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The Fictional Black Blues Figure:

Blues Music and the

Art of Narrative Self-Invention

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Kimberly Renee Mack

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Fictional Black Blues Figure:  
Blues Music and the  
Art of Narrative Self-Invention

by

Kimberly Renee Mack

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Richard A Yarborough, Chair

My dissertation examines representations of black American blues musicians in contemporary American fiction, drama, and popular music, and it argues that blues music can be examined as a narrative art rooted in the tradition of fictionalized autobiographical self-fashioning. I contend that the contemporary, multi-racial, literary and musical characters in my project who participate in so-called “authentic” blues expression create, sometimes consciously and sometimes unwittingly, a fiction on top of a fiction. This project questions the belief held by many blues scholars, critics, and fans that blues music is a racially essentialized form instead of a narrative tradition made possible through carefully constructed autobiographical and biographical fictions.

My project makes two important interventions into traditional discussions of blues production and the representations of blues figures in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century American literature. First, it destabilizes racial, socio-cultural, temporal, and gendered blues tropes by shifting blues expression from an innate skill to a storytelling art form through which its makers invent themselves. Second, this study allows for a different, interdisciplinary approach to autobiographical and biographical expression. In this project, I excavate literary and musical texts in order to identify moments of autobiographical and biographical articulation. Rather than relying on texts that are generically marked as autobiography or biography, my project teases out the autobiographical and biographical utterances in a wider variety of literary and musical texts. When narrators or characters tell their stories (in my project, songs, musical performances, and interviews with real-life musicians are stories too), they use formal structures, like description or dialogue, to define their lives and personalities. These mini-narratives constitute autobiographies or biographies, even if they are not formal ones.

In my opening chapter, literary texts that include iconic American bluesman Robert Johnson as a character, such as *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie and *RL's Dream* by Walter Mosley, juxtapose Johnson, the character, with his historical, mythologized, biographical representation, allowing him to subvert or support his depiction through fictionalized autobiographical expression. Other chapters focus on the self-fashioning of female blues musicians, on the blues apprenticeship, and on blues rocker Jack White's autobiographical self-invention.

The dissertation of Kimberly Renee Mack is approved.

James E Goodwin

Caroline Anne Streeter

Robert W Fink

Richard A Yarborough, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

For Mom

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## VITA

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March 2013	C.Phil., English, University of California, Los Angeles
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Popular music criticism (CD and live reviews, interviews, and music industry-related stories) for the following national and international publications from 2002-present:

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## SELECTED LECTURES

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- 2015 “‘Trouble in Mind’: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Black American Female Blues Expression,” UCLA Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies Circle of Thought Series, Los Angeles, CA (May 12)
- 2015 “Living With Music: Ralph Ellison, Gary Clark Jr., and a 21st-Century Vision of American Blues Expression,” Ralph Ellison and the Territory Symposium, Lewis and Clark College, Portland, OR (February 28) – Invited Lecture

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### Panel Organized

- 2014 “Stomp, Swerve, Rattle, and Roll: Fun and Pleasure as Political Resistance in American Blues Music,” American Studies Association Conference, Los Angeles, CA (November 6-9)

### Papers Presented

- 2015 “Big Mama Thornton, Esther Phillips, and Oral History’s Transgressions,” EMP Pop Conference, Seattle, WA (April 16-19)
- 2015 “Autobiographical Migrations: *The Color Purple*, *Corregidora*, and the Perilous Road to Self-Invention,” The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States Conference, Athens, GA (April 9-12)
- 2014 “‘That Natural Blues Man Look’: Black Elvis and the Demythologization of the Black Blues Figure,” American Studies Association Conference, Los Angeles, CA (November 6-9)
- 2014 “The Politics of Silence and the Withheld in Blues Autobiography,” The Futures of American Studies Institute, Hanover, NH (June 16-22)
- 2014 “‘What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?’: Ralph Ellison, Mississippi Ham Rider, and the Search for an Individualized Blues Identity,” American Literature Association Conference, Washington, DC (May 22-25)
- 2014 “‘I Respect the Art of the Show’: Jack White and the Art of Self-Invention,” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference, Chicago, IL (April 16-19)
- 2014 “The Space Between: The Politics of Silence in American Jazz and Blues Fiction,” The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States Conference, Oklahoma City, OK (March 6-9)
- 2013 “From ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ to ‘Angel of Harlem’: Irishness, American Blackness, and U2’s Authentic Performativity,” U2 Conference, Cleveland, OH (April 26-27)

## The Fictional Black Blues Figure: Blues Music and the Art of Narrative Self-Invention

### Introduction

Scholars love to praise the ‘pure’ blues artists or the ones, like Robert Johnson, who died young and represent tragedy. It angers me how scholars associate the blues strictly with tragedy.

--B.B. King

With their sounds and words, blues musicians created a rebel persona, a romanticized black figure who said no to hard work and yes to personal pleasure. The blues rebel announced that transformation was possible, that individual black lives could not be contained and controlled by whites. It is more than ironic, then, that later white fans understood the music as the somehow pure, “outside of history” voice of rural black southern “folk.”

--Grace Elizabeth Hale

It is common to hail blues artists not for their technical skill or broad musical knowledge, but rather for their “authenticity.” By this standard an unknown genius discovered in a Louisiana or Mississippi prison is by definition a deeper and more real bluesman than a million-selling star in a silk suit and a Cadillac.

--Elijah Wald

Since the 1960s blues revival, the concept of racialized blues authenticity continues to loom large and serves as the foundation for the creation of the black blues subject in numerous literary, dramatic, and popular culture texts. In these works, the blues musicians are usually modeled on popular, persisting ideas about what comprises an authentic black blues figure. The concept of blues authenticity is gendered with many predominantly white and male blues scholars, critics, and fans viewing the mostly male country blues artists Robert Johnson, Son House, and Charley Patton, and the predominantly male urban blues artists, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Howlin’ Wolf, as prototypes of the authentic blues figure. These men were the focus of the renewed interest in blues music among white, middle-class youth during the 1960s. It is important to note that there was a sizable black audience for urban blues—rural blues transported to the city with the aid of amplification— during the 1940s and into the 1950s (Barlow 328; Wald, *The Blues* 63). Female classic blues artists such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Ida Cox are still marginalized despite the facts that they recorded records for race labels such

as Paramount and Okeh before the country blues artists did and that they enjoyed significant commercial success.

It is not surprising that the country blues artists enjoyed a revival during the 1960s, given the scarcity of recorded Delta blues music, particularly at that time, and the dearth of information available about the rural blues artists' lives. When there is less known about an artist and his or her body of work, it is easier to project fantastic ideas about the context and meaning behind those efforts. As Elijah Wald states:

White urbanites, for obvious reasons, are fascinated by a creation myth in which genius blossomed, wild and untamed, from the Delta mud, and are less interested in the unromantic picture of Muddy Waters sitting by the radio and listening to Fats Waller, or a sharecropper singing Broadway show tunes as he followed his mule along the levee. (*Escaping* 72)

In addition to the majority white blues fans and collectors, there are also non-white blues scholars and critics who believe that one has to be in a particular body or from a specific social class or geographical region to play so-called authentic blues music.

Here I am referring to seminal blues studies such as *Blues People* (1963) by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in which he states, blues music “is a native American music, the product of the black man in this country: or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (17). Jones traces a direct line from slavery, to freedom, to what he calls “primitive blues.” For Jones, the condition of slavery strips away one’s humanity. However, with freedom, blacks gained their subjectivity, leading them to document their struggles through the rural blues (60-66). My work views the blues tradition in a different way. I do agree that the oppression black people faced during

slavery and Jim Crow informed some of their blues making; however, I do not believe that black American people played the blues solely because of their social position. This would suggest that one has to be a black American slave (or former slave) to play so-called authentic blues. My project takes a different approach; I explore the ways in which fictional and real-life black bluespeople participate in the narrative blues tradition by telling fictional stories about their lives and the lives of others. These autobiographical and biographical narratives offer the bluesmen and blueswomen a pathway to self-empowerment. Whether they are using autobiographical expression to rebel against oppressive racist or patriarchal dictates, they are inventing new selves through blues self-fashioning, or they are telling other people's stories, blues makers exist because of their investment in storytelling.

In *Blues, Ideology, and African American Literature* (1984), Houston Baker also argues for black people's sociological experience creating a distinct cultural expression. According to Baker, "Black folk expression is a product of impoverishment of blacks in America. The blues, as a case in point, are unthinkable for those happy with their lot" (197). Robert Palmer's work *Deep Blues* (1981) similarly privileges particular racial and geographical experiences in the development of authentic Delta blues expression. According to Palmer, "Delta blues is a refined, extremely subtle, and ingeniously systematic musical language. Playing and especially singing it right involve some exceptionally fine points that only a few white guitarists, virtually no white singers, and not too many black musicians who learned to play and sing anywhere other than the Delta have been able to grasp" (18). And currently, *Living Blues* magazine's website states that the publication's mission is to "document and preserve the African American blues tradition" ("Living"). It is important to note that blues scholars such as Ralph Ellison in *Shadow and Act* (1964) and Albert Murray in *The Hero and the Blues* (1973) and *Stomping the Blues* (2000),

have resisted racially essentialist approaches to considerations of authentic blues expression. There is also a contemporary body of revisionist blues literature that moves beyond limiting ideas of authentic blues legitimacy. Elijah Wald, Grace Elizabeth Hale, Patricia Schroeder, and Marybeth Hamilton are scholars from varied disciplines who engage the romance and mythology inherent in the blues tradition. Grace Hale examines blues figures' personas in the context of self-created fictions in "Hear Me Talking to You: The Blues and the Romance of Rebellion." Hale laments the white blues fans who mistake a constructed blues persona for a naturalized state: "Rather than an artistic and commercial creation, the blues rebel became a 'real' black identity, proof that African Americans—especially southern rural people 'uncontaminated' by modernity—lived and felt more deeply than modern whites repressed and alienated by modern life" (240). In *The Hero and the Blues* and *Stomping the Blues*, Albert Murray's ideas about the black blues figure are in line with my own. Murray sees black blues figures as artists in control of their creative expression. In *Stomping the Blues*, Murray asserts that rather than blues music arising out of a dark or sad context, it is life-affirming and designed to make people feel good (this is in stark contrast to Baker who cannot envision a happy person playing the blues) (45). Grace Hale's and Albert Murray's stances in their texts support my belief that the black blues musician can have an individual rather than a collective experience. If the blues musician experiences personal agency and the ability to develop his or her artistic craft, he or she may be able to break away from a racialized or gendered essential identity if he or she so desires.

In *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, Wald dismisses the notion that blues music was strictly an outgrowth of the folk tradition, rather than a new musical form (71). He allows, "It is impossible to trace the history of blues without taking note of these older black singing traditions, but one must also remember that blues was something



quite new and different” (71). For Wald, it is important that blues musicians be seen as the groundbreaking artists they are, rather than primitives whose music is consumed by white audiences in a narrow and limiting racialized framework. As Wald asserts, “Check any popular image of an old-time blues singer. He is male and black, of course. He plays guitar. He is a loner and a rambler, without money or a pleasant home. He is a figure from another world, not like the people next door, or anyone in your family, or anyone you know well. And his music is haunting, searing, and cuts you to the bone” (221). Despite these scholarly interventions, some contemporary blues musicians, critics, and fans continue to perpetuate notions of authentic blues expression, as they remain tethered to the early twentieth-century model of the Mississippi Delta Blues figure.

It is against this backdrop that my dissertation contests such ideas about the existence of a legitimate black blues figure. It is my belief that this narrative hinges on ideas about racial (as well as class- and gender-based) essentialism. For many blues fans and critics, an authentic blues figure is black, comes from a modest economic background, and lives outside of modern technology. That figure can be male or female, but the women have to combat patriarchy in addition to racism and are punished for transgressing the cult of femininity. While blues fans, critics, and scholars who ascribe to notions of blues authenticity are attracted to rebellious bluesmen and blueswomen who live outside of societal norms (eschewing a hetero-normative domestic life, drinking and drug taking, living outside of the law), the women are subject to particularly harsh consequences for those behaviors.

My work examines the autobiographical impulse in contemporary American blues fiction, drama, and popular music. My project considers the role that autobiography might play in crafting a musical persona, and I look at contemporary American literary texts that include

blues music performances and feature blues musician characters who express themselves autobiographically through invented personas. It is important to stress here that when I use the term *autobiography*, I am building on Paul John Eakin's work, and I cast autobiography as necessarily fictional. It is also important to note that although I sometimes refer only to autobiography, these concepts can be adapted to biography as well. Instead of exclusively focusing on texts that are generically marked as autobiography, I tease out the informal autobiographical utterances in a wide variety of musical and literary texts. When narrators or characters tell their stories—in my project, songs, musical performances, and interviews with real-life musicians are stories too—they use formal structures, like description or dialogue, to define their lives and personalities. These mini-narratives constitute autobiographies or biographies, even if they are not formal ones.

