

QUEER AND MOANING: QUEEN OF THE MOANERS CLARA SMITH

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ABSTRACT

Caitlin Margaret Rimmer: *Queer and Moaning: Queen of the Moaners Clara Smith*
(under the direction of Patricia Sawin)

This thesis begins the project of producing a functional narrative of the life of Clara Smith, the second most recorded blues singer of the classic period. Smith had significant relationships in her life with both men and women, and would now fall under the umbrella of queerness. In this thesis, for the first time, the disparate fields of information that have been known about Clara Smith are gathered in one place alongside new discoveries.

As the record of the life of a queer woman of colour, this information has been divided not by chance, but by the shaping forces of homophobia, racism and colonialism. I have drawn upon the dual intellectual histories of folklore and queer theory not only to provide a critical framework for undertaking this work, but also to develop new and experimental approaches for locating, compiling and interpreting sources.

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INTRODUCTION

Clara Smith was the second most recorded blues singer of the early blues period, and was celebrated as ‘Queen of the Moaners’ during her performing career. Born September 1892 in Spartanburg, South Carolina, she recorded a total of 151 sides between 1923 and her death in 1935. She does not, however, often come up in discussion of the blues greats, and she has not yet been inducted into the Blues Foundation’s Hall of Fame. Why is Smith’s legacy so diminished in comparison to those of her blues artist contemporaries?

My goal in studying Clara Smith is first and foremost to produce a functional narrative of her life. I have approached this task as a folklorist, and a queer. This perspective has intimately shaped my understanding of what a ‘functional narrative’ is and how it should be pieced together. In the pages that follow, I shall delineate my methodology for gathering materials and constructing this narrative before delving into a chronological account of Smith’s life, composed of every detail that I have been able to discover, most not previously known to other blues scholars. I shall close with a discussion of my critical framework for this project. Whilst presenting the material outcome of my work *before* a discussion of the critical framework in which they were produced might seem rather like putting the cart before the horse, this structure serves several important functions.

Firstly, the nature of the materials has informed my theoretical approach as much as any approach has enabled me to find these materials. I worked from the ground up, incorporating concepts as the work demanded it of me. The necessity of these theoretical approaches cannot be discussed without directly referencing the source materials. Discussing

theory first would, inevitably, push me to order the materials by the logic of theoretical interpretation and requirement, scrambling their own narrative logic. In short, to debut the story of Smith's life and the materials from which I extrapolate it in this manner would be serving my own interests as a theorist over honouring the significance of these materials.

This leads to my second motivation. Most of the materials contained within the narrative are original archival documents pertaining to Clara Smith's life. Of those published sources that do exist, the information contained within has not yet been compiled and viewed holistically. Prior to this thesis, the longest piece to be published with Clara Smith as the sole subject was the 6½ page entry of her discography in *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890-1942*.¹ In this thesis, for the first time, the disparate fields of information that have been known about Clara Smith are gathered in one place alongside new discoveries. As the record of the life of a queer woman of colour, this information has been divided not by chance, but by the shaping forces of homophobia, racism and colonialism. As so little was known about Smith, hearsay, rumour and poorly referenced works have been given undue credibility. Much previous literature has relied upon information heavily filtered through other, often problematic, mediums: allowing greater opportunities for cognitive bias to shape interpretation. To date, Smith's music itself had been the only source of primary material relating to her. As such, interpretation of her lyrics has been used as the basis for vague and unverifiable insights into her life. I acknowledge that her lyrics do provide both a rich insight into her life and community, and an abundant source of investigatory suggestions. However,

¹Robert M. W Dixon, John Godrich and Howard Rye. *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, Fourth Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 813-819.

I wished to use the scope of this project to look beyond the pale of current research and prioritise seeking out additional primary materials relating to Smith's life.

I have predominately focussed on the erasure Smith has experienced as queer person. The intersecting powers of racism and sexism—compounded with the force of colonialist imposition—have greatly amplified the erasure she has experienced in this aspect. I shall address this in more depth following the narrative of Smith's life. Preceding this work with a lengthy discussion of the specific ways in which Clara Smith's legacy has been fractured under the duress of social structures of power would, I worry, revive the power of these divides.

In working theories in from the ground up, I have been influenced by what Dorothy Noyes describes as the 'trinity' of the folklorist's experience; 'The ethnographer, the practitioner, and the theorist are mutually dependent and mutually constitutive: they cohabit, to different degrees, in singular folklorist bodies.'² Whilst archival work is often the realm of the theorist, perhaps practitioner, I have also been mindful to not overlook the value of the ethnographer. As ethnographers we encounter material culture before it has become catalogued and transformed into archival material. Whilst one might see this as merely a technical distinction, the impact of this process is not to be understated. The institutional aura that gathers around archival materials with time suggests that they are objective records from which we extract information—distinct from the resonant, suggestive process interpretation we allow ourselves of material culture. In working through the lens of material culture, I have refocussed conscious reflection upon the act of interpretation, rather than dismissing it under the guise of an objective reading. The power of the interpretative process

²Dorothy Noyes, "Humble Theory." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45 (1), (2008): 39.

is not be overlooked, as folklorist Margaret A. Mills perfectly articulates; “Aptness, resonance, and suggestive power become criteria of productive theory, rather than exclusiveness, comprehensiveness, or level of abstraction.”³ Reinstating the significance of conscious interpretation required me to be both reflective and responsive in my interactions with these materials and to blur the arbitrary boundary between ‘archival materials’ and ‘material culture.’

In constructing the narrative that follows, I shored up a conventional archival skillset with some unconventional research techniques, both in gathering my primary sources and interpreting them. Firstly, I supplement and expand upon traditional archival research by utilising what I call ‘community archives’ (explained below) in areas where Clara Smith lived and visited. Secondly, before, during, and after my research process, I interrogated the impact of previously used modes of knowledge production on Smith’s legacy. Finally, in the interest of transparency and accountability, before committing my interpretations of these archival materials to text, I proposed them and received feedback in a public-facing setting. I created a series of creative non-fiction writing workshops, teaching participants how to bring the skillset of creative nonfiction writing to bear on archival documents when constructing life narratives. Using the archival materials of this project as writing prompts for our exercises, I was personally able to explore the subjectivity of my own deductions. Participants were made aware that I was both teaching them various techniques to approach non-fiction writing and exploring how to present Clara Smith’s life narrative in this thesis. [Appendix A] Running these workshops often required me to see the documents from alternate perspectives and to critique my own interpretations.

³Margaret A. Mills, “What(’s) Theory.” *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45 (1), (2008): 22.

As I explain the methodological practice behind my research, I ask the reader to keep in mind that these three paths of research are simultaneous with one another, rather than occurring sequentially. Results in one aspect would create fruitful leads in another. Moving as a triquetra— a Celtic trefoil of three interlaced arcs—each path cannot exist without flowing into and out of its peers. The overall structure gains its strength by the parts’ moving into and out of one another.

I had already had a longstanding interest in Clara Smith when I began my research in September 2015. I flew over from the UK for a period of three weeks, traveling through Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina to conduct archival research and gather contemporary field recordings at locations visited by Smith. Upon arriving in an area, I conducted traditional archival work—visiting local town archives and museum spaces to search for traces of Smith’s presence in the town. Alongside research in ‘official institutions’ of record keeping such as local libraries, town hall records offices, etc., my traveling companions and I asked around in communities and went to any marker of Clara Smith on the landscape and tried to find out how it got there. Most productively, we stopped in any diner or corner store that looked like it had locals, and I struck up a conversation about our work, utilizing community knowledge to connect us to ‘community archives.’ Through this practice, I made connections with people and resources I would have had no chance of meeting otherwise. Arriving in Laurens, South Carolina, on a sleepy Sunday before Labor Day, for instance, we received a recommendation from the waitress of a well populated Italian restaurant to meet with a pastor who studied the history of the local gospel tradition. He in turn connected me with the director of the Laurens County Museum around the corner, who called local record collector Hunter Holmes to talk with us at the museum. By

combining the community outreach of fieldwork with archival practice, I was able to locate multiple resources relevant to the project. This process created the basis of the network of places and people that continued to support my ongoing archival research. Looking for materials that had been overlooked in places we didn't know, this experimental approach of incorporating contemporary fieldwork into archival research was the invention of necessity rather than of grand design.

I was incredibly surprised by the large amount of content we discovered in such a short time. I uncovered much previously 'unknown' information on Clara's life. In this, I realised that the apparent lack of information about Smith had as much to do with research practice as an actual absence of materials. Analysing methodological practice from the blues revival to the present day makes the significant role played by the informal transmission of knowledge in British blues scholarship practice extremely apparent. Much of the data I found was not so much unknown or undiscoverable as un-included or unsought-for. The blurred line between formal and informal practice, formal field and record collectors' hobby, has bred a very specific culture that enables the erasure of a figure such as Smith.

Conscious of how deeply form has affected content in this area, I realised it was essential for me to rethink my own research process. I thus had several motivations for developing creative nonfiction writing workshops. As previously mentioned, in the interest of instilling accountability I wanted to develop my interpretations in a public-facing setting. I believe that in approaching a topic creatively, people become more aware of the space in which their own biases play in their interpretation, providing a space for dialogue unavailable to 'objective' interpretations. Creating art in a structure of facilitated, open discussions facilitated constructive criticism and challenging conversation. This allowed me to

interrogate the biases that go into constructing narratives of the lives of historical figures, including my own.

I decided to circumvent traditional, exclusionary methods of interpreting the histories of queer people in favor of a culturally productive alternative. With so little material available relating to Smith, I wanted to work in a framework that focussed on the potentialities of the materials, rather than its limits. José Esteban Muñoz has theorized extensively on such approaches, and formulated the concept of ‘Disidentification’ which he explores through multiple case studies of queer performers in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Whilst the process is not concisely explained within its pages, the blurb for this text reads;

There is more to identity than identifying with one’s culture or standing solidly against it. José Esteban Muñoz looks at how those outside the racial and sexual mainstream negotiate majority culture—not by aligning themselves with or against exclusionary works but rather by transforming these works for their own cultural purposes. Muñoz calls this process “disidentification,” and through a study of its workings, he develops a new perspective on minority performance, survival, and activism.

Disidentifications is also something of a performance in its own right, an attempt to fashion a queer world by working on, with, and against dominant ideology.⁴

Muñoz demonstrates the essential nature of creativity to the queer history-making project; he writes “doing, performing, engaging the performative as force of and for futurity is queerness’s bent.”⁵ Queer people have historically constructed our history and our legacies in the margins, queerly communicating a future for ourselves through art.⁶

⁴José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999,) blurb.

⁵José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York University Press, 2009.) 32.

⁶For more on this concept, see Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill. *Queering the Grimms*. (Wayne State University Press, 2012.)

I hired dramaturg James Varney to help develop my creative non-fiction writing workshops. Varney specialises in developing accessible theatre; when developing these workshops, I wanted to explore storytelling techniques that involve multiple layered forms of communication. Working with a dramaturg also functioned to keep my development process grounded in a queer, creative environment and to physically move me beyond the library space so that I could approach the development process with the mindset of creating something publicly engaging, such as theatre. Varney and I have worked together on previous creative projects that were quite similar to this, only not aimed for an eventual academic audience.

Varney and I initially decided upon a format of four, two-hour long workshops over a two-week period. Each workshop would build upon the last to explore and problematise a different aspect of writing about Smith. Our first workshop was an exploration of both the materials and how individuals approach archival documents. I was very interested in unpacking the Benjaminian ‘aura’ that surrounds archival documents. Discussing participants' differing subjective responses to original archival documents and copies, this workshop explored the slippage between the ‘inherent objectivity’ of the original and its power to evoke subjective response in the audience, which I believe to be an essential part of mythmaking.⁷

Our second workshop was an exploration into the ways in which we remember and misremember our histories, especially as queer people. The participants and I worked

⁷Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. 43503rd edition. Translated by J.A Underwood. (Penguin, 1994.) Original work published 1936.

together to develop a timeline of Smith's life and we collaboratively produced writing pieces. The third focused on the presentation of legacy and persona, both within the field of blues scholarship and in the queer community, with the final workshop set aside to bring all of these elements together, aiming to produce a final tangible creative product.

Approaching this problem through a folkloric lens, attuned to the importance of material culture, aesthetic expression and community impact, allows a new space to open for this dialogue. Folklore has always been 'folk' centred; folklorists work with people. Whilst I have no personal connection with Clara Smith, drawing upon research frameworks that have been used in such instances allows personal accountability to become an essential part of the research model. I have drawn upon folklore's best practices for both ethnography and for interaction with material culture. In using both concepts beyond their originally intended context, my research illuminates the wide applicability of folklore methodology. In addition, the application of folkloric understanding to the life of a queer person, whilst not new, in every instance expands our field. Combining the intellectual histories of folklore and queer theory to concepts centred by both (such as group, identity, time, culture, the aesthetic) proves reciprocally beneficial.

My goal for this project is not to provide an all-encompassing narrative. In acknowledging my approach to Clara Smith as coming from a queer folklorist, I offer a fresh perspective to this topic, in hopes that mine is the first of many more. The following narrative was shaped by each of my experiences—my field work, my reflection and my workshop process—and the voices of those who helped me at each stage of the research process supplement my own voice.

