspect of her career. Based on the relevance of the minstrel shows in the career development of classic singers, and the bold statement by Borneman that Bogan, Rainey and Smith were the "big three" of the classic blues (Borneman 1946, 39), an educated guess is that Bogan likely *did* play the minstrel circuit. Therefore, an examination of this performance context is warranted.

Travelling minstrel shows, also known as sideshow annex companies, provided employment for a large and burgeoning number of African American musicians and entertainers, both men and women, around the turn-of-the twentieth century in the American South. Performance represented virtually the only alternative means of employment to sharecropping and physical labour for blacks post-slavery. Michelle Wallace suggests that this avenue of work, singing and dancing in particular is, "critical to defining the spectrum of possibilities for black women beyond servility and self-abnegation" (Wallace 1990, 70). The touring circuit was ultimately the gateway for the popular dissemination of blues and other styles of music and it



was here that classic blues women got their start as singers, performers and recording artists. Humphrey Lyttelton suggests, “Few ‘classic’ blues singers of note became famous without serving a tough apprenticeship in the tent shows, barn-storming from settlement to township to plantation” (Lyttelton 1978, 66).

As a term used to describe the music, the word blues first appeared in connection with the travelling minstrel shows both in promotional material as well as in the black press, the latter playing an important role not only in the development of the blues as a genre, but also in the success and notoriety of the artists themselves.

In the second half of the 1800s, the professional business of entertaining large audiences for profit emerged in the United States. A circus known as Rickett’s opened in Philadelphia as early as 1792, but the proliferation and popularity of the circus did not fully manifest until the latter half of the 1800s, with over one hundred circuses in existence. Travelling shows or variety acts had old world antecedents in entertainment far too numerous to mention herein, however, the variety show, as the name implies, was comprised of short acts that showcased singing, dancing and comic routines with no connected story or unifying theme.

The Theatre Owner’s Booking Association (TOBA), known colloquially as Tough on Black Asses, was established by black American vaudeville performer Sherman H. Dudley who became well-known as the Lone Star Comedian before the end of the 1900s. Dudley launched S. H. Dudley Theatrical Enterprises, a company that bought and leased theaters around Washington and Virginia. By 1916, his touring circuit had extended into the South and Midwest providing black entertainers with work that extended beyond the regular travelling show season. Bessie Smith biographer, Jackie Kay, writes:

The minstrel troupes and blues travelling shows were often booked by TOBA... They sang comedy songs, ballads and performed dramatic routines in addition to singing the blues. (Kay 1997, 30)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, black travelling minstrel shows began to tour with bigger, white circuses, performing not under the big top or main circus tent but in the sideshow tent alongside “freaks and curiosities” (Abbot and Seroff 2007, 158). Sideshow annex companies, as the travelling minstrel shows were also referred to were divided into two units: band and minstrel. The band played in the daily street parades along with the larger white circus band, generally with its own colourful bandwagon. The minstrel unit of the sideshow typically consisted of an old time first part and an olio incorporating singers, dancers, comedians and specialty acts accompanied by a small orchestra (ibid). During the first part, an ensemble sat in a semi-circle. After an opening number, usually comedic, the actors would lead the ensemble in a series of jokes, songs and dances (Kenrick 2003).

The Olio consisted of miscellaneous songs and acts performed in front of a painted backdrop, typically satiric pieces that poked fun at contemporary issues and political figures (ibid). The minstrel ensemble would continue to provide music for the remainder of the sideshow attractions and select players were sometimes summoned to the big top to perform in an after concert, for which the audience commonly paid an additional admission fee (ibid).

There was a popular demand for up-to-date black vernacular music like coon songs such as “Every Race Has a Flag but the Coon” and ballads. A September 15, 1900 *Indianapolis Freeman* article described The Sherrah Quartette as one of the most popular acts in the sideshow “singing all the latest sentimental and coon songs of the day” (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 159).

Despite the audience appetite for popular songs in the travelling minstrel shows, many African American musicians such as legendary coronet player, band leader and businessman P.G

Lowery, were in fact trained and capable of delivering a repertoire of challenging classical overtures and waltzes (ibid). Perry Gordon Lowery was the son of freed slaves who settled in Kansas after the Civil War. While his parents encouraged his music, they insisted he practice the coronet in the barn (*News & Record* 2004). He mastered his instrument well enough to start a career as a musician and was later accepted at the Boston Conservatory. Lowery was also an entrepreneur in the travelling vaudeville and minstrel shows. In addition to his musical ability, he was noted for his articles about his travels and about the state of the music business for black talent. In 1903, he wrote a piece for *The Indianapolis Freeman* in which he stated, “we are rapidly leaving the shores of random work and landing on the cultured shores of musical accomplishment” (ibid).

A golden age of sorts for the sideshow bands performing ragtime, coon songs, waltzes and classical overtures was marked by a July 9, 1910 photograph of Lowery appearing on the front page of the *Indianapolis Freeman* entertainment supplement with a caption identifying him as the architect of the circus sideshow annex: “Minstrel and Vaudeville – A Recent Phase of the Show Business.” The announcement read, “Since Lowery’s initiatives all have fallen in line – the little ones and the big ones – until at this time no less than fourteen white tents are giving employment to big colored companies...The number promises to increase since the features have proven popular, hence mean[s] money to show managers.”

Of all the different genres of music talked about and written about at the time, the word blues does not appear in black journalism until 1912 in connection with a sideshow minstrel part under the direction of Prof. James Wolfscale, an historical trailblazer of circus annex minstrelsy, “known by every man, woman and child in the business.” The minstrel part consisted of only eight people and it is noted that Herman Brown sang the “proto-blues anthem ‘All Night Long’”

(Abbott and Seroff 2007, 167).

In *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*, authors Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff feature information on black entertainers gathered from their thirty years combing through the pages of the *Indianapolis Freeman*, the *Chicago Defender* and other black newspapers of the late 1800s to the early 1900s. In part three of *Ragged But Right*, titled "Blues for the Sideshow Tent," we see the sideshow annex companies written about in the black press as hosting performances of ragtime, blues and jazz. As mentioned, the word blues first appeared in black newspapers in 1912 but did not reappear until two years later in 1914, this time in connection with a band leader named Prof. R. Roy Pope. On May 18, 1914, under contract with the Ringling Bros. Circus, Pope's all male orchestra gave a thirty-minute concert including songs such as "Remick's Hits No. 13 overture; Handy's Memphis Blues and Revelation March" (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 165).

W.C. Handy, often called "The Father of the Blues," was himself employed in the sideshow annex business and in 1896 became band leader of Mahara's Minstrels. After three years, Handy grew weary of life on the road and settled with his wife Elizabeth in his hometown of Florence, Alabama. He rejoined as leader of the Mahara's Minstrels in 1902 and while his innate ability to recall, transcribe and write music was always at work, it wasn't until 1912 that his composition "Memphis Blues" was actually published (Handy 1961, 106). As noted above, the first written mention of this song being performed was in 1914 with Pope's orchestra and it was again performed in the 1915 sideshow annex season also under Pope, along with another song with blues in the title called "Florida Blues." As reported in the September 4, 1915 edition of the *Indianapolis Freeman*, "All of the above numbers are by colored writers" (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 166).

In his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, Handy writes this of the travelling minstrel shows:

It goes without saying that minstrels were a disreputable lot in the eyes of a large section of upper crust Negroes...but it was also true that all the best talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage-performers – the minstrel shows got them all. For my part there wasn't a moment's hesitation. (Handy 1961, 33)

Handy's statement not only lauds the black talent pool of the era but it also supports my suggestion that Bogan, being one of "the best talent of that generation," was a party to the stage performances.

Sideshow annex band leader J.C. Miles made a fascinating statement that was printed in the May 16, 1914 edition of the *Indianapolis Freeman* which involved one of the earliest references to the blues in black journalism:

Our band and minstrels, although only eleven strong, is the feature of the Annex, featuring principally the latest rag and popular airs. And who says that the 'Blues' won't go in this section. It goes bigger here than it does in Bam [Alabama], as they follow the big band wagon in vast throngs, yelling can be constantly heard, 'Give us some more of yer Memphis Blues.' (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 179)

By 1915, song titles with the word blues in them begin to pop up in much greater numbers, as reported in black newspapers. Prof. Wolfscale's 1915 and 1916 musical program for the sideshow annex under contract with Barnum and Bailey's Circus included titles such as "The Florida Blues," "Jogo Blues," "Jelly Roll Blues," and "The Hesitating Blues." According to an October 21, 1916 *Indianapolis Freeman* article, Bob Pace and W.C. Handy's "The Hesitating Blues" was requested more than any other number performed by the group (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 170).

Most sideshow annex companies carried at least some women performers, while some carried only one who was known as a novelty female interlocutor, and still others had none at all.

As mentioned above, Pope directed an all-male band and minstrel outfit and it was his desire to forge an alliance with the white owned Ringling Bros. Circus, the ultimate goal being to elevate the status of his band and relieve himself of minstrel duties all together (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 163-164). Why Pope's notion of a female free band and/or minstrel outfit would bolster the status of his ensemble is unclear, however, on January 21, 1911 this announcement was made in the *Indianapolis Freeman*:

Last season Prof. Pope was the first of band masters to discard women performers and this season he took the initiative in eliminating the minstrel part...It has been Prof. Pope's ambition and purpose to convince his employers and the public that the Negro can measure with other races in the musical profession, without the addition of the "Aunt Dinah" and "Uncle Eph" acts, and his efforts have been rewarded. (ibid)

Pope's reference to characters from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, messy maid servant, Aunt Dinah, and Uncle Eph, presumably a raccoon hunting character from an 1878 Bob Allan Song, "Old Uncle Eph," demonstrates his desire to leave black minstrel stereotypes out of his acts. He severely underestimates the ability of female performers, however, by categorically eliminating them from his ensembles. Ironically, four years after his decree, in the Ringling's 1915 new season, Pope's wife, a trained musician, joined his orchestra and was featured as "the only colored lady saxophone soloist en route with a circus" (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 165). Mrs. Pope is not identified by her first name in the article announcing her participation in her husband's orchestra, which appeared in the *Indianapolis Freeman* on April 10, 1915.

One instance of a band and minstrel company director who did feature female acts was Prof. Wolfscale who showcased Princess Wee Wee and Her Jass Band, Ida Forsyne and Edna Parker among others. In *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records*, architectural historian and blues author Paul Oliver writes, "Many [minstrel shows] featured celebrated show singers: Lizzie Miles with the Alabama Minstrels, Bessie Smith and Butterbeans and Susie with

the Cole Brother's Carnival" (Oliver 1984, 79). It should be noted that all of the artists mentioned here, including other contemporaries that toured the circuit, were employed by more than one of the companies over the course of their careers.

In 1904, "Ma" Rainey appeared with her husband "Pa" Rainey in the sideshow annex company tour circuit. Together they were billed first, as Black Face Song and Dance Comedians, Jubilee Singers [and] Cake Walkers, and later, as Rainey and Rainey, Assassimators of the Blues (Lieb 1981, 5). As her fame spread, "Ma" Rainey went on to headline shows of her own, billed under her own name, and performed with such companies as Florida Cotton Blossoms, Shufflin' Sam from Alabam' and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels (ibid).

Rainey was a dark-skinned black woman and accounts by some of her musicians tell us that she was short and heavy with wild hair and a large mouth filled with gold teeth. Aware of the prejudice against dark-skinned women in the business, like bias faced by Smith and others – Rainey lightened her complexion by using heavy greasepaint on her face along with powder and rouge which, under the stage lights, made her skin look bright or gold-coloured (Lieb 1981, 8). Her musical ensemble included a drummer, violin player, bassist and horn player. Other parts of the variety show are recounted by band member Norman Mason, "We had another man was outstandin' by the name of John Pamplin, he did that Devil Act, that Faust; rattled that big iron ball and did a lot of juggling...Delamon Miles, a contortionist who turn himself around completely...acrobats from down in New Orleans called the Watts Brothers, also the Mile [Brothers] who had an aerial act" (Oliver 1965, 122). Rainey's trombone player, Clyde Bernhardt, recalled that Rainey was popular among white audiences in North Carolina, but preferred to perform for black crowds. Sam Chatmon, guitarist in the Mississippi Sheiks, once said that when she performed in Jackson, Mississippi, it was usually for whites who brought in

more money (Lieb 1981, 12).

Sandra Lieb writes about the role that the black press played in Rainey's career as an artist touring on the circuit as well a recording artist:

If, without the recording industry, Ma Rainey might have remained merely a Southern celebrity, it is equally valid to state that without the black press and especially the *Chicago Defender*, her recordings could never have achieved the same widespread publicity and distribution, for Paramount's aggressive promotional campaigns and frequent advertisements in the *Defender* for her records and tours reinforced her stature as a major recording artist. Since much of Paramount's business was mail-order, the *Defender's* large circulation brought Ma Rainey into remote rural areas as well as to new urban environments. (Leib 1981, 168)

The success of Rainey and her contemporaries was symbiotically due to the role of the record companies and the black press.

As Rainey was well into her tenure in the travelling minstrel shows, Bessie Smith's brother Clarence got her an audition with the Moses Stokes show, a troupe he was already employed by. She was hired by them in 1912 but only stayed under their employ for a few months, taking on work in Irving C. Miller's show as a chorus girl. In 1913 Smith was fired by Miller for being too dark. "She was a natural singer," said Miller, "but we stressed beauty in the chorus line and Bessie did not meet my standards as far as looks were concerned. I told the manager to get rid of her, which he did" (Albertson 2003, 14).

A notable billing for Smith came later that same year at the 81 Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia where she was seen by veteran film actor Leigh Whipper. Although Whipper didn't play a big part in Smith's career until twelve years later when, as manager of Newark's Orpheum Theatre, he hired her to perform, he is documented as having a particular recollection of her series of shows at the 81 Theatre:

She was just a teenager, and she obviously didn't know she was the artist she was. She didn't know how to dress – she just sang in her street clothes – but she was such a natural that she could wreck anybody's show. She only made ten dollars a week, but people would



throw money on the stage, and the stage hands would pick up about three or four dollars for her after every performance. (ibid)

Smith's momentum from her residency at the 81 Theatre propelled her to get out on the road. She toured with the sideshow annex companies, dancing and singing, and used the 81 Theatre as her home base. She had an impressive following from her work on the road before she made her first recording. Although she is known today as a singer, Smith appeared in her own show, *Liberty Belles Revue*, as a singer, dancer and as a male impersonator at the 81 Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia from 1918-1919.

#### *Turn-of-the-Century Black Entrepreneurs*

An important African American figure in the phenomenon of the tent shows was Ephriam Williams. Not only did the TOBA provide employment for a large number of black entertainers, it presented an entrepreneurial avenue for those inclined to succeed business-wise. Born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1860, Williams spent his youth as a shoeshine boy and hotel porter in Milwaukee. He became an accomplished horse trainer and magician who liked to dress in tailor-made evening wear with a bright red vest. His first circus, the Ferguson & Williams Monster Show out of Appleton, Wisconsin launched in 1885. It included, at various times, a German trapeze artist and sword-swallower by the name of Frank Skerbeck and his family. By 1893, when he was only thirty-three years old, Williams had amassed a fifteen-car railroad circus based in Medford, Wisconsin named the Consolidated American and German Railroad Shows. The local Medford newspaper wrote, "It is beyond question that with the company selected for this year, Prof. Williams need not turn out of the road for any show going.... His skin is dark, but he will come out on top yet" (Circus in America 2004).

In 1898, Williams was the only black circus owner in America. He employed twenty-six people, was running a show with as much talent and extravagance as the best of the smaller

circuses of the day and he was only in his thirties. He did, however, face a string of hard luck by way of bad weather and bad creditors. It has been suggested that his fall from prominence may have been further aggravated by whites who were defiant about the success of an upstart black business man (ibid).

In the summer of 1907, after working at nothing of great significance since 1902, Williams and his trained horses appeared in a musical written and composed by Bob Cole and J. Rosamund Johnson called *Shoo-Fly Regiment*, a style of show known as Negro musical comedy (Miller 2011, 38). Participating in this event appears to have added momentum to Williams' career, reinvigorating him, and in just a few short years he was back on top and had become the founder and sole owner/operator of Prof. Eph Williams' Famous Troubadours touring an important all-black tent show known as Silas Green from New Orleans (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 314). Billed back in the day as The Show That is Different, this circus-revue played one-night stands throughout the South becoming one of the longest-lasting tent shows in America. Williams managed the show and performed in it alongside future legends Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. By 1928 the Silas Green show had a troupe of fifty-four people which included a sixteen-piece band and sixteen female dancers. The main show tent had a capacity to seat approximately one thousand, four hundred people (International Independent Showmen's Museum 2017). In 1922 Williams sold half the share in the show to a white American, Charles Collier, who took over sole ownership after Williams' death in the mid-1930s. The Silas Green from New Orleans show continued to tour until the late 1950s and in later years was sometimes billed simply as the Silas Green Show.

An interesting connection can be made between the Silas Green from New Orleans show and Bob Cole. As early as 1898 a stage character named Silas Green appeared in Cole and Billy

Johnson's first big show, *A Trip to Coontown*, and this eventually inspired the tent show that took that character's name. Although it was enormously popular among both black and white audiences in its day, when Williams died in Florida, sometime in the 1930s, no one considered his death important enough to announce in an obituary or to even mark his grave. A much-overlooked figure in the history of American circus, Williams was a victim of the same racial discrimination that has blocked the paths to success and happiness of many Americans throughout our history.

Silas Green's main rival was the Rabbit's Foot Minstrels company, managed in its later years by white American Fred Swift "F.S." Wolcott from his home in Port Gibson, Mississippi (Lyttelton 1978, 66). Originally, the company was founded and directed by Pat Chappelle, an African American former string band guitar player and entrepreneur from Jacksonville, Florida, who established a small chain of theatres in the late 1890s (Rivers and Brown 2007, 169). The Spanish-American War of 1898 brought Chappelle increased fortune via waves of troops, correspondents and sightseers whose presence launched Florida's economy and pushed potential show business profits to new heights. This permitted Chappelle to create his own touring company and he initially called the players the Imperial Colored Minstrels but then changed the name to the Famous Imperial Minstrels. The company billed itself as a minstrel show and included people like seasoned comedian Arthur "Happy" Howe and toured successfully around the South. Howe is listed in Henry T. Sampson's book *Blacks in Blackface* as well as a few other sources and I can only assume he was African American as nowhere (that I can find) is it clear what his race was.

Chappelle also opened the Excelsior Hall in Jacksonville, the first black-owned theater in the South, which reportedly seated five-hundred people. For this feat, music historian Henry T.

Sampson credited Chappelle as one of two pioneers of black-owned and managed theatres in America. Robert Church was the other businessman who opened his venue in Memphis on the famed Beale Street (Sampson 1980, 197). In 1899, Chappelle closed the theater and moved to Tampa where, with fellow African American entrepreneur R. S. Donaldson, he opened a new vaudeville house, The Buckingham Theatre Saloon, in the Fort Brooke neighbourhood. It prospered economically and was a destination for the culturally diverse community in Tampa. The March 24, 1900 *Freeman* wrote, “The house is crowded to the doors every night with Cubans, Spaniards, Negroes and white people.” Interestingly, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* printed the following notice about the Buckingham, “Special attention will be shown to white visitors” (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 250).

The successful launch of the Buckingham was followed by a second theatre called the Mascotte. The prosperity of their shows at the Buckingham and Mascotte venues led Chappelle and Donaldson to announce in early 1900 their intent to establish a traveling vaudeville show. Chappelle commissioned Caucasian Frank Dumont of the Eleventh Street Theater in Philadelphia to write a show for this new venture. Dumont was an experienced writer for minstrel shows who created a now historical document called the *Frank Dumont Minstrelsy Scrapbook*. The title of the work he wrote for Chappelle and Donaldson was *A Rabbit’s Foot*, a simple story with an uncomplicated plot. A newspaper at the time said, “it is an excellent vehicle for the presentation of an abundant amount of rag-time, sweet Southern melodies, witty dialogue, buck dancing, cake walks, and numerous novelties” (ibid).

In the month of May, that same year, Chappelle and Donaldson advertised for sixty black performers calling for male, female and juvenile applicants of every description to be part of their new play, announcing that they would be traveling in the company’s own train of hotel cars.

In the summer of 1900, Chappelle put the show into theatres rather than under tents, first in Paterson, New Jersey and then in Brooklyn, New York. Ambitions aside, he next encountered a string of bad luck. His bandmaster Frank Clermont left, his partnership with Donaldson ended, and business for the new show was not as strong as hoped. Determined to continue, in October 1901 the company, now solely run by Chappelle, launched its second season with a roster of performers again led by comedian Arthur “Happy” Howe and toured through Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and Florida, this time growing in popularity throughout the early years of the century, and used both theatres and tents as performance venues (Sampson 1980, 48-49). Pat Chappelle, now partnering with his brothers James E. Chappelle and Lewis W. Chappelle, decided to formally organize a small vaudeville circuit that included theatre venues in Savannah, Georgia as well as Jacksonville and Tampa, Florida. With the return of good fortune, by the following year the Chappelle brothers had full control of the African American vaudeville business in that part of the country and was able to provide employment to at least seventy-five performers and musicians each season, one that lasted anywhere from twelve to fourteen weeks a year (Peterson 1997, 104).