Rather than viewing blues expression in racially essentialist terms, I consider the ways in which blues expression participates in a narrative tradition in which its practitioners invent themselves through autobiographical and biographical fictions. This fictive structure is reflected through the presence of fictional literary and musical characters, through what I see as the fictional nature of blues authenticity, and through the larger concept of autobiography as an inevitably fictional enterprise due to its subjective nature. My project makes two important interventions into discussions of blues production and the representations of blues figures in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century American literature. First, it destabilizes racial, socio-cultural, temporal, and gendered blues tropes by shifting blues expression from an innate skill to a storytelling art form through which its makers invent themselves. Second, this study allows for an interdisciplinary approach to autobiographical and biographical expression. I excavate literary and musical texts in order to identify moments of autobiographical and biographical articulation. In this project, I

contend that the multi-racial, literary and musical characters in my project who participate in so-called “authentic” blues expression create, sometimes consciously and sometimes unwittingly, a fiction on top of a fiction. And these constructions sometimes contest and at other times advance romantic notions of blues authenticity into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Many contemporary musicians and musician characters in literary texts are in an active dialogue with Delta blues and urban blues artists. Because of this continuum, the Mississippi Delta is a logical place to begin a discussion about constructions of the black American blues musician in post-1960 American literature and popular culture. What is it about the artists who emerged from the Delta—and those who played amplified blues while gesturing at a rural style—that resonates in such an enduring fashion with contemporary audiences? According to Wald, “The country blues performers have been far more popular with modern listeners than the blues queens—in large part because they are now heard as forerunners of rock ‘n’ roll” (*The Blues* 31). This certainly seems like a viable reason for country blues’ appeal, since rock ‘n’ roll, and later rock music, particularly during the 1950s-1970s, was an extremely lucrative commercial enterprise and the rockers enjoyed a great deal of power in the music industry. Rock ‘n’ roll’s unparalleled popularity allowed its artists to successfully revive the country blues artists, bringing some, like Son House, out of retirement to “amaze college students with the trace-like passion of his performances” (*The Blues* 72). What is it about the sounds of country blues that correlate with the sounds of rock ‘n’ roll? Wald suggests it could be the fact that there was not one distinctive country blues sound (*The Blues* 31). First of all, aside from the Delta, there were influential artists coming out of Texas (Blind Lemon Jefferson) and the Piedmont (Blind Willie McTell). All of these artists had different sounds due to the varied, prevailing regional styles; but it is important to note that even within a particular region, the artists did not

sound like each other and “they did not sound like anyone in mainstream show business” (Wald, *The Blues* 30-32). This was in stark contrast to the blues queens who, though they were each distinctly talented, “shared a common vocal approach, similar accompaniments (frequently by the same musicians), and overlapping material” (*The Blues* 30).

The individualistic, disparate sounds of the country blues are a compelling corollary to the often rebellious and diverse styles and sub-styles of rock ‘n’ roll and rock music (British invasion, psychedelic, punk, metal, etc.). The outlaw persona of blues musicians like Robert Johnson also has appeal for contemporary audiences. Wald explains, “For many young fans, Johnson exemplified not only an ideal of blues music but also a romantic image of the blues life. And since he was dead, these fans turned to the surviving artists who had a similar style or mystique” (*The Blues* 72). This “style or mystique” has inspired contemporary musicians and authors to craft narrators and characters who embody their romantic vision of the black American blues persona (*The Blues* 72).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

My dissertation uses literary and musicological theories of Samuel Floyd, Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, Elijah Wald, Eric Lott, Baz Dreisinger, Daphne Brooks, Ronald Radano, Sidonie Smith, and Judith Butler. Since both literature and music studies sometimes take a semiotic approach to reading texts, I use Roland Barthes’ theories about myths in contemporary culture to explore the socio-cultural and musical signifiers attached to the black blues figure. I also use music scholar Andrew Legg’s gospel vocals taxonomy (Legg, like other scholars, correlates gospel vocals to blues singing styles) to engage Jack White and to analyze the depiction of Ursa Corregidora’s vocals in Gayl Jones’ novel *Corregidora*. I similarly use *Blues People* by LeRoi

Jones [Amiri Baraka] and Ralph Ellison's *Living With Music* and *Shadow and Act* to talk about contemporary blues rocker Gary Clark, Jr.

This project concentrates on the formal aspects of both the literature (characterization, Point of View, dialogue, setting, sensory details, etc.) and the music (sounds, musical signifiers of black blues, etc.) and demonstrates how those formal aspects create the fictional autobiographical and biographical representation of a so-called authentic American black blues musician. My project also raises questions about how narrative autobiographical and biographical representation informs and reflects a gendered and class-based reading of the Black American blues figure.

### **What is Autobiography?**

Given that my argument centers on narrative autobiographical and biographical blues expression, autobiographical studies can be of great use. It is also important to note that although these critical works focus on autobiography, these concepts can be adapted to biography as well. In fact, in many cases, the authors of these studies gesture at biography while developing their arguments.

In the main, literary critics have embraced the conventional definition of autobiography as an independently verifiable, non-fiction and book-based endeavor. In *On Autobiography* French theorist Philippe Lejeune discusses what he calls "the autobiographical pact," wherein a text can only claim itself as an autobiography if there is no distinction between the author, narrator, and protagonist (5). The autobiographical pact is, in fact, "a contract of identity" between author and reader that ensures the earnest veracity of the narrative (19). Lejeune offers a definition of autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his

personality” (4). For Lejeune, there is no question that an autobiography should be grounded in an unassailable truthfulness. If not, it must be categorized generically as fiction. I do not agree with his stance, as I do not believe it is possible for an autobiography to be objectively truthful. The most any author can do is write his or her version of the truth. As a result, for the purposes of this study, all autobiography is fiction.

Texts such as Herbert Leibowitz’s *Fabricating Lives*, Timothy Dow Adams’ *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, and Paul John Eakin’s *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* are also essential when engaging a figure like Jack White, as they analyze an autobiographical text as a repository for necessary fictions, if not lies. In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Eakin argues that “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). These theorists also view the autobiographical work as a vehicle for creating a self. In fact there is a strong tradition of fabricated blues identities derived from myths and tall tales on the part of black and white blues musicians alike. Eakin’s text is of particular relevance for my dissertation because I view each blues figure, whether he or she is in a work of narrative fiction or drama or they are a well-known musician in popular culture, as a constructed fiction born out of the blues figure’s narrative telling or re-telling of his or her autobiography. In other words, through the narrative voice in a novel, a song, or even an interview in a music publication, we learn about the blues figure’s life story and personality. It is important to note that in my study the narrative voice can take many forms. In a novel, for instance, a first or third person narrator of the story can, through description or characterization, ventriloquize a blues musician character’s life, as does Celie with Shug in *The Color Purple*. Or the blues figure can, through dialogue, tell the story of his or her

life. Another character in the novel who is neither the protagonist nor the narrator can facilitate a blues figure's telling of the story of his or her life. In all of these examples it is my contention that the blues figure is created through autobiographical acts, rather than existing due to a racially essentialized state. In the case of popular music subjects, musicians use a narrative voice to create their own personas as blues figures through lyrics, performance, and even in their interactions with the press. Jack White might, for instance, claim that his ex-wife is his sister and that he is the seventh son of a seventh son in his first person lyrical narratives, or he may even make these claims during interviews or include them in press releases. These fabricated autobiographical acts allow White blues figure status. Eakin's argument allows me to ground my study in the idea that the use of autobiography in a narrative work is not only fictional but also serves to invent a character's life story and personality.

In their essay collection *Getting A Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson endeavor to take autobiography out of the traditional literary form and read it in everyday activities. Their introduction states, "Every day we are confessing and constructing personal narratives in every possible format: on the body, on the air, in music, in print, on video, at meetings" (2). Smith and Watson's inclusion of music as a vehicle for autobiographical expression likewise provides a productive framework for reading the non-book-based autobiographical performances of the real-life musical characters in my project.

### **What is the Blues?**

In *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction*, Elijah Wald grapples with how to define the blues. Wald stresses the difficulty in trying to nail down one definition, as there are myriad perspectives on the musical style. Moreover, in the United States, the blues has long been associated with a state of mind or emotion. When having the blues is equated with sadness or

depression, the music becomes a reflection of pain and heartache (1-2). Scholars like Wald, Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison have strongly resisted this perspective, especially given the significant number of blues songs classified as comical or dance-oriented. Some scholars contend that the blues is a musical form with a twelve-bar blues being the standard. Wald points out the flaw in that definition, as several other types of blues do not follow the twelve-bar pattern. As Wald states, “there are at least two other common blues chord patterns, the eight- and sixteen-bar blues” (4-5). The AAB—lyrical structure: “two repeated lines followed by a rhyming third”—has been a feature of numerous blues (and non-blues) songs, but all blues songs do not follow this pattern (Wald 4).

The blues is often defined as a cultural practice, with only a select few able to render a so-called authentic performance. Wald asserts, “Many people consider the blues tradition to be primarily a matter of ethnicity and culture, the musical heritage of the African American South, which can rarely if ever be fully understood by northern, or foreign, or white artists” (6). This particular definition is the site of contentious debates. Many scholars, including Amiri Baraka, Houston A. Baker, Eileen Southern, and Samuel A. Floyd Jr. argue for blues music as a strictly black American art form, evolving out of African musical and cultural practices. Alternatively, Wald, Murray, and Ellison offer a more culturally and racially inclusive definition of blues music. For those scholars, blues music, and black American music more generally, is a cross-cultural and cross-racial project. Blues music exists due to the cross-pollination between African American and European American musical elements and is strengthened by the involvements of black and non-black artists and audiences.

For the purposes of my dissertation, I define blues music not in strict formal terms, but as a musical style encompassing elements of blues as a musical form and as a narrative



autobiographical aesthetic. The narrators and characters in the contemporary literary, dramatic, and musical texts may work in one of the canonical blues forms (twelve-, eight-, or sixteen-bar blues) or simply feature blues facets “based on a pentatonic or five-note ‘blues scale’ that is frequently used by West African performers,” including blue notes (“flatted third and seventh notes”) and African-derived rhythms (Wald 5-6). In my study, a Western singer who “uses a broad range of microtones and moves between them with...freedom and subtlety” can also be deemed a blues or bluesy vocalist (6). In other words, an artist does not have to use strict blues forms exclusively, or play only in a blues style to be included in my dissertation.

In the methodology I deploy here, vernacular definitions of blues music as first, an emotional state and, second, a cultural practice are continually in conversation. Articulations of feeling in blues are in dialectical relationship with blues as a cultural practice. Although traces of sadness, for example, can be read in blues texts, I argue that expressions of sadness or depression can be found in many styles of music including folk, rock, country, hip-hop, and so on. Blues music does not have proprietary rights to expressions of grief, longing, pain, or heartache. Again, upbeat, party blues songs are well documented. As for the cultural practice argument, it is clear that early-twentieth-century American blues music was able to flourish due to regional and sociological factors, including black Americans’ close proximity to the legacy of slavery, relentless racial oppression expressed through repressive Jim Crow laws, economic hardship, and political and social limitations. However, blues music need not rely on these factors nor is the experience of these conditions necessary for an artist to produce so-called authentic blues. Such requirements collapse the importance of racial and cultural interchange in the growth and development of blues music. Moreover, projections of authenticity directed at black blues musicians in particular tend to overshadow their accomplishments as professionals, in control of

their work and their personas and striving for commercial success. Also lost in the purely cultural argument is the blues musicians' personal agency through narrative self-invention. It is through their storytelling, both in their song lyrics and in their constructed public personas, that these men and women were able to resist racial, social, economic, and gendered oppression and invent or re-invent themselves. This is the crux of my argument. Through a constructed autobiography (and in some cases through a third party constructing their biography) many blues musicians are able to overcome limiting oppressive structures and use their personal agency for self-empowerment. Through these autobiographical and biographical acts, these musicians demonstrate the spirit of a *narrative* blues tradition.

### **What is Blues Authenticity?**

Blues authenticity requires a person to play the role of a blues figure whose persona comprises a series of gestures, behaviors, rituals, and stylistic choices that many blues critics, fans, and performers deem authentically black and authentically blues. This concept is necessarily racially, culturally, and socio-economically essentialized. Only a black American growing up in a particular time and place, and under a particular set of circumstances, can be an authentic black blues figure. A black blues figure should be phenotypically black and have first-hand experience with racial, social, political, and economic oppression. The American black blues figure also comes out of a social construct that is gendered. The black blues figure can be male or female; in each case he or she must demonstrate a rebellious spirit and a tendency towards flouting social conventions. There are important distinctions to be made between male and female blues figures; however, as black female blues figures pay a steep price for stepping outside of the boundaries of their prescribed gender roles. Due to patriarchal structures, some female blues figures may experience adulation from their fans, and even enjoy commercial

success, but are judged as whores bereft of feminine respectability both inside and outside of their communities. In spite of my close attention to the constructed nature of the black American blues figure, I am not suggesting that there are not real people who possess these qualities; I simply contend that the black American blues figure does not exist as a natural, essentialized phenomenon.

The black blues figure continues to resonate in a contemporary context due to the power of myth. I am defining myth using Roland Barthes' influential theorizing of the way signs work in contemporary culture. Barthes' definition of myth springs from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework where anything in existence—a guitar, a pair of glasses, a pinstriped suit—can function as a sign, directing meaning at a referent elsewhere in the real world. The sign is defined by an arbitrary relationship between a signifier (sound, image, or object) and a signified (concept) (Barthes 112-113). For Barthes, myth is a second-order semiological system that stays true to the same tri-dimensional semiotic pattern pioneered by Saussure (signifier, signified, sign) (114). On the second semiotic level, the first-level sign “empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates” (Barthes 117). Thus a signifier on the mythical level is depoliticized (143). At the denotative level, a pinstriped suit marks the wearer as a man who chose to wear that suit for any number of social, political, or historical reasons. But at the connotative level, that suit becomes the mythical sign of an authentic bluesman. At that point, the mythical, pinstriped suit can do its cultural work, rendering the image of a man in a pinstriped suit on a CD cover apolitical or ahistorical (143). It is understood, based on the myth, that the man is an authentic bluesman. This is how the pinstriped suit, rather than being an object of clothing that was in vogue at a certain time and place in American history, becomes the natural garb of the authentic black American bluesman.

