

# THE BELOVED PURPLE OF THEIR EYES: INHERITING BESSIE SMITH'S POLITICS OF SEXUALITY

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You never get nothing by being an angel child  
You'd better change your ways and get real wild  
Ida Cox, "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues"

## **1. New Perspectives of African-American Feminist Studies**

Some of the latest studies in Black Feminism are concerned with outlining its historical evolution as a discipline, as well as envisioning major tasks to undertake in the future. Other studies compile features underlining a common ground of thematic links among different arts, thus interrelating cultural expressions from different genres. There also seems to be a particular interest in compiling anthologies including outstanding, but often neglected, artists from different manifestations of African-American culture. Taking the first premise into account, many critics have focused on outlining the evolution of Black Feminist literary studies from a historical perspective. V.P.Franklin (2002) dwells upon the reasons why Black Feminism arose during the 1970s as a response to the lack of attention African-American women had to bear both in Black Studies, eminently male, and the Women's Liberation Movement, primarily white. By coining the term 'womanism' in her seminal book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*

(1983), Alice Walker came to terms with these distinctions by bridging the gaps between disciplines such as Black Feminism, Black Studies and Feminism. By means of her 'womanist' perspective, Alice Walker highlighted the differences in strategies used in black and white feminist approaches while defending the wholeness of the entire black community, including both females and males.

In a similar way, Ula Taylor (1998) attempted to outline four main phases in Black feminist thought. To her mind, in the first wave, women created self-definitions to repel negative representations of Black womanhood. In a second phase, Black women confronted any structure of oppression in terms of race, class and gender. Subsequently, Black women became involved in intellectual and political activism, and finally, they came to terms with a distinct cultural heritage to resist discrimination. Thus, resembling Kristeva's work (1995) to a certain extent, it is possible to argue they followed a scheme of difference, dominance, and eventually, understanding of a shared cultural heritage. Similarly, Frances Smith Foster (2000) also reflects on the evolution of African-American literary studies, stating that 1960s texts were characterised by being "predominantly twentieth-century and overtly political". (1967) Nevertheless, as Black studies evolved, the consideration of gender relations among African-Americans became a central concern with the increased availability of books written by women. Moreover, as Foster admits, "much ado was made about writing literature in genres that were accessible to 'the people'" (1967), so that the scope of African-American studies broadened in order to incorporate different cultural and artistic manifestations. Deborah E. McDowell (1980) complained about the lack of a developed body of Black feminist political theory (154) and the eminently practical nature, rather than theoretical, of Black feminist scholarship approaches (154). In this respect, McDowell raised a note of caution so as to define a Black feminist methodology while outlining three main tasks African-American feminist criticism should take into consideration: examination of the works of Black male writers; revision of the scholarship of feminists in other disciplines, and isolation of thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities among Black women writers (156-157). These two latter tasks, the concern about other disciplines and the identification of shared features in texts by different African-American writers, have been the focus of many recent studies in Black Feminism.

A second major concern in Black Feminism, following McDowell's thesis, has been to outline commonalties and establish links between different cultural manifestations within African-American women's studies. Judith Musser (1998) states that "the Harlem Renaissance was a period in which diversity flourished" (27) and establishes a poetics of common characteristics that different short-stories of the period were found to share. Some of the characteristics Musser mentions can also be attached to other African-American women's cultural manifestations such

as: urban settings; themes of struggle, conflict and oppression; female protagonists; use of dialect; a first-person narrator; female relationships, rejection of stereotypical representations of women; gender conflicts and violence. The subject of gender conflict and violence seems particularly recurrent as a result of poverty and oppression, to the extent that Barbara Smith<sup>1</sup> (1977) considered it to be present in most African-American women's fiction (8).

A third main trend in African-American women writers' studies has been to compile or review anthologies incorporating major names from different cultural manifestations. Aslaku Berhanu (1998) argued that important contributions by notable African-American women were neglected by most mainstream scholars (296), so she endeavoured to compile recent publications collecting outstanding names of African-American women from different arts in important anthologies such as Darlene Clark Hine's *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1993) and *Black Women in United States History* (1990); Jessie Carney Smith's *Notable Black American Women* (1992), Donald Bogle's *Brown Sugar: Eight Years of America's Black Female Superstars* (1990), and Marianna W. Davis' *Contributions of Black Women to America* (1982).

## **2. Revision of black feminist canonical works in the light of the new perspectives**

In the light of these three main trends in Black Women Studies today,<sup>2</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison<sup>3</sup> can usefully be made objects of reflection in order to gauge the evolution of Black Studies through history and the main trends within Black Feminism today. Most anthologies compiling African-American women writers' fiction include stories by Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.<sup>4</sup> Taking into consideration the concern about the historical evolution of Black Feminism, these three main writers often stand out as representative characters in the phases of Black Feminism that Taylor (1998) outlines. In a way, they share a common cultural heritage that can be appreciated through their fiction, especially with regard to gender relations and sexual politics. Moreover, not only their novels *per se* but also the latest critical studies of their works exemplify these new trends within African-American Women's Studies.