In 1902, Chappelle stated that he had accomplished what no other black man had yet done and that was to successfully run a Negro show without the help of a single white man (Abbott and Seroff 2007, 253). The business grew and resulted in him being able to own and manage multiple tent shows and the Rabbit’s Foot Company in particular would travel to as many as sixteen states in a season. Chappelle liked to point out that his show was “well patronized by the best of white and colored ladies and gentlemen” (ibid).

Business grew steadily over the next several years but by 1910, Chappelle was slowed down considerably from sheer exhaustion (Rivers and Brown 2007, 186). His wife Rosa

convinced him to enjoy a European tour beginning in May 1911 and reports had him benefiting from the sea air and new locations but Chappelle didn't stay away long. He returned home rested but far from recharged and made an announcement that the show would not be out on the road that season. Pat Chappelle died in October 1911 at his home in LaVilla, Florida at the age of forty-two. At the time of his death he was said to be one of the wealthiest black American citizens.

The Rabbit's Foot company lived on with Walcott assuming control and retaining the original name for the first few years, changing it eventually to F. S. Walcott's Rabbit Foot Minstrels. In *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, Eileen Southern importantly notes that, "the show toured widely, particularly in the South, and employed some of the most important blues and vaudeville singers of the race during its early years, beginning in 1915 with 'Ma' Rainey and Bessie Smith" (Southern 1983, 299).

This brief look inside the history of travelling minstrel shows provided the performance context seminal to the beginnings of the dissemination of the blues and the classic blues. It also traced the term blues and its entry into popular culture in association with the shows via performance advertisements and entertainment reviews published in the black press. Economic opportunities afforded black Americans, such as ownership of the travelling shows, were landmarks in the social climate in the post emancipation era. For performers like Rainey and Smith whose tenures in the touring circuit were discussed, tent shows provided an alternative form of income to physical or domestic labour.

The next chapter considers another area of the black entertainment industry ripe with socio-political polemics about the lack of equality in post-slavery America. The theatre industry in cities like New York and Chicago became an avenue in which African American playwrights

and musicians could disseminate racially sensitized material to white and black audiences.

## Chapter 4

### SOCIO-POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN BLACK ENTERTAINMENT, 1900-1930

This chapter briefly reviews the socio-economic climate in the years following Reconstruction, describing some of the difficulties faced by black Americans in establishing a place for themselves. I explore the black theatre industry in urban centers, considering why this platform was a formidable method of protest. I also discuss female playwrights who contributed works articulating events relating to lynching. This is followed by a look at the small group of black musicians, entertainers and dramatists who took up residence in a section of New York City, establishing what quickly became a hub for African American artists. Finally, I include a singular, musical example by Billie Holiday which articulates a lucid description of racial violence.

This chapter is relevant to the life and study of Lucille Bogan in that, like the playwrights, Bogan was born into and grew up in a racially divided society that was intolerant of black assimilation. Her recordings challenged social norms demonstrating how music, like theatre, was a way to culturally produce ideas that castigated racial bias in the post-Emancipation era. It is documented that Bogan recorded the majority of her songs in New York City which was an entertainment hot bed for musicians, playwrights and authors alike. Regardless of the limited biographic information available on her, it is impossible to state that Bogan did not interact, intersect, connect with or be influenced by the African American artistic community around her. The potency of theatre as a platform to disseminate material depicting black realities to white and black audiences is an extension of the discussion about the classic blues forum and the music of Lucille Bogan.

Despite the Republican efforts at Reconstruction, many blacks in the South struggled



with poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau, was a federal government agency set up in 1865 to assist former slaves in the South during the Reconstruction era. As Reconstruction came to an end in 1877, however, even the government agency was unable to keep matters from declining rapidly for African Americans. The Freedmen's Bureau closed, voting restrictions such as poll taxes and literacy tests proliferated and racist violence spread. In July of 1866 the Bureau's national superintendent of education wrote that white objection to schools for African Americans in the South was so great that only "military force will prevent the frequent outbreak of every form of violence" (Abbot 1956, 74).

Discrimination further intensified with the passage of Jim Crow laws in the 1880s which segregated public transit services, schools and restricted or forbade black access to other facilities like theaters and restaurants. During this time, Southern whites strove to maintain social dominance. Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) instigated extrajudicial assaults and killings, commonly referred to as lynchings, to keep power and intimidate blacks from voting, finding work and or obtaining an education. After Reconstruction, the number of killings rose dramatically. The Tuskegee Institute record of lynchings between 1880 and 1951 shows 3,437 African American victims while the number of whites lynched stood at 1,293 (University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law 2016).

African Americans used every resource available to them for self-affirmation and self-definition in this hostile socio-political climate, "from written text to spoken word, from photographic image to musical improvisation, from sermon to soulful moan" (Mitchell 2011, 8). This affirmation and definition of the black community as an equal and worthy group of Americans was, in itself, opposition to the hegemonic racial intolerance omnipresent in America.

Turn-of-the century black activist Ida B. Wells was an important figure who boldly launched an anti-lynching campaign in which she used not only the written word but also engaged in public speaking in the U.S. and abroad to draw attention to the subject.

To speak publicly about atrocious acts against African Americans, however, was considered improper in the eyes and ears of whites and was potentially dangerous for the orator. Activists learned that speaking out could subject them to punishment and result in terrifying repercussions (Cherry 1998, 225). This chapter looks at the intersection of arts and public protest demonstrating how theatre, like the classic blues, was a way to produce and present ideas criticizing racial injustices and biases, subverting efforts to silence black Americans. This forum created a narrative of socio-political opposition recognizing a positive black American identity.

Author and social activist Gloria Jean Watkins, best known by her pen name bell hooks, writes in “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition” that, “Throughout African-American history, performance has been crucial in the struggle for liberation, precisely because it has not required the material resources demanded by other art forms...the voice as instrument could be used by everyone, in any location” (hooks 1995, 211).

In the 1910s, many black authors moved away from prose and poetry to address racial violence and other social inequalities through dramatic plays. A group of black playwrights wrote specifically within the genre of lynching plays. Others wrote works for the theatre industry in general which primarily consisted of white audiences. These plays contained racially sensitive material such as stereotype reversals and the depiction of black romantic love. The latter material stood in staunch opposition to the dominant thought that a love scene between two African Americans was nothing short of absurd (Johnson 1930, 171).

In the 1998 text, *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, editors Kathy

Perkins and Judith Stephens characterize a lynching drama as a play in which the threat of or the occurrence of a lynching has a major impact on the action of the story (Perkins and Stephens 1998, 3). Lynching plays emerged as a genre early in the twentieth century when writers began to include specific incidents of lynching depicting victims that were hung, beaten, burned, or stabbed to death and included a common feature of the victims being tortured and/or castrated before they were killed. This particular version of lynching developed around the end of Reconstruction and became a systematic feature and official indicator of black-white race relations until the 1950s.

An important text on the topic of lynching plays is Koritha Mitchell's *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930*. Associate professor of African American studies at Ohio State University, Mitchell has written a meticulous examination of how blacks used theatre as one avenue to survive decades of racial terror that tore families apart. While mainstream white society produced stories and images that justified and even exalted the grotesque killing of African Americans, black playwrights, the majority of whom were women, wrote plays about lynching that offered an entirely different and survivalist perspective. Mitchell also points out that nearly all of these playwrights lived below the Mason-Dixon line – a fact that “shaped its residents’ realities before and after Emancipation and into the new century” (Mitchell 2011, 9).

Looking at lynching plays and the evolution of the genre from 1890 to 1930, Mitchell challenges the existing narrative that regards them solely as protest art, suggesting instead that these works helped African Americans survive this era by preserving a sense of black community. Lynching photographs were typically and sickeningly taken by a member of the mob, depicted the black body as a dark, evil force that had been reckoned with and were often

sold as postcards. Many lynching dramas, however, took the lens away from the corpse and put it on the family members of the deceased who were left behind. These plays sought to counter the hegemonic narrative that lynching was the justified execution of isolated brutes (Mitchell 2011, 7).

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, several black writers began to focus on addressing racial violence through drama. Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Burrill, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Myrtle Smith Livingston were among the notable playwrights. Black-authored lynching plays first emerged in 1914 when Grimké wrote *Rachel*, a three-act play, chronicling the tale of African American women who chose to not have children in a society that devalued blacks. At the time, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was dedicated to promoting black culture through its program called the Drama Committee, created by W.E.B. Dubois.

When the NAACP eventually produced Grimké's play in 1916 she became the first black woman to have a play staged in a public theater (Black History Now 2011). The play sparked heated discussion within the community about African American identity, racial violence and talk also began about exactly what black plays should set out to accomplish (Mitchell 2011, 10). *Rachel's* program read, "This is the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten million of colored citizens in this free Republic" (Hull 1987, 117). Unlike many playwrights who followed writing lynching plays, Grimké was striving to have her play attract an integrated audience, reaching out to whites hoping to convince them that lynching was wrong. Authors who succeeded her chose instead to target blacks who would themselves stage the plays within the community in spaces like schools or black churches in an effort to sustain the collective self-image of the black

people. Mitchell writes:

When mobs not only killed with impunity but also advertised their activities with photographs that appeared in newspapers and became picture postcards, the intended message was clear: *Blacks are not citizens*. Though not immune to the messages of their society, African Americans nonetheless held on to their conceptions of themselves not only as loving, respectable men and women but also as exemplary citizens. (Mitchell 2011, 13)

It is this idea that Mitchell talks about, a self-identity amid the black community, that embodies the socio-political opposition disseminated by black writers which states that their community is a group of people worthy of the protective rights established for citizens of America.

Two years after *Rachel* debuted, Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* was published in the black journal, *The Crisis*. This quarterly publication was founded by W.E.B. DuBois along with other leaders of the black community in 1910 for the purpose of promoting "the elimination of racial discrimination and the effects that historical segregation and the denial of opportunity...on the darker races" (Hooks 1985, 6). Dunbar-Nelson's one-act play was printed in *The Crisis* as a model of how communities could be involved in the reification of their collective worth. Rather than depict blacks in a way they thought would influence whites, one-act lynching dramatists focused on the African American demographic.

One example of community participation in the enactment of one-act plays was the 1918 performance of *Mine Eyes Have Seen* at Howard High School in Wilmington, Delaware where Dunbar-Nelson was employed as an English teacher (Hatch and Shine 1974, 169). Professor of African American literature and history at Columbia University, Saidiya Hartman, posits that lynching plays point to "connections forged in the context of disrupted affiliations and sociality amid the constant threat of separation" (Hartman 1997, 59).

To understand the difference between Grimké's hope of effecting change in the white population and that of the one-act writers who followed her, I considered Grimké's motivation.

She took her share of criticism in the years after *Rachel* debuted in 1916. Although specific sources of critique have not been identified, it was jarring enough to motivate her to publish words in her own defense:

Since it has been understood that ‘Rachel’ preaches race suicide, I would emphasize that that that was not my intention. To the contrary, the appeal was not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites. (Mitchell 2011, 58-59)

In addition to her plea for clarity, Grimké boldly articulated that the majority of women everywhere make up one of the most conservative elements of society who are resistant to change. Hoping to convert this group, Grimké used the pain that motherhood brings to her characters Mrs. Loving and Rachel in an attempt to make white women “see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons has on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere” (ibid). It was an important attempt by Grimké to humanize black people for white audiences. Although other one-act playwrights neglected this aspect, they used theatre to characterize black austerity, identity and citizenship from within the community.

Not only did lynching plays seek to humanize African Americans and make life better for black families, they also put forth key black characters such as the soldier, the lawyer, the mother and wife (Mitchell 2011, 15). Notably, Dunbar-Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and Mary Burrill’s *Aftermath*, 1918 and 1919 respectively, include themes of lynching and black military participation. *Aftermath* dramatizes the reaction of a soldier who returns from World War I to discover that his father was lynched. This story line influenced both plays and was inspired by the very real race riots happening in America where black soldiers were attacked and sometimes even killed by angry white mobs (Krasner 2002, 101).

As lynching plays continued to be written and performed it was not long before the figure

of the black lawyer became popular. According to Mitchell, it was the black soldier character that paved the way for the increasing visibility of black attorneys:

The conditions under which the black soldier and lawyer became pivotal figures remain legible in the issues of *Crisis* published between 1919 and 1925 [which] demonstrates that blacks' experiences with courts of law came to epitomize their sense of themselves and their citizenship – according to the extent to which they were respected as witnesses, included on juries, taken seriously as plaintiffs. And encouraged to become lawyers. In the years immediately following World War I, a shift occurs in *Crisis* coverage: its spotlight on black soldiers represented by white attorneys moves to draw attention to black attorneys defending African Americans from every walk of life. (Mitchell 2011, 115)

Coinciding with this evolution of the role of the black attorney were the emergence of two one-act lynching plays. Georgia Douglas Johnson's 1925 piece, *A Sunday Morning in the South* and Myrtle Smith Livingston's 1926 play, *For Unborn Children*. Both include the figure of the black attorney as someone who is committed to truth and justice and believes the system is responsible to preserve witness testimony. Because men were mainly the targets of white mob violence, it was women who were left to be haunted forever more by the brutal killing of a loved one – though it is important to note that between 1880 and 1930 at least 130 black women were murdered by lynch mobs and many more were mutilated, tortured, tarred and feathered, whipped or raped by angry mobs (Feimster 2009, 159).

In the four one-act plays I have briefly discussed thus far, the surviving black women characters were sisters and grandmothers. It was Grimké who first included the grieving wife and mother character of Mrs. Loving in the 1916 play *Rachel* and Douglas Johnson also uses this figure to shine a light on the most tragic aspects of lynching attacks on black families. It is interesting to note that in many of her literary works, motherhood is a main theme and the girl characters have loving mothers when, in her own life, Grimké grew up without a mother (Hull 1987, 109).

Historians have typically depended on archives that document mainstream discourses

which seldom provided depictions of black mothers and wives in their home environment. Lynching plays, on the other hand, were very focused on the family and community amongst black Americans, and most of these works were by women. As these female writers became more well-known for their work they were perceived as asexual and undesirable or overly sexual and unscrupulous (Feimster 2009, 212). In fact, with reference to the latter characterization, at the turn of the century mainstream discourse often portrayed black women as sexually available and subservient to white men (Rosen 2009, 8). Douglas Johnson's plays *Blue Blood*, *Safe* and *Black Eyed Boy* – 1926, 1929 and 1930 respectively – reflected a black community conversation about women who were wives and mothers enduring racial violence.

Grimké, Dunbar-Nelson, Burrill, Douglas Johnson and Livingston, as noted earlier, lived and worked in or near Washington D.C., south of the Mason-Dixon line. Looking at other black authors and playwrights who headed North when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed on January 1, 1863, we find that what was once less than eight percent of the black population living in the Northeastern or Midwestern United States, had increased to forty percent as a result of the first wave of the Great Migration which occurred between 1916 and 1930.

The cities of Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and New York had some of the biggest increases in the early part of the twentieth century (History 2017). Tens of thousands of blacks were recruited for industrial jobs such as positions related to the expansion of the Pennsylvania Railroad. For the very poor, housing and sanitation were deplorable and discrimination limited job opportunities for newly transplanted black Southerners.

In New York City, not all African Americans were impoverished. According to Danish American social reformer and photographic journalist Jacob Riis, a socially active black middle class prospered. Riis observed, “a neat and orderly community in Harlem different from the



black and tan slums of the lower city, and there were well-to-do blacks in Brooklyn” (Riis 1989, 30-31).

Broadway was the heart of the theatre circuit in New York City featuring shows that catered to white audiences. There was, however, another district closer to Union Square wherein a small group of black musicians and entertainers took up residence in the Marshall Hotel on West 53<sup>rd</sup>. This building quickly became the venue that hosted virtually all major black entertainers in the first decade of the twentieth century. The scene generated a significant buzz outside the black community and its activities attracted white socialites and entertainers (Riis 1989, 31). James Weldon Johnson, his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, Bob Cole and Bert Williams were the core group of African American musicians, comedians and composers in this hub of black entertainment. Bob Cole, it should be noted, was one of the greatest black comedians of the day known for his bold appearance on stage in white-face; this in an era when even blacks were blackening their faces for stereotypical amusement enjoyed by whites.

Between 1900 and 1910, Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson, often in collaboration with James Weldon Johnson, wrote over 150 songs for more than twelve theatre shows including two of their own musicals and/or plays with music written for all-black casts; *Shoo-Fly Regiment* in 1906 and *The Red Moon* in 1908.

The *Shoo-Fly Regiment* featured Cole but showed a different side of his talent. It was structured in three-acts with a strong narrative, more so than ever before in black musicals. The story was set against the backdrop of the beginning of the Spanish-American War. By placing the characters in institutional settings, Cole and Johnson were able to situate black Americans as real people and “leave behind the farcical abstractions that typified earlier shows” (Dunbaugh Smith 2006, 34). The characters in *Shoo-Fly Regiment* were not only responsible educators and

soldiers but they demonstrated the ability to make dignified, ethical choices. The play also included a romantic element treated in a serious manner, rather than comically, which was a significant departure for the time, making *Shoo-Fly Regiment* a very different type of show for white audiences around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Cole and Johnson's *The Red Moon* was their most ambitious production in which they carefully avoided the pitfalls of spectacle and managed to achieve a praiseworthy balance between the elements of music, comedy and drama. The narrative described the story of Minnehaha, a young mixed-race girl who is kidnapped from her mother's home in Virginia and taken to the West by her Native American father. Bob Cole played Slim Brown, a comic lawyer. Rosamond portrayed Plunk Green, the fake doctor who falls in love and tries to rescue Minnehaha, played by Abbie Mitchell. Theodore Pankey was Red Feather, the girl's father.

A review of an early performance of *Red Moon* yielded this praise, "This is not a storming hit or boisterous, just a plain big success. The music is the best that was ever offered by Negroes. Every number received an equal amount of encores and was well paced throughout the program. The comedy was exceptionally light; nothing to scream at, but keep smiling, not laugh. The piece is so well-balanced that any two good comedians could do the show justice. The scenery and costumes was everything that could be wished for; nothing spectacular or gorgeous" (Dunbaugh Smith 2006, 36).

Presumably, the writer of the review was a white male with moderate tolerance for black theatre. Yet, he expressed surprise that black composers offered up music he really appreciated and was so impressed with their play-writing, "that *any* [*it.*] two comedians could do the show justice." Perhaps his review was an effort to urge white theatre-goers to see *Red Moon*.

Scenes depicting romantic love between black characters presented a very real challenge

for African American playwrights like Cole and Johnson. James Weldon Johnson (J. Rosamond's Johnson's brother) used the word taboo with regards to the acting out of romantic love between black characters. He writes, "if anything approaching a love duet was introduced in a musical comedy, it had to be broadly burlesqued." Further, he describes the hegemonic view "that a love scene between two Negroes could not strike a white audience as anything except as ridiculous...the taboo existed in deference to the superiority stereotype that Negroes cannot be supposed to mate romantically, but do so in some sort of minstrel fashion or in some more primeval manner than white people" (Johnson 1930, 171). Johnson suggested that brother J. Rosamond and Cole had come the closest to shattering this form of censorship in *Shoo-Fly Regiment* and *Red Moon*.

### *Strange Fruit*

Not a play or a classic blues song, but very much on the topic of the arts articulating socio-political opposition to racial injustice is the song "Strange Fruit." It originated as a poem written by Caucasian American writer, teacher and songwriter Abel Meeropol under his pseudonym Lewis Allan. He originally published the poem under the title "Bitter Fruit" in 1937 in *The New York Teacher*, a union magazine. Though Meeropol had asked around, notably to Hollywood songwriter Caucasian Earl Robinson, for someone to set his poem to music, he eventually wrote the music to "Strange Fruit" himself. What would prompt a Jewish American Tin Pan Alley songwriter to write what would become a globally iconic song about the gravity of lynching? Eighty-six years ago, two young African American men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, were lynched in the town center of Marion, Indiana. The previous night, on August 6, 1930, the two had been arrested and charged with the alleged armed robbery and murder of a white factory worker Claude Deeter, and the rape of one Mary Ball. That evening, local police were unable to

or did not stop a mob of reportedly thousands from breaking into the jail with sledgehammers and crowbars to pull the young men out of their cells and lynch them (NPR 2016). Local photographer Lawrence Beitler took what would become the most iconic photograph of lynching in America and the news of this terror spread around the world. The photograph showed two bodies hanging from a tree surrounded by a crowd of ordinary citizens, including women and children. Thousands of copies were made and sold (ibid). It was this photograph that inspired “Strange Fruit,” a song that would eventually be made internationally famous by singer Billie Holiday. Holiday first performed the song at Café Society in Greenwich Village, a club created to showcase specifically African American talent, in 1939. She admitted that singing “Strange Fruit” made her fearful of backlash but confessed that the imagery in the song reminded her of her father so she continued to sing it making it a regular part of her live performances (Margolick 2001, 44-46).