So for this project, the black blues figure adheres to various seemingly naturalized or essential signifying gestures, while also supporting well-worn blues myths. These gestures, behaviors, rituals, and stylistic choices include, but are not limited to, aesthetic concerns like clothing and fashionable accessories. A guitarist playing a song that has a blues form, while wearing a fedora, a dark suit, and sunglasses, will invoke the image of a black, male American blues figure in the minds of many blues fans and critics. Outlaw behaviors (drinking, fighting, sexual promiscuity, lawlessness, a wandering spirit, Godlessness, and transgressions of gender and racial boundaries) and the use of old and worn instruments and low fidelity amplification do the same mythical work. This is not to say that these clothes, behaviors, and instrumentation are confined to the blues style of music. Rock music shares many of these tropes, which is not surprising given that many scholars believe rock 'n' roll evolved from the blues. But my contention is that these myths continue to shape the way many blues fans and musicians view the style, leading to essentialized notions of the black American blues figure in contemporary literary and popular music texts.

### **Literature Review**

My dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach necessitating an examination of literature and music across a broad variety of theoretical frameworks and disciplines. I examine constructions of the contemporary Black American blues musician through literary and musicological criticism. My project includes theoretical works in the areas of performance studies, autobiography, feminism, passing, and blues music to interrogate racially essentialized ideas about a naturalized black American blues identity as represented in contemporary American literature and popular culture.

In the realm of performance studies, “Performances: Belief in the Part One is Playing,” by Erving Goffman suggests that a performance is more successful if the performer has sincere belief in his own performance. According to Goffman, this belief contributes positively to the “realness” of the performance, while a performer who does not believe his own performance is deemed cynical (61). In other words, an audience will only believe a performance if the performer does. Otherwise, the audience will see the performer as a swindler pushing a cynical agenda. Goffman also reads performance as an everyday experience, and he cites examples like doctors prescribing placebos for their patients and inferior office workers putting on airs when greeting out of town superiors (62). For Goffman, the success of these performances depends on the sincerity of the given performance. Goffman also introduces the idea of “front.” According to Goffman, “It will be convenient to label as ‘front’ that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (63). Goffman includes “setting” (“furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action”) and “personal front” (“clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristic; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like”) under the general heading of front (63-64). What is striking here is that, while Goffman sees most of these fronts as carriers of portable signs that can be varied from one performance to another, he sees racial characteristics as relatively fixed and unchanging for an individual performer. While he does not include gender explicitly, it is not a leap to suspect that he would see gender as a relatively fixed characteristic as well. Goffman sees performance as something internal that an individual expresses to the world. In this sense, Goffman views race and gender as essential rather than social constructs that necessitate an ability to perform them in socially advantageous ways.

While I don't agree with his viewpoint that race is a fixed characteristic, Goffman's concept of the necessity of belief in one's performance is useful for my project, given that I analyze live performances of popular music figures. Jack White, in particular, is a performer who embraces autobiographical fabrications in interviews with the media. However, on stage, he prides himself on delivering honest performances for his audiences.

Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* provides a feminist perspective through the close readings of women's blues lyrics. Davis sees blues women like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday as transgressive figures who use their lyrical and musical performances as a vehicle for discussing the social and political issues at stake for black working-class women. In addition to the expected songs about love, these women speak frankly about sexual desire, domestic violence, and the harsh economic realities facing their communities. Davis reads the lyrics as literature in the sense that she divorces the lyrics from the performer and sees the songs as stories with a narrator who is distinct from the songwriter or singer. In other words, these lyrics and the women's performance personas are fictional. Obviously, this connects nicely with my project, as I believe the fictive nature of the lyrics and performance personas allows the women the agency to create their own blues identities. The fictional reading of the blues lyrics and performance does not take anything away from the subversive nature of these women's lyrical and musical performances, as it is a bold act to enunciate a rebellious, uncontrollable blues woman, even when doing so through the use of a persona.

In the field of literary studies there are two texts that stand out for me as particularly relevant to my dissertation. Of note is *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* by Patricia R. Schroeder. Schroeder examines Robert Johnson's enduring

mythology as depicted in film, literature, and popular culture. Further, Schroeder does close readings of many of the same texts I analyze in my project, including *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie, *RL's Dream* by Walter Mosley, and "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" by T.C. Boyle. While Schroeder mostly looks at mythmaking as an external proposition, with outsiders propagating the various Robert Johnson tall tales, my project examines mythmaking as an act of personal agency on the part of the blues figure. With close readings of literary, film, and other popular culture texts, Schroeder's multidisciplinary approach is a good model for my dissertation.

From the musicological perspective, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States* by Samuel A. Floyd Jr. and *The Music of Black Americans: A History* by Eileen Southern make the argument that black music, including blues, exists as a result of African retention. The African retention argument suggests that blues music is essentially black, and, accordingly, no non-black musician can authentically produce the blues style. According to Eileen Southern:

Despite the interaction of African and European cultural patterns in black communities, with the resultant emergence of new, *African-American* patterns, there persisted among black folk musicians a predilection for certain performance practice, certain habits, certain musical instruments, and certain ways of shaping music to meet their needs in the new environment that had roots in the African experience. (21-22)

Floyd echoes Southern when he asserts,

African survivals exist not merely in the sense that African-American music has the same characteristics as its African counterparts, but also that the musical

*tendencies*, the mythological beliefs and assumptions, and the interpretive strategies of African Americans are the same as those that underlie the music of the African homeland, that these tendencies and beliefs continue to exist as African cultural memory, and that they continue to inform the continuity and elaboration of African-American music. (5)

My view differs considerably, as I see the blues music style as one dictated by commercial music trends as much as coming out of cross-cultural experiences between blacks and non-blacks.

Musicologist Ronald Radano in *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* takes a completely different approach. Radano seeks to intervene in the concept of African retention and an essential black musical identity. Instead of supporting the long-accepted narrative of black American music as a collection of styles reflective of oppression, with the ultimate goal of racial uplift (“a kind of hero’s tale”), Radano challenges this history as a collective fiction (xii). Radano, however, does not in the process undermine black music’s powerful creative expression. He instead desires “to outline a different kind of story about black music, one that affirms the importance of cultural distinctiveness to the making of black identities while also reconsidering the efficacy of commitments to singular notions of meaning and form” (xiii). The fact that he sees “black” music as a narrative fiction speaks very directly to my work, as my project is focused on the creation or extension of fictions through narration: Each blues musician character in my study (whether they are in a novel or they exist as a pop culture figure) is viewed as a constructed entity. Additionally, my dissertation seeks to disrupt the idea of blues music, or the black American blues figure, as having an essential racial or cultural identity.

*Near Black: White-To-Black Passing in American Culture* by Baz Dreisinger looks at white-to-black passing as a function of white Americans’ proximity to black Americans. Her text



includes an examination of white musicians Johnny Otis and Mezz Mezzrow who famously lived and worked among black people and self-identified as black. What is of particular importance for my dissertation is that fact both of these musicians wrote autobiographies in which they sketch out their musical and personal transformations from white men to black men. Dreisinger's study also allows for a re-reading of black-to-white passing narratives as "white-to-black narratives because they often introduce 'black' characters who pass into blackness as much as, if not more, than they pass into whiteness" (4). One of the examples she uses is the unnamed narrator in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. According to Dreisinger, when the narrator "speaks of having 'pass[ed] into another world' as a child, he is learning, in a manner of speaking, how to be 'be' black" (4). This supports my own ideas about blacks and non-blacks enunciating a constructed black blues persona. In my dissertation, non-whites are not the only characters who perform the role of a blues figure. Blacks perform the same role.

In *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* Gayle Wald also examines Mezz Mezzrow. Her study focuses on the inherently gendered nature of the passing narrative. For Wald, while black-to-white passing is feminized due to the disempowered position of blacks in American society, white-to-black passing is a "masculinized (and often masculinist) enterprise" (16). Both Wald and Dreisinger note the difference in how public white-to-black passers are versus black-to-white ones. Dreisinger states, "Black passing narratives are commonly, though not exclusively, fictional; white passing narratives, however, often merge the fictive with the factual and lean toward the autobiographical" (7). Dreisinger believes this is due in part to passing whites' full embracing of the powerful feeling racial transgression affords them (7). This is why Mezz Mezzrow and Johnny Otis proudly display their "blackness" through the vehicle of the autobiographical narrative. The act of transgressing

gender or racial roles confers power, as does the act of transgressing essentialist notions of the black blues figure.

In Chapter one, Robert Johnson, Myth, and the Power of Autobiographical and Biographical acts, I analyze texts that have Robert Johnson as a character, including the novels *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie and *RL's Dream* by Walter Mosley and the short stories "Black Elvis" by Geoffrey Becker and "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on my Trail" by T.C. Boyle. I examine the ways in which the fictional Johnson's autobiographical expression engages the real-life Johnson's mythologized biographical representation. I also examine the role that popular myths about Johnson—such as the crossroads tale—play in catalyzing other characters' autobiographical blues expression.

In Chapter two, Blueswomen and their Self-Fashioning through Autobiography and Biography, I consider literary and musical texts that construct the classic blues queen. I analyze texts such as *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson, and songs like "You Know I'm No Good," "Back to Black," and "Tears Dry on Their Own," and "Rehab" by Amy Winehouse. This chapter considers how fictional and real-life blueswomen who have largely been erased from blues history—and if they are visible they are deemed transgressive by their predominantly male critics—talk back to their negative representations through autobiographical self-expression.

In Chapter three, The Blues Apprenticeship, I examine *Mister Satan's Apprentice: A Blues Memoir* by Adam Gussow, "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin, and "1955" by Alice Walker. I also consider U2's performance of so-called black American music during their *Joshua Tree* tour and in the subsequent tour documentary *Rattle and Hum*, and I look at the black American blues performer Gary Clark Jr. This chapter examines the role of the apprenticeship in

fomenting a black blues persona. All of the literary and musical texts highlight the symbiotic relationship between the young blues acolyte and the willing mentor and show the ways that autobiographical and biographical expression affects the various apprenticeships and vice versa. In some of these examples, the novice is white and male and the experienced bluesman is black. This is certainly the case with *Mister Satan's Apprentice: A Blues Memoir* by Adam Gussow and U2's collaboration with B.B. King. But Gary Clark Jr. had white mentors like Jimmie Vaughn help him find his way as a young blues player in Austin, Texas; and "1955" and "Sonny's Blues" feature masters and apprentices who disrupt assumptions about race and gender.

Chapter four, *Jack White: A Study in Blues Self-Invention*, explores a white musician's autobiographical blues self-invention by focusing on blues-rock singer, songwriter, musician, and producer Jack White. In this chapter, I provide close readings of various songs and live performances by White with his band, the White Stripes, and in his solo work, in addition to analyzing his public persona as seen in print, on TV, and in film media. White self-consciously adopted a highly stylized visual image for the White Stripes in order to sidestep the thorny issue of blues authenticity. Additionally, he, like Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison before him, uses the media to disseminate fabricated aspects of his autobiography. He is also a compelling figure because he continues to re-invent himself post-White Stripes in his work as a solo artist, record label executive, and book publisher.

## Chapter 1

### “Robert Johnson, Myth, and the Power of Autobiographical and Biographical Acts”

Robert Johnson was born in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, most likely on May 11, 1911 (Davis 126; Schroeder 19). Though younger and far less successful during his lifetime, Johnson emerged when country blues masters such as Charley Patton, Son House, and Skip James were performing and making records. Patton was perhaps the most famous of the Delta bluesmen in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—a “rock star” in his time whose stage antics included playing the guitar between his legs and behind his back (Gioia 51). Today many blues scholars view Patton as the key Delta blues innovator who influenced numerous artists, including Bukka White, Son House, Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Waters, and even Robert Johnson (Davis 99). As Davis asserts about Patton:

Though he may not have been the first Delta guitarist to use a bottleneck, or the first singer from the area to bellow his lyrics in what we now characterize as a Delta growl, he may have been the first Delta *bluesman*—the performer who codified these and other elements into the blues, and established the blues as a vehicle for personal commentary. (99)

Yet it is Robert Johnson’s legend that looms larger in the minds of average blues fans.

Columbia Records’ 1961 release, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, introduced Johnson’s work to a new generation of young, white, and largely middle-class American folkies. During the late-1950s into the mid-1960s, white folk revivalists were enamored with acoustic country blues music to the exclusion of electric blues. For these collectors and performers, rural bluesmen Son House and Robert Johnson were more “authentic” than amplified Chicago blues players like Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. These fans tended to conflate the *real blues* with particular

class, regional and, of course, racial experiences. A so-called authentic blues musician was black, poor, rural, and, most importantly, unsullied by modern technology.

Johnson's music found its way across the ocean, influencing English musicians such as Eric Clapton, Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin, and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones. Johnson's representation in a variety of contemporary cultural spaces has also played a role in his continued relevance. For instance, in 1994 the United States Postal Service put Johnson's image on a stamp. Numerous films take Johnson as subject, including the 1986 narrative film *Crossroads* and the documentaries *The Search for Robert Johnson* (1992) and *Can't You Hear the Wind Howl?* (1997).

At the heart of the romantic blues music imaginary is the legend that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for guitar virtuosity. The story goes that Charley Patton, Son House, and Willie Brown disparaged Johnson's early musical efforts, prompting him to disappear for about a year. When he returned, his playing had improved dramatically. Time and practice can do wonders for a musician, but it may be that Johnson himself decided to season the story with a heaping spoonful of autobiographical blues self-fashioning. He is supposed to have claimed he met the Devil at midnight at a crossroads somewhere in the Delta where he made the Faustian bargain (Davis 2). This tall tale has given blues scholars and fans over the generations plenty to talk (and dream) about.

The endurance of the crossroads narrative demonstrates the power of autobiographical self-invention. Johnson's decision to tell this story was an act of personal agency. Through the telling, he perhaps experienced an approximation of what it might actually feel like to have sold one's soul to the Devil. This echoes Paul John Eakin's approach to autobiographical self-invention in his work *Fictions in Autobiography*.