Bearing in mind the evolution of Black Feminism, Jordan (1988) offered an alternative view to the consideration of Hurston's *Their Eyes* as one of the first canonical Black feminist novels. Despite acknowledging its importance in the field, Jordan describes Hurston's novel as a 'feminist fantasy' since Janie "never perceives herself as an independent, intrinsically fulfilled human being" (115). Jordan argues black feminists have often turned to Hurston's novel as an eminently feminist text,

thus neglecting the reactionary atmosphere of the period and, at some points, of Hurston's novel itself. Nonetheless, as Batker (1998) points out, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* situated women at the centre of an African-American women's literary tradition and its transcendence takes shape "within a broad continuum of African-American women's writing on sexuality early in this century" (199), thus concluding that "*Their Eyes* engages in early twentieth-century black feminist politics" (199). Recently, the latest studies published with regard to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* have focused on the unravelling of *Beloved*'s identity in order to highlight the concept of a past common heritage, ultimately finding out that "*Beloved*'s lack of name signifies that she is everybody" (Koolish 2001: 177), or that "*Beloved* represents the pain of slavery they all suffer in some way" (Parker 2001: 12). Following another recent trend in Black Feminist studies, some critics have focused on depicting commonalities between black women writers' novels and other cultural manifestations such as folk culture. Ferguson (1987) identified the male archetypes embodied by Janie's three husbands in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Similarly, Jordan also put forward the importance of women's relationships with one another as an important presence in both Hurston's *Their Eyes* and Walker's *The Colour Purple* (108).

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### **3. The classic blues women singers and their politics of sexuality in Black Feminist Studies**

Taking into consideration the emphasis on the historical evolution of Black Feminism, along with the concern about identifying common features and the interdisciplinary approach to different arts within Black Feminism, several recent studies have focused on the importance of the blues, thus revealing this tripartite tendency in African-American Women Studies. The blues interpreted from the point of view of African-American women singers was described as the classic blues, as opposed to the country or folk blues which was particularly termed as male (Hamilton 2000). The classic blues became popular during the 1920s and 30s; the period commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, in a way, the classic blues originated at the same time that Black consciousness also began to emerge. Moreover, the blues, as specifically black music, broadened the scope of African-American culture, thus considering popular culture in addition to mainstream literary manifestations. As Hamilton suggests "[t]he years from 1920 to 1960 saw the publication of a diverse array of accounts of African-American music, written by social scientists, folklorists, poets, record collectors and others who interpreted and documented black musical practice" (139). In addition, the classic blues lyrics included many of the features of cultural and gender politics commonly found in

African-American women's fiction, even if rendered differently, emphasising its sexual overtones.

Paul Oliver (1983) was one of the first critics to detect the relationship between ethnic literature and the blues. In his view, the link between blues and literature is "not 'inter-' but one-sided" (9) in the sense that it was often African-American writers who drew material from the blues rather than blues singers who found inspiration in literary texts. Oliver states this relationship began in the origins of the Harlem Renaissance and was personified by women singers of the blues, among them Bessie Smith: "Blues-related poetry appeared first in the 1920s 'Negro Renaissance' when the experience of blues by Black poets was mainly through recordings or the stage presentations of Harlem shows and the vaudeville performances of Bessie Smith and Clara Smith" (10). According to Oliver's statement, blues women singers gained status in Black Feminist studies, especially, Bessie Smith, who became a female icon (Oliver 1959; Albertson 1972; Brooks 1982). Lately, this connection has been recognised by Saadi A. Simawe (2000), depicting the transforming power of blues music in the fiction of major African-American women writers such as Sherley Anne Williams, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker or Toni Morrison.

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Women blues singers transformed the blues from a local folk tradition into a performing art, ushering black culture into the American mainstream due to the emergence of the recording industry. Consequently, women vocalists contributed to the professionalisation of the blues. In contrast to the male country blues singers, who traditionally conceived the blues as a way of easing labour and as a means of personal expression, and heritage from the work songs and spirituals of slavery times, it was mainly women who were responsible for creating the classic blues. Female blues singers also brought innovations to the blues itself, as regards the content of their songs, the style of their singing, and in their musical accompaniment. They began to combine the country blues elements with vaudeville and performances that significantly contributed to the audience appeal, infusing them with the central subject of love, often gone wrong. These songs also included elements of fun and parody, ironic remarks, subtle references to sexual intercourse and numerous indirect lines, which unveiled many layers of complex and profound meaning. These women singers transformed the blues tradition from a personal, largely local expression of black experience into a public form of entertainment, introducing it to both black and white audiences. Consequently, they transformed the folk music of the country blues into popular music, bringing experiences of black life to the public stage and granting them public recognition on a national scale.

In her seminal book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1999), Angela Y. Davis, put forward the connection between women blues singers and Black Feminism,

stating that “hints of feminist attitudes emerge from their music through fissures of patriarchal discourses” (xi). Davis argues that black feminist traditions have often excluded ideas produced within poor and working-class communities because these women had no access to published written texts. Nevertheless, she states that “some poor black women did have access to publishers of *oral* texts” (xii). Actually, these black women were the first to record the blues, thus granting the community of African-American women a voice of their own. Before the black men blues singers began to achieve popularity in the decade of the 30s, these women had already managed to contribute “a vast body of musical texts and a rich cultural legacy” (A.Y. Davis: xiii). One might expect that, since these black women blues singers emerged during the artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, critics at that time might have become interested in their music. However, the contributions of blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Ida Cox were regarded as ‘low culture’ in contrast to other forms of art such as literature or painting. This may be the reason why some African-American women writers, well-aware of the importance of women’s blues legacy, have often included the figure of the blues woman in literature, have inscribed in their texts the rhythm of the blues songs, or have contributed to developing the politics of women’s sexuality that characterises women singers’ blues songs. As Davis points out, some fictionalized portraits of blues women appear throughout the novels of Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Sherley Ann Williams, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, or Toni Morrison. Even Mary Helen Washington entitled her second collection of short stories *Any Women’s Blues* (1986). Thus, the blues lyrics of black women constitute a privileged discourse to analyse issues related to gender and sexuality in working-class black communities.