PART ONE: CLARA SMITH 1892-1935

SPARTANBURG

Records from the beginning of Smith's life are, aptly, very murky. The first widely circulated reference to her birth is attributed to a source lauded for accuracy in recall, the Jazz trombonist Clyde Bernhardt;

Clara was born in Spartanberg, [sic] South Carolina, in 1895; that's what I heard from some friends who knew her well. She was an excellent blues singer, and good at putting over her songs.⁸

Taking the quote at face value, we see that Bernhardt's friends knew Smith, suggesting she circulated with jazz musicians; that she mentioned her home town to those who knew her well; that she told people she was born in 1895, and that she was a respected and effective artist, "good at putting over her songs." Though Bernhardt's recollections have often proven to be a reliable source for blues scholars, this quoted recounting is brief and distilled through other unnamed informants. Compounding this issue of evasiveness, the source is difficult to verify. The quote appears in *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* by Derick Stewart-Baxter, who prefaces the quote with, "Clyde Bernhardt, in a letter to Bill Daynes-Woods, is probably correct when he writes..."⁹

⁸Derick Stewart-Baxter. *Ma Rainey and The Classic Blues Singers*. (November Books ltd, 1970), 64.

⁹Stewart-Baxter, 64.

This letter, like all primary materials in that commercially-facing book, is uncited, removing knowledge of the contents, date and context of the letter from the public sphere. Stewart-Baxter provides only an approximation to a bibliography in the acknowledgments at the end of the book. He writes, “the musicians and singers gave generously of their time to advise me, and I am especially indebted to blues singer and trombonist, Clyde Bernhardt.”¹⁰ The addressee of the letter, Daynes-Wood, worked closely with Stewart-Baxter on this book and as a fellow writer for the British publication *Jazz Journal* in the late 60s,¹¹ so we may guess Daynes -Wood asked Bernhardt specifically what he knew of Clara Smith on behalf on Stewart-Baxter. Significantly, however, Stewart-Baxter’s unscholarly and proprietary approach ensures that we do not, and cannot, know crucial things about this piece of evidence; perhaps the letter is quoted verbatim, perhaps copied inaccurately, perhaps it is from a decade earlier.

I begin my account here because this “fact” and the way it is offered are emblematic of Smith’s life as it has been told so far. Stewart-Baxter’s telling forces dependency on the teller, instating a hierarchy of knowledge. This is the only quote in Stewart-Baxter’s chapter on Smith that alludes to her personal life, a piece of writing that has formed the cornerstone of Smith’s biographies for the past half-century. Without citation, this first lead is buried in the private papers of English middle-class men, and unlikely to be shared beyond a circle of friends. Stewart-Baxter’s self-assurance in his reading, and lack of scholarly rigour, prevents alternate interpretations of the materials. Without citation, no more can be (or, indeed, has

¹⁰Stewart-Baxter, 110.

¹¹Derick Stewart-Baxter and Bill Daynes-Wood. ‘Farewell Rosa Henderson.’ *Jazz Journal*, 21, 7 (1968):16.

been) said on the matter—Stewart-Baxter’s hubris places his interpretation above the further pursuit of knowledge regarding Smith.

Clara Smith’s beginnings emerged for me slowly, hazily, in searching through piles of near identical birth records. Taking the shaky premise of Bernhardt’s reference as a start, I entered the search ‘Clara Smith,’ ‘birthplace Spartanburg,’ ‘1895’ into the genealogy website Family Search, which yielded over 11,000 results.¹² Although there are many shadowy presences that might be her, none of the certificates I found match the criteria closely enough to be for the Clara Smith we’re searching for—in fact, very few even correspond with the search criteria. Whilst offering no leads, this process is not without benefit—in an important act of recontextualization. Hundreds of times a possible hit elicited a sense of her start for me. As leads emerge and fizzle out it is evident that Clara Smith’s name and social position were not unique. I came to envision Smith as one among thousands of run of the mill, mundane individuals, although she is no less special for this.

I finally found a firm root by moving forward in time and looking back. The first concrete lead to Smith’s roots in Spartanburg comes, aptly, from Spartanburg; in writing about Clara Smith for the local newspaper, the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, Linda Conley sourced primary materials from the town archive:¹³

Records from the 1900 census show two Clara Smiths living in the county, but only one in the city of Spartanburg. Born in September of 1892, she was the daughter of William and Selena Smith. The family lived on Sims [sic; Simms] Street near where Harris Automotive stands today off Daniel Morgan Avenue. It was a neighborhood of black laborers.¹⁴

¹²Family Search, accessed June 6 2018. <https://www.familysearch.org>

¹³Linda Conley, email message to author, June 26 2018.

¹⁴Linda Conley. ‘Clara Smith: ‘Queen of the Moaners.’’ *Spartanburg Herald* (Spartanburg, South Carolina), March 6, 2005.

The Smith household covers lines two through five on page six of the census.¹⁵

[Appendix B] At line 4 there is an entry for a seven-year-old Clara Smith. Pulling at this document more, we can detect layers of information about Smith's early life compacted into it. The head of household is her father, William Smith, 33 years old at the time of the census. Her mother is Selena Smith, twenty-seven years old. Clara Smith is listed as her only child, living or dead. Her parents would have been around twenty-six and twenty years old at the time of Smith's birth. It would be unsurprising if they did not have other children later, but this is the last document that I have found on which they appear. Whilst answering many questions, the 1900 document is not without its mysteries; her father has the letters 'c-b' over his position as 'head of household', an abbreviation that is unaccounted for in the official instructions to enumerators for that year.¹⁶ Each head of household on this form has a combination of letters and numbers written above their title, a particular idiosyncrasy of this enumerator. The 'No. years married' for Smith's parents is represented by a symbol that looks to be a seven or a two that has been crossed out, but it doesn't look like the other sevens and twos on this sheet, for example the '27' of Selena Smith's age, so is perhaps a crossed through 'z'? [Figure 1] Like the 'c-b' over her father's position, this code is also unaccounted for in the official instructions,¹⁷ and no other couples on this census have this symbol. With the absence of the 1890 census (Alongside many other records, the 1890

¹⁵'United States Census, 1900,' Spartanburg City Ward 2-3, Spartanburg, South Carolina, United States; enumeration district 107, sheet 7A, family 127, June 7, 1900. NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972.); FHL microfilm 1,241,542.

¹⁶Department of the Interior, Census Office. 'Instructions to Enumerators: Twelfth Census of The United States. June 1, 1900.' Washington, Government Printing Office, 1900.
<https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/1900instructions.pdf>

¹⁷'Instructions to Enumerators: Twelfth Census of The United States. June 1, 1900.' 29, paragraph 135.

census for Spartanburg was burnt in a 1921 fire and ultimately destroyed in 1935.¹⁸) there is no way of knowing whether they were married before Smith's birth or not; or whether they were indeed formally married at this time.

Interestingly, whilst neither of Smith's parents is described in this census as being able to read or write, columns 22, 23 and 24 'Can Read, Can Write, Can Speak English' have been answered for Smith, but scored from the surface of the paper. The *Instructions* state that these columns are to be left blank for persons under ten;¹⁹ luckily for us, this census taker often includes these details for children and later redacts the information to fall back in line with protocol. I believe that it is answered affirmatively given that the space where the text was is longer than other 'no' answers, combined with my knowledge that Smith was able to read and write in later life. No census lists Clara Smith as having attended a school. This prompts the question, who taught Clara Smith to read?

LOCATION.				NAME of each person whose place of abode on June 1, 1900, was in this family. Enter surname first, then the given name and middle initial, if any. INCLUDE every person living on June 1, 1900. OMIT children born since June 1, 1900.	RELATION. Relationship of each person to the head of the family.	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION.									
IN CITIES.		Number of dwellings, in the order of visitation.	Number of family, in the order of visitation.			Color or race.	Sex.	DATE OF BIRTH.		Age at last birthday.	Whether single, married, widowed, or divorced.	Number of years married.	Mother of how many children.	Number of those children living.	
Street.	House Number.							Month.	Year.						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
1				Owson, William B	Son	W	M	Jan	1900	1/2	S				
2		118	126	Smith, William B	Head	W	M	May	1867	33	M				
3				Smith, Selma	Wife	W	F	May	1873	27	M		1		
4				Smith, Clara	Daughter	W	F	Sept	1892	7	S				

Figure 1: Smith Family in 1900 Census.

¹⁸Kellee Blake, "First in the Path of the Firemen: The Fate of the 1890 Population Census, Part 1." *Genealogy Notes* Vol. 28, No. 1 (1996): accessed May 20, 2018.
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1996/spring/1890-census-1.html>

¹⁹'Instructions to Enumerators: Twelfth Census of The United States. June 1, 1900.' 39, paragraph 225-228.

Below the family's listing is an entry for Linie Carter, 'boarder', sixteen years old, born April 1884, who can read and write, and works as a servant. It seems to me most likely that Linie taught Smith to read. There are sixteen other residents of Simms street listed that are under sixteen. [Appendix C] Of those, the only ones that can read and write are white children, who were unlikely to have taught Smith, two other black sixteen-year-old girls who also worked as servants, and Linie Carter. Unfortunately, her entry in the 1890 census would have been destroyed, so we cannot guess the length of their relationship, and I have been unable to trace her further into the future. Given how important penmanship was to Smith in later life, it would be nice to know if Linie remained in Smith's social circle.²⁰

Neither of Smith's parents has an entry for 'Occupation,' 'Owned or Rental,' or 'Owned Free of Mortgage,' despite this information being provided for their direct neighbours. It is very likely, given the location of their house, that one or both parents' work was connected to the Produco Mills oil mill nearby. Simms Street falls just below the area covered by the Sanborn maps for Spartanburg of 1898. However, its contemporary location is a three-minute walk along West Henry St from the Produco Mills site.²¹ [Appendix D] Work at the mills is not listed as an occupation for any of the surrounding properties, and many other entries for both employment and unemployment in the area are left blank, so I suggest it was considered an 'unmarked category' for work in the neighbourhood. Months not employed are meticulously entered for other individuals in the area, so I find it unlikely that a blank entry for 'Occupation' would signal unemployment.

²⁰This association between Clara Smith and Linie Carter emerged as a result of the writing workshops.

²¹Sanborn Map Company. 'Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps.' Spartanburg, SC: Produco Mills. 9, 1898.

Cotton oil processing was a relatively new industry to the area; the *Annual Report of the Railroad Commissioner of the State of South Carolina, 1893*, notes a connection “with the industry in this state since the first mill was erected in 1881.”²² Smith’s parents may have moved to the city for a job in a developing industry at a modern factory. Born in May 1867 and 1873, respectively, her parents came into adulthood amidst a climate of rising racial discrimination as Jim Crow laws were being instated and secure jobs were increasingly hard to come by for people of colour.

As no maiden name is listed for Selena Smith, I have been as yet unable to trace her beyond 1890. However, this census entry indicates that she and her parents were all born in South Carolina. Perhaps Selena’s family were local, perhaps visiting them instilled a taste for travel in the young Clara. William’s past has been somewhat easier to unearth. The 1880 census brings two plausible contenders, both are called William Smith, black, unable to read or write and could be thirty-three years old by 1900. The first lives in Union County, directly southeast of Spartanburg, with his uncle James Byrd, who is a farmer, and his family. He is thirteen years old at the time of the census and works as a ‘labourer.’²³ The second, from York County, east of Spartanburg, is ‘Willie’ Smith, who lives with his immediate family.²⁴ Willie is listed as ten years old in 1880, but in tracing this same family back to the 1870

²²D’arcy P Duncan, H. R. Thomas, Jefferson A. Sligh, Marcellus T. Bartlett. *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Railroad Commissioner of the State of South Carolina, 1893*. Charles A. Calvo, Jr., State Printer, 1893.

²³‘Tenth Census of the United States, 1880.’ Goshen Hill, Union, South Carolina, United States; enumeration district ED 155, sheet 508B, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 1242; FHL microfilm 1,255,242. [William Smith in household of James Byrd.]

²⁴‘Tenth Census of the United States, 1880,’ Kings Mountain, York, South Carolina, United States; citing enumeration district ED 170, sheet 562D, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 1243; FHL microfilm 1,255,243. [Willie Smith in household of Wesley Smith.]

census he is listed as three.²⁵ I am more inclined to trust this earlier age, given there is less room for error in estimating the age of an infant: making him thirty-three at the time of the 1900 census. The 1880 census shows only other one other black, thirteen-year-old, William Smith in the area.²⁶ However, he can read, unlike Smith's father.

Whilst we are unsure of exactly which William Smith will eventually become Smith's father, the striking similarities between two cases give plenty of common ground. The paternal figures were both farmers in rural areas, with nearly ten years' difference in seniority to their wives, who had 3 children. They were born in South Carolina like their parents. Neither family's being listed on the 1860 census makes it very likely they were enslaved peoples before emancipation in 1865.²⁷

The only difference is potentially in the colour of their skin, and therefore their pre-emancipation heritage: In 1870, Willie's mother Emily Smith, is listed as 'M' (mulatto [sic]) along with her children, however in 1880, Emily remains listed as 'M', but the children are now listed as 'B' (Black). The census is self-aware of the leaky nature of this category: 'Be particularly careful in reporting the class *Mulatto*. [sic] The word is here generic, and includes quadroons, octo-rooms, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood.'²⁸

²⁵'Ninth Census of the United States, 1870,' South Carolina, United States; page 13, family 85, NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 553,011. [William Smith in household of Wesley Smith.]