In this chapter I examine the 1995 novels *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie and *RL's Dream* by Walter Mosley, and the short stories "Black Elvis" by Geoffrey Becker (1999) and "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" by T.C. Boyle (1979). In each text, Johnson, the character, is in a dialogue with his historical, mythologized, biographical representation. Multiple versions of the real-life Johnson's crossroads tale and violent death have been documented in numerous fiction and non-fiction works, over several decades. In many of these projects the creator takes an overly romanticized approach, rendering Johnson in simplistic, one-dimensional terms. In these texts, Johnson is mythologized in Barthian terms. His womanizing, his restless spirit, and his guitar are all relegated to mythical signs of an authentic bluesman. The texts in this chapter engage these myths—sometimes overtly—and the fictional Johnson has no choice but to confront his problematic representation. As this project's argument centers on the blues as a narrative tradition, and it was a specific moment of narrative—the tale of the "crossroads"—that helped to grow Johnson's legend, it is appropriate to begin with an examination of these fictional works featuring a character named "Robert Johnson." Three of the four texts I examine in this chapter—*Reservation Blues*, *RL's Dream*, and "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail"—include a recounting or reimagining of that iconic moment; all of the narratives, save *Stones in My Passway*, include characters other than Johnson who are compelled to tell stories about their lives, about the blues, or about how they somehow fit within the blues tradition whatever their race or regional identity. While the fictional Johnson is frequently silenced in the various texts, and his romantic, idealized, mythological image is placed in the foreground by the narrator or other characters, his narrative legend serves as a vehicle for the autobiographical blues self-invention of other characters. When allowed to speak for himself,

the fictional Johnson also, sometimes subtly and at other times overtly, undermines commonly held beliefs about his life, blues music, and his place within the blues tradition.

My argument will proceed as follows: I will first analyze “Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail,” a short story that embraces the romantic mythology surrounding Johnson, while attempting to recreate the last hours of Johnson’s life and traumatic death. Then I will explore *R.L.’s Dream*, a novel about Soupspoon, an elderly and terminally ill New York City based blues guitarist from Mississippi who is determined to tell the story of the blues, as well as his own coming of age tale, before he dies. As Soupspoon talks about his life in the Delta, he details the ways in which Johnson served as a catalyst for his growth as a bluesman. Next, I will discuss *Reservation Blues*, a novel about the adventures of Coyote Springs, a Spokane Indian rock band whose meteoric rise is aided by Robert Johnson’s demonically possessed acoustic guitar. Finally, I will turn to “Black Elvis,” a short story about an interaction between an African American Elvis impersonator and a Korean American Robert Johnson imitator. This story takes a postmodern approach, playfully disrupting Johnson’s mythology, as well as romantic notions of blues authenticity. Ordered this way, the texts take us from a thoroughly romantic, authenticist approach to the blues tradition—in Boyle’s narrative, Johnson exists in a sensual blues world of his own making where the only events of importance pertain to his own physical survival or to playing music—to a subversive undermining of the very notion of blues authenticity.

The vision of Johnson as a haunted, damned figure permeates most artistic works featuring him as a subject. In most of the stories in this chapter, Johnson is described as possessed by an otherworldly force, if not the devil. Yet in *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, Elijah Wald states, “There is no suggestion from any of his

friends or acquaintances that the hellish or demon-harried aspects of his work were of particular importance to him, or that they were even noticed by the people who crowded around him on the streets of Friar's Point" (266). Thus it is striking how consistently fictional representations of Johnson characterize him as a man disconnected from society. If he is not actually haunted by Satan or demons, at the very least the fictional Johnson is distracted and alienated from the conventional dictates of the community spaces he occupies.

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The notion of blues authenticity, and the ways in which it is either celebrated or undone in American literary and dramatic texts, is a thread tying my project together. "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on my Trail," concerned overtly with romantic blues mythology and blues authenticity, is a useful place to begin. Boyle's story was published before there was much information about Johnson's life. In *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture*, Patricia Schroeder states:

Sam Charters's sketchy *Robert Johnson* had appeared in 1972, Greil Marcus's highly romantic *Mystery Train* in 1975, and a few articles in music journals had tackled the elusive subject in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but Boyle's story was written before the groundbreaking research of Gayle Dean Wardlow or Peter Guralnick was published. (69)

Given its publication date, it is not surprising that the narrator renders Johnson as a romantic outsider who exults in his role as a rebellious bluesman, eschewing work in the cotton fields while accepting his low social status. Portrayed by Boyle, Johnson is happy as long as he can make a little money playing the music he loves, drink as much as he wants, and chase and bed multiple women.



As Schroeder asserts, “In Boyle’s case, we see a worldview influenced by both historical fact and romantic disposition” (70) This story takes care to include as much historical detail as was available at the time. For Boyle, telling a story about Johnson’s life and death—providing a fictionalized biography, of sorts—is as important as celebrating Johnson’s music. As Schroeder shares from her own virtual conversation with Boyle via an internet message board, Boyle writes: “The story came from my love of the music and from my desire to tell the definitive story of his death (definitive in my universe, anyway)” (qtd. in “Message Board” 69)

Boyle set out to tell the previously untold story of Johnson in a fictionalized work, while also being faithful to historical details. Though the story is brief—just seven pages—it includes a fair amount of factual information about United States current events during the time that Johnson lived:

It is 1938, dust bowl, New Deal. FDR is on the radio, and somebody in Robinsonville is naming a baby after Jesse Owens. Once, on the road to Natchez, Robert saw a Pierce Arrow and talked about it for a week. Another time he spent six weeks in Chicago and didn’t know the World’s Fair was going on. Now he plays his guitar up and down the Mississippi, and in Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. He’s never heard of Hitler and he hasn’t eaten in two days. (147)

While this passage supports the predictable and well-worn concept of the primitive black immune to technology and modern progress—how would it be possible for Johnson to spend six weeks in a major city like Chicago and not at least overhear talk about the World’s Fair while busking on a city corner?—it also demonstrates how important the concept of the primitive is to blues mythology. Recounting Johnson’s travels without providing a contrast with the goings-on

in mainstream white culture would not have the same effect. It is necessary to show that there are multiple Americas occurring at once. A shared one: “It is 1938, dust bowl, New Deal;” a black one: “somebody in Robinsonville is naming a baby after Jesse Owens;” and a white one: “He’s [Johnson’s] never heard of Hitler” (147). As Schroeder suggests, “Taken together, the depiction of an unsophisticated Johnson and the imagistic foreshadowing combine to present a vision of Johnson as a doomed, haunted singer—a figure of romance, detached from the historical setting Boyle carefully constructs around him” (71). Johnson is a legendary blues master worthy of a story because his life is the stuff of myth. He is in the real world, but he is not of it. Many writers represent Johnson as a sensitive artist who would crumble under the weight of a modernized, world at war. Therefore it makes sense that he would disengage himself from the reality of the depression and the growing fascism abroad. And given Johnson’s race and class, the only way Boyle, a white baby boomer, and other American blues aficionados of a that generation can label Johnson as authentic is to render him as a dream.

Boyle attempts to put Johnson’s story in its historical context, sticking to the factual events in Johnson’s life that were known at that time, but he still fictionalizes key biographical details. For instance, in this story, as in real life, Johnson meets with a producer whom he calls twice and interrupts at dinner the night before a recording session. In the story, the producer’s name is Walter Fagen and they meet in New Orleans, while in real life the producer’s name is Don Law Sr. and they met in Dallas. In the story and in real life, the first call was from the police station letting him know that Johnson was picked up on vagrancy charges and needed to be bailed out of jail. Johnson made the second call when he wished to solicit a prostitute and needed more money (Schroeder 70; Boyle 150-151). The narrator suggests after that incident that “Robert’s dream is thick with the thighs of women” (151). According to the narrator, not only is

Johnson child-like and irresponsible, but he is also stereotypically over-sexed. The fictionalizing of the historical details calls attention to the constructed nature of the work, and it underscores its narrativity. What makes Johnson such an attractive subject are the various larger-than-life stories—the crossroads tale, his drinking and womanizing, and his violent death—that help situate him within the so-called authentic blues tradition. It is not the content of the various stories about Johnson, or their veracity, that make Johnson’s legend. Rather it is the very *existence* of those compelling, half-unbelievable stories that places Johnson within a rich and flexible narrative blues tradition that allows blues makers to invent themselves through autobiographical fictions.

Boyle’s final scene is an example of how a compelling blues story can be mythologized. There are conflicting accounts of Johnson’s death, and the story of his demise has been told in multiple fictional and non-fictional contexts. As Schroeder states, “The white researchers focus on disease and illness—pneumonia, syphilis, liver damage—while the black Delta residents focus on violence—poison, stabbing, shooting” (48). In this sense, it is not surprising that Boyle would choose to recreate a violent version of Johnson’s death, as a poisoning is in line with how some of Johnson’s contemporaries believed he died:

Cramps. A spasm so violent it jerks his fingers from the strings. He begins again, his voice quavering, shivered: “Got to keep moving, got to keep moving, / Hellhound on my trail.” And then suddenly the voice chokes off, gags, the guitar slips to the floor with a percussive shock. His bowels are on fire. He stands, clutches his abdomen, drops to his hands and knees. “Boy’s had too much of that Mexican,” someone says. He looks up, a sword run through him, panting, the shock waves pounding through his

frame, looks up at the pine plank, the barrels, the cold, hard features of the girl with the silver necklace in her hand. Looks up, and snarls. (152)

The violent end—a man on all fours snarling like a dog—is fitting for a man who suggested through his lyrics that a hellhound was on his trail. Boyle, through his narrative voice, tells a story about Johnson that has elements of historical accuracy, while keeping Johnson outside of history. By focusing on Johnson’s romantic qualities, Boyle advances Johnson’s blues mythology in the name of fostering blues authenticity. However, this storytelling approach has an additional outcome: It demonstrates the ways in which the stories make the blues tradition unique.

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*RL’s Dream*, told mostly in close third person point of view, takes a similarly romantic view of Robert Johnson; but instead of rehashing historical facts about Johnson’s life, this text uses Johnson as a vehicle for recounting the larger story of the Delta blues scene and as a model and backdrop for the tale of a fictional unknown Delta guitarist named Atwater “Soup Spoon” Wise. Soup Spoon is nearly 70 years old, and he has bone cancer that has metastasized into his lungs and pelvis. He lives with his young, white, female neighbor Kiki who takes him in after he is evicted from his apartment. As a teenager, Kiki was raped repeatedly by her father, and in adulthood she has become an angry and violent alcoholic who lashes out verbally and physically at Soup Spoon and others in her home and work environments. Kiki is emotionally damaged, but she has great compassion for Soup Spoon and she makes it her personal mission to save him.

Soup Spoon believes that he is dying, so as soon as he starts to feel better after his initial cancer treatments he begins to document his story as a young boy growing up in the Mississippi Delta by way of tape-recorded conversations with Kiki. The epigraph at the beginning of *RL’s*

*Dream* comprises an excerpt from a fictional book within the book called *Back Road to the Blues* by William Early in 1986—close to the time frame of *RL's Dream's* narrative. Early, based in Chicago, contacted Soupspoon several years earlier. As Soupspoon remembers, “He wanted to interview me twenty years ago for a book about the blues. He called it *Back Road to the Blues*. I didn't want to at the time. That was a bad time in my life an' I didn't want to think about no blues” (100). But now, given the state of Soupspoon's health, he is ready to tell his story—his first person autobiography. He is also interested in writing a biography of the blues that includes his precious memories of his friend Robert Leroy Johnson.

Throughout the story, Soupspoon refers to Johnson as RL. In *RL's Dream's* epigraph, Soupspoon describes Johnson to Early in a romantic way that is reminiscent of Boyle's approach:

RL wasn't no real man. A real man gits born, does what li'l he can, and then he dies....But RL fooled you. He played the guitar when he shouldn't'a been able to, an' nobody knows how he died. Maybe it was the pneumonia, maybe a jealous man. Satan coulda come an' made him bark like a dog “for takin' him home. (9)

Soupspoon describes Johnson as an otherworldly creature who managed both to exemplify Delta culture and somehow to transcend it. He did not live by the same rules as the other black men and women who suffered under Jim Crow and were too busy trying to survive to truly live. He played the guitar better than anyone Soupspoon had ever seen; he travelled outside of the Delta; and he possessed a hypnotic charm that drew audiences and women to him. As Soupspoon recounts:

That's how it was with Robert Johnson.

You looked up one day and there he was singing and acting crazy. He told you about far-off places in the world and played music that was stranger yet. He made songs that were deep down in you—and then you looked up again and he was gone. He took something of yours that you didn't even know you had; something your mother and your father never knew about. And taking it away he left you with something missing—and that something was better than anything else that ever you had. (44)

According to Soupspoon, Johnson's music is so powerful that it awakens something within the listener that needs to be fed, and when Johnson disappears he takes that something with him; however, Soupspoon retains it and feels compelled to share it with an audience. In order to do that, he must speak his story into a tape recorder, tapping into the Afro-diasporic oral tradition, with the ultimate goal being his memories' inclusion in a written text.