Blues songs share with other forms of popular music their concern with love. Nevertheless, the blues deviated from other popular compositions in their treatment of love. While the European-derived American popular songs of the time described “idealised nonsexual depictions of heterosexual love relationships” (A.Y. Davis: 3), blues songs dealt with extramarital relations, domestic violence, ephemeral sexual partners, sexual desire and bisexuality. Moreover, they were sung by women. As Davis concedes, this openness to address male and especially female sexuality “reveals an ideological framework that was specifically African-American” (A.Y. Davis: 4). Davis claims that the former slaves’ economic and political status had not changed, but the status of their personal relationship had altered so as to allow African-American men and women to make autonomous decisions as regards their sexuality. Thus, issues related to sexuality were not frequent in musical forms produced during slavery. After emancipation, sexual issues could not be expressed through spirituals and work songs, which were the most popular musical forms under slavery focused on a collective desire to end their enslavement. Thus, the

blues emerged as “the predominant postslavery African-American musical form [that] articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires” (A.Y. Davis: 5). Consequently, from the spirituals and work songs, which were inherently collective, emerged the blues, on the one hand, which was secular in origin and the gospel, on the other hand, which was conceived as a sacred musical form.

Angela Y. Davis argues that “personal and sexual dimensions of freedom acquired an expansive importance, especially since the economic and political components of freedom were largely denied to black people in the aftermath of slavery” (10). Thus, sexuality became an important theme of blues songs for men and women singers, but it even became more pronounced in the women's blues. As opposed to the mainstream assumptions of women's sexuality and idealised love, women blues singers challenged issues such as domesticity, marriage and motherhood, and even often exalted economic independence and sexual promiscuity. Quoting the scholar Daphne Duval Harrison, Angela Davis (13) gives a list of the most commonly found themes in women's blues: advice to other women, alcohol, betrayal or abandonment, broken or failed love affairs, death, departure, dilemma of staying with man or returning to family, disease and afflictions, erotica, hell, homosexuality, infidelity, injustice, jail and serving time, loss of lover, love, men, mistreatment, murder, other women, poverty, promiscuity, sadness, sex, suicide, the supernatural, trains, travelling, unfaithfulness, vengeance, weariness, depression and disillusionment and even weight loss. Nevertheless, despite the recurrence of men's abuse of their women, the lyrics often depict assertive and self-willed women who do not hesitate to retaliate with more virulence if necessary.

Thus, women's blues songs challenged any assumptions of women's gender-based inferiority that usually pervaded mainstream culture. By expressing their different views on sexuality politics and defying romanticised relationships, women blues singers redefined women's place and reaffirmed the identity of African-American women. As Angela Y. Davis claims, they were wholly responsible for forging and memorialising “images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings” (41). Gradually, the experiences of these African-American women, depicted through songs, influenced other forms of art such as literature. The sexual politics described and defended in the women's blues was imbibed by African-American women writers who infused their female characters and experiences with those of the women in blues songs. As Houston A. Baker (1987) claims, blues should be conceived as a matrix and “the matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses in productive transit” (3) to the extent that it constitutes “the multiplex, enabling *script*, in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (4). Thus oral and written texts influence and intersect with each other.

#### 4. Bessie Smith's legacy to Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison

Some African-American women writers have acknowledged the deep influence some women blues singers exerted on their work. Zora Neale Hurston was deeply concerned about African-American anthropology and folklore and she was Bessie Smith's contemporary. Alice Walker proved a fervent admirer of Bessie Smith and her influence can be traced through some of the female characters that appear in her novels. Moreover, Toni Morrison has also admitted that music deeply influenced her career as a writer; her character Sula meaningfully illustrates her remark. Not only women writers but also critics and scholars have paid some attention to the mutual influence between blues songs and literary texts. Thomas F. Marvin (1994) and Maria V. Johnson (1998) outlined some established links between blues music and the novels by Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. In the next pages, I will also aim to outline some links between Bessie Smith's lyrics and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, focusing on the politics of sexuality of African-American women in their intercourse with men that emerged through women singers' blues songs.

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Bessie Smith will always be considered the Empress of the Blues. Her voice, harsh and coarse, implied she was not trying to please anyone. As Elaine Feinstein remarks, "the habit of submission, of letting yourself be used, comes too easily to women [whereas] Bessie's voice is a full-hearted rejection of any such foolishness" (11). Underneath the sad tone Bessie imprints on her songs, there suddenly emerges "a sense of freedom and the triumph of her own courageous spirit" (Feinstein: 11). Her lonely voice hardly ever flatters the men she addresses in her songs, but is rather a powerful counterpart to "men's most arrogant interest in women" (Feinstein 1985: 12). In fact, Bessie never dreamt of having a home, with a husband and children to look after. As Feinstein concedes, "home wasn't the place in which she felt most herself" (12). Instead, Bessie seemed glad to be able to manage on her own. Bessie Smith imprinted roughness and lack of social acceptability in her blues songs as a way of defiance. Thus, although on-stage Bessie was declared to be the best, her daring and intimidating behaviour frequently caused more than a stir off-stage. As regards her appearance, Feinstein states: "if I try to conjure up Bessie's presence, in wig and feathers, ready to go on stage, she rises before me, a large-framed woman, with a quick temper, used to resorting to violence when crossed. She was strong enough to fell a man; and she didn't always wait to be attacked before using her fists" (13-14).

