In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, her 1998 study of the careers of classic-blues singers Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, Angela Y. Davis quotes a 1925 *Vanity Fair* article by Carl Van Vechten that encapsulates the essentialist attitude held by some white patrons of Harlem Renaissance artists. His admiration of Smith’s exoticized physique dominates his description of her onstage presence:

[A] great brown woman emerged. She was at this time . . . very large, and she wore a crimson satin robe, sweeping up from her trim ankles and embroidered in multicolored sequins in designs. Her face was beautiful with the rich ripe beauty of southern darkness, a deep bronze brown, matching the bronze of her bare arms. Walking slowly to the footlights . . . she began her strange rhythmic rites in a voice full of shouting and moaning and praying and suffering, a wild, rough, Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, but seductive and sensuous, too, released between rouged lips and the whitest of teeth, the singer swaying lightly to the beat, as is the Negro custom. (147)

Van Vechten’s words, while intended to pay tribute to Smith’s musical talent, succeed instead in emphasizing the ideological distance between performer and audience, between a professional black female singer and an upper-class white male critic. I begin my study with this example not to draw my readers’ attention to a series of Manichean oppositions but to suggest that black women’s creative work grows out of realities much more complex and dynamic than Van Vechten’s perceptions indicate.
Bessie Smith repeatedly overstepped the bounds of social expectations, as the introduction’s opening anecdote demonstrates, in order to pursue her right to the expressive and personal freedom that sensibilities like Van Vechten’s forestalled.

As an African-American performer who relied only upon her own skills for professional survival in the early-twentieth-century entertainment world, Bessie Smith could not afford to subscribe to reductive stereotypes of black femininity that recalled either the plantation South or white fantasies of jungle-inspired blackness. Her valorization of her body’s physical presence—and, through it, her beliefs about one’s right to self-determination—stemmed instead from a conception of female empowerment that presaged not only the Civil Rights and Black Power movements but also later black feminist theory’s investment in the intersecting categories of gender, race, and class. Davis notes, for instance, that Smith spent a great deal of money on jeweled performance outfits meant to dazzle her audience, as did the other blues performers of her day (137). Her onstage visibility allowed her to pose her physical bulk as a threat to would-be abusers of black women in order to call attention to “domestic violence in the collective context of blues performance,” proving to her audience that it was “a problem worthy of public discourse” (Davis 28). Smith asserted her physical presence against social violence off-stage as well, even single-handedly threatening a group of Ku Klux Klansmen who had pulled down her performance tent in the middle of a song (Albertson 132–33).1 Far from allowing her body to remain a passive object of contemplation for observers like Van Vechten, Smith transformed her striking physical presence to arguably feminist ends, promoting personal liberation and social expression.

Sherley Anne Williams explores the feminist potential that Bessie Smith represents in her jazz-poetic portraits of the singer, drawing an analogy between blues performance and political statement. Roughly one-third of the poems from her two books of poetry, *The Peacock Poems* (1975) and *Some One Sweet Angel Chile* (1982), use jazz references and themes. Several of these poems are written in the traditional AAB blues-lyrics song form or employ improvisational techniques such as repetitions with a difference and nonreferential sound syllables. The poetry exemplifies Williams’s own notion of a blues aesthetic: political statements that spring from the attitudes and music of early female blues singers like Smith. These poems’ imbrication in both social and geographical discourses signals Williams’s pointed assessment of the connections between regulating public movement and restricting private bodies. She valorizes the visually marked and marginalized—female, black, economically disadvantaged—as a means of social protest. These elements enable