Holiday was signed to Columbia Records at the time. When she approached her label about recording the song, they recoiled from the idea fearing a negative reaction from record retailers in the South as well from affiliates of its co-owned radio network, CBS. Even Holiday’s producer John Hammond refused to record it. Determined to make it happen, however, Holiday turned to her friend Milt Gabler, whose label Commodore produced alternative jazz, and sang “Strange Fruit” for him a cappella. Gabler was moved to tears. Fortunately, Columbia gave Holiday a one-session release from her contract with them so that she could record it for Commodore. Holiday used Café Society’s eight-piece house band lead by Frankie Newton for the session. Recorded in 1939, the lyrics to the song are below:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

The famous Apollo Theatre in New York City was owned by Frank Shiffman at the time that Holiday performed this song. His son Jack was initially against “Strange Fruit” being part of her set when she was on their stage, likely because of its macabre lyrics. Yet when she did perform it at the Apollo for the first time, it was Jack who articulated the effect it had on the crowd as soon as she ended “Strange Fruit,” “There was a moment of oppressively heavy silence...and then a kind of rustling sound I had never heard before. It was the sound of almost two thousand people sighing” (White 1987, 55).

Unlike the one-act lynching plays which focused on black families and not the gruesome images of lynching victims, this song did not shy away from depicting lynching. The three short verses juxtapose a beautiful landscape with the scene of lynching and the smell of magnolias with that of burnt flesh. The imagery of racial terrorism in this song, that uses simple, non-aggressive or accusatory language (but critically-chosen words), points the finger at racism in America, and because it was recorded, it had the same effect on an international platform.

Angela Davis writes this of Holiday and “Strange Fruit:”

Billie Holiday’s recording of “Strange Fruit” achieved something far greater than the permanent preservation of her most important song, the aesthetic centerpiece of her career. Eventually, millions heard her sing this haunting antilynching appeal – more people than she herself would ever have imagined. She could not have predicted that “Strange Fruit” would impel people to discover within themselves a previously unawakened calling to political activism, but it did and it does. She could not have foreseen the catalytic role her song would play in rejuvenating the tradition of protest and resistance in African American and American traditions of popular music and culture. Nevertheless, Billie Holiday’s

recording of “Strange Fruit” persists as one of the most influential and profound examples and continuing sites of the intersection of music and social consciousness. (Davis 1999, 195-196)

Davis celebrates this song sung by Holiday for eliciting political activism in its receptors and credits it as reviving black traditions of protest and resistance. It is important to note that Davis’ example of how music and social consciousness intersect is in a song composed and authored by a straight, white, Jewish American male. This does not negate Davis’ claim about the profundity of “Strange Fruit,” and yes Holiday’s particular articulation of the words and melody are what make it effective, but had Meeropol not been moved as a human being and songwriter to do what he did after seeing a lynching image, Davis wouldn’t be able to herald this song as she did.

I was deeply disturbed to learn that it was not until 2005 that the United States Congress finally and formally apologized for its failure to enact any of more than two hundred bills to outlaw lynching. As incredible as it is, lynching was not only tolerated in the years after the emancipation proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln, it was actively maintained by southern Democratic Congressional Lawmakers when these bills were introduced to Congress over two hundred times. The first anti-lynching law was introduced in 1918 by Republican Representative Leonidas C. Dyer of Saint Louis, Missouri and it was supported by Republican President Warren G. Harding. Known colloquially as the Dyer Anti-Lynching bill it passed the house in 1922 but did not pass the senate in 1923 due to a filibuster by Senate Democrats. Over the next eighty years Democrats and Republicans continued to interfere with passage of the over two hundred anti-lynching bills brought to congress. Finally, in 2005 Louisiana Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu defied the historical opposition to this issue and courageously joined Republican Senator George Allen to address the shame of the United States Congress for not acting decisively on this by offering Congress’s apology. At least 4,749 Americans are known to

have been lynched.

Theatre has been influential in shaping black life in the United States by providing employment and a platform for expression, social commentary and political opposition. In her essay, “Negros Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity,” cultural critic Jacqueline Stewart suggests that turn-of-the century black press treated all public spaces as sites for enacting politics of representation. Newspaper columns regularly outlined standards for streetcar deportment, proposing that “the streetcar functioned as the exemplary stage for black urban performance, an important corollary to the theatre” (Stewart 2003, 663). Character portrayals started on the stage but did not stay there, so seeing a black woman or man in the street, in every-day life, easily became an opportunity to compare them to images seen in the theatre.

This chapter discussed how black theatre, like the music of Lucille Bogan and her contemporaries, saw the emergence of stage material voicing more than fashionable themes characterizing hegemonic entertainment ideals. Plays and musicals were used to disseminate scenarios that were uncomfortable to mainstream white audiences. It also examined how topics like racial violence, romantic love between African American women and men and blacks in authoritative social positions, were some of the oppositional stage presentations.

The next chapter journeys into the Harlem Renaissance, a post-Emancipation urban literary movement and community centered in the city of Harlem, New York. Many classic blues women were active in this district, both as performers in various nightlife venues as well as participants in social events. The relationship between the black literati and the women singers was not always one of appreciation and respect. Attitudes evolved, however, as new black authors and cultural contributors emerged on the scene.

## Chapter 5

### THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance was an African American social, artistic and cultural movement prominent in the 1920s that took place in Harlem, New York. It was also known as the New Negro Movement, named after the 1925 anthology by African American writer, philosopher, educator and patron of the arts Alain LeRoy Locke (*The New York Times* 1987). In this chapter I begin by examining changes in class structure post-Emancipation that shaped the ideology of the Harlem Renaissance. A determination included in the ideology was that blues music of any kind was beneath the status of the movement. I describe the evolution of this relationship as a younger generation of black literati authored tributes articulating the contributions of blues and classic blues artists as culturally relevant. Finally, I discuss how the subject of sexual content in the classic blues was ignored in black literature, even by authors who celebrated the genre in their writing.

The most successful years for the classic blues women coincided with the Harlem Renaissance, yet these working-class artists and the African American literary elite had an uneasy relationship. Angela Davis writes, “Because women like Bessie Smith 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” (Davis 1999, xiii). An examination of more than eighty issues of *Opportunity* Magazine, a popular publication of the Urban League [non-partisan civil rights group], and the NAACP’s *The Crisis* Magazine published between 1925 and 1930 reveals a palpable absence of any articles, poems, short stories or even announcements regarding anything to do with the blues (Wheeler 2006, 175).



Lucille Bogan is important in this discussion because she was one of the artists whose work was deemed inferior to Renaissance ideology. Bogan's lyrics appear in this chapter as an example of music mirroring the non-normative activities and identities embraced by architects of the movement in the African American homosexual subculture that dominated the nightlife in the city blocks of Harlem. Juxtaposing classic blues music with counter-cultural lifestyle choices made by members of the Harlem Renaissance complicates the boundaries they constructed to set themselves above and apart from blue music.

Not long after Emancipation, class structure changed quickly in America, culminating into two identifiable groups: one emulated and imitated socio-economic concepts of the white upper-class; the other, comprised of the masses of newly emancipated African Americans, was much slower in adopting these patterns (Frazier 1957, 18). Starting from the bottom up were the tenant farmers and migrant workers. Moving up the ladder were ministers, shop-keepers and professionals and it was the latter who became leaders of many black communities. The developing black middle-class and the lower stratus blacks now faced the idea of a separate but equal society wherein equality is said to have been almost nonexistent. Late author and literary critic LeRoi Jones examines the significance of this divergence:

This disparity within the black community is of such importance that it cannot be overemphasized, and it became more and more pronounced as the Negro achieved more latitude and status in America. At its ugliest, the attitude was symbolized by the abandonment by a great many Negroes of the mores of customs they considered slave customs, or "too Negroid." (Jones 1963, 58)

This cutting-of-ties from historical links to slavery and its customs by the black middle-class manifested itself most notably in literature. Early novelists such as Charles Chesnutt, Otis Shackleford and Pauline Hopkins produced works that reflected prejudices found in novels of the white middle-class. Robert Adamson Bone, late scholar of African American literature and professor of English at Columbia University, writes:

It must be understood at once that the early [black] novelists believed substantially in the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Pauline Hopkins writes: “Surely the Negro race must be productive of some valuable specimens, if only from the infusion which amalgamation with a superior race must eventually bring”... In several of the early novels there is a stock situation in which a ‘refined Afro-American’ is forced to share a Jim Crow car with dirty, boisterous, and drunken Negroes. (Bone 1965, 18-19)

The middle-class, educated blacks involved in the architecture of the Harlem Renaissance aligned themselves with white upper-class ideologies, resulting in expressions like the one above between the refined black person and the disorderly black person. The fact that Harlem was crucially located within close proximity to the publishing world facilitated new opportunities with white, mainstream outlets. These relations helped promote the movement above and beyond what race magazines and journals could. Black feminist writer and professor Gloria T. Hull describes how white Americans chose to be involved in the Harlem Renaissance:

White participation in the Renaissance is a reminder that the 1920s were also the time of the Jazz Age and the Lost Generation, and of experimentation with black themes by white writers like Eugene O’Neill, Dubois Heyward, and Julia Perkin. Freudian-influenced whites were fascinated with the potential naturalness and exoticism of blacks and with these manifestations in all forms ranging from Harlem street life to the singing and dancing of black musicals. (Hull 1987, 2-3)

Despite this curiosity and interest by some whites in the artistic aspects of black culture, the same was not unilaterally shared by the older generation of black literati. Even though blues music and the classic blues singers’ voices resounded through the streets and bars in Harlem in the 1920s, they were not acknowledged as part of the emerging culture.

What *was* deemed part of the black cultural elite in Harlem was articulated by African American sociologist, historian, writer and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt “W.E.B.” Dubois. He published a genealogy of what he called distinguished Negroes in his 1903 essay, “The Talented Tenth,” writing, “from the very first it has been the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass” (Teaching American History 2015).

Du Bois named important and worthy people such as poet Phyllis Wheatley and esteemed Dr. Lemuel Haynes as part of his aristocracy of talent, clearly idealizing what he called the college-bred Negro. Early blues women like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and her contemporaries, singing to the masses at revivals and tent shows, did not, in Du Boisian ideology, embody the kind of talent that would elevate black masses. Far beyond any other blues woman’s work, the content of Lucille Bogan’s material would have been untouchable for the literati of the Harlem Renaissance.

Two writers who did consider the blues and contributions of blues performers as pertinent to the evolution of black cultural politics were African American poet, playwright and social activist Langston Hughes and black professor, poet and literary critic Sterling Allen Brown. According to African American literary critic and professor of English at Rutgers University, Cheryl Wall, Hughes was the first writer to represent the character of the blues woman in literature in his 1930 book *Not Without Laughter*, but no comparable portrayal would appear in fiction written by black women for decades to come (Wall 1995, 39). Hughes’ contemporary Sterling Brown also sought to express in his works devices that directly employed formal elements of the blues.

Unlike their predecessors, the younger generation of Harlem Renaissance writers possessed less elitist attitudes. Hughes, Brown, Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Brooks each wrote blues poems, recognizing the significance of the blues tradition in African American history and culture. Hughes published at least fifteen blues poems before World War II, boldly articulating the merit of the blues as a critical mode of creative expression.

The poem that catapulted him into national recognition was his 1925 “The Weary Blues,” one of the earliest representations of blues performance in literature. Cheryl Wall writes that the

poem's most remarkable achievement is its representation of blues as performance:

As Albert Murray (1976, 69) argues, "even as the words of the lyrics recount a tale of woe, the instrumentation may mock, shout defiance, or voice resolution and determination." Hughes conveys this dialectic through the medium of words alone, by describing the musician's movements as well as his voice. The rhythm of his "rocking" elicits a similar rhythm in the poem. Rather than a regular refrain, the poem repeats the line depicting the man's "lazy sway." The verbal "swaying," several lines later, suggests an intensified movement akin to dance... The determination to put aside (not resolve) his troubles is reinforced both by the stomping of his feet and by the chords that complete the twelve-bar blues structure. The stanza naming the "weary" blues confirms that the performance will continue until the depth of the feeling and the power of the music subside. (Wall 1997, iii)

Hughes' poem can't, on its own, represent this extended performance, but due to its "delineation of the spirit and structure of the blues" (ibid), it can be imagined by the reader.

Even Countee Cullen, who at one time pressed Hughes to omit jazz rhythms from his poems and otherwise suggested that showcasing unpleasant realities would only strengthen the bitterness of the enemy, acquiesced to the importance of blues music in his 1925 work "Colored Blues Singer." In Cullen's compelling composition published in 1932 entitled "Ma Rainey," Sterling Brown pays homage to one of the most influential blues women. Gwendolyn Brooks was one of the first successful African American female poets to endorse the blues as culturally influential in her poem "Queen of the Blues." This wasn't until well after the era when the classic blues women enjoyed the status of blues royalty. Further to these authors, Michelle Wallace writes:

The black female blues singer as a paradigm of commercial, cultural, and historical potency pervades twentieth-century Afro-American literature by women. Beginning with Zora Neale Hurston's use of lines transparently derived from blues lyrics in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I don't think I've ever read a book by a black woman writer that does not include some reference to the fact that Afro-American women have sung the blues for a living, and sung them well. (Wallace 2008, 69-70)

The inclusion and validation of blues women in black-authored writing is now, according to Wallace, the norm.

In the early works of the so-called first generation of contemporary black women writers, such as Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Sherley Anne Williams, Alice Walker, Helen Washington, Toni Morrison and Alexis De Veaux, representations of blues women appeared (Davis 1999, xiii-xiv). Angela Davis writes:

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 Gertrude “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 blasphemies of fictionalized blues women...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. (ibid)

Davis rightly suggests using the lives and music of the classic blues women as a legitimate source for examining not only a historical feminist awareness, but also a socio-political one. She further contends that these historical blues women’s influence is of equal importance to that of other black leaders and civil rights activists.

Many poets, theorists, singers and musicologists since the Harlem Renaissance have made efforts to articulate a definition of what the blues is in terms of both form and content. It is perhaps African American scholar, writer and literary critic Ralph Ellison who comes closest to interpreting the musical tradition when he writes:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching conscience, to finger its jagged grain, and then transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically...they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. (Ellison 1964, 90)

Ellison eloquently articulates in prose what the blues conveys musically; that the genre is a survivalist reaction to the harsh realities imposed on African Americans. This description,

however, partially explains the need by the black middle-class to remove itself from the genre.

Ellison and Hughes, among other writers, do not, however, include the important role that sex and sexuality plays in the blues in their works. Even Alberta Hunter, a classic blues woman of note who was not timid about sexuality in her songs, bypasses any mention of sex when she was asked to define the blues:

The blues? Why, the blues are a part of me. They're like a chant. The blues are like the spirituals, almost sacred. When we sing the blues, we're singing out our hearts, we're singing out our feelings. Maybe we're hurt and just can't answer back, then we sing or maybe even hum the blues. When I sing, 'I walk the floor, wring my hands and cry – Yes I walk the floor, wring my hands and cry'... what I'm doing is letting my soul out. (Dall and van Falkenburg 1989)

Hunter talks about how the blues is a vehicle that makes people feel better, much like Hughes and Ellison, and then likens them to spirituals. Even though Hunter wrote works provocative for her time such as “You Can't Tell the Difference after Dark,” a song about inter-racial lust, sex is conspicuously absent in her depiction of the blues.

More recent blues scholars also skirt around the topic of sex. The late African American scholar of black theatre, Larry Neal, describes the blues as such in his 1972 essay “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation”:

At the pulsating core of their emotional center, the blues are the spiritual and ritual energy of the church thrust into eyes of life's raw realities. Even though they appear primarily to concern themselves with the secular experience, the relationships between males and females, between boss and worker, between nature and Man, they are, in fact, extensions of the deepest, most pragmatic spiritual and moral realities. (Neal 1972, 152)

Wheeler suggests that sources like Neal's, who connects the blues with spiritual realities, are not anomalies in their discussions of the genre. Rather, they are representative of the non-sexualized or sanitized description of the genre. She writes, “there is a profound reticence in discussing the sexual elements of the blues – a reluctance that pervaded not only the Harlem Renaissance, but

continues to silence musicologists and literary critics today. This reluctance, I believe, revolves around the larger impulse to mute those who reside outside of dominant culture” (Wheeler 2006, 179).

Considering the taboo nature of sexuality that characterized most dominant discourses of the twenties, thirties and beyond, blues music of the same era was a terrain antithetical to this, recognizing that no subject matter was taboo. The classic blues women sung about sex, sexuality, heterosexual and homosexual behaviour as well as other non-normative sexual and employment practices.

Against the backdrop of racialism and the Western art movement of primitivism, African American female literary figures disseminated their version of what DuCille calls blues inscriptions (DuCille 1993, 70). The inscriptions were parody-like prose written by Larsen, Faucet and Hurston using black female desire as a principal subject in situations such as male/female desire, love, longing and power relations.

Contemporary black feminist critics Barbara Christian and Cheryl Wall express a widely held opinion that the three authors mentioned here, like many black women writers of the twenties and thirties, tried to reverse the racist image of black women as loose and morally bankrupt by characterizing the people they wrote about as being bourgeois, white middle class women. By describing lighter skinned, more refined heroines in their works, these writers characterized African American women within a white traditional realm of womanhood (Christian 1980, 40).

Jessie Fauset was one of the more prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance as well as an important figure in the community for two reasons: first, she held the position of literary editor of *The Crisis* and second, Fauset was well recognized as a host of intellectual gatherings which

served as a backdrop for cultural happenings (Hull 1987, 5). As an author, Fauset wrote four novels, several short stories, poems and articles that covered topics from Pan-Africanism to African Americans in the theatre. She seldom drew attention in her work to the depressed conditions under which many blacks lived in around the turn of the century. Instead she favoured stories with characters who were trying for a life of culture and reason – meaning Western and refined (Gale 1931, viii). Fauset’s stories were insistent that the upper-middle-class African American share the same values as those of her or his white counterpart. The problem with her novels, according to Christian, is that by favouring upper-class black characters, “[Fauset’s] Negroes become apologists for race, indicators of the heights of refinement blacks might attain, given the opportunity” (Christian 1980, 41-42).

What appears as a championing of the middle-class and a slandering or omission of other aspects of black life in America in the works of Larsen, Fauset and Hurston, also appears as a critique of the pompousness of the bourgeoisie as well as the primitivism designated to the black, transplanted urban masses. Because of this double vision, as described by DuCille, their fiction could be seen as a complex commentary with regard to a changing society more so than a criticism of their contemporaries in the classic blues. This position indeed raises many questions such as, what defines and who decides what is authentic blackness and, if an African American obtains the social status of middle-class, is she or he less genuinely black? Who is to say what is a true representation of black female experience in the twenties and thirties? Surely it was not a monolithic journey.

The number of black female writers, essayists, poets, novelists and playwrights whose work was published, usually in journals, was indeed remarkable but it remained a smaller corpus than that published by men during the Harlem Renaissance. Despite the inclusion of women in



the movement there were patterns of exclusion. When certain men were in influential positions they often enacted anti-female prejudice. An example was Harvard-trained Ph.D., Rhodes scholar and Howard University philosophy professor Alain Leroy Locke who dispensed advice, financial aid and other forms of support to many up and coming writers. The way he handled his role was notoriously controversial but its importance was never denied (Hull 1987, 7).

Allegedly, however, Locke was a misogynist and earnestly favoured men. According to extensive research by David Levering Lewis in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Locke was a certified misogynist who customarily “dismissed female students on the first class day with the promise of an automatic grade of C” (Lewis 1981, 96). In a 1971 archived tape, transcribed by Hull, of James V. Hatch interviewing one of the leading black poets of the Harlem Renaissance Owen Dodson, the poet explained that Locke “didn’t believe in women’s lib...if women enrolled in his classes as seniors, he’d say, ‘You come here at your own risk’” (Hull 1987, 7). This contemptuous attitude of Locke’s was aimed at almost all females with a reported exception of Zora Neale Hurston who he, for some reason, took a liking to. Interestingly, however, whatever things he may have done for Hurston she still said that he was “a malicious, spiteful little snot who lends out his patronage...and God help you if you get on without letting him represent you” (Anderson 1982, 201). Initially I imagined that perhaps the two had a romantic spat, but further research uncovered that Locke’s favouring of men was fueled by the fact that he was also sexually attracted to them. On this subject Hull writes:

Locke, in fact, functioned within a homosexual coterie of friendship and patronage that suggests that literary events were, in more than a few instances, tied to “bedroom politics” and “sexual croneyism” – as they no doubt may have been in the heterosexual world also. The point here though, is that women were definitely excluded from Locke’s beneficence and this particular sphere of favoritism. (Hull 1987, 8)

There appears to be a connection between Locke’s misogyny and homosexuality which I will not

analyze emotionally or psychologically, however, it arguably had an effect on women and their careers.

With regards to homosexuality, it was in Harlem during the Renaissance that African American men and women carved out a space for non-normative sexual self-expression:

Its transgender community during this era was notoriously cheered and despised for their drag ball extravaganzas. Langston Hughes depicted the balls as “spectacles of color.” George Chauncey, author of *Gay New York*, wrote that during this period, “perhaps nowhere were more men willing to venture out in public in drag than in Harlem.” (Monroe 2013)

This colourful depiction of events is echoed by Eric Garber. He writes about the uniquely African American gay subculture in New York’s Harlem, describing black lesbians and gay black men “meeting each other on street corners, socializing in cabarets and rent parties, and worshiping in church on Sundays, creating a language, a social structure, and a complex network of institutions” (Garber 2017). Some members of the community were politic about their sexual identities while others were unabashedly open.

It is this scenario, surrounding the excitement elicited by counter-cultural expressions in Harlem, that convolutes the relationship between Renaissance ideology and classic blues material. The Renaissance community promoted college-bred blacks as those who elevated the masses and, at the same time, embraced sexually deviant behaviour. Not only did the Harlem gay community celebrate non-normative sexual practices, it also “fostered friendships between people of disparate ethnic and economic backgrounds” (ibid). Both realities contradict the movement’s lofty identity.