Bessie's personality emerged as one of her most remarkable features. As Feinstein claims, "Bessie carried herself as if she did not know how old she was, and felt



beautiful, and liked her own size, in the same way that she wore her blackness with pride instinctively and before it was fashionable” (29). She fervently believed in herself and both her confidence and strength have often been regarded as symbols of resistance by African-American females. Her humble origins and her eventual success as a blues singer are illustrative examples of a self-liberated and autonomous woman, fulfilling the American dream of ascending from *rags-to-riches*. Nevertheless, despite her behaviour which was somewhat dissolute and even violent on occasions, Bessie always felt responsible for her family, her brother and sisters, often taking the role of their mother and father. Despite the strength and resoluteness Bessie showed throughout her life, she sang about the sorrows of women's lives, especially about their heartaches, denouncing female dependence on men, and their efforts to face desertion and betrayal. Despite the fact that women in the United States could vote in 1920, the situation of black women was not likely to change. As Feinstein remarks, black women of the time were consigned to the roles of *mammy* or *whore*. As regards their relationships with men, their male counterparts were frequently so abominably treated that they found it impossible to react humanely towards their women. As a consequence, they often abused them. However, in Bessie's songs and in most of other female blues singers, men are presented as lazy and irresponsible, in addition to treating their women badly, and so they are often scorned. As time went by, these women blues singers produced numerous songs which imbibed and contained the shared thoughts and feelings of the black women as community.

The appearance of the blues in Black Feminist Studies today also tends to follow the previously-mentioned tripartite tendency. Anthologies compiling African-American women writers' prose fiction granting the blues a major role have recently been published,<sup>5</sup> thus showing that the blues is present, either thematically or stylistically, in major canonical texts. Moreover, there has been a concern to study different cultural manifestations following an interdisciplinary approach blending both literary texts and musical texts. Furthermore, there is a need to detect common features shared by different writers within Black Feminism. This article identifies common features of the sexual politics in these three novels in relation to Bessie Smith's classic blues lyrics.

Zora Neale Hurston was a folklorist concerned with gathering as many representations of African-American cultural manifestations as possible during the Harlem Renaissance. Batker (1998) acknowledges both Hurston's familiarity with the classic blues culture emerging at the time, and the influence the classic blues ideology exerted on her writings (Wall 1982; Baker 1984; Ellison 1989; Long 1990). In fact, in a clear reference to Hemenway (1977), Batker admits that “on a trip with Langston Hughes, she [Hurston] stayed with Bessie Smith and was quite familiar with Harlem cabarets as well as the Southern tent-show and

vaudeville tradition which showcased classic blues singers”(200). Batker mentions different features often attached to Bessie Smith’s classic blues which can also be identified in Hurston’s *Their Eyes* (1937). One of them is the rejection of the traditionally neat dichotomy between respectability and desire. As happens in *Their Eyes* with Janie, “Bessie Smith’s ‘Young Woman’s Blues’ plays with the opposition between respectability and sexual assertion” (Batker 1998: 203). Batker also refers to the importance of the mistreating-man character together with images of mules and fruit trees as metaphors of women’s sexual potency, commonly found in both Hurston’s novel and classic blues songs. Maria V. Johnson (1998) also corroborates the cultural link that can be established between Zora Neale Hurston and Bessie Smith. As Johnson states,

like Bessie Smith and other vaudeville blues singers of the 1920s and ’30s, Hurston also used blues as a means to present new images and to celebrate the individual voices of African American women. Hurston’s most extended blues critique and celebration of blues creativity is her acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (401)

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Throughout her exhaustive analysis, Johnson points out several thematic and stylistic links between Hurston’s novel and the classic blues, such as the impermanence of love and relationships, the celebration of female sexuality, the blues tripartite structure,<sup>6</sup> some images (like the bee, the mule, the jellyroll and Tea Cake as the blues man), or the juxtaposition of different voices. Johnson even quotes several of Bessie Smith’s blues lyrics so as to link them thematically to Hurston’s novel, pointing out common themes such as loneliness (“Empty Bed Blues”), voicing one’s feelings (“Jailhouse Blues”), powerlessness (“Men Old Bedbug Blues”), or desertion (“In the House Blues”).