²⁶'Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Wadmelen Island, Charleston, South Carolina, United States; citing enumeration district ED 92, sheet 392C, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 1224; FHL microfilm 1,255,224. [William Smith in household of Cooper Smith]

²⁷Debra Newman Ham, *Black History: A Guide to Civilian Records in the National Archives*. National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1984.

²⁸'Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Instructions to Assistant Marshalls.' Department of the Interior, Census Office. 1850. <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/1870instructions-2.pdf>

Comparing the same family between the 1870 and 1880 censuses, inaccuracy of early census data for people of colour is striking, alongside changing race there are multiple discrepancies within age.²⁹ Most notable is Willie's father, Wesley, who is listed as twenty-four and then forty.

Whilst being able to trace Smith's paternal family back, "Her parents don't appear in the 1910 or later censuses. It raises the question: Did one or both of them die before she turned 18?"³⁰ The 1910 census reveals a Clara Smith living with Ed Foster and his family in Union County and working as a farm labourer. In the absence of her parents she may have moved with relatives in Union County. However, Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds "believes Clara Smith lived with a Beacham family for a short time on St. John Street."³¹

²⁹Newman Ham, 13.

³⁰Conley.

³¹Conley.

LIFE ON THE CIRCUIT

Multiple accounts say that Smith was a star on the Vaudeville circuit by 1918. Derick Stewart-Baxter writes, “by 1918 she was a headline attraction on the T.O.B.A circuit (Theatre Owners Booking Agency), and by 1921 she was filling the house at the Dream Theatre in Columbus, Georgia. [...] she made appearances at the Lyric, New Orleans, the Bijou Theatre at Nashville and, by 1923, we find her at the Booker T. Washington Theatre in St Louis.”³² Daphne Duval Harrison echoes this: “by 1918, she was a headliner on the TOBA and appeared with various tent shows and at major theatres.”³³ Smith had to have made this rise from somewhere, so was likely performing for a much longer earlier period. She was twenty-six in 1918, leaving nearly twenty years of her life formally unaccounted for. I would conjecture that during this period she moved around a lot; doing stints on the circuit for as long as possible and coming home to Spartanburg as a safety net, knowing she could stay with family friends and neighbours. The knowledge that she was breaking into the T.O.B.A whilst still being remembered as present in town by Ira Tucker supports this conjecture, especially when coupled with the harsh conditions of working on the T.O.B.A at the time. With 80 theatres on the circuit between Philadelphia and Dallas, working the T.O.B.A meant long journeys with short stops and little rest. Booking black acts for black audiences, whilst primarily organised by white businessmen, many came to joke that Tough On Black Acts (or Asses) was a more apt explanation for the acronym.³⁴

³²Stewart-Baxter, 64.

³³Daphne Duval Harrison. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. Rutgers, 1988. 240.

³⁴‘T.O.B.A’ *The Encyclopaedia of Popular Music*. Edited by Colin Larkin. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Smith was known to be an experienced traveller by the 1920s; for example, Josephine Baker informs us that when they began travelling together, “Clara Smith travelled with her own clean sheets”³⁵ to reduce the nuisance of bed bugs. Given her success at this period in time, it may also be possible that she is coming home to Spartanburg purely out of a desire to do so. I would not like to place too much stock in conjecture based on Smith’s fondness for her hometown, however, as there does come a point where she stops returning. The 1920 census shows a Clara Smith boarding in the city with the Hawkins family and working as a ‘laundress’ although her age was listed as twenty³⁶ and she cannot read and write. There is one other Clara Smith listed nearby who can read and write, but is married to a Tom Smith. At twenty-three, she is closer to Smith’s real age of twenty-seven at the time, but if Smith were in the area it was more likely as a temporary residence, making the first, if either, of these two Clara Smiths most likely.

Waiting at Spartanburg station during my first research trip there, I imagined a grand and final exit: Smith, waiting for a train to take her from her home town forever, is off to make it on her own. An excerpt from my field notes reads: “Sat on the platform at Spartanburg station, same place Clara would have come through. It looks out on an old graveyard; some of the graves date 1870. Would have been the same graveyard and the same big old trees she would have looked at. Part of me imagines her waiting for the train out of here, looking at all these people who lived and died in Spartanburg.”³⁷ In actuality, given

³⁵Jean-Claude Baker. *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*. Cooper Square Press, 2001. 42.

³⁶Conley.

³⁷Caitlin Rimmer, Field Notes, Tuesday, 8th September 2015.

Smith's comings and goings, there probably was no grand departure; she most likely left town for work one day and just never ended up returning.³⁸

Later in 1920, Clara Smith first meets Josephine Baker in St Louis.³⁹ By this time, Smith is the star of the show *Twenty Minutes in Hell*, which "told the story of a man who dreamed he had sold his soul to the devil."⁴⁰ In 1924, Smith would become the first blues musician to cut a track on this theme. The year before they meet, Baker, aged 13, married steelworker Willie Wells who her family said was "too old for her. He was about twenty-five or thirty." They separate after Baker splits his head open with a beer bottle after fabricating a pregnancy, and Baker returns to using her family name: Tumpy.⁴¹

At approximately twenty-eight, Smith is twice Baker's age and well established in the entertainment business. If Smith was misreporting her age on the census, Baker may never have known her exact age. Bernhardt's inaccuracy in recalling her birth year does suggest that Clara Smith may have been flexible in discussing her age. Baker had only been in intimate relationships with significantly older men at his point; her earlier marriage to Willie Wells was in part an attempt to distance her from a "brush with Mr. Dad," an older man she briefly lived with who "loved young girls."⁴² More worryingly, it is obvious that before meeting her Baker idolised Clara Smith: "she [Baker] had spent eight years mimicking every line, every gesture she had observed onstage [...] she watched Clara Smith pick out the

³⁸I came to this realisation through the communal timeline making process of the writing workshops.

³⁹For ease, I use Josephine's later name 'Baker' throughout, rather than switch between Tumpy, Wells and Baker.

⁴⁰Jean-Claude Baker. *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*. Cooper Square Press, 2001. 39.

⁴¹Baker 37.

⁴²Baker 35.

ugliest man in the audience and sing a love song to him; later, she would work the same trick into her own act.”⁴³

Smith overtly used her influence to get Baker closer; Baker biographer Amy Cuomo contends that:

Clara Smith, billed as ‘The South’s Favorite Coon Shouter [sic],’ took a fancy to her [Baker]. Smith insisted that the manager Bob Russell hire her to join their vaudeville troupe, The Dixie Steppers. Baker started as a dresser, but she quickly found her way onto the stage, eventually performing in the chorus. According to an associate of Russell’s, she was Clara Smith’s ‘lady lover’. Clara Smith also played a significant role in Baker’s career by introducing her to ‘black glamour.’⁴⁴

Booth Marshall was a Drag Queen on this circuit and a close friend of Russell’s. He recalls that Smith spotted Baker waiting tables at the Chauffeur’s club;

She had become Clara’s protégée, you know, her lady lover as we called it in those days. Bob did not like that kind of hanky-panky, but Clara was a big draw, and anyhow, better a steady date than a fight in every city. Josephine had no real experience, you know, but Bob saw she had potential, and Clara did the rest.⁴⁵

Smith was a mentor to a young Josephine Baker, providing her first introduction to the queer world that would become a central part of Baker’s identity. Through working on this show with Smith, Baker would have been given connections to other queer community members. Biographer Jean Claude Baker casually reflects, “once in a while—starting with Clara Smith—there would be a lady lover in Josephine’s life.”⁴⁶ Ean Woods’ account of Baker’s life gives tremendously precise details of the two’s time together; “they took to

⁴³Baker 38.

⁴⁴Amy Cuomo, *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*. Ed. Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, Robert A. Schanke, University of Michigan Press 2005 39.

⁴⁵Baker 38.

⁴⁶*The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy* 40.

spending their afternoons together, when Clara would help Baker improve her reading and writing and would buy her little gifts of liquorice, peppermint sticks and sweet-potato pie.”⁴⁷ Baker herself reflects on this sweet potato pie “...she made me eat them too. As I had a sweet tooth, I loved sugar... and I fell sick.”⁴⁸ Baker’s tone toward Smith as she recalls Bob Russell’s aggravation also reveals her reverence: “He wasn’t paying me to spend hours in Mama Smith’s dressing room improving my penmanship.”⁴⁹ Whilst tongue in cheek, Baker speaks fondly of the value Smith placed on her continuing education. Smith is potentially able to pass along the lessons of Linie Carter, a resonance that frames this interaction as an act of familial intimacy. In the very least, this report confirms Smith’s literacy prior to this date.

Smith’s teaching moments with Baker also allude to Smith’s own performance styles. Smith was a comedian as well as a singer.⁵⁰ She shared Baker’s humour and may have taught her how to work it into her stage act. Smith certainly taught her plenty about performing. Baker’s son writes in her biography, “it wasn’t only Clara’s voice that Josephine loved, but the long silk handkerchief Clara used as a prop, and her blue feather boa. Blue was Josephine’s favourite colour,”⁵¹ and, “borrowing from the art of Clara Smith she had worked with a handkerchief, and she had worked with an electric guitar before electric guitars were

⁴⁷Ean Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story*, Omnibus Press, London, 2000.

⁴⁸Baker, 44.

⁴⁹Josephine Baker, Jo Bouillon *Josephine* Harper and Row, 1977, 24.

⁵⁰Sheldon Harris. *Blues Who’s Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Singers*. Arlington House Publishers, 1979. 467.

⁵¹Baker, 43.

common.”⁵² Smith clearly worked hard on creating a performance style unique and innovative enough to be seen as distinctly hers. The use of a handkerchief and feather boa in particular suggests a more sexually charged performance than other reports let on. No other descriptions allude so specifically to the physicality of Smith’s performances.

The use of a handkerchief in particular indicates a heavily coded performance. Handkerchiefs were used for signaling amongst the upper and middle classes in late 19th and early 20th century straight culture, which was often reported on in local newspapers.⁵³ Specifically blue handkerchiefs were used in gay cowboy culture in the mid to late 19th century. Apocryphally, the disproportionate number of men on the west coast after the gold rush led to men wearing bandanas around their left or right arms to denote whether they were willing to lead or follow respectively. This led to gay men who would signify to one another by using specifically blue and red handkerchiefs⁵⁴ The large resurgence of the ‘hanky code’ as a queer flagging⁵⁵ technique in the late 1970’s as leather daddy culture expanded indicates that it was kept alive in queer memory during this hundred-year difference. The show *Twenty Minutes in Hell* was a particularly queer place; many of the contemporary accounts quoted in Baker’s biographies of this time come from drag queens and noted queer performers, making it likely these references would have been appreciated and read. I can’t help but appreciate the queered resonance this prompts in Smith’s performance, even if it may be anachronistic.

⁵²Baker, 354.

⁵³For example: ‘Handkerchief Signals.: Here Is the Code Lovers Are Using to Communicate With in Public.’ St Louis Post (St Louis, Missouri.) November 22, 1895:16.

⁵⁴Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman’s Handbook*. Greenleaf Publishing Company, 1972.

⁵⁵‘Flagging’ is an emic term for signalling one’s queerness.

Sunday, January 30th, 1921, it is the final show of *Twenty Minutes in Hell*. Just after midnight Smith and Baker catch the last train to Memphis together; “the weather is fair and cold, thirty degrees, and Josephine runs along the platform, following Clara.”⁵⁶ Baker has run away from home to join Smith. This kind of relationship was not unusual at this time. Maude Russell, a great favourite at Harlem's Cotton Club, describes the ubiquity of their situation

We girls would share a room because of the cost. ... Well, many of us had been kind of abused by producers, directors, leading men—if they liked girls. In those days, men only wanted what they wanted, they didn't care about pleasing a girl. ... And girls needed tenderness, so we had girl friendships, the famous lady lovers, but lesbians weren't well accepted in show business, they were called bull dykers. I guess we were bisexual, is what you would call it today.⁵⁷

Lucille Bogan's *B.D. Woman's Blues* is sung from a bull dyker's perspective, and expresses this same objection to the treatment of women by men:

Comin' a time, B. D. Women ain't going to need no men/ Oh the way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin.⁵⁸

The phrase ‘lady lover’ skirts around the social ostracising of the term ‘bull dyker,’ but also functions to couch these relationships in a series of excuses. We can see these cropping up in this quote from Maude Russell. She proffers that women were in bisexual relationships for cost, for safety, because men couldn't express tenderness. Smith and Baker's relationship fails to be explained by each of these. Smith doesn't need to share a room to save money and besides, I doubt she was expecting Baker to cough up. Baker at this point has no history in show business, so would have unlikely learnt the necessity of

⁵⁶Baker, 39.

⁵⁷Baker, 63-4.