Classic blues singers whose material reflected the counter culture of Harlem were Lucille Bogan, “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith. Bogan’s original song, “B.D. Women Blues” (B.D. standing for bull dagger or bull dyke), states, “B.D. women sure is rough / They drink up many a

whiskey and sure can strut their stuff / B. D. women you sure can't understand / They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man." In a song sung by Rainey, "Sissy Blues," written by African American Thomas Dorsey, she complained, "My man got a sissy, his name is Miss Kate / He shook that thing like jelly on a plate." Smith crooned in "Foolish Man Blues," "There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I don't understand / That's a mannish-acting woman and a lisping, swishing, womanish-acting man." It is unclear who wrote this particular tune. Garber suggests that the cross-dresser, the sissy and the bull dagger characters were mostly for banter but they were not shunned by the listeners (Garber 2017).

Classic blues songs reflected acts of sexual fluidity, including homosexual behavior and identities. Barbara Christian and Cheryl Wall insist that the genuine poetry of The Harlem Renaissance was found in the lyrics sung by women like Rainey and Smith whose racial identity and artistic integrity are affirmed by their daring displays. Hull describes the actions of the classic blues singers as "raunchy, woman-proud sexuality that echoed the explicitness of this licentious era" (Hull 1987, 24). Despite this, the hierarchy of black classes was carved out by the literati, placing the singers in this study outside the circle of distinguished African Americans. Nathan Huggins was not only a noted author and historian, but was also professor of History and of African American Studies at Harvard University. Huggins interviewed a man active in Harlem's music scene during this era, black composer, lyricist and pianist Eubie Blake. Blake insisted that music was at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance and that much of the interest in the district was because of the music. In the interview Blake told Huggins, "The white people were coming up to Harlem to hear this music" (Huggins 1976, 339). Huggins suggests that eminent blacks tended to treat blues and jazz of the era as a folk art that needed to be enriched or improved in order for it to be regarded as a meaningful part of black culture. He writes,

“Promoters of the Harlem Renaissance were so fixed on a vision of high culture that they did not look very hard or well at jazz...Were it not for Langston Hughes, we would have almost no specific notice of the blues from the Harlem writers” (Huggins 1976, 9-10).

Black composer, musician and promoter, Perry Bradford, the writer behind “Crazy Blues,” recorded by Mamie Smith in 1920 that launched the race records phenomenon, had this to say of the Harlem attitude:

It was confusing to see some of those ‘Hate Blues’ hypocrites, who were preaching and brainwashing before the public how much they detested the blues, yet whenever the same so-called sophisticated intellectuals and top musicians would hear some lowdown blues sung and played at a House-Rent Party or some hole-in-the-wall speakeasy, they’d let their hair down, act their age, be themselves and go to town by belly-rubbing and shouting, “Play ‘em daddy-if it’s all night long.” (Bradford 1965, 97)

Bradford found success, creatively and financially, in the music industry. That the architects of the Harlem Renaissance would distance themselves so righteously and so soon after centuries of slavery, citing education – something not available or easy to access for all African Americans – as the qualifying factor to be a part of the elite, makes their position difficult to digest. What about Bradford, for example, who elevated his position in society through music?

This chapter discussed the importance of the class stratification that occurred rapidly after Emancipation and how it played a significant role in the division of the Renaissance black middle-class and the majority of African Americans. The latter group was struggling with societal and psychological ramifications of slavery while the elite of the Renaissance had aligned themselves with the socio-economic model of white Americans. It also looked at Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes who were open-minded about blues music’s cultural relevancy. Hughes made a pointed statement aimed at black intellectuals in his manifesto, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” writing, “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-

intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand” (Hughes 1995, 309).

The next chapter focuses on the history of feminism in America with an emphasis on social and political issues specific to black feminism and black feminist theory. As these factors are presented, connections between lyrics by Bogan, Rainey and Smith and contemporary feminism are made, identifying a pre-feminist consciousness found in the music of these classic blues women.

## Chapter 6

### A HISTORY OF FEMINISMS AND FEMINIST THEORY IN BLACK CULTURE

*The assertiveness and self-definition in classic women's blues have become popular topics, including analysis of themes and lyrics as overtly and deliberately feminist.*

*Doris Davenport, 2003.*

This chapter looks at a history of feminism in America. First, I discuss the development of the movement in a broad sense. Next, I concentrate on issues and theories that evolved specifically to address black women. By providing the contemporary context of feminism I am able to establish the works of Lucille Bogan, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith as protofeminist material, that is to say, material that anticipates current feminism in a time when the term feminism was not articulated (Botting and Houser 2006, 265).

The history of feminist politics and theory is often explained as consisting of three waves. First-wave feminism is generally associated with women's suffrage movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First-wave feminism is characterized by a focus on officially sanctioned inequalities between men and women, such as the legal barring of women from voting, property rights, employment, equal rights in marriage, and positions of political power and authority (Pacific University 2016). Second-wave feminism is associated with women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. While seeing themselves as inheritors of the politics of the first wave which focused primarily on legal obstacles to women's rights, second-wave feminists turned their attention to issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, women's roles and labour in the home, and patriarchal culture (ibid). Finally, what is called third-wave feminism is generally associated with feminist politics and movements that began in the 1980s

and continues today. Third-wave feminism emerged out of a critique of the politics of the first and second waves, as many feminists felt that earlier generations had privileged experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women and ignored [and even suppressed] the viewpoints of women of colour, poor, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, and women from the non-Western world (ibid).

In examining a history of black feminism, it is evident that African American women faced discrimination on counts of both gender and race. The late author, professor of African American studies at the University of California, and lesbian activist, Barbara Christian, stated in her essay “Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(s) Survive the Academy?” that black feminists have, in fact, existed since the nineteenth century. Barbara Christian names activist Sojourner Truth, poet Frances Harper, and educator Anna Julia Cooper as articulating the interrelatedness of racism, sexism, and classism central to America’s social structure as early as the 1850s (Christian et al. 2007, 205-207). She further cited Ida B. Wells, a turn-of-the-century radical black feminist who published hard-hitting journalistic pieces about lynchings. Wells’ writings demonstrated how not only racism acted as an interdependent mode of oppression, but also how sexism furthered this injustice by articulating gender issues within the discussion of race. In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was established in Washington by civil rights activists Josephine Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell, though the two had been working for black rights as early as 1869 (Spartacus Educational Publishers 2016). The original intention of the organization was to “furnish evidence of the moral, mental, and material progress made by people of color through the efforts of our women” (ibid). Over the next ten years the NACW became involved in the campaigns for women’s suffrage and desegregation (ibid).

The early twentieth century black suffrage movement in America revolved around how the

National Woman's Party (NWP) addressed the issue of enfranchising African American women in connection to the passing of the suffrage amendment. Although the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, ratified in 1920, was designed to give all women suffrage, black women were, in many instances, denied this right in practice (Lunardini 1986, 21-23). Prior to 1920, African American women were often barred from participating in the suffrage movement because (white) leaders feared they would lose the support of white southerners (ibid).

Looking back to the years before the Equal Rights bill was ratified (the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution), European American suffragist, Alice Paul, was leader of the Congressional Union, an organization that campaigned for a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women's suffrage. Paul was described as a challenging militant. Despite her fight for an Equal Rights Amendment, she was otherwise conservative and uninterested in social reform, race issues, birth control, or a change in gender roles (Keetley and Pettegrew 2005, 284-285). In 1913, a suffrage parade was held outside of the White House, gathering groups of women from all over the country. Ida B. Wells and her organization from Chicago working together for suffrage were also there. Prior to the launch of the event, Alice Paul expressed sympathy for black women's suffrage in her speeches, but when the parade began, she had other suffrage leaders ask Wells, her group and other black Americans not to march in the parade. Leaders of the Congressional Union were keenly aware that they would need the support of southern whites to achieve suffrage and intended to dissociate themselves as best they could from black activists.

In 1917, when the Congressional Union became the National Woman's Party, Paul urged the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) to change its state-based strategy and throw their power behind the effort to secure a federal suffrage amendment (ibid).



Due to the power of white southern politicians in the federal government, northern white women who advocated a constitutional amendment also realized that they needed the support of white southerners if they were to get the suffrage amendment passed. In 1919, Paul described her goal as, “removing the sex qualification from the franchise regulations... to see to it that the franchise conditions for every state were the same for women as for men” (Wheeler 1995, 22). This statement was interpreted by some as her way of reassuring the white population that black women could be just as easily disenfranchised by state laws as black men had been. Paul was forewarning black women, even before suffrage was passed, that she would or could do little to tamper with the ability of individual states to disenfranchise black women.

Opposing black suffrage, the NWP and the NAWSA sought to marginalize as many African American women as possible through the idea of the educated suffragist (Terborg-Penn 1998, 120-124). This was the notion that being educated was an important pre-requisite for being afforded the right to vote. Since many African American women were uneducated or under educated, it meant exclusion from the right to vote. The educated suffragist movement was prevalent in the South but eventually gained momentum in the North as well (ibid).

Black women were not deterred, however, by this rising opposition and became even more aggressive in their campaign to find equality with men and other women. Mary Church Terrell, founder of the NACW, is documented as making the following statement in support of black suffrage. She insisted, “The elective franchise is withheld from one half of its citizens, many of whom are intelligent, cultured, and virtuous, while it is unstintingly bestowed upon the other, some of whom are illiterate, debauched and vicious, because the word ‘people,’ by an unparalleled exhibition of lexicographical acrobatics, has been turned and twisted to mean all who were shrewd and wise enough to have themselves born boys instead of girls, or who took

the trouble to be born white instead of black” (Spartacus Educational Publications 2016).

Despite the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, African American women, particularly those inhabiting Southern states, still faced a number of issues surrounding the voting process. At first, black women in the North were easily able to register to vote, and quite a few became actively involved in politics (Terborg-Penn 1998, 185-187).

One such woman was Annie Simms Banks who was chosen to serve as a delegate to Kentucky’s Republican Party in March 1920 (ibid). White southerners took notice of African American female activists organizing themselves and also noticed the fact that post 1920, black female voter registration in Florida was higher than white women’s (Bobo, Hudley, and Michel 2004, 65-78). Due to the fear of blacks wielding political power, African American women found themselves targeted by efforts to disenfranchise them. These included having to wait in line for up to twelve hours to register to vote, pay head taxes, and undergo tests on the constitution (Terborg-Penn 1998, 185-187). In the deep South, African American women faced even more severe obstacles to voting, including bodily harm, and fabricated charges designed to land them in jail if they attempted to vote (Prescod-Roberts and Steele 1980, 14).

This treatment of black women in the South continued up until the 1960s, and Alice Paul and the NWP did nothing to stop it. Stating that the enfranchisement of black women was a race issue, not a women’s issue, Paul argued that black women should address the people who blocked their access to the vote rather than the NWP (Cott 1986, 64-70). As African American women became increasingly frustrated by the lack of attention to their needs, educator, race and gender activist, writer, suffragist, and political organizer, Addie W. Hunton, led a delegation of sixty black women from fourteen different states to urge Paul and the NWP to make the race question a prime concern, but their efforts fell on deaf ears (ibid). In the second half of the 20th

century, in an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the 1960s women's movement and sexually oppressed in the 1970s Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement emerged. All too often, woman was associated with white women's issues and black was equated with those of black males, rendering black women an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored (hooks 1981, 121). The purpose of the Black Feminist Movement was to develop theories which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in the lives of African American females, and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination.

Barbara Christian's writings suggest that the second wave of black feminism did not arise in the academy despite all the hoopla in scholarly arenas about political correctness, rather its roots were indeed in the civil rights, black power, and women's movements of the 1960s and early 1970s (Christian et al. 2007, 76-78). She writes that, in the 1970s, the academy scarcely acknowledged the existence of black women in major areas of knowledge such as literature or history, and that for much of that decade, the subject of race was mainly associated with men and the subject of gender was related to white women (ibid).

Another part of the overwhelming frustration black women felt within the Women's Movement was white feminists' unwillingness to admit to racism within the campaign. This disinclination came from the sentiment that those who are oppressed cannot oppress others. White women, who were and perhaps still are, sexually and economically oppressed by white men, believed that because of these injustices they were unable to assume the dominant role in the perpetuation of white racism. Not only did some white feminists refuse to acknowledge their ability to oppress women of colour, some claimed that white women have always been anti-racist.

Cited as both a radical feminist and one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the twentieth century is European American Adrienne Rich. bell hooks quotes a portion of Rich's 1979 essay, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," which comments on the issue of white female accountability:

Our white forefathers have, in Lillian Smith's words, repeatedly been "disloyal to civilization" and have "smelled death in the word 'segregation'," often defying patriarchy for the first time, not on their own behalf but for the sake of black men, women, and children. We have a strong anti-racist female tradition despite all efforts by the white patriarchy to polarize its creature-objects, creating dichotomies of privilege and caste, skin color, and age and condition of servitude. (hooks 1981, 125)

In response to Rich's potent words, hooks states, "there is little historical evidence to document Rich's assertion that white women as a collective group or white women's rights advocates are part of an anti-racist tradition" (ibid). One need only refer to the backlash surrounding black suffrage post ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment as evidence that is contrary to Rich's claim.

As a result of black women's dissatisfaction with their position in society, a group of activists established the short-lived National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973, an organization aligned with another black feminist effort, the Combahee River Collective Statement, a document that was being developed at around the same time by some of the same women (Collins 2006, 163-168).

The NBFO stopped operating on a national level in 1977 and is now defunct. In an effort to explain why this initiative failed to thrive, African history scholar, E. Frances White, writes in her essay, "Listening to the Voices of Black Feminism," "Some attribute the National Black Feminist Organization's demise to its inability to reach any workable consensus around what constituted a Black feminist politic" (White 1984, 8).

The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was formed in 1974 and characterized itself as a black feminist lesbian organization (Collins 1990, 264). Members of the CRC felt it critical that the organization address the needs of black lesbians, in addition to organizing on behalf of black feminists.

The CRC is perhaps best known for the Combahee River Collective Statement, a key document in the history of contemporary black feminism, and the development of the concepts of identity as used among political organizers and social theorists. The CRC Statement is covered extensively in *The Columbia Documentary History of American Women Since 1941* and is suggested to be “among the most compelling documents produced by black feminists” (Sigerman 2003, 361).

### *Womanism*

One of the two main theories that evolved out of the black feminist movement was termed womanism, a social ideology rooted in the racial and gender oppression of black women (Phillips 2006, 56). First coined by African American author Alice Walker in her 1979 short story, “Coming Apart,” womanism is a social change perspective based upon the everyday problems and experiences of black women and women of minority demographics. It does, however, include looking for ways to abolish inequalities for all people (ibid). The spirit of activism, spirituality, and a woman’s relationship with herself, other women, and her surroundings are essential components of the ideology. Author and associate professor of sociology at DePauw University, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, describes womanism as, “focusing on the experiences and knowledge bases of black women which recognizes and interrogates the social realities of slavery, segregation, sexism, and economic exploitation this group has experienced during its history in the United States” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009, 43).

The classic blues women in this study embodied this theory and disseminated music that reflected it. In chapter one I cited Elisabeth D. Kuhn who writes, “The lyrics of blues are very straightforward, sincere, and down-to-earth, creating a connection between the singer and his or her audience” (Kuhn 1999, 525). Lucille Bogan connected with her listeners over the decade-plus she wrote and recorded songs by fearlessly singing about economic realities for black women in post-slavery America – illegal and sometimes unpleasant methods of earning a living like bootlegging and prostitution. “Ma” Rainey challenged gender politics at a time when conservative representations of marriage and heterosexual relations remained uncontested in the mainstream. Bessie Smith defied popular notions that she was politically apathetic when she sang songs that painted a picture of class relations that openly incriminated white America for existing social conditions.

These women were not marginal artists, either in their own time or looking at them retrospectively. If singing the kinds of songs that they did, did not connect with listeners and was something not embraced by the masses, they would not have had the lengthy, successful careers that they did.

Linda Hogan, English Professor Emerita from the University of Colorado, asserts that the term womanist is most often associated with feminists of colour, specifically black women, since the feminist movement at large has been experienced by many as intrinsically racist (Hogan 1995, 43). While feminism can be alienating to African American women, womanism allows them to affirm and celebrate their colour and culture in a way that feminism does not. Black feminist theorists such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins, have also argued that black women, unlike many white women, are marginalized along lines of race, class and gender.

As such, mainstream white feminist theory has neither comprehensively accounted for the economic, racial, and gender exigencies of the black female experience, nor, in many cases, even attempted to (Collins 1990, 134). Black feminist legal studies scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, notes, “black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender” (Crenshaw 1989, 209). Crenshaw argues that black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either racism or sexism but as a combination of both racism and sexism. Yet the legal system has generally defined sexism as based upon an unspoken reference to the injustices confronted by all (including white) women, while defining racism as referring to those injustices faced by all (including male) blacks and other people of colour (Crenshaw 1989, 140). This framework frequently renders black women legally invisible and without legal recourse.

An ongoing critique about the womanist ideology regards its failure to critically address homosexuality within the black community. Walker states in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, that a womanist is “a woman who loves another woman, sexually and/or non-sexually” (Walker 1983, xi), yet there is very little literature linking womanism to lesbian and bisexual issues. Without giving detailed attention to the issue of sexual orientation, womanists paint a picture of black women as sisters, other-mothers, girlfriends, and loving church mothers, when there is much more to the picture. Womanist theologian, Renee Hill, cites Christian influences in the ideology as the main cause of the lack of sympathy towards heterosexism and homophobia (Townes 1995, 76), while Barbara Smith blames it on the black community's reluctance to come to terms with homosexuality (Collins 1996, 11).

I here find the ideal opportunity to insert samples of material by Bogan, Rainey and Smith.

While their work is not literary, I suggest it is interdisciplinary, part of African American feminist tradition and of cultural relevance in addressing Walker and Smith's claims that womanism does not connect to the contemporary lesbian/bisexual issue and the black community's hesitation to accept homosexuality.

In "B.D. Woman's Blues," Bogan shamelessly sings about women who are bull dykes or bull daggers, "B. D. women they all done learnt their plan / B. D. women they all done learnt their plan / They can lay their jive just like a natural man." Bogan's "Till the Cows Come Home," noting the variable interpretations of the word "cock," complicates ideas about sexual norms as the singer brazenly articulates homosexual and alternative sexual identities and acts, "I told them I've got a good cock/ It's got four damn good names / Rough top, rough cock / Tough cock, cock without a bone."

Rainey's composition, "Prove it on Me Blues," includes these lyrics, "I went out last night with a crowd of my friends / They must've been women 'cause I don't like no men."

Further to Bogan and Rainey's unveiled, counter-normative sexual expressions, Bessie Smith also articulates homosexual interaction in "The Boy on the Boat," "When you see two women walking hand in hand, just look 'em over and try to understand / They'll go to those parties, have the lights down low, only those parties where women can go."

In her essay, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," black feminist activist Cheryl Clarke harshly criticizes black female scholars for their silence on homophobia. She writes, "Like her black male counterpart, the black woman intellectual is afraid to relinquish heterosexual privilege" (Clarke 2000, 191-199). By widening the scope of analysis in contemporary feminist discourse to include multidisciplinary traditions, classic blues songs provide potent historical antecedents for black feminism.



### *Intersectionality*

Kimberlé Crenshaw is responsible for identifying and labelling the second of two main theories found within black feminism, intersectionality. She writes that intersectionality is the name given to the “complex of reciprocal attachments and sometimes polarizing conflicts that confront both individuals and movements as they seek to navigate the raced, gendered, and class-based dimensions of social and political life” (Crenshaw 2004, 2). Crenshaw asserts that any serious comparative historical view suggests that demands for solidarity across race, class, or gender lines are as likely to compete as to coalesce (ibid). The concept of intersectionality came to the forefront of sociological circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s in conjunction with the multiracial feminist movement (Thompson 2002, 337). Recognizing that the forms of oppression experienced by white middle-class women were/are different from those experienced by black, poor, or disabled women, supporters of the intersectionality paradigm sought to understand the ways in which gender, race and class combined to determine the female destiny (ibid). Leslie McCall argues that the introduction of the intersectionality theory was vital to sociology and that before its development there was little research that addressed specifically the experiences of people who are subjected to multiple forms of subordination within society (McCall 2001, xii).

Crenshaw used the following analogy, referring to a traffic intersection, or crossroad, to further explain, or reify the concept of intersectionality:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination...But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident. Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. (Crenshaw 1989, 149)

Intersectionality gained prominence in the 1990s when sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins, reintroduced the idea as part of her discussion on black feminism. This term replaced her previously coined expression black feminist thought and increased the general applicability of her theory from African American women to all women of colour. Much like her predecessor Crenshaw, Collins argued that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity (Collins 1990, 42).

There are three different approaches to studying intersectionality: anti-categorical complexity, inter-categorical complexity, and intra-categorical complexity, and these serve to represent the broad spectrum of current methodologies that are used to better understand and apply intersectionality theory.