With regard to Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (1982), Maria V. Johnson (1996) has asserted that “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the blues music of blues women like Bessie Smith rank among Walker’s most significant musical/literary influences” (221). She particularly focuses her analysis on both Walker’s short-story “Nineteen Fifty-Five” from her collection *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* (1981), and *The Colour Purple* (1982). Johnston argues that Walker became endowed with the blues techniques in prose fiction through the influence Hurston and *Their Eyes* exerted on her writings (222), and she especially focuses on the relationship dynamics that both Walker’s novel and the classic blues lyrics share as a case in point in order to prove the presence of the blues throughout *The Colour Purple*. While Johnson mainly highlights the blues techniques used in Walker’s novel, Thomas F. Marvin (1994) concentrates on a comparative analysis between Shug Avery, a major character in Walker’s novel, and Bessie Smith. As he mentions,

She [Shug] transforms the life of Celie, the novel's protagonist, through a 'blues conversion' of the type advocated by Bessie Smith in her song 'Preachin' the Blues'. Shug, like Bessie Smith, forges a strong bond with her audiences and gives voice to the 'spirit of the blues' in order to bring relief to less articulate sufferers. But more importantly, she encourages Celie and other oppressed women in the novel to express themselves and stand up for their rights. (411)

Moreover, Johnson also discusses the relevance of Shug in Walker's novel as the blues female personification who prompts Celie's gradual sexual awakening. Moreover, particularly focusing on Bessie Smith's song "Preachin' the Blues", Johnson refers to both Shug and Bessie as catalysts that mediate between the boundaries that often separate the sacred and the profane.

In relation to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Eusebio L. Rodrigues (1991) analysed the telling of *Beloved*, claiming it follows a musical style (296). More recently, Christine Spies (2004) has analysed the use Morrison makes of music throughout her novels. Even Morrison herself acknowledges the important role music, and particularly blues, usually plays in her writings asserting that "music is the mirror that gives me the necessary clarity" (Gilroy 1993: 181). Rubenstein defends the presence of the blues through Morrison's fiction to the extent that the author of *Beloved* "thematically 'sings the blues' of black experience through the use of literary techniques that inventively borrow from blues patterns" (148). Actually, in Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973), published more than a decade earlier than *Beloved*, the protagonist refers to Bessie Smith when she complains she will be loved "when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith" (*Sula*, 145). Subsequently, in *Jazz* (1992), as Sherard (2000) admits, Morrison quotes some of Bessie Smith's blues lyrics such as "Get it, bring it and put it right here". Many studies have focused on Morrison's use of music techniques in her writings with regard to *Jazz*. However, it was not until Eckstein (2006) that the importance of the blues in *Beloved* became a focus of attention. According to Eckstein, both the musical gathering of women at Sethe's house towards the end of the novel (271), and Paul D's chain gang experience of call-and-response (275) bear important points in common with the blues. Moreover, he also analyses the relationship some of the most important characters in *Beloved* establish in relation to the blues. *Beloved* may be linked to the black oral tradition as an embodiment of the spirit child that returns after its death; Baby Suggs is remindful of the Afro-Christian tradition of singing, and Paul D embodies the secular tradition of the blues, while the 'white-girl' Amy Denver represents the cross-cultural birth of the blues.

## 5. Bessie Smith's Politics of Sexuality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *The Colour Purple* (1982), and *Beloved* (1987)

In the following sections, thematic links regarding the politics of sexuality between Bessie Smith's lyrics and these three novels will be mentioned with a view to exemplifying the new trends of Black Feminism, that is, intertextualising different artistic texts, revising canonical literary texts under these new perspectives and popularising neglected artists in the African-American cultural domain.

### 5.1. Bessie Smith's songs and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: love, dependence and desertion

When Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937, it did not receive full recognition. It was in the early 1970s that the novel was rediscovered by literature professors and scholars such as Alice Walker, bringing Zora Neale Hurston's novel into the modern literary canon. Just as Walker searched for Hurston's unmarked grave and marked it as a sign of recognition, her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was also retrieved as a deserved homage to African-American men, and especially women, in their search for identity, becoming one of the most important works written during the Harlem Renaissance and one of the first novels to gain insight into African-American women's situation. At a more general level, the novel portrays the series of experiences Janie Starks undergoes in her process of maturation as a woman. In Hurston's novel, we find thematic links with Bessie Smith's blues lyrics in relation to gender, and particularly, with regard to: i) love and women's expectations, ii) men's economic power and women's dependence on them, and iii) men's meanness and women's subsequent desertion.

#### *i. love and women's expectations*

Hurston's novel tackles women's right to voice their need to love and be loved. Janie awakens to love and desire as she matures as a woman. During her adolescence, Janie undergoes a transcendental experience while she is lying under a pear tree and observes the bees pollinating the blossoms. This epiphanic experience is regarded as Janie's first awakening into sexuality as a woman. It is through this mesmerising state that she beholds Johnny Taylor, whom she terms "a glorious being" when before she had regarded him as merely "shiftless". In "Baby Doll", Bessie Smith pleads to be somebody's baby doll to ease her mind and fulfil her wish to love. She is not too demanding as to what this man should be like, since she sings, with obvious sexual connotations, "he can be ugly, he can be

black, so long as he can eagle rock and ball the jack". Thus, at this point, as in Bessie's song, Janie only wishes to love somebody as her sexuality is emerging. Gradually, Janie also gains insight into the importance of choosing wisely. After three months of marriage to Logan, Janie goes back home to ask Nanny the way to love her husband. This episode shows obvious links with Bessie Smith's song "A Good Man is Hard to Find", in which she expresses her sadness because her man treats her meanly and reflects upon how difficult it is to make a good choice since, although she believed her man was good, now she even "craves to see him laying in his grave". Janie soon leaves Logan behind to start a relationship with Joe, thus displaying women's capacity to feel desire and be sexually aroused. The flirting conversation between Janie and Joe at the beginning of their relationship shows links to Bessie's song "I Need a Little Sugar in my Bowl", in which she repeats "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". Joe proves an enterprising character, self-conceited and confident who promises to rescue Janie from the oppressive yoke under which Logan holds her. Nonetheless, it is Janie who finally takes the initiative and leaves Logan. Thus, in both Hurston's novel and Bessie Smith's lyrics, African-American women unashamedly voice their desire to love and be loved.