⁵⁸Lucille Bogan, 'B.D Woman's Blues,' ARC, 1935.

protecting herself from the abuses of show business by lodging with Smith. She joined show business through joining Smith. Smith, on the other hand, though apocryphally beaten up by Bessie Smith, might look for a better protectorate than the slim, young Baker.⁵⁹

What this quote from Maude Russell doesn't address is the difference in age. Framing this as a relationship of convenience erases their queerness whilst being a very convenient way of overlooking a twenty-eight-year-old woman's desire for a fourteen-year-old. It cannot be denied that, in this relationship, Smith held all the cards. Looking at Smith's life through her time with Baker, though troubling, can bring more human and personal details into the frame of our understanding of her.

Baker and Smith's time together was seemingly short-lived; the troupe went from Memphis to New Orleans and up to Philadelphia. Here Baker is a featured act alongside stars such as Butterbeans and Susie:

By April of 1921 the Dixie Steppers were playing in Philadelphia, and Josephine Baker had risen from dresser to comic chorus girl. Demonstrating already her extraordinary energy and her evident desire to please the audience, she enlivened every show with the crazy antics and frantic dancing of the chorus girl on the end who kept forgetting the steps and messing up the routine.⁶⁰

This successful trip for Baker drew them apart; Jean-Claude Baker noted that 'Clara Smith had stayed behind—she never came north if she could help it.'⁶¹ Whilst in Philadelphia for the show's run, Baker met Billie Baker, and on September 17th of that year they would elope to Camden, New Jersey, to marry. Moving east with Billie proved a success

⁵⁹Albertson, Chris. *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*. Yale University Press, 2003.

⁶⁰'Josephine Baker and Le Revue Negre' *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* edited by Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates. 2005, Oxford University Press: 338.

⁶¹Baker, 48.

for her career and provided relative stability in Baker's life; from August 1922 through Autumn 1923, Baker worked in 'Shuffle Along' as a chorus girl and garnered attention from many other casting directors. The show waited for her to turn 16, and toured across the country in 1924. Shuffle Along changed the attitudes of many and was a breakthrough moment in African American performance history and was revived in 1933, 1952 and 2016. Whilst billed as a chorus girl, Baker adapted the role to bring her unique skills into the limelight, subverting the traditional role of chorus girl with perfectly timed comedic missteps and fumbles.

In March 1924 she opened the minstrel show, 'The Chocolate Dandies,' billing as 'The Highest Paid Chorus Girl in The World' (earning \$125 compared to the other girls' \$30.)⁶² During this early rise in Baker's popularity, there are no mentions in her biographies of her meeting with Clara Smith.⁶³

⁶²'Josephine Baker and Le Revue Negre' *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* edited by Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates. 2005, Oxford University Press: 338.

⁶³Josephine Baker, Jo Bouillon *Josephine* Harper and Row, 1977; Ean Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story*, Omnibus Press, London, 2000.; Jean-Claude Baker. *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*. Cooper Square Press, 2001.

HARLEM



Figure 2 Clara Smith, 1923.

In 1923, Clara Smith moves to Harlem and begins her recording career under contract for Columbia, overcoming her apparent distaste for the north.⁶⁴ Aptly, her first record is titled ‘I Got Everything a Woman Needs.’ Here, she lodged at her Aunt’s house, and it appears she was notably sensible with her money. Carl Van Vechten describes the modesty of the house she lived in at the height of her fame in the mid-twenties; “there never seemed to be a carpet on the floor.”⁶⁵ This is not to say it was not a warm home, “there were always

⁶⁴Daphne Duval Harrison. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. Rutgers, 1988. 240.

⁶⁵Carl Van Vechten. “Keep A-Inchin’ Along”: *Selected Writings of Carl Van Vechten about Black Art and Letters*. Edited by Bruce Kellner. Greenwood Press, 1979. 173.

neighbours running in and out, in addition to her business visitors and ofays like myself who paid attention to her because they liked her.”⁶⁶ Vechten also recalls her hosting a rent party (a common occurrence in the 20s, where food and entertainment would be provided for a small fee at someone’s house) though he crucially adds “as the house in which Clara resided belonged to her aunt, the idea of a rent party seemed a trifle odd. It is possible the idea only occurred to Clara after I had telephoned from downtown that I was about to call on her with a few pleasant people.”⁶⁷ It seems Smith was wealthy enough that Van Vechten finds it ‘a trifle odd’ for her to charge guests. I also suspect that Van Vechten’s privilege prevents him from considering that Smith’s aunt might still have to charge her rent. Following this description Van Vechten adds that, unlike the rest of the house, her front room was lavishly furnished; ‘there must have been an upright piano in this room, too, but I do not remember Clara ever singing at home. In the first place an accompaniment was lacking during my visits and in the second place Clara was not one to sing unless she were getting well paid for it.’⁶⁸ Smith knew the value of her time.

Looking at contemporary accounts from this time and first-hand recollections of Smith, the amount of respect and esteem in which people held her is evident. Langston Hughes described her as a “great black artist,”⁶⁹ and from trumpet player Doc Cheatham; “Clara outdrew Bessie Smith in Nashville all the time ... because she was mean, and she

⁶⁶Van Vechten, 173.

⁶⁷Van Vechten, 173.

⁶⁸Van Vechten, 173.

⁶⁹Langston Hughes. ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.’ *The Nation*, 1926.

sang mean. She would give everybody hell, give the men hell, give the women hell, in her blues singing. She was a mean woman but she was a great blues singer.”⁷⁰

Considering what people include and exclude in their commentaries, I can’t help but feel Smith’s quiet self-confidence influencing them. Most notably, it seems she had even influenced the New York ‘tastemaker’ Carl Van Vechten, as the “uncomfortable condescension”⁷¹ with which he treated other black artists is greatly limited in reference to Smith. Van Vechten was a heavy force of curation in the early 20th century black art world through his patronage of artists. Van Vechten used his wealth and social platform to promote his racist view of blackness as modernist primitivism, and his writing on Smith reflects the oscillating paternalism and deep othering that he felt toward each of the “Black literati,” to whom he consistently refers as “those people,” that he gathered around himself with his paternalistic patronage. The largest source of information on Smith is thus the most unreliable. In a letter to Walter White, Van Vechten others Smith through glowing praise, “she epitomizes the tragic moments in the love lives of those [sic] people. But she is expert in her delineation of comedy songs too. Personally, as you know, I consider her an important artist.”⁷²

Van Vechten wrote surprisingly little about Smith for publication, and significantly less than he did about Bessie. Interestingly, his writing on Smith both public and personal doesn’t provide any compromising statements about her—a kindness he doesn’t extend to other black performers of the period. In light of this, I feel that his lack of published material

⁷⁰Baker, 43.

⁷¹I thought this turn of phrase by editor of *Keep A-Inching Along*, Bruce Kellner, an excellent way to summarise the particular breed of racist undertones in Van Vechten’s writings.

⁷²Van Vechten, 172.

on Smith is a kind of self-censorship; it seems he felt uncomfortable talking about Smith's personal business, full stop. The piece in *Keep A Inchin' Along* begs for comparison with the third section of his March 1926, *Vanity Fair* piece "'Negro'[sic] Blues Singers,' on which it seems clearly to be an expansion; both begin "When we listen to Clara Smith we are vouchsafed another manifestation of the genius of the Negro [sic] for touching the heart through music..."⁷³ The *Vanity Fair* piece contains much florid description of her artistic prowess, "her voice is powerful or melancholy, by turn, it tears the blood from one's heart."⁷⁵ It contains, however, no indication of personal association, no hint of Smith's life.



Figure 3: Clara Smith, 1924.

⁷³Carl Van Vechten, 'Negro 'Blues' Singers' *Vanity Fair*. March, 1926: 67.

In 1924 the Clara Smith Theatrical Club opened in New York. It stayed in operation until 1932.⁷⁴ Smith toured regularly and kept recording as one of the most successful women of the time. Perhaps unknown to Van Vechten, Smith's frugality was not out of necessity, but rather an invention of his racist perception.

A recording from this time that I wish to draw particular attention to is her 1924 'Done Sold my Soul to the Devil,'⁷⁵ which made her the first blues singer to record a variant of this popular theme. Smith revisits the theme of her starring role in Bob Russell's play *Twenty Minutes in Hell* that was at the start of her relationship with Baker in 1920, but by 1924 Baker has completed her run in *Shuffle Along*, one of the most popular and successful shows of the day and has become 'The Highest Paid Chorus Girl in The World' in 'The Chocolate Dandies' - with no evidence found of continued contact between the two women.

In her moving this now classic trope from a queer theatre setting to the blues sphere, we see how Smith blurs these two worlds: they are not entirely distinct social spheres. Smith's prior claim to the track provides increasing evidence of the fluidity between these two worlds, unpacking the whiteness so often backgrounded onto queerness. This knowledge interestingly recontextualises the history and meanings of this trope. Because the trope of selling your soul to the Devil is most often associated with masculine figures such as Charley Patton and Robert Johnson, standard interpretations in the world of blues scholarship imbue the act with a sense of bravado and masculine recklessness. Smith's prior claim to the trope,

⁷⁴*The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*. Edited by Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, Robert A. Schanke. University of Michigan Press, 2007.

⁷⁵Clara Smith, 'Done Sold My Soul to The Devil,' Columbia Records, 1924.

however, suggests that it might better be regarded as a reflection on the compromises a person has to make when society views that which is inherently part of you as evil.



Figure 4: Clara Smith, 1925.

In 1925 Josephine Baker moves to Paris with her act *La Revue Nègre*, to wide critical acclaim.⁷⁶ Whilst there is no evidence that Baker and Smith kept in contact before, both were living in the New York area and performing on a very similar circuit. Past 1925, we can be definitively sure that they no longer saw one another.

In the Washington Memorial Library in Macon, Georgia, I found a telegram dated April 19th, 1925, at 7 pm, from a Sam E Reeves to C H Douglass of the Douglass Theatre requesting to “confirm today” a payment for \$275 to be made for “Clara Smith and accompanist,” playing on the twenty seventh,⁷⁷ followed by a deed from May 2nd 1925

⁷⁶A comprehensive account can be found in: Karen C. C. Dalton, Henry Louis Gates. ‘Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes.’ *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No.4 The University of Chicago Press (Summer, 1998): 903-934.

⁷⁷Sam E Reeves, Telegram to C H Douglass of the Douglass Theater, April 19th, 1925, 7 pm. *Courtesy of the Middle Georgia Archives, Washington Memorial Library, Macon Ga.*

revealing that Clara Smith purchased a house on Elizabeth St. in Macon, Georgia.⁷⁸

[Appendix E] I imagine the urgency of this earlier confirmation was related to exactly this upcoming expense. Elizabeth Street has since been named Emory Avenue, and the site of Smith's home is now within the bounds of a gated community complex. A section of this road has not been subsumed by the gated community, however, and I was able to take a photograph of what looks to be an original property. [Appendix F] Though the house has suffered the effects of time, it is wonderful to see the kind of home that Smith would presumably have bought. Looking at town records, I found no evidence to suggest that Smith actually lived in this house, so I surmise, rather, that she bought it as an investment and let the place out. From Van Vechten's report, we can assume that she then lived at her aunt's house in New York and used her tenants' rent money to pay off the mortgage on the house that she had purchased. It has been rumoured in the community of British blues scholars that Smith used the money from her fame to purchase multiple properties; the discovery of a signed deed for Elizabeth St. is a step in uncovering the facts behind this rumour.

Another symbol of Smith's prosperity at his time was to be found in Macon, with evidence of her career as a comedian. Sheldon Harris' *Blues Who's Who* lists 'Jolly Clara' as an alternate comedic billing, and Van Vechten describes her as "expert in her delineation of comedy songs."⁷⁹ Reference to Smith's comedy act is significant in its rarity; it is a side of her that has been greatly left by the wayside. She also earned significantly less for this aspect; comparing the \$275 from April 19th 1925, her comedy stage name merits just \$50 on

⁷⁸"Index to Realty Deeds and Mortgages – Bibb County, Ga." Housed in The Washington Memorial Library: Macon, Georgia. Dated May 2nd 1925. *Courtesy of the Middle Georgia Archives, Washington Memorial Library, Macon Ga.*

⁷⁹Sheldon Harris. *Blues Who's Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Singers*. Arlington House Publishers, 1979. 467.

July 1st of the same year.⁸⁰ Why did she keep performing as a comedian? It seems then that Smith did this work out of enjoyment rather than monetary reward, which is a strong statement of self-governance and empowerment.

With the security of this investment in real property, Smith then starts a family. An article in *The Baltimore Afro-American* from 1926 contains reference to a marriage between Clara Smith and Charles Wesley, and also to a daughter between the two, “little Willie Lee Smith, who is a smaller edition of the mother, and who may succeed to the mantle worn by her illustrious mother.”⁸¹ I find it indicative of Smith’s character that the first three quarters of the piece focuses on her career and how she wishes to be perceived as “just a singer,” while news of her new husband and child are left to the final paragraph.

I have found no evidence of this child elsewhere. Unfortunately, it seems most likely that Willie Lee died young. An alternative possibility is that Charles took her with him after separating from Smith. This seems unlikely, however, both because taking a child from its mother seems an odd choice for a transient baseball player early in his career, and because neither Clara nor this child appears to have taken Charles Wesley’s name (which further suggests that he might not have been Willie Lee’s biological father).⁸²

⁸⁰Theatre Owners Booking Association, ‘Contract’, Signed C.H. Douglass, Manager of Douglass Theatre. 1st July, 1925. *Courtesy of the Middle Georgia Archives, Washington Memorial Library, Macon Ga.*

⁸¹‘Clara Smith is No Blues Singer.’ *Baltimore Afro-American*, (Baltimore, Maryland.) May 22, 1926.