The anti-categorical approach is based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories, and dictates that social categories are an arbitrary construction of history and language that contribute little to understanding the ways in which people experience society. Sociologist Leslie McCall suggests that, of the three categories, the anti-categorical approach has been the most successful. She writes:

This approach...satisfies the demand for complexity, judging by the fact that there is now great skepticism about the possibility of using categories in anything but a simplistic way. (McCall 2005, 1773)

Social life, then, is simply too complex to make into rigid categories that ultimately serve to reduce sociological realities to fiction-like groupings that result in inequalities.

The inter-categorical approach to intersectionality acknowledges the relationships of inequality among existing social groups, as imperfect as they are, and places these relationships at the center of study. The task of this approach is to clarify these relationships and doing so

requires the provisional use of categories. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn writes, in advocating for a greater emphasis on relationality in studies of intersectionality, scholars can treat race and gender categories as “‘anchor’ points – though these points are not static” (Glenn 2002, 14).

Finally, the intra-categorical complexity falls conceptually between the anti-categorical approach, which rejects categories, and the inter-categorical approach which uses them strategically. McCall states:

Like the first approach, it interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself, though that is not its *raison d'être*. Like the [second] approach, it acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories. (McCall 2005, 1773-1774)

Intra-categorical complexity is termed as such because scholars working in this avenue tend to focus on social groups located at overlooked points of intersection.

I am pressed here again to inquire as to why these scholars did not look at the expressive culture of the classic blues women? Are the theories initiated by middle-to-upper class black women part of a culture (like that of the early Harlem Renaissance) that deems the working-class inflected material as low culture, or, are they simply unaware of the wealth of oppressive culture that supports their ideologies, written and disseminated by black American women in the twentieth century?

As outlined in my lyric typology of Lucille Bogan's catalogue (appendix), songs crossing the boundaries of constructed categories articulating the intersection of gender and socio-economics and social subordination were numerous. In “Shave ‘em Dry” Bogan sings, “my fuckin’ is made for workin’ men’s two dollars” and “your goddam asshole stands open like a church door and the crabs walks in like people.” Here, she characterizes the illegal work of prostitution. The anus standing open like a church door and the crab as parishoners simile require

that the listener consider a breach of normative sexual practices and transgression toward the dominant religion. In “Whiskey Selling Woman” Bogan sings, “the judge he said put a padlock on my door and I can’t sell whisky and I can’t give parties no more.” In this instance, Bogan points to incarceration and illegal activity – both arguably connected to race and class in the American South post-Emancipation.

Bessie Smith’s recording of “Washwoman’s Blues,” written by African American musician/songwriter Spencer Williams, describes the impact of domestic labour on the women who were relegated to servicing middle and upper-class whites. She sings, “All day long I’m slavin’, all day long I’m bustin’ suds / Gee my hands are tired washin’ out these dirty duds...Rather be a scullion cooking in some white folks’ yard / I could eat up plenty, wouldn’t have to work so hard.” Here, race and gender intersect with socio-economic reality and subordination.

### *Racialization*

According to many black feminists, and some white feminists, experiences of class, gender and sexuality cannot be adequately understood unless the influences of [historical] racialization are carefully considered. Sociologically, racialization is characterized as the process of ascribing ethnic or racial identities to a relationship, social practice, or group that did not identify itself as such (Omi and Winant 1986, 21). While it is often born out of domination, the racialized group is prone to gradually identify with, and even embrace, the ascribed identity and thus becomes a self-ascribed race or ethnicity (ibid). In his 1989 publication simply titled, *Racism*, sociologist Robert Miles described racialization as “a dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings” (Miles 1989, 76). Sociologist Yehudi Webster later defined the concept of racialization as “a systemic accentuation of certain physical

attributes to allocate persons to races that are projected as real and thereby become the basis for analyzing all social relations” (Webster 1992, 23).

In her 1981 publication, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, scholar and feminist bell hooks highlights instances of racialization that occurred during slavery (noting that the very concept of slavery is, in itself, an act of racialization). She writes, “A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of rape, and sexual exploitation of black women [by white owners] during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years” (hooks 1981, 53). Seen not as victims but accomplices, these women were then perceived to have lost any value or worth because of their humiliations. Consequently, these women attempted to shift the focus of attention away from sex and sexuality by emphasizing their commitment to motherhood (hooks 1981, 70-73). As participants in the cult of true womanhood that reached its peak in early 1900s America, black victims of sexual violence ventured to prove their value and worth by demonstrating that their lives were deeply rooted in the family (ibid). According to hooks, their efforts were acknowledged by the public, but white owners insisted on casting them in a negative light, labelling self-sacrificing black women who were dedicated to creating a safe and supportive environment for their families as Aunt Jemimas, Amazons, Sapphires – all denigrating images based upon existing sexist and racist stereotypes (ibid).

I suggest that, in opposition to this, Bogan, Rainey and Smith sung pointedly about enjoying normative and non-normative sexual acts, assuming control of the role of the prostitute and resistance to the legal and emotional bonds of the institution of marriage. Regardless of the fact that all three of them were mothers in their personal lives, articulations of commitment to motherhood and domestic duties in their music were shunned. I do not believe that these details are coincidental.

In more recent years, the labelling of black women as matriarchs (circa 1965) emerged as yet another attempt by the white power structure to cast the positive contributions of black women in a negative light. hooks states, “As sexist ideology has been accepted by black people, these negative myths and stereotypes have effectively transcended class and race boundaries and affected the way black women were perceived by their own race and the way they perceived themselves” (ibid). Assuming hooks to be correct, this is an instance in which the racialized group became prone to identify with the ascribed identity of matriarch, ultimately rendering it a self-ascribed label. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that case studies of black women as head of the household must be attentive to racially segmented local labour markets and community patterns, to changes in local political economies specific to a given city or region, and to established racial and gender ideology for a given location (Collins 1990, 221-238). She writes, “This approach would go far to deconstruct Eurocentric, masculinist analyses that implicitly rely on controlling images of the matriarch or the welfare mother as guiding conceptual premises” (ibid).

To fully understand the racialization of oppressed groups, it is important to examine the ways in which racializing structures, social processes and representations (or ideas purporting to represent groups and group members in society) are shaped by the intersection of gender, class and sexuality (Meyer 2012, 858).

In this chapter I discussed the differences separating black feminism from that of the broader feminist movement and noted a connection between black women’s history and contemporary black feminist thought. Black political activist, scholar, and author, Angela Davis, suggests that there is a core meaning in the texts of classic blues women such as those of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith (I include Bogan), that are pre-feminist in a sense. This demonstrates that black women of the early twentieth century were acknowledging and

addressing issues central to contemporary [black] feminist discourse (Davis 1999, 24).

While we cannot project a feminist consciousness onto the women of the twenties and thirties, at least not in the way we think of it today, it is possible to suggest that their material was protofeminist. It is also safe to say that early women's blues held important socio-political implications:

Women's blues helped to construct an aesthetic community that affirmed women's capacities in domains assumed to be the prerogative of males, such as sexuality and travel...the construction of this women's community entailed bold challenges to institutions and ideologies within the African-American community, as well as in the dominant culture. Women's blues contested black bourgeois notions of "high" culture that belittled working-class popular music. They also challenged the most powerful African-American institution, the Christian church. In order for the blues to be extricated from a hierarchy that established Christianity as the community's overarching moral authority, they had to affirm, in a self-conscious manner, their own cultural integrity. (Davis 1999, 121)

Davis points to an arsenal of dominant cultural forces challenged by the music of blues women. The impact that the classic blues singers had on their immediate communities has extended over the last several decades to infiltrate the discourse of contemporary scholars. I here locate Lucille Bogan and her body of work. She left behind a force significant enough to inspire this study. My quest to raise interest and awareness about her life and music has only scratched the surface. I will continue this journey on her behalf.

## CONCLUSION

One of the main goals of this study was to examine the work of Lucille Bogan through the recordings she made over the course of her career from 1923 to 1934, something that has not been done before. By typologizing sixty-six songs from her repertoire, I obtained an insight into her life and social perspective by examining the content of what she wrote and sang about.

As noted earlier, this work is a starting point on the journey to locate Lucille Bogan beyond documented dates of her birth, studio sessions and death. Future projects about Bogan might include in-depth musical analyses on more, if not all of her recordings. Further investigation into where and how often she toured, by sourcing survivors of her contemporaries who could attest to this, would be invaluable.

Looking at considerable portions of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith’s repertoires provided context with regards to what Bogan’s contemporaries were accomplishing. I suggest that lyric typologies – not just transcriptions – could be done for these and other classic blues artists to help determine norms of black cultural experience through female expressive culture.

A history of turn-of-the century travelling minstrel shows as the starting grounds for classic blues singers provided the performance context for the then nascent genre. This important terrain was where the blues and other genres of popular music were first heard and identified by the public and the press. Another platform pertinent to African American entertainers after Emancipation was the urban theatre industry where playwrights and musicians wrote stage shows for white and black patrons. Here, black artists used their material not only to entertain, but to articulate narratives voicing socio-political opposition to racial disparities in America.

The Harlem Renaissance saw black writers and artists directing their works to black



intellectuals and middle to upper-class forums. These groups, however, were made up of a minority of the black population. The lives of most African Americans were barely touched, if at all, by this cultural movement. More likely it was the music of the classic blues singers that had an impact on their lives and was the basis for their musical culture. The class division that occurred after slavery wherein a new black elite modeled themselves after white upper-class social and economic structures, was the impetus behind the dismissal of the classic blues as low culture. When writers like Langston Hughes and Sterling Allen Brown emerged into literary circles of Harlem, blues and jazz artists began to be acknowledged in the works of these authors as cultural contributors, worthy of recognition. In 1926, Hughes contended that the black American was not taught to see “the beauty of his own people; he is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns” (Hughes 1926).

One of the conclusions I have drawn from developing an understanding of how the classic blues matured as a genre, first in the tent shows in the South and Mid-West of the United States, then on record, is the significant role played by the black press. The black press helped in launching and sustaining careers of the classic blues singers through its promotion of race records and performance reviews (McGuire 1986, 103). On February 21, 1925, Bob Hayes from *The Chicago Defender* wrote that Rainey had packed Chicago’s Monogram Theater with her all-star line-up, “Ma Rainey flashed some great gowns, some new blues and some clever lighting effects.” Hayes found fault with her act for using what he called the usual wham, but noted how the venue had a sold-out crowd “at each show on Monday night long before curtain time” (McGuire 1986, 111). To black music critics of the time, Bessie Smith was known as the “Empress of the Blues,” a title given to her not only because of her powerful voice but also because her record sales surpassed those of all other classic blues singers combined (Bogle 1980,

29-33). *The Chicago Defender's* Tony Langston wrote that fans expected Smith's shows to be "far above the average in her line, and that's just what the famous artist handed them." He reviewed her Chicago debut on May 10, 1924 with warm praise, taking care to mention that her songs were both new and well-chosen, writing "[Smith] put each and every one of them over with the well-known 'Bang' ...in fact, Bessie tied up her own show and it is a safe prediction that she has earned a standing welcome with 'Blues' fans." Although it is likely that Lucille Bogan toured and performed, there is no known press coverage of her.

A theme that runs through every chapter in this study is the African American experience in the United States after Emancipation. There were irreparable injustices served the community on both social and systemic levels, yet African Americans accomplished a great deal. The black entrepreneurs of tent circuits successfully earned and grew financially. They offered an avenue of employment to African Americans that was not sharecropping or other types of physical labour. Black entertainers in the urban theatre sector not only earned a living writing and performing but found a stable public platform wherein to voice social and political protest. The Harlem Renaissance, while causing segregation within the black community, saw the development of a new type of African American culture. As younger black writers emerged on the scene, the gap between middle-class and working-class culture was somewhat ameliorated. Langston Hughes, Sterling Allen Brown and other authors featured the previously demeaned work of the classic blues artists in their writings, viewing their contributions as significant.

As the decades moved on, black feminist theory and ideology was developed. It differentiated from white aspects of the feminist movement, acknowledging and rectifying a neglect of the areas specific to black women who were dealing with gender and racial bias. The portions of this study looking at the lives and songs of Bogan, Rainey and Smith revealed the

triumph of black women in the music industry who began as poor and uneducated, but whose determination as individuals brought them success in a business that many artists, even today – black or white, rich or poor – do not necessarily achieve.

Lucille Bogan had a successful tenure as an artist. Her recording career lasted for thirteen years. Although she has been overlooked in blues scholarship since the classic blues era – perhaps because of her daring lyrics in songs like “Shave ‘em Dry” and “Till the Cows Come Home” – it is likely because of the notoriety of these songs that her name has survived to the present day. Bogan’s shock-value reputation keeps her at the vanguard of internet users, but also serves as a prompt to blues lovers to investigate her other material, thus uncovering the wealth of her contributions to this era and the history of the blues.

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## APPENDIX A: Themes and Images in the Lyrics of Lucille Bogan's Recorded Works

### *Domestic and Culinary Imagery*

In the sexual language found in the blues, there are metaphoric and symbolic expressions often used by artists and this section focuses on those of the domestic/culinary nature as found in Lucille Bogan's repertoire. The first two examples of culinary imagery serving as sexual metaphor in Bogan's catalogue are found in "Pot Hound Blues" (1929) and "Man Stealer Blues" (1935). These lyrics are straightforward and simple instances of edible items as representative of sexual acts.

In "Pot Hound Blues" the singer refers to stew and beans as the pretense for sex:

You come home every day lookin' for your stew and beans  
You come home every day lookin' for your stew and beans  
And you have got more nerve than any pot hound I've ever seen

Now you take your money you have your fun  
You don't have nothin' when house rent come  
And I'm through cooking your stew and beans

In addition to the use of edible items as sexual innuendo, the second stanza iterates that the woman's partner does not provide for his female counterpart. As a result, the singer states that she is through giving him his stew and beans.

In "Man Stealer Blues," the female character sings about the fact that she was betrayed by her best friend who had relations with her man. The singer bites back at the cheating friend, using culinary imagery to describe the superiority of her own sexual skill:

I never had the blues 'till my best friend loved my man  
She may have loved him one time but that's one man she can't hold  
She may have loved him one time but that's one man she can't hold  
'Cause it's done been tested that I cook the best jelly roll

A popular and commonly used culinary symbol for female genitalia, sex and things connected to sexual activities in the blues is jelly or jelly roll (Lieb 1981, 123) and in this regard Bogan's "Man Stealer Blues" is no exception. The singer proclaims that despite her man's infidelity with her best friend, it is she who cooks the best jelly roll.

Some of Bogan's domestic and/or culinary references are intertwined with the singer's self-ascribed identity as a prostitute, thus straddling categories domestic and culinary imagery as well as labour and economy. In "Barbeque Bess" (1935) and "Stew Meat Blues" (1935), the prostitute's eats represent her sexual wares for sale. In "Barbeque Bess," Bogan's character is unapologetically living in squalid conditions working as a sex-trade worker and it is not until late in the song that her eats for sale are fully unveiled as sexual acts. In the first stanza she sets the scene:

When you come to my house come down behind the jail  
I got a sign on my door "Barbecue for Sale"  
I'm talkin' 'bout my barbecue only thing I crave  
And that good doin' meat gon' carry me to my grave  
I'm sellin' it cheap 'cause I got good stuff  
And if you try one time you can't get enough  
I'm talkin' 'bout barbecue only thing I sell

We see that the woman lives behind a jail and she has a sign on her door that reads, "barbeque for sale," thus setting the tone of double-entendre between sex and meat. Queer studies scholar Lorna Wheeler suggests that Bogan's lyric about the meat that will carry her to grave potentially refers to the little death of an orgasm (Wheeler 2006, 149). Pleasure could be one interpretation of how the singer ends up in her metaphorical grave but health risks that come with being a sex trade worker might be another. Regardless, the singer makes it clear that she wants to be a prostitute for the rest of her days as she tells the listener that only death will put an end to her selling barbecue.

The lyric suggests that there is no middle man in this scenario. Not only does the singer set the prices for her wares, but as we see in the following stanza, all the money goes straight to her:

Some people wants it some people don't  
If you buy my barbeque it just won't don't, don't, don't  
Some people wants to know the reg'lar price  
Fifty-five cents you can get some twice  
And I'm talkin' 'bout my barbeque only thing I sell  
And you can get my meat any night at twelve

It is not until this stanza that she unveils what she is referring to actually is. The female character is selling sex. All the earlier lines could mean either meat or sex, but in the last line of "Barbeque Bess," Bogan makes it clear that she is talking about sex.

It is appropriate to apply Bogan's candid lyrical approach here to what author Elisabeth D. Kuhn suggests when she writes, "The lyrics of blues are very straightforward, sincere, and down-to-earth, creating a connection between the singer and his or her audience" (Kuhn 1999, 525). Bogan's thinly veiled use of food to represent sex is conversational and typical of what some would call trash-talk common in bars and other hang outs.

"Stew Meat Blues" references stew as the singer's sexual wares that are for sale and while this is not a mystery, the focus of this song is about how a customer might pay for the services rendered:

A man say I had something look like new  
He want me to credit him for some of my stew  
Say he's goin' up the river, try to sell his stack  
He would pay me for my stuff when the boat got back

Now you go on up the river man and sell your stack  
You can pay me for my stew when the boat get back  
I got good stew and it's got to be sold  
The price ain't high I wanna get you told

Go on up the river man and sell your stack  
It'll be stew meat here when the boat get back

Now look here man what you want me to do  
Give you my stew meat and credit you too  
You go on up the river try and sell your stack  
'Cause I have my stew meat here when that boat get back

I credit one man it was to my sorrow  
It's cash today, credit tomorrow  
So hurry up the river baby try to sell your stack  
It' gonna be meat here when that boat get back

The lyric is matter-of-fact in the characterization of a prostitute pushing her quality wares. The fourth stanza reveals the truth about the singer's insistence about getting paid up front, "I credit one man, it was to my sorrow / It's cash today, credit tomorrow."

The next song in this category is "Groceries on the Shelf" (1933) which begins with these choice words:

My name is Piggly Wiggly and I swear you can help yourself  
My name is Piggly Wiggly and I swear you can help yourself  
And you've got to have your greenback and it don't take nothin' else

It is no accident that Bogan identifies her prostitute in this song as Piggly Wiggly which is the name of the very first self-service grocery store founded in September of 1916 in Memphis, Tennessee by Caucasian American Clarence Saunders (Piggly Wiggly 2017). Continuing

confidently the singer asserts:

You can go to your buy, you can go to your ten-cent store  
You can go to your buy, you can go to your ten-cent store  
But if you come to my Piggly Wiggly you won't go back there no more

Ownership of the role as prostitute is apparent. In this lyric, however, is the suggestion of regret and/or sadness in the song's last two stanzas about the character's chosen lot in life. The singer states:

Now my friends all hate me 'cause I got a Piggly Wiggly store  
Now my friends all hate me, got a Piggly Wiggly store  
I got groceries on my shelf and they're laying all on my floor

Now my mama told me, papa told me too  
Say my mama told me, papa he told me too  
That that Piggly Wiggly store is going to be the ruin of you

Even though she sings of friends' rejection, parental warnings and images of the once stocked shelves now existing as empty with scattered grocery items on the floor, the singer gives no indication that these factors will affect the practice of her frowned upon activities.

"Coffee Grindin' Blues" (1929) is the final song in this category. The lyric employs the commonly consumed daily household staple of coffee as the metaphor for her sexual desires, as outlined in stanzas one, six and seven:

Ain't nobody, it ain't nobody  
Ain't nobody in town can grind a coffee like mine  
I drink so much coffee till I grind it in my sleep  
I drink so much coffee I grind it in my sleep  
And when it get like that you know it can't be beat

Now I grind my coffee at two and three dollars a pound  
I grind my coffee at two and three dollars a pound  
And it ain't no more cheap like mine in town

It's so doggone good until it'll make you bite your tongue  
It's so doggone good that it'll make you bite your tongue  
And I'm a coffee grindin' mama and won't you let me grind you some

### *Labour and Economy*

Black prostitutes in turn-of-the-century America faced the idea of male superiority endemic to all sex-trade workers but also navigated racialized sexual beliefs of middle and working-class white men (Blair 2010, 50-52). Whether Bogan's songs reflect abject elements or attitudes about prostitution or boast sexual power and prowess, they appear to be based on personal experience.

In the liner notes to Sony's 2004 collection titled *Shave 'Em Dry: Best of Lucille Bogan*, music

scholar and radio personality Dick Spottswood writes that Bogan “had strong ties to the local black underworld” and it is at least rumored that Bogan was, at some point in her life, a prostitute.

In the early 1900s in Chicago, most black prostitutes operated out of an area notoriously known as the Levee. They worked in all sectors of this area but laboured mostly in the district’s paltry brothels and saloons. The attraction of brothel prostitution for black women was the potential of earning money, “especially for women whose other labor opportunities were so severely restricted” (Blair 2010, 58). Bogan’s “Levee Blues” (1927) lyrics portray some of the grim aspects of this scene:

Down on the Levee at number nine  
Down on the Levee at number nine  
You can find my house honey you can hear me cry

Now my mama got them, my papa got them too  
My sister got them, brother got them too  
We got the rickets and the rackets, we all got the Levee blues

I ain’t found no doctor, ain’t no doctor in this whole round world  
I ain’t found no doctor, ain’t no doctor in this whole round world  
That can cure the blues, the blues of a Levee girl

Recorded in Chicago for Paramount Records, this is one of Bogan’s earliest works. “Levee Blues” reflects a defeated attitude toward ill-health and illegal activities. The singer’s surrender to what she calls rickets and rackets is indicative of a less assertive lyric in the early steps of Bogan’s career, posturing the singer more as a victim of circumstance.