The fact that Soupspoon can articulate his memories of Johnson is important because those memories inform the coming-of-age stories that he shares about his own life in the blues. In this case, it is useful that Soupspoon sees Johnson as a shadowy figure. If Johnson is an apparition that is here one moment and gone the next, Soupspoon can conjure him up, access the memories, and document them through a tape recorder and eventually the written word:

The memory of Robert Johnson was so strong in him that he sometimes felt that he could actually talk to the guitar man. He'd walk around Kiki's studio apartment, while she was at work, imagining RL was at his side talking about women he'd known and how many records he could play from memory. It all came in one big rush; too much for him to make sense of. He tried to write it down but the words were flat and toneless. He

turned on the cassette recorder that Kiki brought home from Radio Shack and tried to talk out his stories. But when he played the tape back he was reminded of a hapless baby-sitter trying to tell a fairy tale that he couldn't remember. Finally he asked Kiki to help. "Just listen to me," he said. "I'm a storyteller. Storyteller need somebody wanna hear what he got to tell.

(130)

As Schroeder asserts, "Soup Spoon is proud to be a transmitter of cultural history, capturing his memories of Johnson and so potentially creating new lieux de mémoire for Kiki and others" (132). In this role, Soup Spoon is taking on the responsibility of telling the larger story of the blues. When he tracks down his black friend and bass player Alfred Metsgar, he hopes to include more forgotten voices in his blues biography: "I'm yo' old friend, Alfie. Soup Spoon. We used t'play together. I wanted t'tell the story about that night [their guitarist friend Quickdraw's possible murder] if I could get you to remember. I wanted t'tell some stories 'bout the blues 'fore they all gone. You. Me..." (176).

When Soup Spoon tells his story about Johnson, he focuses on Johnson's engagement with the Devil and gestures towards the crossroads tale. Soup Spoon starts by talking about how one night Johnson played "Love in Vain" and then, predictably, "Me and the Devil." He introduces a young female character named Booby Redman who was overwhelmed by Johnson's music, and ultimately drawn to Soup Spoon because his music was gentler: "I guess RL's music was too much for Booby, because she come across the street, really it was just a graded dirt road, to hear my soft sweet blues. Satan wasn't after me. That's why I'm still here in the flesh" (133).

Soup Spoon's description of Johnson's music reinforces the idea that Johnson was possessed by

the devil: “We played and played. The nickels fell like hail. Everybody was movin’ to RL’s evil moods” (133).

When the county sheriff arrives to break the street concert up, firing shots in the air with black folks running in terror in different directions, Soupspoon and Johnson are caught by the big, mean, white sheriff Heck Wrightson. The sheriff takes Soupspoon and Johnson to a makeshift jail in the back of the local white barbershop. While Soupspoon tries to communicate with Johnson, Johnson acts strangely, breaking unexpectedly into song: “That’s when Bob started in. ‘Ohhh, momma yeah. Yeah, yeaaaaahhhh,’ he sang out. ‘Ohhh, momma, I,’ he cried. Then he th’ew his head back and crooned a long high note” (135). Johnson’s crooning captures Heck’s attention, and he demands to know what is wrong with Johnson: “‘RL got spells,’ I told him. I figured it was true” (135). Soupspoon does not actually know if Johnson has “spells,” but he assumes that a possessed man might have those sorts of ailments. Soupspoon is unfazed when Heck proceeds to beat Johnson up; yet after each blow Johnson gets back up and keeps singing:

Heck hit Bob so hard that the poor boy rolled across what little floor they was. But he jumped right up into a crouch and scabbled back to his corner and started singin’ again. And Heck hit him again. But this time RL had his behind anchored. You could see how hard the slap was but RL just shuddered, shuddered and moaned. The Sherriff was a little worried when he seen that his slaps didn’t bother RL. So he turned to me and said, “What’s wrong with him?” “Spells,” I said. I hunched my shoulders up to my ears. “Had ‘em since he was a babe,” I lied. “That time Heck used his fist on RL. That boy’s head rolled back and so did his eyes. He slid down on his side but he was still singin,” “Ohhhh, momma yeah. Yeah.” And a



sweet smile crossed his beat-up face. Heck backed on away from him then. He looked down on that po' bluesmaster with a kind of awe. He whispered, "Spells." "Bad ones," I tells him. (136)

These "spells" might offer a clue as to why Johnson is silent—silenced really—throughout the novel. He has few lines of dialogue in the narrative, and when he does speak he is disoriented, as in this exchange after Soupspoon finds him after the two men are separated when they are released from jail:

"Bob!" I says. "Bob, it's me, Soup, Soupy!" RL huddle down in the yellah dirt and sobbed. I helped him up and got'im t'walk wit' me. I told 'im that we could get some whiskey if we went back to Mary's general store. Back then the general store was also a juke joint, what they call a nightclub nowadays. RL says, "Why you got my guitar, man?" "Just carryin" it till you want it back, RL. Ole Heck almost busted it." W RL looked at me so wary I didn't think he knew who I was. (138)

Later Soupspoon even suggests that Johnson may have forgotten about jail and their run in with Heck: "RL took his guitar and we headed for Mary's. He didn't even say nuthin' 'bout bein' in jail. I don't even think it was real fo' him. It was more like we had passed through a dream and now he was back to where we was" (138). Johnson wanders through the narrative as if he is dreaming, and Soupspoon engages Johnson in his memories as if he too is dreaming. This is also why the memories are so close to the foreground of his mind; he interacts with Johnson as if he is in the room with him as he speaks. The only way it would be possible for Johnson to be in the room with Soupspoon would be if Johnson were a ghost, or if Soupspoon was in a dream state.

Johnson's otherworldly state is explained when Soupspoon asks him how he learned to play the blues: "'Made a trade fo'it, Soup.' That's what he said! Give up his right eye to the blues. Made a blood sacrifice with a witch woman down Clarksdale. Soiled his hands in the blood of an animal, then goes out to the crossroads. He said that and then he jammed his hand under Linda's skirt" (141-142). This is a variation on the usual crossroads tale where Johnson does his business directly with Satan, circumventing the witch, but it is every bit as compelling. It is also important to note that Johnson speaks for himself in that moment. He is able to share a key autobiographical detail in his own words, but Soupspoon tells the rest of the crossroads story for him. Soupspoon also tells the tale about how Johnson, the character, died—invoking the mythical Satan encounter allegedly experienced by the real-life Johnson: "They said Satan come got him in a little place outside Greenwood, Mississippi. Satan or a jealous man" (143). Johnson is unable to speak for himself throughout the novel because he is not fully present in his body. In Soupspoons' imagination Johnson exists in a liminal space between the physical plane and some form of after- or underworld, so others are able to speak for him.

As Soupspoon attempts to tell the full story of the Robert Johnson he remembers, he visits his ex-wife Mavis who had a sexual liaison with Johnson before becoming involved with Soupspoon. Mavis met Johnson on the night of a deadly juke joint fire that killed four people. This was also the last time that Soupspoon saw Johnson. After saving Mavis's life by helping to put out the fire that had begun to consume the hem of her dress, Johnson took her home, made love to her, and then told her about his life (192-195). Mavis in turn is another person who speaks for Johnson—sharing his autobiography:

He told me all 'bout his girl down around Robinsonville. Just fifteen but she still died with their baby. He cried like Chirren do, all lost and sad. I

could see by the way he felt her death how he could play such strong music. “He told me how everybody hated him. First his stepdaddy who beat him and then later all the folks who made fun’a him not workin’ in the fields. Even the musicians didn’t want him to play nuthin’ but mouth harp. They bad-talked him until he trained hisself to play right...” (195)

After that incident,

As Mavis tells Johnson’s story, Soupspoon reflects on his own failed relationship with Mavis and wonders if their relationship ever had a real chance since he met her after she had been involved with Johnson:

There was a loud thought in Soupspoon’s mind. He never knew that Mavis had met RL at Panther Burn; at the fire that marked the last time he was ever to see his friend. He felt a double loss. It seemed to him that RL had raised up out of his grave to steal his wife away. Mavis had never been his because she had never, even from the start, opened her whole heart to him. (193)

Soupspoon’s own romantic ideas about Johnson cause him to feel inferior to him, and place Johnson in the dual role of friend and rival. At the end of the novel, as Soupspoon waits for death in his hospital bed, he sees RL:

when the young man [Kiki’s boyfriend Randy] lit his cigarette Soupspoon could see RL’s evil, handsome face in the flame. Even after he blew out the match his face stayed alight. He smiled but his cold eyes told Atwater that he was finally going to die. RL didn’t say anything, but that didn’t

surprise Soupspoon. He knew that ghosts couldn't talk like men anymore.

All they do is to haunt you with what they once looked like. (266)

Throughout the narrative Johnson is represented as a ghost even though he is supposedly alive, and at the end of the story the close third person narrator finally refers to Johnson as such. The narrator even focuses on Johnson's silence, suggesting that he does not speak because he is a ghost. This is particularly striking given the fact that he barely talks while alive throughout the novel. Johnson was, in reality, a ghost all along, a mere figment of Soupspoon's dreams.

Soupspoon invented this ghost-like character named Johnson to perhaps replicate the unknowability of the real-life Johnson. Soupspoon has been engaging a myth with a temporary body the entire time. Johnson's tenuous attachment to the physical world allows others to speak for him and provides the opportunity for Soupspoon to become the storyteller he longed to become and participate in the narrative blues tradition.

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In *Reservation Blues*, the Robert Johnson character is a minor one who, as in *RL's Dream*, catalyzes the main character's participation in the blues tradition through storytelling and romantic myth making. While the protagonist, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, is already known as an unrelenting storyteller, it is Johnson's wayward guitar—imbued with special powers due to black magic—that motivates him to start a Spokane Indian rock band called Coyote Springs.

When Johnson wanders onto the Spokane Indian Reservation, the community immediately takes notice: "The entire reservation knew about the black man five minutes after he showed up at the crossroads. All the Spokanes thought up reasons to leave work or home so they could drive down to look the stranger over" (3). The first person whom Johnson encounters is Thomas Builds-the-Fire: "The black man waved at every Indian that drove by, but nobody had the

courage to stop, until Thomas Builds-the-Fire pulled up in his old blue van” (3). Thomas is a familiar Alexie character (along with Victor Joseph) whom he first introduced in his short story “This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona” from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and who later appears in the film *Smoke Signals*. It makes sense that Thomas would take an active interest in meeting Johnson and learning about his background, given Thomas’s obsessive need to tell stories. As Schroeder asserts, “*Reservation Blues*...suggests that storytelling also is important for cultural transmission and for survival....And even though the Spokanes reject Thomas’s stories, the novel proposes that the stories offer one way to survive individually and communally....The blues also share some stylistic similarities with Native American storytelling, notably in their use of repetition” (125). The real-life Johnson’s crossroads tale is told over and over in books, films, and other media—reflecting the repetition Schroeder describes as part of Native American storytelling and the blues. Thomas also participates in this sort of repetition, as he is prone to telling the *same* story over and over again: “Thomas repeated stories constantly. All the other Indians on the reservation heard those stories so often that the words crept into dreams” (15).

In *Reservation Blues*, the crossroads tale drives the plot. When Thomas meets Johnson he has a guitar with him, but Johnson is careful to keep his hands at his side rather than shaking hands with Thomas. Johnson also refuses to say the guitar’s name aloud due to fear of conjuring “The Gentleman”—another name for Satan (4-5). As the omniscient narrator states, “The Gentleman held the majority of stock in Robert Johnson’s soul and had chased Robert Johnson for decades. Since 1938, the year he faked his death by poisoning and made his escape, Johnson had been running from the Gentleman, who narrowly missed him at every stop” (6). The Gentleman originally approached Johnson by offering him his deepest desire for a steep price:

“What do you want, Mr. Johnson?” asked the Gentleman. A handsome white man, the Gentleman wore a perfectly pressed black wool suit in the hot Mississippi heat. He leaned against the crossroads sign, picking at his teeth with a long fingernail” (264). Johnson exchanges his freedom for guitar prowess, and he now hopes to undo the pact. Johnson has travelled to the reservation to find Big Mom, a Spokane Indian elder who counsels young musicians, as she sees them as the embodiment of the slaughtered Native American horses—or the metaphorical Indian peoples—that white men killed several generations earlier: “With each successive generation, the horses arrived in different forms and with different songs, called themselves Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, and so many other names. Those horses rose from everywhere and turned to Big Mom for rescue, but they all fell back into the earth again” (10). Big Mom, like Johnson, is a mythologized figure who is the subject of many tales: “There were a million stories about Big Mom. But no matter how many stories were told, some Indians still refused to believe in her” (199). Johnson wishes to see Big Mom because he “Made a bad deal years ago. Caught a sickness I can’t get rid of” (6). The narrator conflates Johnson’s “sickness” with Thomas’s insatiable need to tell stories: “Thomas knew about sickness. He’d caught some disease in the womb that forced him to tell stories. The weight of those stories bowed his legs and bent his spine a bit. Robert Johnson looked bowed, bent, and more fragile with each word” (6). While Johnson is unable to speak for himself in *RL’s Dream*, in *Reservation Blues* he has a voice that grows stronger as the story unfolds. At the end of this exchange, Thomas agrees to bring Johnson to the base of the mountain where Big Mama lives, and he tells Johnson that he has to now walk on his own. Johnson leaves his guitar behind on the floor of Thomas’s car, and Thomas takes it, thus beginning his new life as a bass player and songwriter in a rock band. (8-9).

Thomas's obsessive nature is demonstrated in his dependence on the instrument:

“Thomas had carried Johnson's guitar around with him ever since then. He so strongly identified with that guitar that he wrapped it in a beautiful quilt and gave it a place of honor in his living room. When he went out for his daily walks, Thomas cradled the guitar like a baby, oblivious to the laughter all around him” (11). While at first it is difficult to understand Thomas's relationship with Johnson's guitar, it is soon clear that the guitar has magical, human attributes, including the ability to talk and play itself. When Victor—Thomas's future lead guitar player—breaks the guitar, it even fixes itself (21-24).