⁸²Prior to the writing workshop process I had not at all actively considered this sparse mention of Smith’s child, which proves both a promising lead for further investigation and a huge life event for Smith.



Figure 5: Clara Smith, March 1926- far right.

Smith and Wesley's marriage can be traced to Florida. Here, dated March 19th, 1926, is a Marriage License [Appendix G], the County deed record of Marriage Licenses [Appendix H], and finally notary paperwork from the day revealing Clara Smith's signature [Appendix I]. Definitively identifying Clara Smith's signature opens a myriad of possibilities toward future research.

The records show Wesley is 29 and Smith 32, (giving her an approximate 1893 birthdate.) Wesley's occupation is given as "owner theatrical bs" (business); more than a ballplayer, Charles was in the same industry as Clara, giving some indication as to the context in which they met. Joseph Jones and Harry Smith were witnesses; I have found

nothing to indicate the nature of their relationship to the couple. The address 18 W 130th NYC, Harlem, is listed for both of them on their marriage certificate, which runs parallel to where The National Jazz Museum stands today. An apartment in this building was recently on the market, and the real estate listing provided excellent historical detail for the property:

These were among the first speculative townhouses built in Harlem, and their design is very unusual. The houses are set back from the street and all have front yards, an oddity in Manhattan, and all have wooden porches. The effect is southern, and has been compared to the appearance of parts of Savannah, Georgia. The houses were built on land that had been purchased by John Jacob Astor in 1844 for \$10,000, but the development was driven by his grandson, William Backhouse Astor, who hired architect and builder Charles Buek to oversee the project. The houses were all built between 1880 and 1883.⁸³

The southern appeal of the design was likely of comfort to Smith. Many of the apartments still have their original features, making it far more possible to imagine how they looked during Smith and Wesley's time there whilst reading Van Vechten's descriptions of the space. [Appendix J]

The front parlour made up for the meagre furnishing of the rest of the apartment. It contained two complete "suites" ... of upholstered furniture, one in green, the other in red plush, probably about fourteen pieces in all. The room was not large, and these suites were packed in together so closely that it was not easy to make your way about it to inspect the framed photographs of Clara and her forebears on the table or the not too skilfully executed oil paintings on the red papered walls.⁸⁴

The quality of light falling into these rooms would have created a warm, rich glow falling against the red papered walls and crowd of plush furniture. I imagine the room felt cozy and secluded on even the brightest morning. Learning about the specifics of this house

⁸³'18 W 130th St, New York, NY 10037, 3 Beds, 1 Bath, 3000sqft.' Zillow. 2017.
https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/18-W-130th-St-New-York-NY-10037/31547253_zpid/

⁸⁴Van Vechten, 173.

makes me insatiably curious about Smith's aunt who owned it, and I have as yet found nothing to lead me to her.

It seems that Clara and Charles were happy living together here. The 1926 newspaper article finishes, "hubby was not present during the interview, but a far away [sic] look that was noticeable in the wife's eyes, seemed to say: 'I wish he were.'" In a slightly less saccharine tone the subheading of the article reads "married to Memphis ball player and is really proud of him."⁸⁵ Van Vechten also speaks of "her husband, to whom she referred ... affectionately as Tootie."⁸⁶

Wesley was complicit in Smith's teasing of Van Vechten: "once she invited me [Van Vechten] to buy him [her husband] an overcoat ... but when I refused she retained her habitual good humor."⁸⁷ Here Smith's dry humour coincides with fiscal savvy to leave Van Vechten second guessing her intent. On several occasions Smith toys with Van Vechten's patronage in this way. Her knowledge that his pockets are far deeper than his knowledge of her forms a punchline to many of their interactions.

I would argue that Wesley's role is historically underplayed in writing on Smith because the presence of both Baker and Wesley as romantic partners muddies the waters. I personally think that there's no evidence to suggest that she wasn't happy with both of these individuals, spending some of her earlier years with Josephine Baker, and marrying Wesley after Baker had moved to France. This bias in knowledge about Smith stems perhaps

⁸⁵Clara Smith is No Blues Singer' in *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 22nd 1926, 4.

⁸⁶Van Vechten, 173.

⁸⁷Van Vechten, 174.

more out of an institutional lack of understanding of bisexuality than of any firm knowledge of an unhappy rift between her and her husband.



Figure 6: Clara Smith, May 1926- centre.

In the late 20s Smith becomes more and more overtly involved in the emerging ‘Pansy Craze,’ an early form of the drag ball that we know today.⁸⁸ As prohibition created a world of deregulated nightlife, queerness followed blackness as a sought-after commodity for white patrons and “pansies increasingly became part of the exotic spectacle clubgoers and

⁸⁸For more on the Pansy Craze I have found invaluable George Chauncey’s *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Makings of the Gay Male World*, Harper Collins, 1994.

tourists expected to see.”⁸⁹ George Chauncey describes the intersecting racist and homophobic fetishization that the Pansy Craze navigated:

If whites were intrigued by the “primitivism” of black culture, heterosexuals were equally intrigued by the “perversity” of gay culture. As the gay world of Greenwich Village and Harlem grew and became more visible in the wake of World War I and the imposition of prohibition, it evoked growing curiosity.⁹⁰

Whilst married to Wesley, Clara Smith became a leading figure on the queer Harlem scene. Given that she was married to an owner in the business, it may be that her increased involvement was simply the result of her increased capacity to put on shows—motivated either by a desire to support the community or simply market savvy as the demand for queer performers increased. These queer activities may have placed a strain on their marriage, but we cannot ultimately know with the evidence we currently have. Smith’s eminence on the queer New York scene is perhaps why she didn’t want to be pigeonholed as a blues singer; the Pansy Craze had produced spaces for the creation of art beyond the category of race.⁹¹ The same article that states her gooey-eyed attachment to her husband emphasises her work

⁸⁹George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Makings of the Gay Male World*. (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 309.

⁹⁰*Gay New York*, 309.

⁹¹This insight was a direct result of discussions raised in the writing workshops.

as a vaudeville singer and entertainer, telling us “the artist prefers to be known as just a singer with the blues left out.”⁹²

Smith opened a string of her own shows in the late twenties. A star act of Smith’s own *Black Bottom Revue* as it opens in 1927 was Irvin C. Miller’s ‘Gay Harlem,’⁹³ a “wanton display of human flesh” with “loose morals and lavaciousness [sic].”⁹⁴ Later in 1927 she ran the *Clara Smith Revue*. 1929 saw her shows *Dream Girls* and *Candied Sweets* and also brought along her Broadway debut in *Pansy*.⁹⁵ I have been unable to determine whether this show was the same, or at least connected to, Maceo Pinkard’s *Pansy*; a show starring Bessie Smith in the same year. Clara Smith’s appearance in *Pansy* is particularly important in cementing her as a fixture on the queer New York scene, as the late twenties were the height of the ‘Pansy Craze,’ and by 1929 club owners were desperate to book acts that clearly communicated queerness. Smith’s 1929 appearance in *Pansy* was followed by *Dusty Lane Revue*, 1930, and in 1931 the *January Jubilee Revue* and an all-

⁹²‘Clara Smith is No Blues Singer’ in *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 22nd 1926, 4.

⁹³*The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*. Edited by Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, Robert A. Schanke. University of Michigan Press, 2007, 39.

⁹⁴NY Amsterdam N quoted in Bernard L. Peterson, ‘Gay Harlem’ in *A Century of Musicals in Black and White: An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage Works By, About, Or Involving African Americans*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1993, 141.

⁹⁵*The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*, 39.

black western musical *Trouble on the Ranch*, produced at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia.⁹⁶



Figure 7: Clara Smith, 1927.

⁹⁶*The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*, 39.

DETROIT

At some point in this period Smith separates from Charles Wesley, though not officially, and moves to Detroit, Michigan.

On February 1st, 1935 Clara Smith dies. Her death certificate is in the blues collection at the University of Mississippi, listing “cardio renal hypersensitive heart disease & decompensation” as cause of death.⁹⁷ At the time of her death Wesley’s whereabouts are unknown. Excepting the brief mention of their marriage in 1926 and his mention in her obituary, I have not yet been able to find any reference to their partnership in local papers. Between the time of their marriage and the time of Smith’s death, Wesley had made a name for himself in the sporting world; her obituary describes him as “formerly manager of Birmingham Black Baron, Memphis Red Sox and Louisville teams.” An ex housemate of Smith’s, Miss Violet Chespeake Scott, is left trying to locate him: “last heard from Wesley was in Texas.”⁹⁸

Smith continued to record multiple times a year until March, 1932, and at the time of her death “she had just returned from a six-month engagement at the Orchestra Gardens here [in Chicago.]”⁹⁹

Her increasing involvement in queer community seemingly removed her from the mainstream spotlight. Speaking of Smith’s death, Van Vechten writes, “News of it did not, so

⁹⁷‘Certificate of Death, Clara Smith, 1935.’ Michigan Department of Health, Courtesy of the Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi.

⁹⁸Clara Smith, Popular Blues Singer, Dies’ in *The Chicago Defender*, Feb. 9, 1935.

⁹⁹Clara Smith, Popular Blues Singer, Dies’ in *The Chicago Defender*, Feb. 9, 1935.

far as I am aware, reach the Negro [sic] press.”¹⁰⁰ However, she was given an obituary in *The Chicago Defender*, “the nation’s most influential black weekly newspaper.”¹⁰¹ From this we learn, “Heart Attack Is Fatal to A Famous ‘Queen of Blues,’” after spending 11 days in hospital for heart problems. Van Vechten may have been wrong, but it is notable that her obituary covers only four paragraphs on page nine. This is a very different situation to the full, front page spread ‘7000 Attend Funeral of Bessie Smith’ in the *Baltimore Afro American* two years later.¹⁰²

Smith was a complicated character. She was an outgoing introvert, a bisexual, and a fiscally reserved blues singer with, apparently, none of the alcohol or drug addiction regularly attributed to so many other early female blues singers. Not an easy woman to typecast. I think that these very nuances of her character have added to her obscurity. Smith doesn’t neatly fit into the stereotypes used to understand early 20th century black womanhood; she actively defies them. She was not excessive and neither was she dowdy. She had sexual agency, but her affairs didn’t reach the paper. Smith’s is not the kind of story that can be crammed into the punchy first sentence of LP liner notes. Although Smith was apparently fiercely private about her business, I think the very rounded humanity of her character has also contributed to the dearth of information published about her.

¹⁰⁰Van Vechten, 174.

¹⁰¹‘The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords; Newspapers; The Chicago Defender’ PBS. Accessed July 14 2018. http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/index.html

¹⁰²‘7000 Attend Funeral of Bessie Smith’ in *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 9 1937.

Clara Smith is buried in Lincoln Memorial Park, Macomb County, Michigan. Her grave marker has no dates upon it, and I do not know who chose to lay it. It lies flush with the grass, with a simple inscription that reads, “Clara Smith Remembered.” [Appendix K] ¹⁰³

¹⁰³Clara Smith (1894–Feb 2, 1935), Find A Grave (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/6666678/clara-smith> : accessed July 18, 2018) Lincoln Memorial Park, Clinton Township, Macomb County, Michigan, USA. Find A Grave Memorial no. 6666678, with grave marker photograph.

PART TWO: QUEERING CLARA'S MOAN

Despite her enormous popularity in the 1920s, Clara Smith has historically been direly understudied. As previously noted, the longest piece of academic writing published on her is the 6½ page entry listing her discography in Dixon, Godrich and Rye's 1997 *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*. By comparison; her contemporary, friend, and collaborator, Bessie Smith, has been the subject of multiple monograph-length biographies and hundreds of articles, has had three recordings inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, has been commemorated on a stamp issued by the US Postal Service, and was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame from its opening year.

As well as being remarkably brief, published research concerning Clara Smith is disparately located, dividing her between her identities as a queer woman and as a blues singer. The realms in which these aspects of Smith's life are studied do not often overlap, leading to an incompleteness in the overall narrative. Blues scholarship has created an image of Clara Smith as a titillating absence, whilst queer studies have seen her as a footnote to the biographies of her partner Josephine Baker. Baker's biographies supply rich biographic details of Smith from the few years the two were together, but these have not filtered across to biographies of Smith proper.

Communicating a narrative of Smith's life necessitated finding a means to counteract the erasure and censure of her life enacted by conventional blues scholarship. To accomplish this, I have needed to renegotiate the institutionalized structures—colonialism, sexism,

homophobia, and racism—that have undermined appreciation of her life and work. Having troubled the previous methods of representation in blues scholarship, my work required that I imagine a new means of researching and presenting biographical materials that would function as a critical methodological intervention.

History is an active, political project that alters each time we write about it. When considering the past, we have a responsibility to consider the present; the way we represent figures historically impacts the relation people have to the past today. If “tradition is the creation of the future out of the past,”¹⁰⁴ the way the past is written alters the world-building potentials of the future. Working as a British blues scholar, I am the subject of a legacy that has not felt this accountability. I came to this field of study through the British blues scholarly tradition, which was developed and dominated by middle class, white, British men, many without any formal cultural studies training. I, in contrast, now draw heavily on (post)colonial studies as a way of unpacking the racist, colonial narratives recursively folded into the history of British blues scholarship, and even into my own work. I must challenge myself to undermine and actively deconstruct the legacy I have inherited that has historically displayed such a lack of accountability.