*ii. men's economic power and women's dependence*

Throughout Hurston's novel, it is implied that women's dependence is mainly caused by men's exclusive economic power. Janie feels dependent on men mainly because she is subjected to men's economic power. Both Janie and Bessie become aware of their discouraging situation once their first hope to love and be loved vanishes. Gradually, men's economic power brings about women's dependence. As time goes by, Janie begins to resemble Bessie in "Lost Your Head Blues", when she sings "I was with you baby, when you didn't have a dime/ I was with you, baby, when you didn't have a dime/ now since you got a lot of money, you have thrown a good gal down". Gradually, Janie becomes aware of her own subjection and subtly voices how men have been debasing her as a woman. In her first marriage, Janie feels hopelessly subjected to Logan. At this period of Janie's life, she feels like Bessie in "Mean Old Bed Bug Blues", when she sings "gals, bed bugs sure is evil, they don't mean me no good/ yeah, bed bug sure is evil, they don't mean me no good/ thinks he's a woodpecker and I'm a chunk of wood". However, she also undergoes the same situation with Joe and Tea Cake. In her third marriage, Janie somehow feels excluded since Tea Cake does not invite her to celebrations. Thus, Janie gradually becomes aware of the fact that the ideal of love that she nurtured at youth may not be totally feasible in real life. Despite their

bad ways, Janie resents being deserted by men, thus underlining women's fear of feeling lonely and abandoned. Janie also undergoes economic dependence in her third marriage, since one week after Janie's marriage to Tea Cake, he leaves her before she awakes. Soon Janie realises that the silk purse in which she hid two hundred dollars has disappeared. Janie immediately believes that Tea Cake has stolen the money with a view to deserting her. This episode recalls Bessie's "Down in the Dumps", through which she sings "I had a nightmare last night, when I laid down/ when I woke up this mornin', my sweet man couldn't be found". Nevertheless, to Janie's own surprise, Tea Cake returns at dawn but having spent Janie's own money. Thus, it is implied, economic dependence is at the centre of women's subjection to men.

*iii. men's meanness and women's desertion*

Janie often resents men's miserliness to the extent of deserting them. Janie's second husband, Joe, soon emerges as the mayor and becomes a commanding character. This is clearly shown when the villagers assert they would like to hear Janie speak after Joe is elected, although it is Joe who takes the podium, implying that Janie's place, as a woman, is not that of the speaker. Gradually, Janie's position as the mayor's wife isolates her from the rest of women in town. As Bessie sings in "Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer", she also complains about men's dictatorial ways referring to the fact that "when he stomps his feet, he send me right off to sleep". Joe repeatedly behaves stubbornly and too severely with Janie. It is implied that once he acquires some power, his authoritative commands resemble, to some extent, that of white masters in slavery times. Actually, his male power over Janie is reified through both Joe's preventing Janie from speaking in public and his continuous remarks for Janie to tie up her hair. Despite Joe's behaviour, Janie feels unable to challenge her husband and her lack of confidence leads her to understate Joe's abusive behaviour. This episode resembles Bessie's "Dirty No-Gooder's Blues", in which Bessie reflects on the way men change their ways so suddenly, singing "he'd treat you nice and kind till he win your heart and hand/ he'd treat you nice and kind till he win your heart and hand/ then he git so cruel that man, you just could not stand". Nevertheless, women progressively take action with regard to their control over their relationship with men. After Logan's continuous threats and Joe's commands, Janie decides to leave both men and escape. As Bessie sings in "Hard Time Blues", "I'm getting tired of his dirty ways/ I'm going to see another brown/ I'm packin' my clothes/ I'm leavin' town". Consequently, after they have completed their process of maturation, women are enabled to make their own decisions and start a new life on their own.

## **5.2. Bessie Smith's songs and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*: mistreatment, desire and retaliation**

*The Colour Purple* (1982) is a novel structured through a series of letters that Celie and Nettie exchange from their separation when they are children to their eventual encounter in their adult life. Throughout Walker's novel we also encounter thematic links with Bessie Smith's songs especially focused on men's violence and mistreatment of women, women's sexual desire and lesbianism, and women's retaliation and reversal of roles.

### *i. men's violence and mistreatment of women*

Celie falls an easy prey to men's continuous threats of violence. At the beginning of the novel, Celie writes a letter to God confessing she has been raped by Alphonso, her mother's husband, whom she also believes to be her father. As Bessie states in her song "Aggravatin' Papa", she denounces men's mistreatment of women and the violence in men-women relationships singing "just treat me pretty, be nice and kind/ the way you're treating me will make me lose my mind". When Celie gets married to Albert, she undergoes the same loathsome experience through her husband's disrespect. Thus, it is argued women feel oppressed under the yoke of violence their husbands inflict on them. Likewise, it is also inferred that African-American women suffered a double kind of oppression at the hands of their white masters and of their black male partners.

