

In the 20s, when “If I Do” by Bessie Smith and “Prove It One Me Blues” by Ma Rainey came out, gender identity was experiencing a pretty significant shift. Up until that point, women were relegated to the domestic spheres of marriage and motherhood, while men worked outside of the home and were the primary bread winners. A female’s identity and worth were inextricably linked to the male in her life, and she was expected to be a reticent and submissive helpmeet. In her article, Carby notes how Smith sings about “the differing interest of women and men in the domestic sphere” (16) in her song “In House Blues.” “Although the man gets up and leaves, the woman remains, trapped in the house like a caged animal pacing up and down” (16).

The First World War, however, saw women venture outside of the home and become part of the work force as everything from schoolteachers to factory workers while the men who had previously held those positions fought overseas. In addition to securing employment outside of the home, women secured the legal right to vote. Both of those advancements precipitated The New Woman of the 20s, also known as flappers. They upended society’s expectations of what a woman should be, how she should act, and the way she should look. I wrote a paper a few classes back about gender roles in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Jordan Baker is believed by some scholars to be a Black woman passing for white who is also a lesbian. She was a decidedly masculine character. She’s noted as having a masculine build and is described as incurably dishonest. In fact, it’s inferred that she cheated in order to make a name for herself as a professional golf player. Jordan is the quintessential New Woman of the twenties. She’s independently wealthy. Her hair is short. She dons short dresses and wear lots of makeup. She drinks. She smokes. She parties. She’s hypersexual. She’s the antithesis of demure femininity and, as such, she’s everything society once told women they should not be. But, Jordan remains unapologetically true to herself and happily enjoys the life she’s manufactured.

I get a similar vibe from Smith and Rainey’s songs. Both refuse to apologize for their choices and have made conscious decisions to stop trying to cram themselves into the societal mold of womanhood. Out of the gate, Smith’s lyrics address the no-win battle of trying to please everyone. No matter what a person does or says, he/she will always come under the criticism and scrutiny of others. Rather than continue to fight a battle she knows she’ll never win, Smith vows to do what she wants to do, regardless of the consequences. At the end of the day, her choices are no one else’s business. After establishing that main thought, she seems to address, verse by verse, the most common arenas where society shames women. 1. The desire to live freely and unencumbered (i.e. jump into the ocean). 2. The right to be a saint (churchgoer on Sunday) and a sinner (partier/dancer/clubber on Monday). 3. Men 4. Money 5. (potentially toxic/abusive) Relationships.

Carby mentions that Rainey actually composed “Prove It On Me Blues” herself and notes that it both “vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women with a public declaration of lesbianism” (18) and expresses “contempt for a society that rejected lesbians” (18). I agree. Rainey’s lyrics, which remind me most of Jordan Baker, allude to a lesbian lover. Considering the strides that have been made in just the last fifty years with regard to gender identity and sexual orientation (and the progress that still needs to be made), Rainey was a woman ahead of her time. She acknowledges that the outside world considers her crooked (or the

opposite of “straight”), but she still wants the whole world to know that she does not like men. Like Jordan, the speaker in Rainey’s song is decidedly masculine. She mentions wearing a collar and a tie. She also mentions talking to women like a man. On the whole, I found her lyrics playful, almost taunting. The song strikes a perfect balance between unabashed pride and a tongue-in-cheek challenge to prove the very thing to which the speaker confesses.

#### Works Cited

Carby, Hazel V. “Black Women's Blues, Motown and Rock and Roll.” In *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*. New York: Verso, 1999.