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Michelle R. Scott. *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xiii + 198 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03338-4; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07545-2.

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Published on H-SAWH (February, 2011)
Commissioned by Antoinette G. van Zelm

Bessie Smith is a blues great with a reputation for hard living and hard drinking. She lost her life in an automobile accident in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1937–the same Clarksdale where another blues great, Robert Johnson, was supposed to have sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads. Although there is much to explore in the life and music of Smith, Michelle R. Scott takes a path blues musicians would appreciate by exploring the intricate interactions between Smith, her hometown, and the history of African Americans in the South. Rather than a straightforward biography, Scott gives readers an origins story in which she seeks to "conceptualize the community and conditions within which entertainers like Smith developed" by examining Smith's life "through the issues of industrialization, southern rural-to-urban migration, black community development … and black working-class gender conventions" (p. 5).

For Scott, one of the most important influences on the life of Smith is not a friend or family member but rather the city in which she spent her youth: Chattanooga, Tennessee. Scott deftly details the Chattanooga of Smith's young life and comes close to creating a microhistory of turn-of-the-century Chattanooga, complete with the smells of freshly laundered clothing and the sounds of brass bands and gospel music in the streets. Smith's family moved to Chattanooga just after her birth in 1892, so her young personality was shaped in a city where "African Americans were not a downtrodden minority but a vibrant 40% or more of the population" (p. 1). At a young age, Smith was a street performer who danced and sang the popular songs of the day. As Scott notes, Smith also had to understand the "unwritten rules of acceptable behavior in the public arena" (p. 97). Rather than focus solely on Smith and her experiences, Scott analyzes the rules of gender and public place for an African American female and discusses the ways in which Smith maneuvered through this maze of tradition.

Scott begins her exploration of Chattanooga in the midst of the Civil War as she explains the initial growth of the African American population from an influx of escaped slaves into what was called Camp Contraband. According to Scott, by November 1864, there were nearly four thousand refugees, which "marked the beginnings of the black working-class community" in Chattanooga (p. 12). Smith would grow up within this community and be shaped by the sexism and racism inherent in turn-of-the-century Chattanooga.

Scott also discusses the early migration of rural blacks to Chattanooga, as Smith's family was a part of this movement. Industrialization and the promise of work brought many African Americans to large southern cities, including Chattanooga, during the 1880s and 1890s. Chattanooga had become a "city of the New South" with a "diverse and complex" population by the time of Smith's arrival in the mid-1890s (p. 37). African Americans also made up 43 percent of the population by 1890, thus the city of Smith's youth offered her some sense of community and pride for her African American heritage while at the same time she had to negotiate the intricacies of black-white interaction.

Scott also spends time discussing the specific neighborhood in which Smith was raised: the "Blue Goose Hollow" area in West Chattanooga. In this predominantly African American neighborhood, there was a focus on hard work and religion. Scott ties both of these to Smith's future career as Blues Empress. Scott argues that the importance of song in monotonous work extended from agricultural labor to urban work in the era of Jim Crow. She also discusses the importance of song in worship. Both of these musical forms influenced the young Smith. The turn of the century also saw other forms of entertainment develop in Chattanooga. East Ninth Street, called "Big Nine" by local residents, was an area similar to Memphis's Beale Street (p. 82). On "Big Nine," Smith saw brass

bands and street performers playing a variety of music. Here, she began her own musical journey.

Scott also discusses Smith's time on the vaudeville circuit, which gives great insight into African American performance opportunities, and the lack thereof. She examines Smith's upbringing with a father who was a day laborer/preacher and a mother who was a laundress. Both of Smith's parents died when she was a child, and she was raised by an older sister. Where Scott really excels is in her discussion of the gender issues Smith faced. Using the works of such scholars as Patricia Hill Collins and Tera Hunter, Scott shows how public space had to be negotiated by Smith in a specific manner. She illustrates the importance of juke joints and dance halls not only for Smith but also for working-class African Americans in general.

Scott has written a readable history of Smith and black Chattanooga. One of the pitfalls in focusing on Smith's youth, rather than going the traditional route of such Smith biographers as Carman Moore, Chris Albertson, Paul Oliver, and Elaine Feinstein, is that there are not a lot of sources to draw on regarding Smith's early years. Thus, Scott makes a number of assumptions. In telling the story of turn-of-the-century Chattanooga; however, Scott does not go outside the realm of possibilities in her speculations about Smith's youth. Scott surmises, for example, that young Smith "might have overheard the songs that laundresses used to lessen the monotony of their work" (p. 90).

Overall Scott's *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga* creates a realistic picture of the emerging New South city of Chattanooga and challenges readers to make connections between the city and the young Smith who honed her skills there.

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Citation: Tammy Prater. Review of Scott, Michelle R., *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30989

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