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### *ii. women's sexual desire and lesbianism*

While Celie grows up as a woman, she is sexually initiated through Shug's endeavours. Thus, it is argued that Celie is firstly introduced to sex by a woman. Shug and Celie represent dichotomous archetypes of African-American women, the *mammy* and the *whore*. Shug is a splendorous and self-liberated blues singer, while Celie is shy and humble and becomes dazzled by Shug's beauty and daring approaches. Shug is very self-confident and presents obvious links with Bessie Smith's personality as Marvin (1994) remarks. It is Shug who initiates Celie into desire and sexuality, and thus Shug may well have sung with Bessie her song "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine", arguing "no other one in town can bake a sweet jelly roll so fine, so fine". Despite the fact Celie and Shug share the same man, as husband and lover respectively, they feel no jealousy but rather become close female friends until Shug's departure. Five years later, Shug returns to Albert's home, having married Grady, of whom both Albert and Celie feel extremely covetous. One night, Shug approaches Celie in bed and she tells Shug about her life with Alphonso. Shug sympathises with Celie and they begin a lesbian relationship. It is at this point that Celie begins to understand the nature of love, and as Bessie sings in "Weary Blues",

Celie might have said “want you in the mornin’ and I want you in the evenin’/ yes, I want you, yes I want you but it don’t do no good/ miss you when it’s rainin’ and I miss you when it’s shinin’/ and I wish that I could kiss you and I would if I could”. Thus, Celie, as Bessie did, starts a lesbian relationship and discovers, for the first time, the experience of being in love and sexual enjoyment through another woman. Through Bessie’s songs, females unashamedly voice their need to feel sexually aroused and fulfil their desire as women.

### *iii. women’s retaliation and reversal of roles*

Once Shug initiates her, Celie feels strong enough to counteract Albert to the extent that their traditionally-established gendered roles become reversed. Celie is finally given the rest of Nettie’s letters, which restores her strength again, through the renewed literal, and allegorical, sisterhood with other females. Celie’s awareness and need to retaliate corroborates Bessie’s feeling in “See If I’ll Care”, when she sings “I know that you feel good now with nothin’ on your mind/ but just mark my words, dear, there’ll come a time/ I know you’re gonna pay, you’ll want me back someday”. Actually, when Celie is away, Albert feels hopeless. A woman’s reprisal often implies a reversal of gender roles to the extent that the woman becomes stronger and the man feels weaker at the woman’s display of strength. Similarly, this reversal can also be observed in the relationship between Harpo, Albert’s eldest son, and the strong-minded Sofia. Harpo attempts to beat his wife into submission, but he ashamedly fails. At this stage, stereotypical gender-based roles are somehow reversed, and consequently, Sofia and Harpo are scorned by the villagers. As Bessie sings in “Foolish Man Blues”, voicing the entire community, “there’s two things got me puzzled, there’s two things I can’t stand/ mannish actin’ woman and a skippin’ twistin’ woman actin’ man”. Thus, towards the end of Walker’s novel, there is an important gender-role reversal between female and male characters, as is usually the case with the female figures in Bessie Smith’s lyrics.

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### **5.3. Bessie Smith’s songs and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: gothic imagery, loneliness, women’s loneliness and a shared grievous past**

In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison explores the themes of love, family, and self-possession in a world where slavery had presumably become an unfortunate issue of the past, but emerges, throughout, as a haunting presence. Nonetheless, there are other forms of slavery that still subject and enslave women and men. In relation to Bessie Smith’s lyrics, *Beloved* also deals with feelings of (re)membering, pain, loneliness and violence from a bitter past; understanding relationships of ownership as a result of a shared past, and gothic imagery, which are also frequently found through Bessie Smith’s blues lyrics.



*i. gothic imagery*

Women have been subjected to the double yoke of slavery and patriarchy, both inflicted by men. Beloved is both a representation of the female victims of slavery and patriarchy, although her ghost returns to haunt all the living, females and males. Thus both Morrison's novel and Bessie Smith's lyrics share an important display of gothic imagery as a result of the haunting presence of past events that continue to exert their painful effects on the present. Beloved often resembles the character in Bessie's "Cemetery Blues", when she sings "folks, I know a gal named Cemetery Lize, down in Tennessee/ she has got a pair of mean old graveyard eyes, full of misery/ every night and day, you can hear her sing a blues away". These feelings are also present throughout Bessie's song "Haunted House Blues", when she sings "this house is so haunted with dead men I can't lose/ and a sneaky old feeling gives me those haunted house blues". The black community around, aware of the situation, begin to sympathise with Sethe, and Paul D, a former slave of the plantation, finally returns to look after Sethe. Nonetheless, despite the fact that her presence is still noticed, Beloved disappears, and in a way, as Bessie sings in "I'm going back to my used to be", Sethe feels at ease with her life again. However, as Bessie claims in "Yodling Blues", Sethe goes on to feel "the blues, the blues, the yodling blues/ they seem to haunt me all the time". Thus, Beloved represents the past grievous memories as a result of slavery, since Toni Morrison dedicated the novel to the slaves that perished during the transatlantic crossing from Africa to America. Sethe's feeling of loss and her eagerness to overcome fear is similar to the blues that haunts Bessie all the time. Sethe experiences a curse similar to that of Bessie, so that the blues becomes an ever-present aspect in her life; an extrapolation of bitter pain and resentment from the past that expands to her present.