I begin by troubling the concept of a single, dominant and objective interpretation. With such a limited scope of facts, objective interpretation will always be undermined by conditions of emergence for interpretation which exist against ever developing and changing contexts. Mark Rifkin describes this action as “an active and shifting process of

¹⁰⁴Henry Glassie. ‘Tradition’ *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* Ed. Burt Feintuch, University of Illinois Press, 2003, 176.

backgrounding.... within such an account, the practices, knowledges, and forms of collective identification often characterized as tradition can be understood as distinctive ways of being-in-time.”¹⁰⁵ In Smith’s case, scholars’ traditional inability to conceive queerness as anything other than a taboo excised it from her historical presence.

I began this project purely focused on reclamation. I organised a three-week trip to Georgia and the Carolinas to gather primary source materials. Corroborating this data with secondary materials, I began to notice that humming between records of life and legacy lay a strange distortion. The longer I worked with these materials, the louder it became. I saw a need for a critical investigation of the methodologies previously used in blues scholarship. The barrier between Smith’s life and her legacy was not just a lack of materials, but something much more significant.

In previous scholarship, those studying Clara Smith seem to see multiple fields of information about Smith, but not to connect them. The data I have gathered concerning Smith and Baker’s time together comes in large part from Baker’s biography, *Josephine*, which has been in print since 1977.¹⁰⁶ It was not included in any biographies of Smith following this date. In this action, I identify the process of aphasia; a severing of signifier and signified verging on active dissociation. In (post)colonial settings, aphasia has been identified as a political condition, functioning as a form of Orwellian doublethink. Scholars may be aware of both fields of knowledge, but the structures of power separating them belie cognitive suture. My use of this concept is developed from Ann Laura Stoler’s *Duress: Imperial*

¹⁰⁵Mark Rifkin. *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self- Determination*. Duke University Press, 2017. (Emphasis in original.)

¹⁰⁶Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon. *Josephine*. Harper and Row, 1977.

Durabilities in Our Times.¹⁰⁷ In framing the arguably colonial history of this discipline as an ‘imperial durability,’ I stress that it is not an inactive history but an active and shaping force.

Stoler defines the phenomenon of colonial aphasia;

Aphasia in its many forms describes a difficulty in retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, a difficulty in comprehending what is spoken. ... As I argue here, very little of these histories has been or is actually forgotten: it may be displaced, occluded from view, or rendered inappropriate to pursue. It may be difficult to retrieve in a language that speaks to the disparate violence it engendered. But it is neither forgotten nor absent from contemporary life. Aphasia, I propose, is perhaps a more appropriate term, one that captures not only the nature of that blockage but also the feature of loss.¹⁰⁸

Smith’s queerness suffers this act of aphasia; the knowledge is not lost, but becomes bizarrely fractured. As Queer Studies scholar Yin- Kun Chang argues, “heterosexual hegemony ... does not absolutely forbid sexual minorities from voicing concerns; on the contrary, the structure allows speaking but within the confines of a rigid steering principle.”¹⁰⁹ Aphasia is easily apparent at work in the detailing of Smith’s relationships. Katherine Young writes that “because we are embodied persons, the body suggests itself to culture as a symbolic operator for organising our thinking about other phenomena... we map the body on to the world.”¹¹⁰ Because she has primarily been studied by white/British/male scholars, Smith’s queer relationships have been conceived through their bodies’ understanding of queerness—represented primarily through shame, denial, and

¹⁰⁷Ann Stoler. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Duke University Press, 2016.

¹⁰⁸Stoler, 128.

¹⁰⁹Yin- Kun Chang ‘Queer Phobic and Cultural Aphasia: Heterosexual Hegemony Suturing the Textbook.’ *Journal of Education and Social Studies*, Vol. 14, (2007): 21.

¹¹⁰Young, Katherine. *Bodylore*. University of Tennessee Press, 1995.

fetishization. Smith's queer relationships become a non-canonical part of her experience; they are relegated to the footnotes of her partner's biographies and discussed in the community of British blues scholars as underhand and risqué additions to our conception of her. Smith has historically suffered from scholars 'backgrounding' their experience into hers; they have overlooked the specific "conditions of emergence" of Smith's identity and choices.¹¹¹ The queer histories of female blues singers are excised and eroticised. The quotidian nature of Smith's relationships is vanquished, or at the very least pushed far to the edges of consciousness. The importance of Smith's agency in forming these relationships should not be diminished. Angela Y. Davis reminds us, "For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered. Sexuality was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation"¹¹²

In searching for a corrective against aphasia, I found it in queer theory. Discussing the phenomena of queer-phobic and cultural aphasia in educational settings, Yin-Kun Chang argues that delivering educational materials surrounded by the heteroglossic conditions of their production enables a fuller and more inclusive conversation.¹¹³ In incorporating theories of heteroglossia into my study, I draw upon Patricia Sawin's exploration of that idea in the study of folklore. Sawin's dialogic ethnography rests upon communication: "A dialogic

¹¹¹Rifkin, 11.

¹¹²Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Pantheon Books, 1998. 25.

¹¹³Yin- Kun Chang 'Queer Phobic and Cultural Aphasia: Heterosexual Hegemony Suturing the Textbook.' *Journal of Education and Social Studies*, Vol. 14, (2007.)

approach consequently emphasises both the multi-vocality and inherent contradiction within any act of communication and the crucial role of the particular listener/interpreter.”¹¹⁴ In utilising dialogic ethnography in my interpretation of archival materials, I have explored how Smith engaged with the construction of self, both in contemporary life and in legacy making, whilst negotiating discourses of gender, class, and race. Keen attention to the multiple levels of communication in each interaction is a particularly necessary development to studying female blues singers, as I would argue that, historically, they have been often rendered stereotypically and two-dimensionally. The historical nature of this project also requires attention to multiple levels of communicative acts. There is a palimpsestic layering of what Sawin calls “the crucial role of the particular listener/interpreter.”¹¹⁵ Smith’s original audience, her original context, her lensing through the history of the discipline, and, of course, my own role as an interpreter who invites further audiences must all be considered.

Aphasia exists against the process of ‘backgrounding’ as identified by Rifkin. “‘The figure ‘figures’ insofar as the background both is and is not in view’ ... Absent a background, nothing can figure in or as the foreground and be available for attention, perception, or acknowledgment.”¹¹⁶ The consistent use of backgrounding functions to control the way in which Smith appears as different. Extant scholarship presents Smith as more similar to the white male scholars writing about her, thus undoing the difference of queer life, while simultaneously creating the idea of an inherently different cultural milieu of a blues

¹¹⁴Patricia Sawin. *Listening for A Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through Her Songs and Stories*. Utah State University Press, 2004, 7.

¹¹⁵Sawin, 7.

¹¹⁶Sara Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2006, 31, 37-38 quoted in Rifkin, 11.

singer. Early blues scholarship thus inferred a universal background, that of the scholar's experience, against which blues singers appear as cognisably different and irreconcilable with the scholar's experience. These works have had a lasting and foundational impact on the way these artists are perceived. The context of production for these foundational interpretations is the white men behind them, who were often born nearer the first half of the last century. The wider context for these men is a world in which female queerness is violently and quietly erased. Their conception provides a background to their understanding—a background from which female queerness has been forcibly removed. Hyper aware of the difference of race by contrast, this difference enters the foreground as an exoticized, concrete point of difference; blues is framed as a living, as a way of being, and, despite her own attempts to distance herself from it, as Smith's way of being.

Blues scholarship has a long and contentious history with this mode of embodied scholarship. The genre is haunted by a legacy of 'true testimony,' of glamorising and fetishizing poverty, and glossing over gendered experiences, which, by reducing blues to a mode of existing rooted in poverty and hardship, seeks to create a colour-blind experience. In doing so it overlooks the specific experience of being a black person living in the Jim Crow South, in favour of a homogenised frame through which to understand the experience of understanding blackness. In the desire to see beyond race, it potentially reinstates an unmarked category of whiteness and erases the nuances of an intersectional experience.

The issues presented thus far are compounded by the historical trend of studying black female artists in terms of 'trope.' Women are often reduced to tropes, particularly women in the public light, such as performers. The voices that have been privileged in the

continued process of categorisation are the etic perceptions of largely white and male audiences; erasing both queerness and nuance from the frame of understanding.

In studying *Black Female Identity Via Rap Music Performance* Cheryl L. Keyes observed four distinct categories of female rappers identified by their communities: Queen Mother, African centred regal icons; Fly Girl, chic and fashionable; Sista With Attitude, “aggressive, arrogant, defiant, I-know-I’m-BAD;” and Lesbian, a later and much smaller category centred on black lesbian culture.¹¹⁷ Each category has roots in previous ways that black female musicians have been perceived—the historical difference is that by the time of Keyes’ writing in the 90s, acceptance of the LGBTQ community has progressed to the point where lesbians are allowed to be a satellite subcategory of the genre they’re performing in.

Smith falls between academic field boundaries and between trope markers. With the inability to conceptualise a ‘Lesbian’ category, Smith and her queerness have been absented. My research convinces me that Smith worked her entire life to control the objectification of her presence. Between the writings of Josephine Baker and Carl Van Vechten we can see that she controlled public discussion of her sexuality, without denying herself a private sexual life. Smith was a complex and nuanced queer figure; her presence troubles the structures of power in the discipline and the fragile masculinity inherent in its construction. Excising Smith from the canon should be recognized as an exercise of control, a fraught effort to maintain an already false boundary and to shore up pre-constructed narratives of what blues singers are and what their lives mean. Smith radically challenges this narrative. My project thus functions not just to raise public awareness of Clara Smith, but also, by insisting on

¹¹⁷Cheryl L. Keyes ‘Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity Via Rap Music Performance’ *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 113, No 449 (Summer 2000) 225-269.

connecting historically severed contexts, inherently critiques the process of queer censure and erasure at work in the institutionalized form of blues scholarship.

From the height of their fame in the twenties, up until their present legacy, female blues singers have been forced into a reduced bracket of tropes in various ways. In 1964, Ralph Ellison wrote, “Bessie Smith might have been a “Blues Queen” to the society at large, but within the tighter Negro [sic] community where the blues were a total way of life, and major expression of an attitude towards life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group and man’s ability to deal with chaos.”¹¹⁸ Biographies of these singers have often been politically loaded, creating goddesses from these women. Far more so than their male counterparts, the last hundred years has seen female blues musicians reduced. They are viewed as significant historical figures as working class, black women but very rarely viewed as notable figures in queer history.

Consider this quote, from Daphne Duval Harrison’s *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*: “this is the essence of the blues woman—autonomous, indomitable, versatile, ambitious, industrious, and sensuous.”¹¹⁹ Harrison deploys these descriptive boundaries as an empowering statement, celebrating a legacy of women who have come to represent, celebrate and inspire these features. Harrison seeks to provide readers “with an opportunity to see these women as pivotal figures in the assertion of black women’s ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor. ... and demonstrate[s] an emerging model for the working woman—one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, assertive,

¹¹⁸Ralph Ellison. ‘The Blues: Blues People by LeRoi Jones’ *The New York Review of Books*. February 6, 1964.

¹¹⁹Duval Harrison, 5.

and trendsetting.”¹²⁰ Angela Davis illustrates how access to the means of production (or lack thereof) has skewed the black Feminist tradition: “what are constituted as black feminist traditions tend to exclude ideas produced by and within poor and working-class communities, where women historically have not had the means or access to publish written texts. But some poor black women did have access to publishers of oral texts. In fact, in the 1920s, many black women were sought after—and exploited by—burgeoning record companies.”¹²¹

Given that many of the early commercially successful blues performers are what would now be considered queer women, their histories are also the history of the queer movement in the 20th century. Allowing these stories to be placed back into mainstream consciousness is essential; given Sawin’s claim that “the terms of self-conception and self-realisation are established by discourses, invisibly coordinated,” we must expand the current discourses to include those which have been historically excluded. Through increased representation, we can “produce permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible.”¹²²

Considering Bengt Holbeck’s claim that the assumptions upon which folklore has been based reflect the prejudices and changing political interests of the class from which folklorists have come, in Muñoz’s words “I wish to disarm a *precritical* celebratory aura that might attach itself.”¹²³ Our desire to celebrate must be balanced with a mindfulness of reality.

¹²⁰Duval Harrison, 10.

¹²¹Davis, xi-xii.

¹²²Sawin, 6. Sawin quotes the second phrase from Foucault.

¹²³Muñoz, 161.

Although perfection in a traditional sense is not something that has been stereotypically associated with female blues singers (a penchant for whiskey, gin, and lovers seems almost a prerequisite) they have still experienced a silence around areas of their life that the discipline has not ‘celebrated.’ Historically, the study of female blues singers has oversimplified their experiences; the power of aphasia erases the fact that their lives are nuanced, complicated and human. Constantly integrating and responding to conflicting discourses of a patriarchal, racist society, blues performers would never have had the luxury of investing in a static sense of self. This is something that I would like to introduce to our studies; a reminder that Smith’s life, like mine and yours and everyone’s, was messy, complicated, and at times seemingly contradictory. She resolved these differences in the way that we all do, in the beautiful way that humans live consistently evolving lives that don’t make sense on paper.