Johnson disappears after climbing the mountain to see Big Mom, and he reappears in the middle of the novel. During his absence, Thomas forms Coyote Springs, with Victor, the recipient of Johnson's possessed instrument. During the band's rehearsals in Irene's Grocery Store, the guitar is hot to the touch, hot enough to burn its owner:

Victor wore gloves when he played Robert Johnson's guitar but still suffered little burns and scratches. At first, Thomas had worried that his amplified bass and Junior's drums would overwhelm the acoustic lead guitar, but Victor could have kicked the guitar around the floor and it would have sounded good enough. Even without an amplifier or microphones, Robert Johnson's guitar filled the room.

(33)

Part of Johnson's allure centers on how immediate his vocals and guitar sound on his recordings, so a magical Robert Johnson guitar would need to fill a room despite having to compete with amplified instruments. And lest the reader forget how the guitar came to be, on the way to an early Coyote Springs gig, the band ends up at a crossroads: “The blue van, tattered and bruised,

cruised down an anonymous highway on the Flathead Indian Reservation and searched for the dirt road that led to the Tipi Pole Tavern....The blue van suddenly stopped at a Crossroads” (49).

When Johnson returns to the story, he has regained his physical health and he is well rested; yet he worries about his guitar. He is sure that it will come back to him, even though he has, in the past, done everything in his power to lose it: “He buried that guitar, he threw it in rivers, dropped it off tall buildings. But it always came back to him” (173). Importantly, it is not Johnson himself who is haunted in this novel—he arrives at the reservation tired and frail, but he is not possessed. It is the guitar that holds all of the power, and Johnson is both afraid that it will return to him and guilty that it has possibly latched on to the members of Coyote Springs. As the narrator states, “The guitar would never let go of those Indians now. It held onto Victor even harder than it ever held Johnson” (174).

Johnson’s response to his fears is to sing a blues song, one that the entire reservation can hear:

Mmmmm mmmm  
I’s up this mornin’  
Ah, blues walkin’ like a man  
I’s up this mornin’  
Ah, blues walkin’ like a man  
Worried blues  
Give me your right hand (174)

This performance taps into a collective blues experience. With Johnson’s blues speaking not only for African American struggle, but also for Native American struggle: “Then the music stopped. The reservation exhaled. Those blues created memories for the Spokanes, but they refused to



claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous” (174). While many Spokanes denied their stake in the blues, Thomas, tapping into his connection to the music vis-à-vis his role as storyteller, feels the connection between African American and Native American blues:

In his bed, Thomas Builds-the-Fire had recognized Robert Johnson’s voice as those blues drifted down from Big Mom’s mountain. But Thomas also heard something hidden behind the words. He heard Robert Johnson’s grandmother singing backup....Johnson’s grandmother was not alone in that cabin. Other black men, women, and children sang with her. The smell of sweat, blood, and cotton filled the room....Thomas listened closely, but the other Spokanes slowly stretched their arms and legs, walked outside, and would not speak about any of it. They buried all of their pain and anger deep inside, and it festered, then blossomed, and the bloom grew quickly. (174-175)

Thomas hears this song, and understands how it applies to Spokanes, because he uses his own type of song—in story form—as a way to share autobiographical and biographical details about himself and others. When Johnson sings a song that expresses his own individual experience, while also allowing others to tap into that experience in a collective way, Thomas can relate because he does that with his stories and with his band. Big Mom also taps into a collective experience.

During the novel, Big Mom counsels the young members of Coyote Springs and a lost and bewildered Robert Johnson. After hearing the legends about Big Mom’s profound impact on

American popular music, the band with two additional members, sisters Chess and Checkers, go up the mountain to be mentored by Big Mom before their audition with the ominously named Cavalry Records in New York City:

Indians all over the country would play scratched record of Elvis, Diana Ross, Chuck Berry, and strain to hear the name *Big Mom* hidden in the mix. “Didn’t you hear it? Elvis whispers *Thank You, Big Mom* just as the last note of the song fades”....Still, Big Mom had her heart broken by many of her students who couldn’t cope with the incredible gifts she had given them. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Elvis. They all drank so much and self-destructed so successfully that Big Mom made them honorary members of the Spokane tribe. (200-201)

While the members of Coyote Springs visit Big Mom, Thomas confides in Chess that while he is scared of Coyote Springs experiencing success or failure, he is particularly afraid of the band becoming self-destructive rock stars (211). As the narrator states,

Thomas closed his eyes and told this story:  
Coyote Springs opens a show for Aerosmith at Madison Square Garden. We get up on stage and start to play. At first, the crowd chants for Aerosmith, heckles us, but gradually we win them over. By the time our set is over, the crowd is chanting our name. *Coyote Springs. Coyote Springs. Coyote Springs.* They chant over and over. They keep chanting our name when Aerosmith comes out. They boo Aerosmith until we come back out. For the rest of our lives, all we can hear are our names, chanted over and over, until we are deaf to everything else. (211)

Thomas is afraid of the band becoming so successful that they lose touch with reality. After rehearsing with Coyote Springs for a week, Big Mom says goodbye to the band. She does not promise them fame; but she tells them that whether they become famous or not, few of her former students have ended up happy (216).

Coyote Springs' audition for Cavalry Records is a spectacular failure when Victor is unable to play Johnson's guitar because it becomes dangerous to do so. According to the narrator, "The guitar bucked in his hands, twisted away from his body. He felt a razor slice across his palms" (225). After Coyote Springs returns to the reservation, Betty and Veronica, two white former Coyote Springs groupies, sign with Cavalry Records. After the recording session with Coyote Springs did not work out, Phil Sheridan and George Wright, the Cavalry Records label executive, decide to market the two white girls as Native Americans. Sheridan and Wright reinvent Betty and Veronica through creating a fabricated biography. As Sheridan states:

I mean, they had some grandmothers or something that were Indian.  
Really. We can still sell that Indian idea. We don't need any goddamn just-off-the reservation Indians. We can use these women. They've been on the reservations. They even played a few gigs with Coyote Springs.  
Don't you see? These women have got the Indian experience down....Can't you see the possibilities? We dress them up a little. Get them into the tanning booth. Darken them up a bit, Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones. Get them a little higher, you know? Dye their hair black. Then we'd have Indians. People want to hear Indians.  
(269)

In order for Betty and Veronica to become Native American, they simply have to change their appearance, and trade on their connection—however tenuous—to Coyote Springs. The women agree to be sold this way and are therefore participants in a culturally and politically problematic version of autobiographical self-invention.

At the end of the novel, Johnson decides to stay on the reservation: “I think these Indians might need me. Maybe need my music. Besides, it’s beautiful here” (303). Johnson’s statement reinforces the notion that the blues resonates in both African American and Native American communities. He is also no longer haunted by the Gentleman’s guitar. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers leave the reservation to move to nearby Spokane— a mere hour away. However, as Thomas says, “Anywhere off the reservation...is a long ways from the reservation” (304). Their move demonstrates their resiliency and their desire to live in honor of the Big Mom’s dead Indian horses. It is ultimately Johnson’s crossroads tale that serves as a catalyst for Thomas’s autobiographical storytelling, as well as Johnson’s own reinvention as a free man whose spiritual debt is paid to the Gentleman.

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We now turn to “Black Elvis,” a work that dismantles romantic ideas about racialized blues authenticity. Because Johnson’s enduring mystique is a function of many elements of his background— including his race, class, gender, and geographical origins—it will be useful to begin with Toni Cade Bambara’s 1960 short story “Mississippi Ham Rider,” about a black blues player who refuses to be limited by stereotypical ideas about what a black bluesman should be. The fictional presentation of Rider foregrounds his autobiographical self-fashioning, using it to question, historicize, and critique the narratives of authenticity that emerge around the blues. Both “Black Elvis” and “Mississippi Ham Rider” demonstrate the ways in which contemporary

fictional musician characters participate in their own autobiographical self-invention while playfully destabilizing racialized, semiological myths.

Rider bears a resemblance to the real-life Son House, who enjoyed a successful second act during the 1960s transatlantic blues revival. In *The History of the Blues*, Francis Davis notes, “By virtue of having survived most of his Delta contemporaries, he became a stand-in for all of them, a living link to the holiest blues tradition. Jesus and Lazarus and the twelve apostles all rolled into one” (108). While “Mississippi Ham Rider” does not include a character named Robert Johnson, Rider—due to his age—could have been his contemporary.

“Mississippi Ham Rider” is about a young, black, female, New York City-based record label representative named Inez Williams, who, with the help of her white male colleague Neil McLoughlin, attempts to convince Mississippi Ham Rider, an old Southern black bluesman, to travel north to record new blues tracks. The titular character, with help from his family and friends, not only resists the duo’s advances but consciously asserts his right to create blues music on his own terms rather than conforming to romanticized notions of authentic blues expression. Inez, as the narrator, and Ham both, in different ways, resist the racialized tropes of the so-called authentic bluesman. Their intervention helps to make a pathway for the eventual emergence of Ham’s individual blues identity.

Given her race and gender, Inez appears to be the correct choice for a label representative who might hold sway over Ham. Neil even teases Inez about her failure to seduce Ham into travelling north. He asks, “But wasn’t he at least knocked out by your superior charms, not to mention your long, lean gams? (51). Although Neil’s tone is more playful than sincere, it makes sense that the label representatives would expect that a pretty woman would soften Ham up. Except the opposite occurs. Inez’ presence in the small Southern town highlights her

generational and geographical distance from Ham. Inez is a liminal figure: she is an insider and an outsider; she is black, but she is not quite black enough. The story's references to sit-ins suggest that its time frame is more or less the same as the publishing date (48). In this context, Inez' first encounter with Ham is typically unsuccessful, as he is distrustful and uncommunicative with the young Northerner. Inez recounts: "We had talked for nearly an hour—or rather I had talked, he had merely rolled his eyes and stared into his cup as he swirled the watery coffee revealing the grounds" (47). And as Inez leaves the coffee shop where she has spent the last hour with Ham, the waitress and cook eye her angrily as she walks out of the door. Over her shoulder she hears, "So what's this high-yaller Northern bitch doin' hittin' on evil ole Ham?" (48). Inez' unforgivable sins of foreignness and lightskinnedness render her a target of scorn and prevent her from connecting with folks in the town.

Inez is as much of an outsider in the South due to her geographical background as Ham is a curiosity to Northern label executives who, as Neil puts it, want "him in the flesh to allow the poor folkway-starved sophisticates to, through a outrageous process of osmosis, which in no way should suggest miscegenation, to absorb their native—" (50). Given that the story takes place during the American country blues revival, it follows that Neil would reference white blues fans who are desperate for authentic black blues expression, yet resistant to experiencing close proximity to everyday black people. When Neil begins to reel off a list of so-called authentic, and cooperative, bluesmen he has encountered in the past, the descriptions feed into familiar bluesman stereotypes: "They were always pretty easy to find. Mobile, Auburn, just sitting there in a beat-up room in a beat-up town in a beat-up mood, just sitting there waiting for an angel of mercy—me. Doing nothing but a moaning and a hummin' and a strummin'—" (51). Neil, a

white, Northern man, represents these musicians as abject creatures who are waiting to be rescued.

At the end of Neil's reverie, Inez states, "Never mind, let's go find Mr. Ethnic-Authentic," revealing her cynicism about their roles as blues revivalists. She is aware that her white bosses in New York are looking for an image as much as they are looking for a musical talent. Ham's saleable authenticity is why they are interested. What is compelling about Bambara's depiction of Inez, however, is that conscious as she is about her label's cynical manipulation of the blues record buying and collecting public, she too at first falls into the authenticity trap. After Inez and Neil arrive at Mama Teddy's, a storefront soul food restaurant, to meet Ham, his wife Isabelle tells Neil, "The man needs money, mister. He's been needing for a long time. Now what you gonna do for him?" Inez admits that she immediately sees Ham as a type rather than a person: "The image of the great old artist fallen on bad times, holding up in a stuffy rooming house, drinking bad home brew out of a jelly jar and howling blues out the window appealed to my Grade-B movie-ruined mind" (55). Her movie reference suggests that she recognizes her own culpability in falling prey to a lazy stereotype, but it is as if she is helpless to resist popular characterizations of the blues figure since those are the ideas that circulate most widely. Inez is a product of her generation, so she is as inclined to see Ham as being "not of these times" as are the middle-class white folkies who push him into a confining bluesman box (56).

When Ham finally arrives with his guitar and Mama Teddy places "big bowls of things onto the table," he announces, "I don't sing no cotton songs, sister... And I ain't never worked in the fields or shucked corn. And I don't sing no nappy-head church songs neither. And no sad numbers about losing my woman and losing my mind. I ain't never lost no woman and that's the

truth” (55-56). Ham asserts himself in this moment. He is cognizant of the mythology surrounding the black bluesman, so much of it springing from the unjust political and socioeconomic status of black people in the Jim Crow South. His monologue suggests he recognizes that these experiences are real for some black bluesman, but not for himself. And when Neil asks, “Well what else is there?...I mean just what kind of songs do you sing?” and Ham responds, “My kind,” he underscores his refusal to play the part of the old-timey, real bluesman for the profit of the white-owned, Northern record labels that cater largely to white, middle-class youth. If he decides to go to New York, it will be on his terms. While Neil is confounded by Ham’s monologue, Inez simply responds, “Good” (56). In her narrator voice she claims she uttered the word for “no particular reason,” but I argue that her utterance is a strong gesture in support of Ham’s desire to be seen as a human being with subjectivity and the ability to craft his own blues identity, one that may not conform to the white record labels’ desires, but one that will be personally and artistically fulfilling (56). Ham’s moment of defiance helps Inez to see him for the first time—instead of the embodiment of a cultural myth. At the end of the story, Ham agrees to go to New York. His declaration of all the things he won’t do affirms all the things he is, will become, and can create, including an alternative blues identity.