“Jim Tampa Blues” (1927) contains a suggestive lyric, at first glance, of a pimp who has several prostitutes. Further examination of some of the language used, however, problematizes this as the only reading of the lyric:

Hey Jim Tampa, hey Jim Tampa  
Hey Jim Tampa, you treat your woman so mean

You treat your tommies like a woman you ain't ever seen

Piqued by the word tommie, I looked to see if it meant more than what I assumed it to mean, that being a prostitute. In *Sex and the Gender Revolution, Vol. One: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London*, Randolph Trumbach maintains that tommie was a slang term for lesbian from as far back as the late eighteenth century in Europe (Trumbach 1998, 10).

Expanding the explanation of the term, Emma Donoghue, award-winning Irish author, notes that tommie or tommy was not strictly an historical idiom for lesbian:

By the mid nineteenth century, 'tom' meant a 'masculine woman of the town' or prostitute; by the 1880s it referred to a woman 'who does not care for the society of others than those of her own sex.'" (Donoghue 1996, 5)

Aside from learning that tommie also refers to a British soldier, an extensive search of both scholarly and popular texts resulted in no other findings of what the term might mean.

Based on the first two lines of the song, it is uncertain if the singer is a spectator of Jim Tampa's or is connected to him in some way. Either way, the singer observes that he mistreats his woman. In the next line, we are introduced to the fact that Jim is a pimp and his sex-trade workers may also be lesbians or are able/willing to provide non-normative sex acts to paying customers. The singer then reveals that Jim treats these women like strangers.

The next song in this category is "Sweet Petunia" (1927). It is one of the best known traditional songs from the twenties and thirties and has been recorded many times under variations of the title such as "I'm Wild About My Patootie" by Ora Alexander (1930) or "Sweet Patuna Stomp" by Monkey Joe Coleman (1935-1939). One of the first examples of this song under the title of "Sweet Patunia" is Lucille Bogan's recording. This early example is not lyrically explicit but it is an early example of her flirtatiousness with risqué subject matter. Bogan's version of "Sweet Patunia" became an influential song which was later adapted by

Blind Blake, Willie Baker, Curley Weaver and others, as described on the Delta Haze corporation website; an organization engaged in the promotion and preservation of American blues, jazz and popular music (Delta Haze Corporation 2012).

It is boldly stated in the first stanza what the singer's job is:

Let me tell you what sweet patunia do  
Take your money and stay all night for you  
And I'm wild about my 'tuni, the only thing I crave  
Wild about my 'tuni, the only thing I crave  
Sweet patuni's gonna follow me to my grave

Patunia is generally understood to be a vaginal simile comparable to the above discussed term, jelly roll. It is interesting to note that of the many versions of this song with its reference to female genitalia, the majority are by male blues singers. Their slant is very different from Bogan's. Little David Alexander's 1936 version sings, "I know a lady she lives by the jail / Got a sign on the door says, 'tuni for sale.'" The same year Jesse James sings, "Ah wake up mama, wake up and don't sleep so sound / Give me what you promised me before you laid down / I can get my 'tuni, only thing I love" (Oliver 1968, 223-224). In both of these instances, the singer is looking for sex whether from a prostitute or a lover.

In Bogan's take on the song, the character claims ownership of the role of prostitute and possibly that of a lesbian identity in the first three lines of the stanza above. It is explicit to me that the singer craves what she calls tuni.

Comparative literature scholar, Robert Philipson, suggests that the blues was an ideal realm for people who were thought of as sexual deviants to inhabit, as the music thrived outside the scope of the dominant white American culture in the early twentieth century. In speakeasies, dive bars and private parties, blues singers had the freedom to explore alternative sexuality and, as Philipson states, "they even expressed it in song" (Philipson 2013).



There is no biographical literature on Bogan describing personal acts of lesbianism but other blues singers from the same period have been documented as delving into homosexual relationships. According to biographer and film historian, Donald Bogle, in the 1920s blues and jazz, singer Ethel Waters was involved with dancer Ethel Williams and the two also performed together with the stage name The Two Ethels (Bogle 2011, 33). They lived together as lovers which, at the time, was considered a disreputable act.

Despite the lack of historical information on the goings on in Bogan's personal life, the examination of her catalogue reveals songs containing varied descriptions of alternative sexual activities. There are several possibilities, educated guesses at best, as to why she employs this kind of content. One, is that she herself had homosexual or other diverse sexual encounters. Another prospect is that she fantasized about having alternative sexual relationships and projected these fantasies through her music. It is also possible that wrote and sang about relations that she witnessed among her peers.

One of the more talked-about songs involving the topic of prostitution also details sexually transmitted disease along with a myriad of power and sexual innuendos. The adults only version of "Shave 'em Dry" (1935) is so explicit that the lyrics warrant being printed in full:

I got nipples on my titties big as the end of my thumb  
I got somethin' 'tween my legs'll make a dead man come  
Ooh daddy, baby won't you shave 'em dry  
Want you to grind me baby, grind me till I cry

Say I fucked all night and all the night before, baby  
And I feel just like I want to fuck some more  
Ooh great God daddy grind me honey, shave me dry  
And when you hear me holler baby, want you to shave it dry

I got nipples on my titties big as the end of my thumb  
Daddy you can have 'em any time you want and you can make 'em cum  
Ooh daddy, shave me dry  
And I'll give you somethin' baby, swear it'll make you cry

I'm gonna turn back my mattress and let you oil my springs  
I want you to grind me daddy, till the bells do ring  
Ooh daddy, want you to shave 'em dry  
Oh great God daddy, if you can shave 'em baby won't you try?

Now if fucking was the thing that would take me to heaven  
I'd be fuckin' in the studio 'till the clock strike eleven  
Ooh daddy, daddy shave 'em dry  
I would fuck you baby, honey I would make you cry

Now your nuts hang down like a damn bell-sapper  
And your stick stands up like a steeple  
Your goddamn asshole stands open like a church door  
And the crabs walks in like the people  
[Woops and hollers from both Bogan and Roland]  
Baby won't you shave 'em dry

A big sow gets fat from eatin' corn  
And a pig gets fat from suckin'  
Reason you see this whore fat like I am  
Great God I got fat from fuckin'  
Whee... tell 'em about me, fuck it!

My back it made of whalebone and my cock is made of brass  
And my fuckin' is made for workin' men's two dollars  
Great God 'round to kiss my ass  
Ooh daddy, shave 'em dry

What makes Bogan's work intriguing beyond its sexual bluntness is how a song like this could represent an intersection of gender politics and sexuality specific to black working-class women in the post-slavery era. Outspoken and frank statements of female aggressiveness and/or unconventional sexuality, often from the perspective of a black female prostitute, were not uncommon in the classic blues and in live black entertainment in general. Like Bogan's "Barbecue Bess," however, "Shave 'em Dry" eclipses other songs of the era that present the view of the prostitute. The singer embraces the label of whore and boasts that she got fat from intercourse, indicating prosperity. In Rainey's version of the song, the singer is a witness to the working prostitute, commenting on her store-bought hair. With Bogan, her character is the sex

worker incarnate who, in one interpretation, straps on a male sex organ (my cock is made of brass).

DeSalvo provides an explanation of the word cock that problematizes the contemporary understanding of what it represents. She writes, “Cock was slang for female genitalia among Southern country African American speakers during the early-to-mid 1900s” (DeSalvo 2006, 39). Although DeSalvo carefully suggests that cock was a term used to reference the female sex organ among black speakers at the turn-of-the century, the examples she provides of those who used the word as such were male, except for one. DeSalvo cites blues legend Muddy Waters and jazz artist Charles Mingus as having used cock to reference vagina and then points to Louise Johnson, a blues artist who recorded but four songs in her life, citing her original song “On the Wall.”

According to Steve Leggett at *Allmusic*, “On the Wall” is a brazen and lusty song and Johnson was a fiery singer and an adept pianist (*Allmusic* 2016). Johnson sounds like an artist reminiscent of Bogan. In support of her suggestion that the word cock was used as slang for female genitalia, DeSalvo presents these lyrics by Johnson, “Well, I’m going to Memphis, to stop at Church’s hall / Show these women how to cock it on the wall” (DeSalvo 2006, 40).

David Evans elaborates on the context of Johnson’s use of the term cock it on the wall in *Blues Review* magazine, “The latter activity was described to me by a now elderly country bluesman as one of the pleasures he indulged in when going outside for a break at juke houses” (Evans 1993, 13).

My dilemma with DeSalvo’s suggestion that cock was slang for vagina is that it appears to have been used mostly by men. Even though the implication here is generally understood as referencing vagina, in the case of Johnson, she uses the particular phrase cock it on the wall

which alludes to an activity more so than a part of the human anatomy. Was this turn-of-the-twentieth century argo for gender-specific body parts used in the same sense by women as men? I would suggest that there is not a definitive answer to this question.

The characters in “Shave ‘em Dry” trade roles over the course of the song. The singer begins as a recipient for the male lover, but by the close of the song it is she who is wearing a brass cock and penetrating him, demonstrating variable identifiers, changing positions, and shifting sexual hierarchies (Wheeler 2006, 168-169). If Bogan uses cock to mean vagina in these lyrics, “my cock is made of brass,” an interpretation of this is that the singer is claiming her genitalia are resistant in terms of receiving several sexual partners.

“Shave ‘em Dry” also revamps the childhood verse and finger game when the singer states, “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple / Open the door and here’s all the little people.” What should conjure images of youth and playfulness instead paints a picture of the dark, dirty and dangerous life of a prostitute. She further sings, “Now your nuts hang down like a damn bell-sapper / And your stick stands up like a steeple / Your goddam asshole stands open like a church door / And the crabs walks in like people.” The crabs (referring to a sexually transmitted infection) as parishoners simile also forces the listener to consider how this image becomes a breach of normative sexual practices and a transgression toward the dominant religion. By using religious imagery, the lyric depiction stigmatizes both sex and the church (Wheeler 2006, 168-169). The brusque lyrics to “Shave ‘em Dry” by Lucille Bogan are an attempt to do one of two things: She is either submitting to a partisan white audience that assumes the black female body to be unprincipled and obtainable or, she is completely aware of the racial dynamic in America at the time and is gladly exploiting that in this song to push the boundary. Given what I have gleaned from this artist and her catalogue of recordings, it is likely the latter. Aside from the

whoops and hollers audible in the recording, which could indicate a thrill in articulating such wild imagery, “Shave ‘em Dry” was not Bogan’s only song featuring impudent lyrics about sex and prostitution, as I will demonstrate in this portion of my typology.

The next two songs in the category are “They Ain’t Walkin’ No More” (1930) and “Tricks Ain’t Walkin’ No More” (1930). The lyrics in both songs are straightforward statements that the sex-trade is not bringing in the necessary funds for survival. In the first song the singer proclaims, “Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down / I can’t make my livin’ around this town / ‘Cause tricks ain’t walkin’, tricks ain’t walkin’ no more.” In the second song, the woman articulated that she will, “do just like a blind man, stand and beg for change / Until these ‘resting officers change my tricking name / ‘Cause tricks ain’t walkin’, tricks ain’t walkin’ no more.”

Associate professor in the Department of African American studies and the Department of History at the University of Chicago at Illinois, Cynthia M. Blair, writes about the nebulous grip many black sex-trade workers had on their financial security in the urban economy:

That so many black women engaged in transactions that were sometimes economically unprofitable and always ideologically fraught underscores the failure of the urban economy to fully incorporate black women into modern, industrial prosperity. (Blair 2010, 237)

Blair points to a deeper meaning in Bogan’s songs, “They Ain’t Walkin’ No More” and “Tricks Ain’t Walkin’ No More.” Black women carried the social and psychological load of racial organization (white hierarchy) in the cities as well as that of a changing sexual economy – not surrendering to its ups and downs, but working to manipulate and survive in these climates.

In “New Way Blues” (1928) the approach to this chosen profession finds the singer boasting about her notoriety as a streetwalker, “Everybody is talkin’ saying I sure do know what to do / Everybody’s talkin’ say I sure do know what to do / And if you pay me my price I’ll learn that thing to you.”

“Struttin’ My Stuff” (1930) has a similar assuredness in the lyric of the prostitute’s distinction:

Now some pay with dollars, some pay with dimes  
Just to see me strut this stuff of mine  
I’m struttin’ my stuff  
I’m struttin’ my stuff  
I’m struttin’ my stuff, strutting it in the rough

In “My Georgia Grind” (1930) the singer pitches her status to a potential customer:

Look here papa I don’t mean you no harm  
I’m just from Georgia to carry the good work on  
It’s the thing I do and it’s mighty fine  
And the mens is crazy ‘bout my Georgie grind

Akin to the attitude in “Struttin’ My Stuff” and “New Way Blues,” here the singer is hubristic in her certainty of the value she offers a john, a trademark so-to-speak, of Lucille Bogan’s.

Historians of turn-of-the-century sex-trade work have often associated black women with the industry’s run-down confines and most dangerous sectors, and this concentration in streets and alleyways demonstrates their degradation in the urban sex economy (Hobson 1987, 35-36).

The last song about prostitution is “Alley Boogie” (1930) and this title upholds a common historical perspective that black prostitutes worked in the streets. Here, the singer looks to her profession and its locale as a kind of escape that serves to drive away her blues rather than a low-down place to be:

My alley boogie, only thing I choose  
And it’s the only thing I do to drive away my blues  
I boogied all night, all the night before  
When I woke up this mornin’ I wanted to boogie some more

Oh, alley boogie, only thing I crave  
I can do my alley boogie so many different ways  
I got a bed in my bedroom, had it on my floor  
Got to do my alley boogie everywhere I go

The woman's alley boogie does not just describe a specific urban location where she works but also indicates an attitude or identity that she brings with her everywhere she goes.

“Payroll Blues” (1928) is about employment in general. At first glance this song has an insipid title and innocuous lyrics. A line like, “I’m leavin’ here broke and I ain’t got no money at all,” matches the title perfectly and leaves little to the imagination. At a second and third glance, however, I discovered an interesting reference in another line, “Pay day on the seven, pay day on the yellow dog.” The first half of the lyric appears obvious, in that, a worker often gets paid at the end of the week. The second half of the line warranted some investigation. Until the 1930s, employers in the United States used a variety of measures to prevent workers from joining labour unions and one of the most effectual ways of ensuring this was something called the yellow dog contract. Using this document, employers could insist that one had to either sign the agreement not to be in a labour union, or hit the road (Ernst 1989, 252). Courts upheld the legality of yellow dog contracts and struck down state laws that attempted to dismiss them. It wasn’t until the Wagner Act came into effect in 1935 that there was an end to these types of agreements. This reference in “Payroll Blues” is connected to one of the socio-economic realities experienced by African Americans in the early 1900s.

Under the banner of labour and economy fall three songs that deal with bootlegging and gambling. Sordid illegal entertainment such as prostitution, drinking and gambling often took place at buffet flat parties, or after-hours parties, usually hosted in someone’s apartment. Buffet flat parties reached their height of visibility in the United States after the National Prohibition Act, also referred to as the Volstead Act, of 1919. In Chris Albertson’s biography of Bessie Smith, he writes:

When asked to describe a buffet flat, Ruby [Smith's tour-mate] replied 'It was nothing but faggots and bulldyers, a real open house...they called them buffet flats because buffet means *everything*, everything that was in the life.' (Albertson 2003, 140)

Other venues where pleasure-seekers routinely partook in these actions were saloons, night clubs and speakeasies which sprung up all around the country during the Prohibition era which lasted from approximately 1920 to 1933 and even longer in some states (Walsh 2014, 294).

Speak-easies were unauthorized establishments that sold alcohol and quickly became a big part of American culture during this time. One of the changes brought about by the emergence of speak-easies was a level of integration. In *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, Daniel Okrent suggests that people of all races would gather together, mix, mingle and have little to no problems (Okrent 2010, 212).

"Whiskey Selling Woman" (1930) is a song about bootlegging. The character sings, "I've got my house full of beer, my backyard full of corn," describing her abundance of product. Connecting lyrics to the title of the song, corn whiskey (sometimes called corn liquor or white lightning) is made from a mash of approximately eighty percent corn, and in this instance the singer has not only beer but supplies to manufacture whiskey for thirsty customers. The next two stanzas take an interesting twist:

I've got four cases tomorrow at that county jail  
I've got four cases tomorrow at that county jail  
And two is for my whiskey and two is for my forfeit bail

The judge he said, put a padlock on my door  
The judge he said, put a padlock on my door  
And I can't sell whiskey and I can't give parties no more

The character's undertakings with alcohol are not impervious to legal ramifications and in this song, she does not dance around the fact that she's been busted. Instead, the singer continues with an entitled, if not arrogant, attitude:



I will sell my whisky to the chief of police in town  
I will sell my whisky to the chief of police in town  
And if he don't like my whisky he's welcome to ride me down

If I had a thousand dollars, judge I'd take my way  
If I had a thousand dollars, judge I'd take my way hey hey  
And I would make this whole town sloppy drunk one day

I would build me a still on every street in this town  
I would build me a still on every street in this town  
And I wouldn't allow police eighteen miles around

The next song involving illegal substances has many of the same lyrics as “Whiskey Selling Woman.” In “Superstitious Blues” (1933) a comparable scenario is apparent when the character sings, “four cases tomorrow at the county jail.” These cases are divided up the same way as they were in “Whiskey Selling Woman.” The difference in the lyrics of this song occurs in the last stanza, “Next time you ‘rest me you’d better put me in a cell / ‘Cause the more you ‘rest me the more whiskey I can sell.” This line has three possible interpretations. The first is that the singer might disseminate alcohol even when she is behind bars. The second is that she may have been arrested but was not necessarily in jail and a brush with the law would boost her notoriety and lead to greater sales. The third interpretation is that the bootlegger is selling to the police at the jail, suggesting that those in power can play it both ways.

A song about gambling is “Baking Powder Blues” (1933). According to jazz historian, William Kenney, gambling saloons in the United States integrated African American men and upper class whites in what he calls “an informal brotherhood of pleasure-seeking bachelors” (Kenney 1993, 6). Saloons eventually expanded their clientele to involve both men and women (Blair 2010, 162).

There is a significant amount of talking over the piano in “Baking Powder Blues” but the first sung line tells the listener why the character is anxious to gamble in hopes of winning some

money, “Got up this mornin’ by the rising sun / Didn’t have no whiskey so I tried to find me some.” With the target outlined, the singer jive-talks over the piano saying, “Got to gamble, wanna win me some dough / Play ‘em now boy, you just don’t play ‘em no mo’ / Here boy, here’s five dollars.” Returning to her singing voice, the character continues, “If the dice jump the hustle, baby my money won’t lose / I got to win tonight and buy this baking powder man some shoes,” then talking again, “Here boy, here’s another five.” The need for money widens in scope from just acquiring whiskey to include buying new shoes for the singer’s man who, it is suggested, has no money of his own. Examining the title of the song led me to investigate the chemical quality of baking powder which is a leavening agent used when making deserts and breads. Without it, the product will not rise. The fact that Bogan titles the song “Baking Powder Blues” likely indicates that the singer’s lover, whom she refers to in the song as this baking powder man, lacks the potency needed to rise to the occasion – whether it be as a provider, a lover, or both.

Whether Bogan sings about prostitution, bootlegging or gambling, her choices of financial income rarely include typical or safe methods of employment. This is due largely to the fact that methods of earning she sings about were the most readily available to blacks in the post slavery Jim Crow era. Late author and arts activist Garth Tate wrote that blacks during this period ran numbers, were active in bootlegging, rent parties [speakeasies], prostitution, cocaine and more, creating an underground economy (Tate 2017). In *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, A.B. Christa Schwarz writes that although there were efforts to clamp down on vice initiatives, reports indicated that in 1929 the sex industry in Harlem cabarets was in full swing. *The New York Times* wrote, “380 out of 392 nightclubs and speakeasies investigated were found to be definitely identified with prostitution” (Schwarz 2003, 10).

### *Relationships and Self-Determined Sexuality*

The next group of songs I discuss deal with relationships of the romantic nature and self-determined sexuality. Some of Bogan's songs involve females with males and others describe the singer's appreciation of same-sex company and gender-bending. As mentioned above, a small number of songs straddle more than one category and the first instance is "Pot Hound Blues" (1929) which was initially referenced in the first category because it uses a culinary term to allude to sex. In this section, "Pot Hound Blues" is cited because it also describes the singer's involvement with a man who satisfies neither her financial nor sexual/romantic needs. Below are the first and final stanzas of the song:

You must bring me a job or money from anywhere  
You must bring me a job or money from anywhere  
'Cause I can get your kind of lovin' in the street just anywhere

Now you're layin' up in my bed between my two white sheets  
I can't see and smell nothin' but your doggone feet  
And I'm through tryin' to make a man of you  
And if you can't bring a job don't you look for your daily stew

I worked hard from Monday until late Saturday night  
And you're a dirty mistreater, you ain't treatin' me right  
And I'm through cookin' your stew and beans  
And you's a dirty pot hound, dirty as any man I've seen

This song finds the singer in a domestic situation with a man but the scenario is racked with complaints, laments and words of warning to the male counterpart. She sings, "must bring me a job or money from anywhere / 'Cause I can get your kind of lovin' in the street just anywhere."