Clara Smith expands beyond what we expect from a blues singer in many ways. By informing the Baltimore Afro-American that she “is No Blues Singer,” Smith, “like all of us, talks and sings simultaneously to her immediate audience and to the ghosts of listeners past and future, both of whose understanding and response she anticipates.”¹²⁴ Smith is in this moment speaking to the future. In considering the phrase “prefers to be known as just a singer with the blues left out,” we can see her negotiating her legacy, wishing to position herself out of the ‘marked category’ of blues and ‘race records’ and into the ‘unmarked category’ of singer. She is also moving herself away from the raucous connotations attached to the lifestyle of a female blues singer in her contemporary society. We should queer her legacy not just in recognising her work on the 1920s gay scene,

¹²⁴Sawin, x.

but by dismantling the boundary that surrounds our understanding of blues singer/not blues singer. She sang fantastic blues songs; she was no blues singer.

Smith was not just queer, but was, significantly, a woman. Angela Davis notes that “When male country blues caught on in 1926, their growing popularity initiated a pattern that eventually marginalised women blues singers after the classic blues era began to decline.”¹²⁵ The privileging of male voices has a long history in the study of the blues. Davis proffers that “given the long histories of slavery and segregation in the United States, it is understandable that black social consciousness has been overdetermined by race. This one-dimensionality is also reflected in the works that attempt to recapitulate those histories.”¹²⁶ The gender bias of the field has been able to go unchecked through this one-dimensionality. “Because most studies of the blues have tended to be gendered implicitly as male, those that have engaged with the social implications of this music have overlooked or marginalised women.”¹²⁷ This oversight greatly obscures the contribution of this world to early feminist thought. “What is most interesting—and provocative—about the bodies of work each of these women left behind is the ways in which hints of feminist attitudes emerge from their music through fissures of patriarchal discourses.”¹²⁸ Davis does not suggest that these singers identify as feminists, but does seek to explore the way that these women navigate patriarchal discourse.

¹²⁵Davis, 20.

¹²⁶Davis, xi.

¹²⁷Davis, xix.

¹²⁸Davis, xi.

Expanding beyond the bracket of the common trope, for example, by including Smith's queerness, happy home life, and financial security as essential elements of her story, disrupts a dominant understanding of black people in this period, a narrative that serves very useful purposes for the dominant ideology. Including these items allows the building of very different futures from the past.

History captures individuals as largely textual remains, and it is easy to forget the unnaturalness of this form. Meeting a person via their textual remains, we tend to conceive of them as 'minds' and separate them from their experience as bodies. We must be aware of how the physical bodies in our work are affecting it. How is culture being inscribed on to the body of, in my case, Clara Smith? How has she potentially experienced the world through her body? Because she was a singer, Smith's body functioned as her means both of self-expression and of income. Considering Smith through the lens of bodylore, we can see a link between her moderate lifestyle and her financial investments. In avoiding excess, she continued to invest in herself. This reveals an attitude to her craft not associated with blues singers, but rather with classically trained (white) musicians. If the second most recorded blues singer of the classic period was doing this, why is this not an attitude we associate with blues singers? Through applying the perspective of bodylore we can unpack some of the ways in which black people of the 1920s have had their agency over their bodies removed from the historic picture. A blues singer's talent is often tied to their ancestral blackness, their experience of suffering. It is also important to remember that blues musicians had agency over their talent and could actively create, curate, and nurture their artistic output. The series of shows Smith developed proves her dedication to maintaining agency over the context and content of her performances.

As folklorists, we are crucially aware of our impact on and integration into the field in which we study, and as archivists the results are just as significant. The past is never static, particularly in a field about which we are constantly writing. We are constantly creating ‘pasts’ in our writing. Each new story of the past gives certain events dominance in our telling. Continually placing this dominance in the same spot warps the narrative. As subjective individuals, we are constantly reframing history in relation to a timeline that serves our ends and that speaks to our experience.

I have undertaken this project because I do not consider history passive. It is an active, political project that alters each time we write about it. When considering the past we have a responsibility to consider the present; the way we represent figures historically impacts the relation people have to the past today. Previous biographies of Clara Smith have been all too brief. Aphasia has left a fractured and divided conception of Smith’s intersectional self. In allowing space for multiple interpretations of the documents I have gathered together, I hope that I will enable blues scholars and those who simply enjoy Smith’s music to move beyond an idolised conception of ‘Clara Smith, Queen of the Moaners’ and finally experience and appreciate the nuances that Clara vocalises.

CONCLUSION

I have sought to give context to Clara Smith and to her extensive catalogue of recordings that have formed the sum total knowledge of her to date. Much can be conveyed by Smith's music. Smith led a life that centred on her music; from the time she was a teenager until her death at age 42, she went where her work demanded. Here, I have shown how she also went beyond her recordings in living a complex, unconventional, and, it appears, fulfilling life. She had a family and friends and was a member of several communities. In comparing her success during her lifetime to conventional perceptions of her in the present day, I have made visible the structures and prejudices that have warped both her history and the process of making that history. Existing practice has failed Smith, allowing the forces of racism, sexism, homophobia and colonialism to be folded recursively into her legacy. By utilising new methods, I have been able to construct the most complete account of her life to date, eschewing dependency on tropes as a narrative tool.

From a series of disparate sources, I have sought to create a network of information and resources. The experience of bisexual women has been expunged from the historical record. As the advocacy group GLAAD notes, "Bisexual erasure or bisexual invisibility is a pervasive problem in which the existence or legitimacy of bisexuality (either in general or in regard to an individual) is questioned or denied outright."¹²⁹ Bisexuality has, and continues to

¹²⁹'Erasure of Bisexuality' *GLAAD*. Accessed July 10, 2018. <https://www.glaad.org/bisexual/bierasure>

be, erased from public discourse. Today, bisexuals experience the worst health in relation to sexual orientation, facing higher rates of anxiety, and depression, higher rates of heart disease, and higher rates of cancer risk factors with lower chances of securing a cancer screening than heterosexuals, lesbians or gay men.¹³⁰ Indeed, we might wonder to what extent Smith's own early death fits into this pattern of neglect. Whilst Clara Smith would not have used the term 'bisexual,' her life exemplifies why it is significant to allow stories about people who love people of more than one gender to be told.

I hope that this thesis serves as a bank of potential. Each document I have discovered prompts far more leads than I have been able to follow in the scope of this project, with implications leading beyond the discovery of more materials relating to Smith and into a wider pantheon of queer performers and entertainers in our history. Clara Smith was perhaps not so much exceptional, as an exceptionally talented member of a wider community. The methodological tools I have developed to approach this task can be applied to finding more on the lives of so many other queer figures who, like Clara, were simultaneously exoticized and excised from the canon.

¹³⁰Michael Johnson and Lynne Nemeth, "Addressing Health Disparities of Lesbian and Bisexual Women: A Grounded Theory Study," *Women's Health Issues* 24-6 (2014), 635-640; Tonje Persson and James Pfaus, "Bisexuality and Mental Health: Future Research Directions," *Journal of Bisexuality* 15 (2015), 98.

APPENDIX A: WORKSHOP PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

CREATIVE NON - FICTION WRITING WORKSHOP

Queen of the Moaners:

researching the life of Clara Smith



- >> *Learn about Blues Singer Clara Smith*
- >> *Queer the history making process*
- >> *Write creative non-fiction*

Totally free
Refreshments provided
No experience necessary

Aug 2nd (6-8pm)& 5th (1-3 pm)
Aug 8th (6-8pm)& 12th (1-3 pm)

For more information contact Caitlin at
984-528-1099 or email cmrimmer@live.unc.edu



[About](#) [Meetups](#) [Members](#) [Photos](#) [Discussions](#) [More](#)

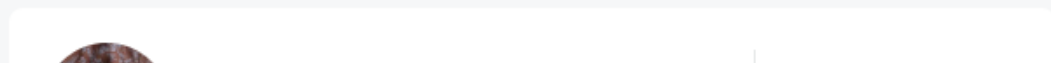
What we're about

This workshop seeks to explore the process of legacy making. Clara Smith is the second most recorded blues singer of the Classic era, and whilst her work survives, little is known about her life. What factors led to this independent, bisexual woman's relative obscurity compared to her immediate peers? Queer people have always constructed our history and our legacies alongside the dominant telling of history. By approaching the project of legacy-making creatively, how can we open up new potentials in old materials?

In this 2 week course, we will be bringing the skillset of creative nonfiction writing to bear on archival documents, constructing life narratives around Smith's textual remains. This workshop is in support of my MA Thesis in Folklore at UNC Chapel Hill.

Members (43)

[See all](#)



APPENDIX B: SMITH FAMILY ON 1900 CENSUS

TWELFTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES. 1900 A

SCHEDULE No. 1.—POPULATION.

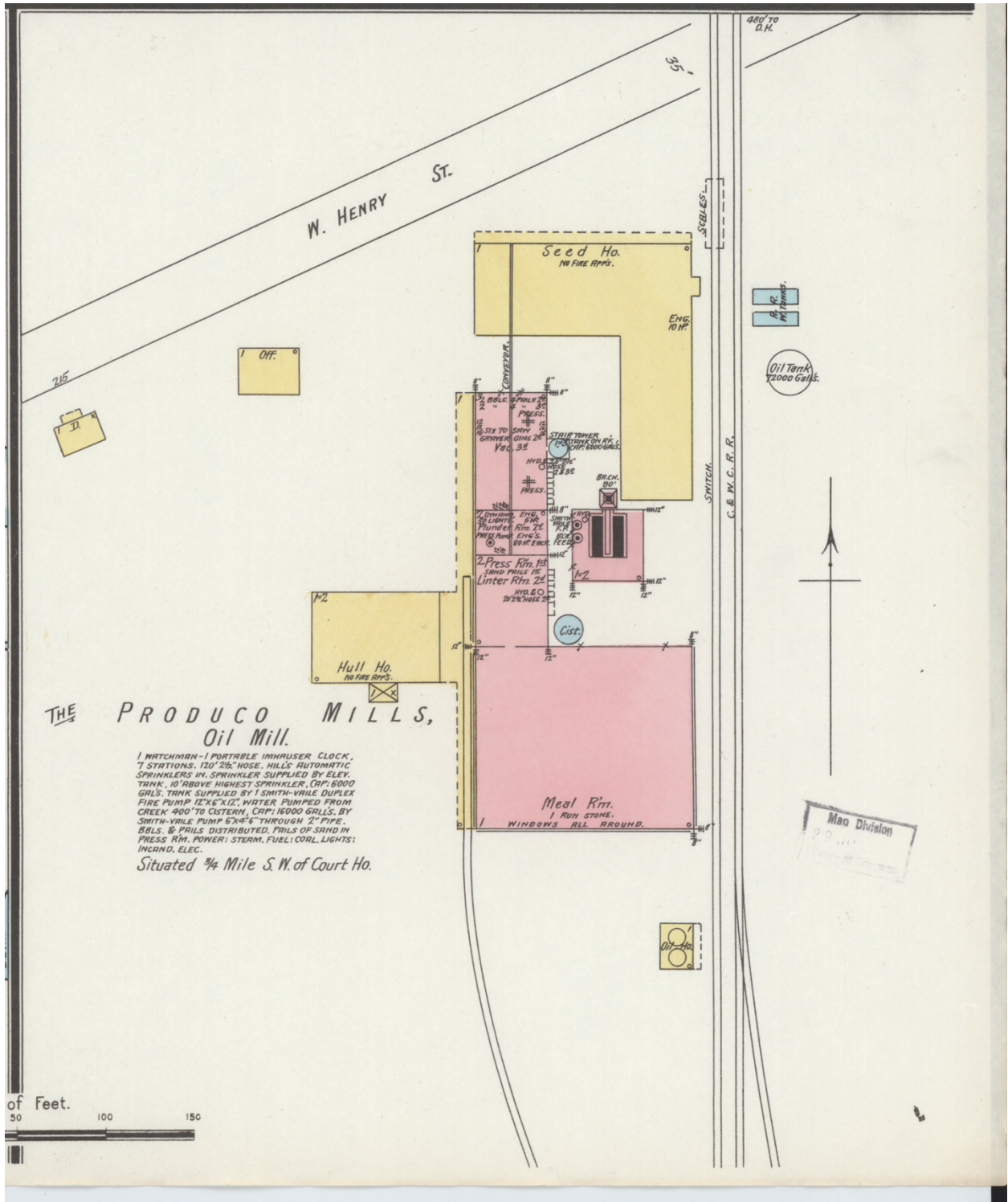
State South Carolina Supervisor's District No. 4 Sheet No. 7
County Anderson Enumeration District No. 107
Township or other division of county Anderson Name of Institution _____
Name of incorporated city, town, or village, within the above-named division, Anderson City Precinct of city _____
Enumerated by me on the 7th day of June, 1900, Thaddeus C. Brown Enumerator.