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In sharp contrast to “Mississippi Ham Rider,” in “Black Elvis” identity is a more fluid construct. This story takes a postmodern approach to engaging the question of blues authenticity and subverts traditional ideas about blues signification. In this fictive world, race (and identity in general) is slippery, with characters putting it on and taking it off, like clothing. This sartorial blackness is foreshadowed in the second sentence of the story, as black Elvis impersonator Black Elvis chooses his outfit: “He laid out his clothes, the dark suit, the white dress shirt, the two-tone



oxfords” (1). When white radio listeners in Memphis first heard the real-life Elvis on record in 1954, they thought he was black. (Elvis himself was thus the first Black Elvis.) In his first radio interview, the dick jockey deliberately quizzed Elvis about the high school he attended to settle the race question in their minds. So the second sentence of the story reflects the questions surrounding the real-life Elvis’ racial background when he first emerged as a recording artist in 1954: Is he black – the dark suit? Is he white – the white dress shirt? Or is he more like the two-tone oxfords- neither black nor fully white? The oxford brogues are also important because they evoke the young, brash, Elvis Presley. Black Elvis is impersonating the sharp-dressed rockabilly cat, rather than the overweight, complacent, establishment star he had become by the end of his career. This Elvis’s musical work (and initial popularity) owes a great debt to black gospel, blues, and rhythm & blues. Thus, when Black Elvis chooses to imitate early, rock & roll Elvis Presley, he puts on early Elvis’ version of whiteness, a version infused with notions of authentic blackness. The phrase “Black Elvis” is, in reality, redundant. A better title for this story might be “*Blacker* Elvis.”

Black(er) Elvis waits to be called by Butch, the manager who runs the blues jam, in his usual spot at the bar in Slab’s BBQ joint (4). He has been doing the jam for four years, and the crowds love him (4). Butch instead introduces a new face:

“We got a real treat here tonight,” he said. “Let’s all give it up for Mr. Robert Johnson. I’m serious now, that’s his real name. Give him a nice hand.” From somewhere in the back, a person in an old-fashioned-looking suit and fedora worked his way up through the crowded restaurant, holding a black guitar case up high in front of him. Trailing out from the back of the hat was a straight black ponytail. When he reached the stage

he opened the case and took out an antique guitar. He turned around and settled into a chair, pulling the boom mike down and into place for him to sing, while Butch arranged another mike for the instrument. Black Elvis just stared. The man was Chinese. (5)

Black Elvis, transfixed, stares intently at the Chinese Robert Johnson as he performs. Johnson, the character, makes sure that all of the so-called authentic blues signifiers are at play. He wears a pinstriped suit and fedora like the real-life Robert Johnson wore in that iconic photo in which he sat cross-legged with a guitar on his lap. The antique guitar is even more compelling. The old guitar signifies authenticity, as it is a given that vintage instruments are a connection to a simpler, less technologically advanced time. Technology is somehow less authentic, so a newer guitar would not have the same effect. The close third person narrator states:

Black Elvis drank some more beer and listened carefully as Robert Johnson began to play the Delta blues. He was good, this boy. Probably spent years listening to the original recordings, working them out note for note. Either that or he had a book. Some of those books had it like that, exact translations. But that wasn't important. What was important was on the *inside*. You had to *feel* the music. That just didn't seem likely with a Chinese man, even one that came from Memphis. (5)

The narrator is convinced that a Chinese man, despite being from Memphis, could never play Delta blues, as only black people can play the blues authentically. The Chinese Robert Johnson could do a good imitation, or perhaps even pass for a song with the aid of a book with "exact translations," but he could never be an authentic bluesman (5). The narrator states, "He did 'Terraplane Blues.' He did 'Sweet Home Chicago' and 'Stones in my Pathway.' He played

‘Love in Vain’” (5). This roll call of some of the most popular (and frequently covered) songs by the real-life Johnson indicates that Johnson, the character, is aware of what it takes to both attract and keep his audience coming back for more.

As Johnson continues to play, Black Elvis becomes increasingly anxious. What if he is wrong? What if Johnson *is* authentic? Will he be left behind? Or is Johnson just better than him? According to the narrator:

Black Elvis felt something dark and opiate creeping through his blood, turning harder and colder as it did so. On the one hand, it should have been him up there, making the crowd love him. But the more he watched, the more he was convinced that he simply could not go on after Robert Johnson. With his pawn shop guitar and clumsy playing, he’d just look like a fool. (6)

Black Elvis owns a cheap used guitar “stowed in a chipboard case held together by a bungee cord,” while Robert Johnson, the character’s, guitar is an expensive antique (1). Both guitars are old, but from Black Elvis’ perspective only one of them signifies commodified blues expression. Paradoxically, in Black Elvis’ mind, Johnson, the character’s, new “antique” guitar is more representative of the necessary commercial polish than his beat up guitar. Of course, the joke here is that Black Elvis believes that he should possess an expensive guitar that signifies blues authenticity, and black musical authenticity more generally, rather than his inexpensive, pawn shop guitar that might what the real-life Robert Johnson would have actually been able to afford in his time.

Throughout the story, Black Elvis expresses concern about his place in the musical pecking order at Slabs, as well as in his larger music career. Some of his anxieties are temporal

in nature. After Johnson finishes his set, the narrator states, “He stood and bowed, antique guitar tucked under one arm. Black Elvis felt he was watching the future, and it was one that did not include him” (6). It is striking that Black Elvis sees Johnson, the character, as the future, when in an historical context, real-life Robert Johnson died just a few years after real-life Elvis was born. The fictional interactions between these two iconic figures, whose images continue to circulate widely in a variety of American cultural spaces, are rich with historical relevance. While I do not agree with Patricia Schroeder’s suggestion that Johnson “may yet become the Elvis Presley of the New Millennium,” given Johnson’s relative obscurity among those who do not follow music closely, I do agree that their circulating images do similar kinds of cultural work (2). Their names have become free-floating signifiers. The words *Elvis Presley* can signify an important contributor to American musical history, or a storehouse for all that is wrong with American commodification and consumption of popular music. *Robert Johnson* too can be the soulful, outside of modernity, folk blues exemplar, or the haunted, self-destructive, tragic blues outlaw, and everything in between.

Later in the story, Black Elvis has a frank discussion with Johnson, the character, where he asks him if he is from “Memphis, China,” prompting Johnson to tell him he is Korean. When Black Elvis asks him what kind of guitar he plays, he states, “Martin. 1924 00-28 Herringbone. I wish I could tell you I found it in an attic or something, but it’s not that good a story. I paid a lot for it. But it’s got a nice sound, and it fits with the whole Robert Johnson act, you know?” (8). This moment could not be any more overt in its enunciation of the tropes of black American blues authenticity. Johnson is not only in on the joke, but is, in fact, helping to extend the punch line. He recognizes that possessing the antique guitar is positive, but he would have a much better “story” if he just happened on the guitar rather than actively pursuing it (8). Johnson tells

Black Elvis that he loves his look: “I love your hair, incidentally. I mean, if I looked like you, Jesus. I’d be working all the time. You just have that natural blues man look. You could be John Lee Hooker’s cousin or something” (9). Blues authenticity is clearly marked on the body. A black man would, of course, have “that natural blues man look,” while a Korean American could not (9). So in this story, Robert Johnson, the character, constructs the persona of a black bluesman with a vintage guitar, the right clothes, and the perfect name. Even though he does not actually have the correct guitar for blues, and can’t claim to have come by it in an “authentic” way, he readily acknowledges that lying about the origins of his guitar might help his career. This demonstrates Johnson’s awareness of the power of a constructed autobiography to invent or re-invent one’s personality. He may not be in the correct body, but he can still participate in blues self-invention.

Black Elvis tells Robert Johnson: “I don’t care much for blues music.” “Never have.” “Really?” [Johnson asks] “I like that rock and roll” [says Black Elvis] (9). While Black Elvis’ overt disdain for blues music, despite his black body, helps to undercut racially essentialist ideas about music production and consumption, it is also unsettling. In most critical accounts, rock and roll evolved from the blues. In fact, Muddy Waters even did a song called “The Blues Had a Baby and They Named It Rock and Roll.” So these two fictional figures are participating in an important historical conversation. The real-life Elvis would not have existed if it were not for the real-life Johnson and the other black blues legends who paved the way. Yet *Black* Elvis chooses (white) rock & roll over the blues. The narrator even locates Black Elvis’ musical selections in the early part of the real-life Elvis’ career when he routinely covered blues (and country) songs, with the cover song serving as a metaphor for blackface: “for the most part he was a Sun Sessions man. ‘That’s All Right, Mama’ for an opener. ‘Hound Dog.’ ‘All Shook Up’ ‘Milkcow

Blues Boogie” (4). “That’s All Right” was a blues written and performed by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup, and “Milkcow Blues Boogie” was a blues recorded by Sleepy John Estes in 1930 (and, under a slightly different title by the real-life Robert Johnson in 1937), but also by white Western Swing pioneer Bob Wills. And, as is fitting for this postmodern story, “Hound Dog,” as performed by Black Elvis, was composed by two Jewish Americans from the East Coast, Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, specifically for black female blues icon Big Mama Thornton. The song was a hit for her in 1953, but it became an even bigger hit for the real life Elvis in 1956. As a result, many music fans are unaware of Thornton’s version. Curious as it is to hear a character named Black Elvis disparage the blues, perhaps his perspective suggests a reclamation of rock & roll, the child of the blues – and maybe even rock, the grandchild that passes for white – as black music.

Despite Black Elvis’ lack of interest in the music Johnson plays, he is impressed with Johnson’s marketing ability. When he asks Johnson for help with his career: “Should I be doing something else? You play good, you sing good, you know about marketing. Just tell me and I’ll listen,” he is showing why he sees the future in Johnson. The fictional Johnson’s ability to turn himself into a commodity, rather than letting others do that for him, redresses, at least in this short story, the real-life Johnson’s historical commodification. Of course, the real-life Elvis is also a commodity, but his whiteness allowed him to reap the significant financial rewards in his lifetime that the real-life Johnson never saw. In this fictional world, Johnson and Elvis trade places, as the black impersonator of the white artist is still unable to reap significant financial rewards from his artistic output.

“Mississippi Ham Rider” and “Black Elvis” both subvert notions of racialized blues authenticity through autobiographical self-invention. For Ham, a stubborn resistance allows him

to retain control over his selfhood, rejecting worn-out black bluesman tropes. The Robert Johnson character in “Black Elvis” is able to re-invent himself as an “antique” blues musician despite having the wrong guitar and the wrong body. And Black Elvis, who has “that natural bluesman look” and plays music derived from the blues, wants no part of them. (9). All three characters face questions about the commodification of their work, and their resistance to prescribed racial roles runs along a parallel track. As the characters take control of their racialized images, they gain the confidence to carve a place for themselves commercially. All three of these characters express themselves musically on their own terms, resisting the proscribed, racialized tropes of blues authenticity, specifically, and black musical authenticity more generally.

These two “postmodern” blues stories stand in stark contrast to the essentialism of “Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on my Trail,” *RL’s Dream*, and *Reservation Blues*. In these more modernist texts, Johnson is a romantic figure of genius whose tortured demeanor is consistent with his mythologized biographical representation. Compelling here are the ways in which the Johnson character, though mostly silenced, provides an opening for other characters to participate in autobiographical and biographical blues expression. Even when the fictionalized Robert Johnson is not overtly undermining the concept of blues authenticity, his role as a blank canvas on which others can project ideas allows these characters to tell their own stories and the larger story of the blues. This storytelling is an important component of the blues tradition.

## Chapter Two

### “Blueswomen and their Self-Fashioning through Autobiography and Biography”

This chapter concerns transgressive blueswomen in fiction, drama, and popular music who subvert notions of acceptable feminine expression, particularly in the realm of sexuality, within a racist and patriarchal culture. Texts considered in this chapter include novels *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker; the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson; and “You Know I’m No Good,” “Rehab,” “Tears Dry on Their Own,” and “Wake Up Alone,” contemporary popular songs with classic blues lyrical themes by singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse. The literary and real-life female blues characters in my study consistently subvert traditional gender roles. Their willingness to perform songs that portray heterosexual and lesbian sexuality, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and the rejection of marriage and a conventional domestic lifestyle reflects their feminist spirit (Wald, *The Blues* 25-26). The simple presence of black blueswomen as performers on stage in a fictional juke joint or club demonstrates personal agency, but it also can put them at narrative risk for physical harm or social ostracism. In the introduction to *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, Daphne Duval Harrison explores the socio-cultural and political contexts from which the real-life classic blueswomen emerged:

Life for working-class black women in the United States has been especially difficult because of their bottom-rung status due to racism and sexism. The grief of a broken love affair is always poignant; it is more so when cast within a racist system. Black women’s quest for independence is constrained by racial and sexual barriers and sometimes leads to types of behaviors that appear to be arrogant, promiscuous, or violent, but are in fact manifestations of a large



repertoire of defense mechanisms employed to gain or defend respect in a hostile environment. (6)

In lyrics and vocal performances, black blueswomen (including the fictional ones in my study) express the full spectrum of their lived experiences. While Amy Winehouse undoubtedly enjoyed multiple privileges as a white, 21<sup>st</sup>-century, commercially successful, and internationally known singer-songwriter, her drug and alcohol abuse, as well as the public incidents of domestic violence that occurred between her and husband Blake Fielder-Civil, made her fodder for narratives in the tabloid press with a strangely pre-civil rights tinge. Given that the fictional and dramatic texts in this chapter are set in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Winehouse's songs from the 2000s consciously evoke classic women's blues lyrics, these women's refusal to play the role of pious, prim, respectable ladies allows others (black, white, male, female, middle- and working-class) to label them as dirty and sinful (and in Winehouse's case, some members of the press reveled in her self-destructive behaviors). This chapter examines the ways in which the blueswomen's transgressive acts, and their resultant blues identities, are forged through the rendering of their narrative autobiographies, as well as narrative third-person biographies with them as subject.