The character tells her man he is not special and if he can't pull his weight financially, he is as good as gone. Not only does the lyric suggest a self-determined sexual relationship chosen by the female character, she also shows that she has standards about how and if the man participates as a partner.

In “Kind Stella Blues” (1927) many of the lyrics are inaudible but those that can be distinguished describe a song that fits into this category. The singer’s attitude about her man takes an adamantly different stance here than in the previous song. She states:

To please, to please my man I’d ruther mistreat myself  
Oh to please my man I’d ruther mistreat myself  
‘Cause I’m crazy ‘bout my gambler and I don’t want nobody else

In this instance, the character is not shy about the fact that she puts her man’s pleasure before her own well-being. The next lines, however, could serve to explain this out-of-character attitude.

She sings:

I ain’t no gamblin’ woman, I got these rowdy ways  
Lord ain’t no gamblin’ woman, got these rowdy ways  
And if my man don’t stop me, be rowdy all my days

I suggest that the woman in this song considers the sacrifice of her natural tendencies (ways that could lead to her demise) a gift of thanks to her man whose needs and desires she places above her own.

True to the title, “Women Won’t Need No Men” (1927) is a song about how, because of men, women are singing the blues and feeling bad. The singer reveals that the blues is something she has never experienced and, in a simple, straight-forward message she tells the listener that there is “coming a time women ain’t gon’ need no men.” The relationship in this instance is of a woman with herself. She is self-reliant emotionally and financially. Wheeler suggests that the lyrics in this song subordinate a hetero-narrative by casting the male/female relationship in purely economic terms when she sings, “Comin’ a time women ain’t gon’ need no men / Just like the water, money will come rollin’ in” (Wheeler 2006, 153).

“Till the Cows Come Home” (1932) contains a lewd lyric wherein Bogan sets a stage similar to that of a buffet flat party that is not only sexual in nature but also a scene rowdy with

non-heteronormative activity. In Eric Garber's "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," he includes a depiction of wild buffet flat parties comparable to the content and context Bogan articulates in the lyrics of "Till the Cows Come Home." Garber writes:

Some were raucous establishments where illegal activities such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution were available. Others offered a variety of sexual pleasures cafeteria-style. A Detroit buffet flat of the latter sort, which Ruby Smith remembered visiting with her aunt, Bessie Smith, catered to all variety of sexual tastes. It was "an open house, everything goes on in that house." Smith continues explaining that "[T]hey had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was that great. He'd give a tongue bath and everything. By the time he got to the front of that guy he was shaking like a leaf. People used to pay good just to go in there and see him do his act[...]. That same house had a woman that used to [...] take a cigarette, light it, and puff it with her pussy. A real educated pussy. (Garber 2017)

The scenario described by Garber, like the lyrics to "Till the Cows Come Home," emphasizes the sexual aspects of the buffet flat parties as opposed to the use of prohibited substances.

Bogan's colourful lyrics merit being printed in full:

I got a man I love, got a man I like  
Every time I fuck him I give him the doggone clap  
Oh baby give him the doggone clap  
But that's the kind of pussy that they really like

I told them I've got a good cock  
It's got four damn good names  
Rough top  
Rough cock  
Tough cock  
Cock without a bone

You can fuck my cock, suck my cock  
Or leave my cock alone  
Oh baby I've been at this all night long  
You can fuck my cock or suck my cock  
Baby till the cows come home

You know both my men they are tight like that  
They got a great big dick just like a baseball bat  
Oh fuck 'em do it to me all night long

I want you to do it to me baby till the cows come home

They know a bitch from Baltimore  
I got hairs on my cock that'll sweep the floor  
I got spunk from them hairs that would shut the door  
And I look over your [words unclear]  
I'm a bitch from Baltimore

Oh talking 'bout a bitch from Baltimore  
And I got hairs on my cock that'll sweep anybody's floor  
I got a big fat belly I got a big broad ass  
I can fuck any man with real good class

Talkin' bout fuckin' talkin' bout grinding  
Baby all night long  
And I can do it to you honey 'til the cows come home.

If you suck my pussy baby I'll suck your dick  
I do it to you honey till I make you shit  
Oh baby honey do it all night long  
Do it to me papa  
Break me in 'til tomorrow comes

Taking into consideration discussions in blues scholarship about the word cock as slang for female genitalia, I maintain the uncertainty of whether the slang was adopted the same way for women as it was, supposedly, for men. I suggest Bogan's use of the word has two interpretations here. She might be using cock in "'Till the Cows Come Home'" to avoid using the word pussy too often or she could be toying with gender role-play.

Is the graphic nature of this song a trash-talking venture or is it an example of material that feminist writer Hazel Carby suggests are the kind of blues that offer excellent fodder for theorizing the reclamation of black women's bodies? Bogan's repertoire, the explicit version of "Shave 'em Dry" and "'Till The Cows Come Home" in particular, provides ideal space in which to do the latter. Bogan complicates ideas about blues lyrics by brazenly bringing homosexual and other non-normative sexual identities and acts into the field. Wheeler acknowledges her significant input into the classic blues in these instances:

Bogan intends again to repossess the phallus. Indeed, Bogan swerves so far from the traditional Harlem Renaissance fare, again she attempts to dethrone the blues. While many of the classic blues singers use double entendre, broach uncomfortable themes tentatively and edge toward the risqué, in “Till the Cows Come Home,” and “Shave ‘Em Dry,” Bogan plays the exhibitionist, and clearly delights in using shocking, even offensive language and imagery. (Wheeler 2006, 173)

The singer describes having four pet names for her good cock and brags throughout the song about her sexual stamina stating that she can do it until the cows come home. This song about relationships and self-determined sexuality widens the scope of females with males and females with females assuming various identities in what we might now refer to as trans-gender individualism.

In the liner notes for the Lucille Bogan compilation issued by Legacy Records titled *Shave ‘em Dry: The Best of Lucille Bogan*, Dick Spottswood writes, “Bogan is a primitive. Her lines are simple, her lyrics direct, and Roland only about half-plays the piano – he sounds more convincing as a guitarist. But this simplicity sticks with you. Not a diva like Bessie Smith, Bogan is halfway to being a country blues performer, halfway urban. There are few women in the history of the blues this simple and direct” (*No Depression* 2015). “Till The Cows Come Home” is an example of said directness, ignoring all normal social constraints and every perimeter of normative sexual conduct.

In an interesting spin on a woman complaining about her man, “Dirty Treatin’ Blues” (1930) starts off with a line that is guileless enough, “I want you to treat me daddy just like I treat you” – a simple, fair request and one that the listener might assume infers that she wants her man to be as good to her as she is to him. The character’s audaciousness immediately follows this and she rounds out the stanza with a cheeky explanation:

And if I treat you dirty, you can treat me dirty too  
You always talkin' 'bout the low-down things I do  
Now look over your lane and see if you ain't dirty too

Admitting her character is far from innocent in the relationship, it turns out her man's lane is as dirty as the singer suggests, filled with other women he is being intimate with. Reluctant to give up on her partner, however, the narrative in this song ends with the woman reminding her man about her own potent sexual wiles. She sings, "Now if I kiss you daddy, make the water run out your eyes / And if I squeeze your lemon baby, you be satisfied." As always with Bogan's material, there is no justification for the singer's actions. If it is the woman's choice to stay with her partner, she needs no rationalization.

Male characters are not always painted as two-timing dead-beats in Bogan's songs. "Black Angel Blues" (1930) describes how much and why the woman loves her protector. She sings:

I got a sweet black angel, I like the way he spread his wings  
I got a sweet black angel, I like the way he spread his wings  
And I'm crazy 'bout him, he spread so much joy in everything

If I ask him for a dime he give me a ten-dollar bill  
If I ask him for a dime he give me a ten-dollar bill  
He does everything to keep my wants filled

English jazz musician and BBC radio host Humphrey Lyttelton asserts that, "In the stanzas of the blues, love may be passionate, tender, bawdy, violent or tragic, but never romantic" (Lyttelton 1978, 63). In this sentimental, softer scenario about feelings of security and happiness, I would suggest that the lyric does depict a love that is romantic. The woman's only thought of being blue comes from *if* her man were to stray. She sings, "If my black angel would leave me I believe that I would die / And if I see him look at another woman I'd just scream and cry."

The next song in this category is "My Baby Come Back" (1933). Not to be fooled by the title, this song is more than a simple tune expressing pleasure that a woman's wandering lover



has returned to her. While this is, in part, the case, the man's acceptance back into the singer's fold comes with conditions. She sings, "He come back this mornin' he got back 'bout half past four" and her man says to her, "If you let me in woman I will make you love me some more." Rather than let this be enough of a deal to allow her aimless lover back into her life, the singer ends the song petitioning her own case:

If I take you back baby, I tell you what you got to do  
If I take you back baby, I tell you what you got to do  
You've got to steal back and borrow daddy  
And bring it all home with you

Negotiating at four in the morning with a wayward partner, the character emphasizes her willingness to take him back, but not without hammering out a firm deal before doing so. To provide some context for the songs about male domestic violence against women, I would like to fast-forward for a moment to the second-wave of the feminist movement, looking at some issues faced by white women as well as women of colour. Whereas the first-wave concentrated mainly on suffrage and overturning other legal obstacles to gender equality, second-wave feminism furthered the debate by drawing attention to domestic violence, marital rape and the establishment of rape crisis and battered women's shelters, among of course, other issues.

Assaults in the home had been regarded as a matter of private life and were deemed unsuitable for public scrutiny. Making domestic violence and other related issues something to be addressed as a society was the purpose behind second-wave feminists' notion that the personal is political (Evans 1979, 213-214). Performances by the classic blues women were a cultural space wherein public discourse on male violence had been established prior to second-wave feminist activities and represent an instance of the classic blues mirroring pre-feminist ideology. On this topic, Angela Davis writes:

There is a body of preserved oral culture...about domestic abuse in the songs of blues women like Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith. Violence against women was always an appropriate topic in 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. (Davis 1999, 25)

Along with Rainey and Smith, Bogan has songs addressing male physical violence and abuse. In "House Top Blues," (1933) the male's forcible behavior is associated with his use of alcohol.

The singer makes no mention of leaving him nor of kicking him out of their abode because of his actions. She states, "He black my eye and I could not see / He black my eye and I could not see / He tore my house top down but that's all right with me." The singer's feeling of vulnerability is reflected in the ripped apart roof, or house top, put in place architecturally to protect, but still she concedes, "that's all right with me."

Another reference to physical abuse is in "Doggone Wicked Blues" (1927). The character sings, "Ah don't whip me daddy, let's try and get along / Ah don't whip me daddy, let's try and get along / You took me from my husband, brought me away from home." While there is no indication of alcohol use in this scenario, the man's conduct is attributed to his having what the singer calls a head like a rock and a heart like a marble stone. Here again, as in the case of "House Top Blues," there is no action taken by the woman to remove herself from the situation.

In "New Muscle Shoals Blues" (1933), a woman is looking for employment for her man. In the opening line she sings, "I'm going to Muscle Shoals to get my man a government job." It turns out that this employment Bogan wrote about connects with an historical landmark, the Wilson Dam. Construction of the dam began in 1918 and spanned the Tennessee River between Lauderdale County and Colbert County in the state of Alabama (National Register of Historic Places 2016). The singer croons:

They get men from a far and they workin' them on the Wilson Dam  
They get men from a far and they workin' them on that Wilson Dam  
Down in Muscle Shoals, Lord, eighty miles from Birmingham

It sounds like a good opportunity and a government job, one might posit, is sure to provide a worker with adequate compensation. Eager for some security from her partner, the singer however, holds on to a seed of uncertainty suggesting that though her man might earn some cash, how it will be dispensed is unknown:

Put your arms around me daddy like a ring around the rising sun  
Put your arms around me daddy like a ring around the rising sun  
If you make any money in Muscle Shoals daddy won't you give me some

“Boogan Ways Blues” (1934) and “My Man is Boogan Me” (1934) both include a less than desirable partner for the female character. In the first song the woman sings, “You’s a dirty mistreater and I’ll be the same way about you.” In the second song the singer proclaims, “There’s one thing I want my man to know / I ain’t going to be his low-down dog no more...I’m sick and tired the way my man is boogan me.” Bogon’s character gripes again in “Tired as I Can Be” (1934) singing, “My house rent’s due, they done put me out doors / And here you ridin’ round here in a V8 Ford / I done got tired of your low-down dirty ways.”

In “Down in Boogie Alley” (1934), vengeful actions appear after the admission of frustration about a woman’s partner and his behaviour. Boogie Alley is a place the man frequents where he runs around with other women and the singer is fully aware of what he is doing, where he can be found. She articulates her remedy to the situation:

I’m going to stop my man from runnin’ around  
I’m going to stop my man from runnin’ around  
‘Cause down in boogie alley is where he can be found

He goes down in boogie alley house number three  
He goes down in boogie alley house number three  
And when he gets down there the womens won’t let him come to see me

I went down in boogie alley with my razor in my hand  
Went down in boogie alley with my razor in my hand  
And the blues struck me I brought back my man

Another song that uses the razor as a tool used on a transgressive male is the first of

Bogan's two recordings of "Shave 'em Dry" (1935):

All you keg women, you better put on the wall  
'Cause I'm gonna get drunk and do my dirty talk  
The monkey and the baboon playin' in the grass  
And the monkey got mad and whipped his yas, yas, yas

Talkin' 'bout shave, mama's gonna shave 'em dry  
And if you don't know, mama's gonna learn you how  
You know a elephant he's big and stout  
He would be alright if it weren't for his snout

Talkin' 'bout shave, mama's gonna shave 'em dry  
And if you don't know, mama's gonna learn you how  
I ain't rough, I ain't tough  
I'm just a stomp-down roller and I like to strut my stuff

Talkin' 'bout shave 'em, mama's gonna shave 'em dry  
And if you don't know I'm gonna learn you how  
I met a man lived down the way  
He had so much money until I had to stay

Talkin' 'bout shave 'em, mama's gonna shave 'em dry  
And if you don't know, mama's gonna learn you how  
If you meet your man and he tell you a lie  
Just pull out your razor and shave him dry

Talkin' 'bout shave 'em, mama's gonna shave him dry  
'Cause I don't want no man to tell me no dirty lie

With a general anti-male narrative, she starts out the song with a warning, "All you keg women [drinkers], you better put on the wall," telling a rowdy group to back up and make room for the singer to do her dirty talk. It is possible she flirts with prostitution when referring to a would-be john as an elephant, but she certainly refers to lesbianism when she iterates that the "elephant...would be alright if it weren't for his snout [sex organ]." The singer encourages her

listeners to take action in the case of a distrustful partner, “If you meet your man and he tell you a lie / Just pull out your razor and shave him dry.” The razor, otherwise a tool assisting with the up-keep of personal appearance, is used as the woman’s weapon of choice in the above mentioned “Down in Boogie Alley” as well as both renditions of the applicably named “Shave ‘em Dry.”

The next song in the category of relationships and self-determined sexuality is “B.D. Women’s Blues” (1935). Historically, it is uncertain as to whether the term B.D., short for bull dagger or bull dyke, was even widely recognized at the time as slang for lesbian. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the words bull dicker as first used by American gay author John Rechy in 1963’s *City of Night*. The term, however, can be found in print as early as 1909 as used by sexologist J. Richardson Parke in *Human Sexuality: A Medico-Literary Treatise on the History and Pathology of the Sex Instinct*. In more recent scholarship, feminist author Judy Grahn considers bull dyke a low-class term. She writes, “[bull dyke] is used by lower-class, ‘straight’ people, to describe a tough, brave, bold Lesbian who is considered ‘mannish’ or ‘butchy’ in her characteristics and mannerisms.” Grahn further suggests that Bogan (under the pseudonym of Bessie Jackson) is likely the first to use the term in the classic blues era (Grahn 1984, 135).

When looking at the lyrics in “B.D. Woman’s Blues” the lower-class interpretation of bull dyke, as suggested by Grahn, is employed. This song displays a clear instance of self-determined sexuality:

Comin’ a time B. D. women ain’t gon’ need no men  
Comin’ a time B. D. womens ain’t gon’ need no men  
Oh the way they treat us is a low-down and dirty sin

B. D. women you sure can’t understand  
B. D. women you sure can’t understand  
They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man

B. D. women they all done learnt their plan  
B. D. women they all done learnt their plan  
They can lay their jive just like a natural man

B. D. women, B. D. women you know they sure is rough  
B. D. women, B. D. women you know they sure is rough  
They all drink up plenty whiskey and they sure will strut their stuff

B. D. women you know they work and make their dough  
B. D. women you know they work and make their dough  
And when they get ready to spend it they know they have to go

The singer begins by telling the listener in the first stanza that men don't treat women in a good manner and they carry an element of deceit. It is in the last three stanzas that the gears shift and the B. D. women take the reigns and some lower-class bull dyke stereotypes appear. In the song, B. D. women are rough, they are all heavy drinkers and are not shy to strut their stuff. In this case, the cliché of strutting one's stuff, when applied to women, indicates flaunting a sexuality attractive to heterosexual males, bringing about a very different image. The last three lines of "B. D. Women's Blues" state that these women make their own money, do not need to entice anyone to pay them for their attention and are inherently aware of when it's a good time to clear out.

"Triflin' Blues" (1923) is an uncomplicated song with an equally transparent lyric. The singer appears keen to do whatever it takes to keep her man happy when she sings, "I plan to give you my last dime and everything I've got." I interpret this as the price she is prepared to pay to keep her lover's loyalty. In return, she simply asks, "Daddy don't you trifle on me."

In "Oklahoma Man Blues" (1927), the character sings a straightforward and romantic lyric, "Now put your arms around me daddy like a ring around the rising sun." The Oklahoma aspect referred to in the title enters the story later in the song, "[I'm] standing here with my man waiting for my train to come...me and my man is Oklahoma bound." In "Doggone Wicked Blues" (1927), the singer states that her man treats her like a dog everywhere they go. Her complaint is

not backed up by actions to leave or to seek vengeance on the mistreating man, instead she sings “Don’t quit me daddy, let’s try and get along.”

The title of the next song, “Skin Game Blues” (1935), might mislead the listener to assume that the song is about sex. Two online sources cite the following definitions of the term skin game: according to *Dictionary.com* the phrase surfaced between 1865-1870 and refers to a dishonest or unscrupulous business operation (*Dictionary* 2016), and *Oxford Dictionaries* online writes that skin game refers to a rigged gambling game; a swindle (*Oxford Dictionaries* 2016). Sure enough, the singer’s male partner in “Skin Game Blues” is an avid card shark. She laments his financially broken state, the risks he has put her in and she herself bets on his gambling ways to remedy the situation:

He’s done pawned my house, he got my life at stake  
He’s done pawned my house, got my life at stake  
And I got to get it back with that money he gamble and make

The woman in the song was doing quite well for herself. She had a house, then met a man she fancied and allowed him to use it as collateral in a high stakes game. In this instance of a relationship with a male, the singer flirts with danger and jeopardizes her future living situation, all for the attention of one wagering man.

Contrary to the female character in “Skin Game Blues” who is devoted to her temerarious man, we find a headstrong lady in “Reckless Woman” (1934). She begins by singing, “Oh a woman gets tired of one man all the time Lord, Lord, Lord.” This song is a simple confession that offers no indication that the woman’s restless sexual or relational nature is anything other than natural to her as well as other women:

I ain’t never loved just one man in my life Lord, Lord, Lord  
I ain’t never loved just one man in my life Lord, Lord, Lord  
‘Cause this kinda love I got I can’t love the same way twice

Some womens like two mens some womens they like three Lord, Lord, Lord  
Some women like two mens some womens they like three Lord, Lord, Lord  
But I like as many men I see is good to me

It is interesting to alternate between the songs in this category as the nature of relations, mostly to men, varies widely. From the helter-skelter woman in the above song we oscillate to a loyal character who is eager to please her man as much as she is keen to reap the rewards when she does things that her lover likes. In the aptly titled “That’s What My Baby Likes” (1935) we see a woman fulfilling some stereotypical domestic duties while using a culinary sexual reference in one instance and describing material rewards earned in another:

I fix his supper and I don’t be late  
And I serve it to him like serving jelly on a plate  
That’s what my baby likes  
That’s what my baby likes  
And he is crazy about it and he do let me have my fun

I get red ripe tomatoes, buy me a T-bone steak  
And if I fix it like he tell me he’ll give me a Cadillac 8  
That’s what my baby likes  
That’s what my baby likes  
He is crazy about me and he do let me have my fun

These lyrics are playful in relation to the singer and her man who, uniquely, is able to provide.

“Jump Steady Daddy” (1935) is all about the singer having her own sexual needs fulfilled by her man. She sings, “Love me daddy, love me all the time / Love me daddy, love me all the time / And if you love me like I tell you / You’ll be that jump dirty man of mine.” The singer describes what she considers very satisfying behaviour:

He goes from the top down to the floor  
Oh, mmm just can’t let him go  
‘Cause he jump better than any man that I know

The assertive lyrics in “Pig Iron Sally” (1934) characterize a woman’s self-determined identity. The relationship in this song is one the singer has with the world at large and she alludes



to what could be called a white racial bias in the first stanza:

Some folks say black is evil but I will tell them, whoa, they're wrong  
Some folks say black is evil but I will tell them, whoa, they're wrong  
'Cause I'm a sin skin brown and I been evil ever since I been born

The last line of this verse is a warning of sorts, that the singer is nefarious by nature. She goes on to describe this characteristic with some detail singing, "I got a head like a freight train and I walk just like a grizzly bear" – a sort of get-them-before-they-get-me attitude.

