



Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South

Michelle R. Scott

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As one of the first African American vocalists to be recorded, Bessie Smith is a prominent figure in American popular culture and African American history. Michelle R. Scott uses Smith's life as a lens to investigate broad issues in history, including industrialization, Southern rural to urban migration, black community development in the post-emancipation era, and black working-class gender conventions.

Arguing that the rise of blues culture and the success of female blues artists like Bessie Smith are connected to the rapid migration and industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Scott focuses her analysis on Chattanooga, Tennessee, the large industrial and transportation center where Smith was born. This study explores how the expansion of the Southern railroads and the development of iron foundries, steel mills, and sawmills created vast employment opportunities in the postbellum era. Chronicling the growth and development of the African American Chattanooga community, Scott examines the Smith family's migration to Chattanooga and the popular music of black Chattanooga during the first decade of the twentieth century, and culminates by delving into Smith's early years on the vaudeville circuit.

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