*ii. women's loneliness and men's impotence*

Denver is the only child who still lives with Sethe, since her two sons, Buglar and Howard, left the house after experiencing frightening encounters with their ghostly sister. Sethe feels lonely as Bessie sings in her song "Beale Street Mama", when she begs "Beale Street Pap, why don't you come back home/ it isn't proper to leave your mamma all alone". The spirit of Sethe's dead baby is malicious and ever present in the house and her absence, or rather her ghostly presence, infuses the house with loneliness and despair. This sense of loneliness affects Sethe's relationship with Paul D. Once they have lain together for the first time, Sethe and Paul D realise it has been a disappointing experience altogether. Men's impotence and women's unfulfilled desire is also ever present in Bessie's song "My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More", where she argues "he won't make a single move unless he's told, he says he isn't lazy, claims he isn't old/ but still he sits around

and lets my stove get cold”. Thus, the grievous past of slavery, impersonated by Beloved, is reflected in the impotence and impossibility of sexual enjoyment between women and men, both rendered powerless through the bitter legacy of enslavement.

*iii. a shared grievous past of ownership*

Both Sethe and Paul D share the burden of a grievous past of subjection under slavery to the extent they feel unable to live as if nothing had happened. Like Bessie in “Mama’s Got the Blues”, Sethe feels “some people say that the weary blues ain’t bad/ some people say the weary blues ain’t bad/ but it’s the worst old feeling that I’ve ever had/ woke up this morning, with the jinx around my bed”. Moreover, Sethe remembers that her husband Halle treated her in a brotherly way, but she reflects on the fact that love necessarily implies being able to make demands, have expectations and lay claim to the other. Actually, ownership becomes an important issue throughout the novel, as a reflection of past slavery. Eventually, it is revealed that, soon after Sethe began to live in the house, the schoolteacher, one of his nephews, the slave catcher and the sheriff came to reclaim Sethe and her children. When Sethe caught sight of them, she killed her daughter, Beloved, and also tried to kill Howard, Buglar and Denver but did not succeed. This is the reason why she has been neglected by the rest of the community. In a way, her situation recalls that of Bessie in “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out”, where she sings “then I began to fall so low, / I didn’t have a friend, and no place to go”. Sethe acted out of love since she preferred sacrificing her own children rather than condemning them to perpetual slavery. However, Sethe’s ongoing trauma renders her unable to resume her life, thus infusing her existence with the blues of loss, as she looks forward to finding mutual understanding in order to feel part of the community again.

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## 6. Conclusions

It has been the aim of this essay to establish links between these three novels and Bessie Smith’s lyrics, in order to articulate the collective experience of African-American women throughout time as revealing a shared and communal past. Many of the experiences female characters undergo in these novels are voiced in Bessie Smith’s songs. Janie, Celie and Sethe go through a process of maturation from their literal, or figurative, enslavement under the yoke of male partners towards their emancipation as mature females. Similarly, Bessie’s lyrics portray weak women dependent on their promiscuous and lazy partners who emerge as sexually-aroused women who reject their males if they fail to fulfil their desire. Bessie’s women can also become rough and violent, although they may suddenly get *the real blues* if

they wake up in the morning and their *papa* has gone. These ambivalent feelings are also present through the novels discussed. They are all women exchanging and sharing experiences. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie unveils her life story to Phoeby as an oral tale at the porch. In *The Colour Purple*, Celie and Nettie write letters to each other. In *Beloved*, Sethe's ghost child compels her mother to remember her past memories. Oral tales, letters and memories necessarily have a folk component that interweaves with songs. Despite their written form, all together present a chorus of experiences shared by African-American women. Past and present merge in order to form a communal experience. Songs and texts are sung and written, listened to and read by a community of women who contribute with their voices to the formation of African-American women's life experience. The thematic links outlined through this essay such as love and women's expectations, men's economic power and women's dependence, men's meanness and women's desertion, men's violence and mistreatment of women, women's sexual desire and lesbianism, women's retaliation and reversal of gender roles, sexuality, gothic imagery, women's loneliness and men's impotence, and a shared grievous past of ownership can be identified and are actually presented in similar ways in Bessie Smith's lyrics and the three novels analysed. These shared experiences contribute to constructing a politics of sexuality within the new trends of Black Feminism, underlining the awareness of the historical evolution in African-American Studies, the recovery of often neglected and forgotten artists, and the identification of common themes through multi-faceted artistic manifestations.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. McDowell (1980) has acknowledged Barbara Smith's essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) as "the earliest theoretical statement on Black feminist criticism" (154).

<sup>2</sup>. Mainly, awareness of the historical evolution of Black Feminism, identification of common themes and the recovery of often neglected artists.

<sup>3</sup>. Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are currently considered canonical writers as is shown by the inclusion of their works in recent Black Feminist manuals and companions, anthologies and courses.

<sup>4</sup>. One of the most recent examples is Valerie Lee's and Melissa Payton's *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African-American Women's Literature* (2005).

<sup>5</sup>. Mary Helen Washington edited the anthology *Any Woman's Blues: Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers* (1986) and Marita Golden edited *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues: Black Women Writers on Love, Men and Sex* (1993).

<sup>6</sup>. Johnson puts forward Janie's three marriages to Logan, Joe and Tea Cake in order to underline the blues tripartite structure of Zora Neale Hurston's novel.

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