With regards to the term pig iron, it refers to crude iron that is the direct product of the blast furnace that is refined to produce steel or wrought iron (*Merriam-Webster* 2016). When the singer touts, "They call me pig iron Sally 'cause I live in slagyne [sp] alley / And I'm evil and mean as I can be," she is relaying the fact that not only does she see herself as hard-as-nails, but her very reputation is nick-named after a term identifying heavy metals.

In "Red Cross Man" (1933), the singer identifies the red cross show repeatedly in the lyric:

Oh baby now you got to go  
You can't go to no hill you got to go the red cross show  
Wonder what them people standin' talking so  
I believe they are talkin' 'bout a red cross show

In the *Encyclopedia of the Blues* edited by Edward Komara, it is suggested that any reference to red cross is in relation to the Red Cross stores that dispensed food and other basic necessities to those in need during the depression era (Komara 2006, 737). This song is an unadorned tribute to the organization.

"War Time Man Blues" (1927) includes lyrics like, "A workin' man is my livin' a gambler's all I crave / Workin' man is my livin', gambler's all I crave / These gamblin' men is going to drive me to my grave." While these words are not complicated, they pay no attention to the poignant title of the song. Instead they point to the singer's preference for a risk-taking man

even though she knows she needs someone with a steady job. At the end of the song the word war appears in the lyrics, “My man’s born in the war time and brought up like a slave / But today he ain’t fightin’ for my gamblin’ [friend].” This is the only reference to the title found in the lyric of the song.

### *Rejection*

In this category we find several tracks that deal with the feelings of being left behind.

“Lonesome Daddy Blues” (1923), “Chirpin’ the Blues” (1923), “Crawlin’ Lizard Blues” (1930), “Seaboard Blues” (1933) and “Lonesome Midnight Blues” (1934) each describe candid scenarios of a woman who wakes up only to find her lover on his way out of her life. In all of these songs about lost love, the singer laments her man’s departure and expresses a spurned feeling as well a desire for reconnection.

Contrary to the title, “Nice and Kind Blues” (1927), the male character in this song is anything but nice and kind. The first two lines of the song say it all as she declares, “My man took all my money / My man, he wants to take my life.” Instead of retribution, the singer reveals her sense of helplessness and vulnerability, rhetorically asking her mate what is going on. She sings, “Help me daddy what are you trying to do / Help me daddy what are you trying to do / Trying to kill me or just break my heart in two.”

Three songs address the impact of the railroad on interpersonal relationships. The first, “T & N O Blues” (1933), is about a man who likes to ride the rails, minus a travel itinerary provided to those he is connected to. The singer’s desperation about her lover’s questionable return is articulated in religious or spiritual terms. Beyond the idiomatic reference to the Lord, she sings, “I fall down on my knees, pray to the Lord above / Please send me back the only man that I love.” The second song is “Forty-Two Hundred Blues” (1933). Here, the singer longingly stands

at the train station when that forty-two hundred left town. The man she loves is on board and she is uncertain as to when or if he will return.

The third song referencing the railroad is “I Hate That Train Called the M. and O.” (1934).

In this instance, unlike the women in the two previous songs, the singer resentfully states:

I hate that train that they all call the M. and O.  
I hate that train that they call the M. and O.  
It took my baby away and he ain't coming back no more

Whether she feels rejected by her man or the train/railroad itself, the singer is clearly defiant about the fact that she has been left behind.

As we have seen thus far there are different emotions displayed in reaction to being rejected – sadness, loneliness and anger being a few of them. In “Walkin’ Blues” (1933) the singer blames herself for the misfortune bestowed upon her:

My baby put me out, put me out for somebody else  
My baby put me out for somebody else  
But that's alright I brought it on myself

The woman goes from blaming herself in “Walkin’ Blues” to being filled with worry and self-doubt in “Troubled Mind” (1933). Here, the singer describes that her absentee lover left her “feeling worried, down-hearted and blue...wonderin’ if my man, Lord, loves me still.”

In “The Bedroom Blues: Love and Lust in the Lyrics of Early Female Blues Artists,” Greg Watson suggests that fear of rejection, long before it happens, is a theme in early women’s blues:

These songs might deal with a situation where the relationship is about to end, or is in the process of doing so, or where the woman is worried about losing her man... The level of expression in this category can be quite desperate at stages, varying from where the woman begs the man to stay, as in Ida Cox’s *Booze Crazy Man Blues*, where she sings: ‘Daddy oh sweet daddy, please don’t drive me away, I love you sweet papa, please let your mama stay’ to where another contemplates murder rather than face rejection and mistreatment, in *Take Him Off My Mind*: ‘It’s all about my man, who’s always kicked and dogged me around, I’ve tried my best to kill him, but when I do my love come down.’ (Watson 2006, 343)

“Walkin’ Blues” and “Troubled Mind” embrace the type of rejection discussed by Watson. His comments point to attitudes in other Bogan songs, like the two found in the domestic violence grouping, where despite the abuse the female characters (similar to Cox’s in the above quote) let the love they feel stop them from leaving.

In “Changed Way Blues” (1934), “Sweet Man Sweet Man” (1934) and “Bo Easy Blues” (1935) we find women distressed over a man who has left them, specifically, a good guy who is normally hard to find. Whether they lament a romanticized version of this man who is now long gone or they are longing for a gypsy-like wanderer who has loved them and left, they are stuck in the land of rejection.

The singer in “You Got to Die Someday” (1934) astutely reminds her lover about karma:

You may be beautiful but baby you got to die someday  
You may be beautiful but baby you got to die someday  
And you going to reap what you sow for treatin’ me this old way

All responsibility, blame and self-doubt are removed from the female character in this song and accountability is placed directly on the mistreating man.

### *Alcohol Use and Dependency*

Bessie Smith had long exhibited an inordinate taste for alcohol, preferring white lightning, a homemade liquor (Albertson 2003, 17). While details of Bogan’s life, such as whether or not she used alcohol, are not known, her repertoire includes songs addressing alcohol use and dependency.

In “Cravin’ Whiskey Blues” (1927), the singer states, “Whiskey is my habit... Ain’t but one thing keep a good woman down in life.” The character who sounds remorseful about her dependence on liquor is replaced in the next song by a saucy woman who is not afraid to name booze as a priority in her life. The lyrics in “Sloppy Drunk Blues” (1930) declare:

I love my moonshine whiskey better than I do my man  
I love my moonshine whiskey better than I do my man  
You can have your beer in your bottle, give me my cool kind can

The singer is not only relaying to the listener that she is not ashamed of drinking, but that, unlike her man, at least she can count on her moonshine whiskey.

In “Drinking Blues” (1934), the lyrics describe a more mature attitude about alcohol dependency that includes a little bit of the sentiment from each of the above mentioned songs:

Blues has got me drinkin’ trouble’s got me thinkin’  
And it’s going to carry me to my grave  
I said blues has got me drinkin’ trouble’s got me thinkin’  
And it’s going to carry me to my grave  
And I’m going to keep on drinkin’ the rest of my worried days

Don’t a woman look real funny when she wakes up cold in hand  
And the broad ain’t got a dollar to give the house-rent man  
Don’t a woman feel real funny when the broad wakes up cold in hand  
And she ain’t got a dollar, oh, to meet the house-rent man

The harsh reality of what happens after the buzz wears off is brought to the forefront in this song.

The singer doesn’t pretend that, because her habit leaves her broke, she plans on changing her ways, but the insolent attitude is absent here. What is left is not so much a sense of remorse, but one of realism and perhaps regret.

### *Death*

The last category in the typology of Lucille Bogan’s lyrics is death. “Roll and Rattler” (1933) begins with these words, “I love my man head down to his toes / Say I love my man head down to his toes / But he put me in bad luck, doggone as bad luck goes.” These lines are direct and leave little to the imagination. If we keep on, however, we see a darker turn:

I follow my man down to the croak of day  
I follow my man down to the croak of day  
And I watch the pall bearer put him in his lonesome grave

I'm going to follow him to the burying ground  
Say I'm going to follow him to the burying ground  
Then I'll catch a rolling mailer and I'll leave this ground

For causes unknown, the singer's man has been lowered into the ground. The woman pays her respects visiting the burial site, but there is no sense of sorrow when she catches her ride and leaves him behind. It is a rather practical, matter-of-fact view of the inevitable.

“Mean Twister” (1933) has a different take on death and loss. Like the title suggests, the twister (or tornado) is the cause of demise in this song unlike the unexplained reason for the death in “Roll and Rattler.” The woman sings:

I'm gon' tell everybody what that mean old twister done  
I'm gon' tell everybody what that mean old twister done  
It tore down my house and hardly left a one

Fell down on my knees and I raised my hands to God above  
Fell down on my knees, raised my hands to God above  
Say you tore down my house and you killed the man I love

While the twister coming down is the reason that her house was ruined and her lover killed, the singer places responsibility for the crisis on God. In disastrous situations that cause loss and emotional pain, people often turn to God, or religion, for comfort and sometimes for someone/thing to hold accountable. This song exemplifies this very sentiment.

APPENDIX B: Lucille Bogan Extra Tracks

**“Hungry Man’s Scuffle” composed by Walter Roland (piano accompaniment, spoken – Bogan and Walter Roland/Josh White; unclear as to who is the male vocal) Recorded 1933 (Allmusic 2016)**

Male: Play it man, it makes me happy

Lucille Bogan (LB): Let your feet get happy boy, that’s what I wanna see, let your feet get happy  
Shuck now look at that stuff. You hear that don’t you boy?

Male: Uh huh

LB: Could you do the button wing?

Male: Yeah babe

LB: Well I wanna see you do it. I tell ya if ya can (feet tapping)

Ah haul them asses home, haul ‘em. That what I’m talkin’ ‘bout, look at that

Come here everybody, come here, come here quick

Who like coals in the mines boy, bring ‘em here. Shook now, boy that just won’t quit

What you do that for womens or for money?

Male: I don’t do it (pause) just because I can, I do’s this keep from starvin’

LB: Why you is hungry I see you look like it

Male: Oh what?

LB: Ted, fix some chili for this man, he hungry, so he can do it good

Male: Anything nice

LB: Boy you just come in this town I can tell that

Male: Angel here

LB: Come outta town and get out the country

Male: Who you talkin’ to?

LB: Some o’ y’ol’ fool

Male: That’s alright then

LB: Pull that wagon boy, pull it. Whoa now, whoa!

Male: Shucks I got to go out hear that music. I can’t fool around here this way

LB: Let me have it then, let me have it (feet tapping), go on (unclear) no how. You look just like  
that nigger I met at slick rock

**“Watcha Gonna Do?” composed by Walter Roland (piano accompaniment, sung – Bogan and Walter Roland/Josh White; unclear as to who is the male vocal) Recorded 1933 (Allmusic 2016)**

Male: Said look here good say you ain’t treatin’ me right, you go all day and you stay all night  
Now watcha gonna do, now watcha gonna do, ah watcha gonna do, watcha gonna do to  
poor me?

LB: I don’t love no man I hope another will, I swear lovin’ men get good womens killed  
Now watcha gonna do, ah watcha gonna do, watcha gonna do, baby watcha gonna do?

Male: My baby won’t treat me right wouldn’t come home sun was shining bright

Now watcha gonna do, now watcha gonna do, now watcha gonna do, watcha gonna do to  
poor me?

Male: Does you know my woman says she treats me good, treats me better by the neighbourhood  
Now whatcha gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, ah whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do to  
poor me?

LB: You went out last night and you stayed all night when you come your pants were fittin' you  
right

Now whatcha gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do to poor  
me?

Male: (unclear) by the judge he's old and grey he's got more womens than the farmer got hay  
Now whatcha gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do to  
poor me?

A good judge says he grabbed a key you know what the judge said "sure wouldn't we"  
Now whatcha gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do to  
poor me?

LB: There's one thing baby can't understand I'm gon' tell you now I got another man  
Now whatcha gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do to poor  
me?

Male: One day when a summer land fell (unclear) country well Now whatcha gonna do, now  
whatch gonna do, now whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do to poor me?



APPENDIX C: Discography

8362-B	The Pawn Shop Blues	OK 8079	1923
71561-B	Lonesome Daddy Blues	OK 8074	1923
71562-B	Chirpin' The Blues	OK 8071	1923
71569-B	Triflin' Blues (Daddy, Don't You Trifle On Me)	OK 8071	1923
71570-B	Don't Mean You No Good Blues	OK 8074	1923
4309-1	Sweet Patunia	Pm 12459	1927
4324-1	Levee Blues	Pm 12459	1927
4668-1	Kind Stella Blues	Pm 12504	1927
4672-2	Jim Tampa Blues	Pm 12504	1927
4673-2	War Time Man Blues	Pm 12560	1927
4674-1	Cravin' Whiskey Blues	Pm 12577	1927
4676-1	Nice And Kind Blues	Pm 12577	1927
4677-2	Women Won't Need No Men	Pm 12560	1927
Some copies of 4677 are titled A Woman Won't Need No Man.			
Matrices 4699 and 4674 untraced.			
4703-2	Doggone Wicked Blues	Pm 12514	1927
4704-2	Oklahoma Man Blues	Pm 12514	1927
C-2418-	New Way Blues	Br 7051	1928
C-2419-	Pay Roll Blues	Br 7051	1928
C-3461-	Coffee Grindin' Blues	Br 7083	1929
C-3462-A	Pot Hound Blues	Br 7083	1929
C-5347-	My Georgia Grind	Br unissued	
C-5348-	Whiskey Selling Woman	Br unissued	
C-5349-	They Ain't Walking No More	Br unissued	
C-5547-	My Georgia Grind	Br 7145	1930
C-5548-	Whiskey Selling Woman	Br 7145	1930
C-5549-	They Ain't Walking No More	Br 7163	1930
C-5550-	Dirty Treatin' Blues	Br 7163	1930
C-5562-A	Sloppy Drunk Blues	Br 7210	1930
Ba 32390			
Me M12484			
Or 8122			
Pe 198			
Ro 5122			
C-6653-A	Alley Boogie	Br 7210	1930
Ba 32390			
Me M12484			
Or 8122			
Pe 198			
Ro 5122			

Banner, Melotone, Oriole, Perfect, and Romeo issues as by Bessie Jackson.

C-6845-	Crawlin' Lizard Blues	Br 7193	1930
C-6846-	Struttin' My Stuff	Br 7193	1930
C-6847-A	Black Angel Blues	Br 7186	1930
		Ba 32389	
		Or 8121	
		Pe 197	
		Ro 5121	
C-6848-A	Tricks Ain't Walking No More	Br 7186	1930
		Ba 32389	
		Or 8121	
		Pe 197	
		Ro 5121	

Banner, Oriole, Perfect, and Romeo issues as by Bessie Jackson.

This artist's real name was Lucille Bogan (*nee* Anderson), but henceforth she recorded as Bessie Jackson.

13548-1	Red Cross Man	Ba 33072	1933
		Me M13036	
		Or 8342	
		Pe 0281	
		Ro 5342	
13549-1	T & N O Blues	Ba 32845	1933
		Me M12774	
		Or 8263	
		Pe 0255	
		Ro 5263	
13561-1	My Baby Come Back	Ba 32956	1933
		Me M12899	
		Or 8301	
		Pe 0268	
		Ro 5301	
13562-1	Forty-Two Hundred Blues	Ba 33119	1933
		Me M13086	
		Or 8361	
		Pe 0289	
		Ro 5361	
13563-1	Walkin' Blues	Ba 33119	1933
		Me M13086	
		Or 8361	
		Pe 0289	
		Ro 5361	
13564-1	House Top Blues	Ba 32845	1933
		Me M12774	
		Or 8263	
		Pe 0255	
		Ro 5263	

13567-	I'm Gonna Have My Way	ARC unissued	
13569-1	Baking Powder Blues	Ba 33059	1933
		Me M13021	
		Or 8338	
		Pe 0280	
		Ro 5338	
13588-1	Groceries On The Shelf	Ba 32904	1933
		Cq 8353	
		Me M12845	
		Or 8285	
		Pe 0262	
		Ro 5285	
13589-1	Seaboard Blues	Ba 32833	1933
		Cq 8243	
		Me M12763	
		Or 8258	
		Pe 0253	
		Ro 5258	
13590-	Kokomo Blues	ARC unissued	
13591-	Mistreatin' Papa	ARC unissued	
13592-1-2	Roll And Rattler -2	Ba 32904	1933
		Me M12845	
		Or 8285	
		Pe 0262	
		Ro 5285	
It is not known which take of 13592 is used on which issues.			
13594-1	Whatcha Gonna Do?	Vo 02532	1933
13603-2	Superstitious Blues (Hooch House Blues)	Ba 32956	1933
		Cq 8353	
		Me M12899	
		Or 8301	
		Pe 0268	
		Ro 5301	
13604-1	Mean Twister	Ba 33059	1933
		Me M13021	
		Or 8338	
		Pe 0280	
		Ro 5338	
13605-1	Troubled Mind	Ba 32833	1933
		Cq 8243	
		Me M12763	
		Or 8258	
		Pe 0253	
		Ro 5258	
13606-1	Hungry Man's Scuffle	Vo 25015	1933
13609-1	New Muscle Shoals Blues	Ba 33072	1933

		Me M13036	
		Or 8342	
		Pe 0281	
		Ro 5342	
15477-2	You Got To Die Someday	ARC 6-04-63	1934
15478-2	Lonesome Midnight Blues	ARC 6-04-63	1934
15486-2	Boogan Ways Blues	Ba 33245	1934
		Me M13212	
		Or 8395	
		Pe 0300	
		Ro 5395	
15487-2	My Man Is Boogan Me	Ba 33375	1934
		Me M13342	
		Or 8445	
		Pe 0317	
		Ro 5445	
15488-	Hard Way Blues	ARC unissued	
15490-2	Pig Iron Sally	Ba 33375	1934
		Me M13342	
		Or 8445	
		Pe 0317	
		Ro 5445	
15491-1	I Hate That Train Called The M. And O.	ARC 6-02-04	1934
15496-2	Drinking Blues	Ba 33245	1934
		Me M13212	
		Or 8395	
		Pe 0300	
		Ro 5395	
15497-	Fools Blues	ARC unissued	
15498-	Black Damper Blues	ARC unissued	
15505-1	Tired As I Can Be	Ba 33313	1934
		Me M13280	
		Or 8419	
		Pe 0308	
		Ro 5419	
15506-2	Sweet Man, Sweet Man	Ba 33149	1934
		Cq 8543	
		Me M13116	
		Or 8375	
		Pe 0295	
		Ro 5375	
		<i>JC L90</i>	
15507-2	Reckless Woman	Ba 33313	1934
		Me M13280	
		Or 8419	

		Pe 0308	
		Ro 5419	
15508-2	Down In Boogie Alley	Ba 33149	1934
		Cq 8543	
		Me M13116	
		Or 8375	
		Pe 0295	
		Ro 5375	
		<i>JC L90</i>	
15509-	Bootleggers Blues	ARC unissued	
15510-	Rolling Alone	ARC unissued	
15511-	Do Right Blues	ARC unissued	
15512-	Jim Stack O'Lee Blues	ARC unissued	
15517-	Doing A Hundred And Eighty Days	ARC unissued	
15518-	Trouble Bearing Down	ARC unissued	
15519-1	Changed Way Blues	ARC 6-02-64	1935
16959-2	Bo-Easy Blues	ARC unissued	
16960-1	Money Loaner Blues	ARC unissued	
16965-2	That's What My Baby Likes	ARC 350913	1935
		Cq 8559	
16966-	Honeycomb Man	ARC unissued	
16970-	Mr. Screw Worm In Trouble	ARC unissued	
16971-	Bo-Hog Blues	ARC unissued	
16972-1	Shave 'Em Dry	Ba 33475	1935
		Me M133442	
		Or 8487	
		Pe 0332	
		Ro 5487	
	Shave 'Em Dry	ARC unissued;	
		<i>CBS(E) 63288</i>	
		<i>Stash ST101, ST117 (LPs)</i>	
The second version of Shave 'Em Dry is believed to come from this session, and may have been issued as a party-records 78.			
16982-	Dirty Bed Bug Blues	ARC unissued	
16983-	Bed Rollin' Blues	ARC unissued	
16984-1	Barbeque Bess	Ba 33475	1935
		Me M13442	
		Or 8487	
		Pe 0332	
		Ro 5487	
16989-	Dangerous Screw Worm	ARC unissued	
16990-	Schoolboy Blues	ARC unissued	
16991-2	B. D. Woman's Blues	ARC 5-12-58	1935
16992-	Baby, You Can't Come In	ARC unissued	
16993-2	Jump Steady Daddy	ARC 5-12-58	1935

16997-2	Man Stealer Blues	ARC 350913	1935
		Cq 8559	
17010-	Cryin' Bed Spring Blues	ARC unissued	
17011-	Sad And Sick Woman Blues	ARC unissued	
17013-1	Stew Meat Blues	Ba 33448	1935
		Me M13415	
		Or 8474	
		Pe 0329	
		Ro 5474	
17014-1	Skin Game Blues	Ba 33448	1935
		Me M13415	
		Or 8474	
		Pe 0329	
		Ro 5474	

[No record of 'Till The Cows Come Home]

(Dixon and John Godrich 1982, 98-101, 630).