LOCATION	NAME	RELATION	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION		NATIVITY			CITIZENSHIP	OCCUPATION, TRADE, OR SERVICE	EDUCATION			SPECIAL NOTES
			Sex	Age	Place of birth	Parents of foreign birth	Years of school			Can read and write English	Can speak English		
1	Brooks, William B.	Head	M	38	1862	Sc	Sc	Sc					
2	Smith, William B.	Wife	F	34	1866	Sc	Sc	Sc					
3	John	Son	M	10	1890	Sc	Sc	Sc					
4	Anna	Daughter	F	8	1892	Sc	Sc	Sc					
5	William	Son	M	6	1894	Sc	Sc	Sc					
6	Carrie	Daughter	F	4	1896	Sc	Sc	Sc					
7	John	Son	M	2	1898	Sc	Sc	Sc					
8	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
9	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
10	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
11	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
12	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
13	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
14	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
15	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
16	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
17	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
18	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
19	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
20	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
21	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
22	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
23	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
24	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
25	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
26	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
27	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
28	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
29	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
30	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
31	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
32	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
33	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
34	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
35	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
36	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
37	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
38	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
39	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
40	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
41	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
42	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
43	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
44	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
45	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
46	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
47	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
48	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
49	John	Son	M	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					
50	Anna	Daughter	F	1	1900	Sc	Sc	Sc					

APPENDIX C: CHILDREN OF SIMMS STREET

Sheet /line	Name	age	Race/ gender/ single?	Job	Can read	Can write	Speak English	Extra notes
7/5	Linnie Carter	16	b/f/s	servant	yes	yes	yes	Boarder w/ Clara's family
7/6	Hettie Mc Elsay	16	b/f/s	servant	no	no	yes	Head of household, had '-b' over title. Specifically lists rental. Her boarder is a 22y/o
6/70	Joseph H Jr Pearson	1	w/m/s		no	no	no	Father from Virginia, parents first family, father 37, m 39
6/71	Mary J Pearson	4/12	w/f/s		no	no	no	Sister of above
6/76	Bernice E Lawson	11	w/f/s		yes	yes	yes	Mother is a seamstress
6/77	Lionel W Lawson	9	w/m/s		yes	yes	yes	'Y's scored from page, brother of above
6/78	Mavis R	7	w/m/s		yes	yes	yes	Same as above
6/79	Clade W	3	w/m/s		?	?	?	'Y's too heavily scored to read
6/82	Perry Johnson	6/12	b/m/s		no	no	no	
6/90	Julia Huntley	6	b/f/s		-	-	-	1 months unemployed
6/91	Carl Huntley	16	b/m/s	Wrayman	no	no	yes	Father from North Carolina
6/94	Agnes Owens	16	f/m/s	Servant	yes	yes	yes	
6/95	Fannie (?) Owens	14	f/m/s	servant	yes	yes	yes	sibling to above
6/96	Ally Owens	11	f/m/s		no	no	yes	sibling to above
6/97	Hettie Owens	4	f/m/s		-	-	-	sibling to above
6/100	Robert Owens	3	b/m/s		-	-	-	Different household to above

APPENDIX D: PRODUKO MILLS SITE



APPENDIX E: ELIZABETH STREET DEED

CHITANTOR Index to Realty Deeds and Mortgages — Bibb County, Ga. <small>Made by The Cott Index Company, Columbus, Ga. Sold by Geo. D. Barnard Co., St. Louis, Mo.</small>									
<small>Open at Proper Tab according to First Letter or Letters of Name and refer to Buff Sub-Index sheet for page reference.</small>									
GRANTORS					GRANTEES				
SURNAME	GIVEN NAMES		GIVEN NAMES		DATE OF FILING	DATE OF INSTRUMENT			BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF PROPERTY (Not Warranted)
	ABCEFGH	IJKLMNOP	Q RSTUVWXYZ			Month	Day	Year	
TH	H. M.	MRS. NORA M.		I. L. SWAFFORD	MAR 16 1925	3P	MAR 16	1925	Godfrey Dist.
	FRANK M.			F. J. & O. E. RAY	MAR 25 1925	5:15P	JAN 22	1912	
	H. GRADY			C. J. MOLTON	APR 8 1925	12:10P	APR 7	1925	
		MISS LOTTIE		MRS. BESSIE N. BONNER	APR 10 1925	5:50P	APR 8	1925	Vineville Dist.
		LOU		W. C. HAWES	APR 11 1925	12	APR 1	1925	Godfrey Dist.
			RICHARD	THOS. W. STOKES	APR 14 1925	10A	APR 1	1925	
		MARY		J. C. GODFREY	APR 15 1925	4:30P	APR 14	1925	Vineville Dist.
	C. E.			LAURA IRMA HAINES	MAY 12 1925	11:30A	MAY 5	1925	Vineville Dist.
	MRS. E. W.			THOS. J. STEWART	MAY 22 1925	12	MAR 26	1925	East Macon
	E. W.		ROBERT	M. R. ROSS	MAY 30 1925	9:50A	MAY 28	1925	Mt. Airy Sub-Divisi
				BIBB COUNTY	JUN 8 1925	9A	MAY 30	1925	East Macon Dist.
		J. W.		RAYMOND MILLS	JUN 9 1925	1:30P	JUN 3	1925	Godfrey Dist.
	CLARA			MIDDLE GA. SAV. & INV. CO.	JUN 11 1925	12:45P	MAY 2	1925	
		MRS. MARTHA		MARY BYAS	JUN 16 1925	10:45A	APR 2	1925	East Macon Dist.
	CHARLES L.			S. E. ODOM	JUN 23 1925	11:50A	JUN 20	1925	Power
	H. G.			MURPHY, TAYLOR & ELLIS	JUN 25 1925	5:30P	MAY 11	1925	
	DANNIE C.			OSSTE E. SMITH	JUL 13 1925	3:10P	JUL 13	1925	
ET AL	C. J.			H. L. SLOCUMB	JUL 16 1925	10:45A	JUL 1	1925	
	CHARLES L.			GEORGE W. WOOD	AUG 10 1925	11:10A	DEC 9	1924	Southwest Commons
	ALEX			H. C. CALHOUN, ET AL	AUG 10 1925	9:45A	JUL 31	1925	
		MRS. MAFFIE M.		J. R. ODOM	AUG 18 1925	3:45P	OCT 10	1924	
	GEORGE D.			JORDAN REALTY CO.	AUG 29 1925	12:50P	AUG 15	1925	
		JAMES LUTHER		TOM M. JONES	AUG 29 1925	10:45A	AUG 28	1925	
ET AL	C. J.			MRS. LUCILE PLATT VINCENT	AUG 31 1925	4:20P	AUG 29	1925	East Macon Dist.
	BILL			MRS. PEARL HERRING	SEP 9 1925	4:25P	SEP	1925	
		MRS. MARTHA		ETTA HELPS	SEP				

APPENDIX F: ELIZABETH STREET ORIGINAL PROPERTY



APPENDIX G: MARRIAGE LICENSE

402

Marriage License

State of Florida, Duval County

TO ANY MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL OR ANY OFFICER LEGALLY AUTHORIZED TO SOLEMANIZE THE RITES OF MATRIMONY.

WHEREAS, Application having been made to the County Judge of Duval County, of the State of Florida, for a License for Marriage, and it appearing to the satisfaction of the said County Judge that no legal impediments exist to the Marriage now sought to be solemnized, these are therefore to authorize you to unite **IN THE HOLY ESTATE OF MATRIMONY**

and that you make return of same, duly certified under your hand, to the County Judge aforesaid.

WITNESS, My name as County Judge, and the seal of said Court, at the Court House in Jacksonville, this 19th day of March, A. D. 1926.

(SEAL)

I certify that the within named _____ County Judge.

were by me, the undersigned, duly united in the Holy Bonds of Matrimony, by the authority of the within License.

Done this 19th day of March, A. D. 1926.

Witness to Ceremony:
Paul J. Robinson
John W. DuBois
Minister of the Gospel

Recorded this 26th day of March, A. D. 1926.

403

Marriage License

State of Florida, Duval County

TO ANY MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL OR ANY OFFICER LEGALLY AUTHORIZED TO SOLEMANIZE THE RITES OF MATRIMONY.

WHEREAS, Application having been made to the County Judge of Duval County, of the State of Florida, for a License for Marriage, and it appearing to the satisfaction of the said County Judge that no legal impediments exist to the Marriage now sought to be solemnized, these are therefore to authorize you to unite **IN THE HOLY ESTATE OF MATRIMONY**

and that you make return of same, duly certified under your hand, to the County Judge aforesaid.

WITNESS, My name as County Judge, and the seal of said Court, at the Court House in Jacksonville, this 19th day of March, A. D. 1926.

(SEAL)

I certify that the within named _____ County Judge.

were by me, the undersigned, duly united in the Holy Bonds of Matrimony, by the authority of the within License.

Done this 21st day of March, A. D. 1926.

Witness to Ceremony:
W. W. Smith
W. J. Anderson
Minister of the Gospel

Recorded this 25th day of March, A. D. 1926.

118

Office of County Judge, Duval County, Florida

Record of Licenses and Marriages for the Month of March 1926

MARRIAGE		FACTS ABOUT CONTRACTING PARTIES - MAN		FACTS ABOUT CONTRACTING PARTIES - WOMAN		DATE OF MARRIAGE		BY WHOM MARRIED		REMARKS	
DATE	TIME	NAME	BIRTHPLACE	AGE	NAME	BIRTHPLACE	AGE	NAME	DATE	REMARKS	
388	Mar. 16	William Carr	Fla.	22	Barbara Munn	Fla.	22	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
389	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
390	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
391	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
392	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
393	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
394	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
395	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
396	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
397	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
398	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
399	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
400	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
401	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
402	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
403	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
404	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
405	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
406	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
407	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
408	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
409	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
410	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
411	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
412	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
413	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
414	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
415	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
416	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
417	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
418	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
419	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		
420	"	Wm. Carr	Fla.	46	Barbara Munn	Fla.	46	Mar. 16	Mar. 16		

APPENDIX I: NOTARY PAPERWORK WITH CLARA SMITH'S SIGNATURE

STATE OF FLORIDA) Col. Col. Birthplace Ala. Occupation Owner
COUNTY OF DUVAL.) Address 18 W. 130th St. N.Y. City
Col. Col. Birthplace S.C.
Address 18 W. 130th St. N.Y. City

Before me, T. V. Cashen Jr., a Notary Public in and for State at Large, Personally appeared Charles Wesley and Clara Smith, who being severally sworn, depose and say, he, the said Charles Wesley that he is 29 years of age; and she the said Clara Smith that she is 32 years of age,

Sworn to and subscribed before me,)
this 19th day of March 1926.)

Charles Wesley
Clara Smith

T. V. Cashen Jr.
Notary Public, State at Large
(Official Title)

STATE OF FLORIDA)
COUNTY OF DUVAL.)

Before me, T. V. Cashen Jr. a Notary Public in and for State at Large personally appeared Daisy Cook and

who being duly sworn, say that she is the mother of the above named Gussie Farris, who is 18 years of age; and that she do hereby consent to the marriage of the said Gussie Farris, whose father is deceased to said Walter Watkins

Sworn to and subscribed before me,)
this 20th day of March 1926.)

Daisy Cook

T. V. Cashen Jr.
Notary Public, State at Large
Official Title

APPENDIX J: INSIDE 18 E 130TH



APPENDIX K: CLARA SMITH REMEMBERED



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- ‘Charles Wesley and Clara Smith, March 19, 1926.’ Florida, County Marriages, 1830-1957, database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FWST-5LK> : accessed July 18, 2018) Duval, Florida, United States, State Archive, Tallahassee and clerk of courts, various counties; FHL microfilm 963,565 [features Clara Smith’s signature.]
- ‘Clara Herself.’ Pittsburgh: The Pittsburgh Courier. Saturday September 3 1927. 14. Newspapers.com [Included as Figure 8: ‘Clara Smith, 1927.’].
- ‘Clara Smith (1894–Feb 2, 1935),’ *Find A Grave* (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/6666678/clara-smith> : accessed July 18, 2018) Lincoln Memorial Park, Clinton Township, Macomb County, Michigan, USA. Find A Grave Memorial no. 6666678, with grave marker photograph.
- ‘Clara Smith and Her Own Intimate Black Bottom Review.’ *Baltimore Afro-American*, (Baltimore, Maryland.) February 14, 1927.
- ‘Clara Smith is No Blues Singer.’ *Baltimore Afro-American*, (Baltimore, Maryland.) May 22, 1926.
- ‘Clara Smith, Popular Blues Singer Dies.’ *The Chicago Defender*, (Chicago, Illinois.) February 9, 1935.
- ‘Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930.’ Forrest Ward, Atlanta, Georgia; Sheet 22b, April 16-19, 1930. Digitized by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 2010 (Film Collection) United States, 1930 federal census: population schedules NARA microfilm publication T626 / United States. Bureau of the Census. 15th census, 1930. [Clara Smith as Head of Household.]

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‘Mean Papa Turn in Your Key.’ Chicago: Chicago Defender. June 21, 1924. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. [Included as Figure 4: ‘Clara Smith, 1924.’].

‘Ninth Census of the United States, 1870,’ South Carolina, United States; page 13, family 85, NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 553,011. [William Smith in household of Wesley Smith.]

‘Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Instructions to Assistant Marshalls.’ Department of the Interior, Census Office. 1850.
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