As a foil to my selection of literary and dramatic texts featuring 20<sup>th</sup>-century black blueswomen, I include Amy Winehouse, who was English of Jewish extraction. While she shared in the distinctive "whiteness of our own"<sup>1</sup> ascribed to Jews in Anglo-American society, in her musical performance Winehouse enunciated a black American musical identity and strived for so-called black musical authenticity rooted in the past. This observation does not imply an endorsement of racially essentialist notions of musical production or musical authenticity, so when I suggest that Winehouse articulates a black American musical identity, I am outlining

Winehouse's desire—based on circulating cultural ideas about race— to participate in an American tradition of music-making featuring black artists (including 20<sup>th</sup>-century pop music styles like r&b, jazz, blues, and “girl group” soul). Winehouse, on her suggestively titled *Back to Black* CD, strives to perform an amalgam of soul, blues, jazz, and pop music that works as so-called authentically black. In her visual presentation (tall beehive hairstyle and Cleopatra-style eye makeup) and song structure, she seems more aligned with 1960s girl groups Martha and the Vandellas or the Ronettes, while her voice, lyrics, and transgressive public persona seem just as deeply indebted to stereotypical images of the 1920s black blues queen.

In this chapter, I argue that due to racism, patriarchy, and classism, some blueswomen in contemporary American literary and dramatic texts, and in popular culture, must combat negative biographical representations, in both public and private spaces, by detractors of different races, classes, and, perhaps most crucially, different genders. These women deploy autobiographical agency in response to patriarchal representations, showing the full scope and multi-dimensionality of their stories. I bring autobiography and biography into dialogue to show how blueswomen self-fashion within multiple narratives. Combining literary criticism, blues music criticism, performance theory, black feminist theory, and musicological methods, this chapter examines narratives generated by authors, composers, lyricists, and musicians. I use these multiple approaches to analyze the stories that the fictional narrators and characters—and real-life blueswomen—tell within the novels, the play, and the various songs and interviews.

In order to show the ways in which the literary and real-life black blueswomen in my study dig themselves out from under the clutter of other people's notions of how they should live their lives, I will analyze *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, looking specifically at the relationship between Celie and blueswoman Shug Avery. Not only will I examine Shug's

negative representation by others, but I will also excavate Celie's romantic renderings of Shug's biographical details in her diary, leading to an examination of Shug's autobiographical acts. I will then turn to *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones, focusing on the blues singer Ursa Corregidora. I will specifically analyze the relationship between Ursa and her husband Mutt, particularly his violent reaction to Ursa's desire to sing the blues. I will also examine Ursa's self-representation as a blueswoman through her fictional musical performance and lyrics. Taking a musicological approach, I will analyze Corregidora's imagined vocal style using "A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music" by gospel scholar Andrew Legg. Though he created his taxonomy to analyze sacred vocalization, I can use the frame to discuss the expressive power of blues singing.

Next I will turn to a historical play about the classic blues, August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. In this section, I will explore Rainey's autobiographical representation in the play juxtaposed with her historical biographical representation and Rainey's relationship in the play with her female lover Dussie Mae. My final section concerns an actual blues singer, Amy Winehouse. I will present a brief biography, then offer thoughts on white-to-black passing and white engagement with music traditionally performed by blacks in the U.S., and situate Winehouse's lyrics within a tradition of American classic blues expression. Winehouse's vocals, lyrics, and performance style can be seen to create an alternative autobiography that contests her public persona largely derived from negative mass-media representations of her life.

To advance my argument, I will first ask a key question: What is the relationship between the history of the image of the black bluesman and the history of the image of the black blueswoman? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while the bluesmen are celebrated figures, critics and scholars either erase female blues singers from the tradition—when blues critics and fans do talk about

the women, they tend to focus on two or three names: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, perhaps Ida Cox—or devalue their contributions. Even though country blues artists like Robert Johnson, Son House, and Charley Patton did not, in their time, enjoy the same level of commercial success as their female counterparts, many contemporary blues scholars and fans take male country and urban blues artists—like Johnson, House, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Howlin’ Wolf—as prototypical. These artists were rediscovered during the 1960s by largely white, male, and middle-class music critics and fans (the Chicago Blues artists were already popular with black listeners during the 1950s and 1960s); and according to Elijah Wald, the country bluesmen “have been far more popular with modern listeners than the blues queens—in large part because they are now heard as forerunners of rock ‘n’ roll” (*The Blues* 31). Wald questions the mindset that sees country bluesmen as true artists who made authentic music, while viewing the blueswomen as imposters who merely desired commercial success (*Escaping* 232). Despite iconic blueswomen like Ma Rainey, who served as an important bridge between the rural and urban blues styles, the men receive much of the credit for the creation of urban blues. As Hazel Carby asserts:

the field of blues history is dominated by the assumption that “authentic” blues forms are entirely rural in origin and are produced by the figure of the wandering, lone male. Thus the formation of mythologies of blues masculinity, which depend on this popular image, have obscured the ways in which the gendering of women was challenged in the blues. The blueswomen of the twenties, who recorded primarily in urban centers but who employed and modified the full range of rural and urban blues styles, have come to be regarded as professionalized aberrations who commercialized and adulterated “pure” blues forms. (“Policing” 755)

Some blues critics and fans view the women's commercial success with suspicion. Still, Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, and Ida Cox have had a considerable impact on generations of pop singers, yet their stories remain largely untold. Janis Joplin, Bonnie Raitt, and Melissa Etheridge are just a few of the later blues-rock artists influenced by the earlier blueswomen. Countless other soul and R&B artists have benefitted from the groundwork laid by the singers of the classic blues.

These blueswomen—the real-life blues singers and the contemporary fictional, dramatic, and pop culture characters—must overcome significant race, class, and gender barriers to enter the canon of authentic blues. After all, in the romantic blues imaginary, approaching the music as a lucrative business opportunity is crass and decidedly inauthentic. As LeRoi Jones argues in *Blues People*:

Classic blues attempts a universality that earlier blues forms could not even envision. But with the attainment of such broad human meaning, the meanings which existed in blues *only for Negroes* grew less pointed. The professionalism of classic blues moved it to a certain extent out of the lives of Negroes. It became the stylized response, even though a great many of the social and emotional preoccupations of primitive blues remained. (87)

While Jones does not completely dismiss the blueswoman's contribution, his praise is mixed. He concedes the blueswomen's ability to reach a larger audience, but he also laments the inclusion of the white mainstream, necessitating a watering down of what he sees as authentic black musical expression (87). The idea that Delta blues icon Charley Patton, for instance, might have also seen himself as a professional when he drove to the 1930 Paramount recording session with Son House, Louise Johnson, and Willie Brown gets lost in such romantic blues idealization (Calt

and Wardlow 215-221). In this paradigm, the lone country bluesman, performing original songs with nothing but an acoustic guitar, exemplifies the singer-songwriter as folk hero. Bluesmen are celebrated as authentic, *real* artists, while the pioneering black women who achieved fame and financial success despite *both* race and gender barriers are derided—almost entirely by men—as commercial sell-outs.

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, large numbers of young, Southern, working-class black women migrated to Northern cities in search of better job and economic prospects. According to Harrison, “The typical black woman emigrant left home at age fifteen or sixteen, around 1915-1920, seeking the better life that itinerant laborers and songsters described in their stories and songs about the city” (64). At home, field and domestic work were their only career prospects, while the North promised more freedom and diverse job options, including work in the entertainment industry. As Harrison states, “Young black women were often so dazzled by the opportunity for freedom, fortunes, and fame offered by the stage that they were willing to accept questionable living and working conditions to achieve them” (22). Voices from various black communities quickly chimed in with concern for both the physical safety and the moral direction of these young black girls (Harrison 22). According to Harrison, a 1910 newspaper article called “Mothers Taking Innocent Daughters to Houses of Ill Fame to Play Piano” “claimed that girls ranging from fourteen to nineteen could be found playing the piano in the red-light district of Chicago’s State and Archer Streets” and “the 1922 Chicago Commission on Race Relations reported objections raised by the black community against the Pekin Café because it offered jazz, vulgar dances, and mixed couples, all considered immoral enticements for the young black women who performed there” (22). It is important to note here that there were many young black girls and women who yearned for freedom from a life of domestic servitude *and* a

chance to express their talent. These young women were already in precarious situations due to their race, class, and gender. As Harrison summarizes, “They saw a world that did not protect the sanctity of black womanhood, as espoused in the bourgeois ideology: only white middle- or upper class women were protected by it. They saw and experienced injustice as jobs they held were snatched away when white women refused to work with them or white men returned from war to reclaim them” (64).

Black women were always part of the laboring body. Most couldn't be housewives, as they were not allowed into the cult of true womanhood. In the eyes of the white ruling class, their sexual exploitation during slavery and Jim Crow resulted from their subhumanity and questionable moral fiber. Black women who aspired to respectability would never gain full entry to American citizenship and the privileges that status endows, so an opportunity for more freedom and better job prospects on the stage, even at the risk of one's reputation, was attractive to women who made the long trek to the North. Carby notes, “The movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous” (“Policing” 739). They were not deemed “sexually degenerate” by whites alone; middle-class blacks also saw the young, single, freedom-seeking black woman as socially disruptive: “The need to police and discipline the behavior of black women in cities, however, was not only a premise of white agencies and institutions but also a perception of black institutions and organizations, and the black middle class” (Carby “Policing” 741). The judgment and policing of black women's bodies, as well as their artistic expression, forced these women to find their own way economically, socially, and creatively.

It was against this backdrop that Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and other first-generation, teenaged blueswomen emerged. While segments of both black and white communities saw these women as dangerous and unruly, later women writers recognized their feminist contributions. Civil rights activist and academic Angela Davis was one of the first to make the argument for classic blues as feminist: “The female figures evoked in women’s blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed” (*Legacies* 13). Hazel Carby’s “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context” ultimately takes a heroic view of their struggle: “The blues women did not passively reflect the vast social changes of their time; they provided new ways of thinking about these changes, alternative conceptions of the physical and social world for their audience of migrating and urban women and men, and social models for women who aspired to escape from and improve their conditions of existence” (754-55). The following narratives, containing real and fictional blueswomen, reflect the strength, resilience, and creativity of those iconic, historical, female blues makers. Featuring unconventional and interdisciplinary approaches to autobiographical and biographical expression, their stories serve to counter the negative representations with which they had to struggle.

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An epistolary novel set in rural Georgia during the 1930s, *The Color Purple* is written as a series of diary entries to God (and later to her sister Nettie) by Celie, a young, uneducated, black woman who endures racial and patriarchal oppression. Celie writes about the physical, mental, and verbal abuse she suffers at her husband Albert’s hands; yet she never writes Albert’s first name, or even utters it in conversations with others, referring to him instead as “Mr.



\_\_\_\_\_.” Through the act of calling Albert “Mr. \_\_\_\_\_,” not only does Celie highlight the emotional distance and age difference between Albert and herself—Celie is 14, while Albert is an older widower with four children— but she also obscures his identity in an attempt to erase him from her narrative. As portrayed in her diaries, Albert participates in Celie’s oppression and has a great deal of power over her daily life and survival; but in that narrative space Celie controls his, and every other character’s, representation. By refusing to name Albert, or his father—another oppressive figure—she undermines male power within her narrative world. In *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Self-Representation*, Leigh Gilmore offers a feminist critique of the hegemonic autobiographical tradition and positions women’s autobiographies as political acts and expressions of personal agency. Gilmore states, “Erupting in texts where it is not licensed, women’s self-representation has frequently been silenced or marginalized because it has not been interpreted/named/authorized as such” (41-42). Since the autobiographical genre has been traditionally gendered as male, Celie’s acts of self-representation, as well as her renderings of other characters’ biographical details in her diary entries, are nothing short of subversive, and they fall under the category of what Gilmore refers to as “autobiographics” (42). Gilmore asserts, “Autobiographics, as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation” (42). Celie’s simultaneous victimization in marriage and empowerment on the page is exactly this kind of contradiction. And the process of journaling, with its necessary starts and stops, leads to both interruptions in the narrative and eruptions of self-representation.

“Autobiographics” is focused exclusively on self-representation; however, here I am applying the term to biography as well. Celie tells her version of events in the story and

represents herself and others the way she sees fit; yet she cannot find her voice in real time when interacting with Albert or his insolent children. Ultimately, her growth outside of her narrative space catches up to her strength within the confines of her journal. Celie is not a blueswoman in a traditional musical sense, so she is not the main character I am examining in this section; however, the structure of the novel is important, as Celie's highly subjective, first-person narrative necessitates the reader's skepticism regarding the portrayals of all of the characters and herself. Celie's narrative point of view calls into question the moments of dialogue she recreates. She does not include quotation marks for any of the conversations. Some of this might be explained as a function of Celie's lack of formal education; however, the missing quotation marks are also an indication of her authorial control. Perhaps Celie leaves out the quotation marks in order to guide each character's autobiographical expression. In this way, she serves as a biographer of sorts, who carefully constructs and reconstructs each subject's life story.

Celie's life is altered significantly when Albert's girlfriend, blues singer Shug Avery, comes to town. Shug is sick with an undisclosed illness, and Albert invites her to stay in his and Celie's home to recuperate. Celie is immediately intrigued by, and attracted to, Shug. When Celie first sees her, her description of the sick woman is rhapsodic: "And she dress to kill. She got on a red wool dress and chestful of black beads. A shiny black hat with what look like chickinhawk feathers curve down side one cheek, and she carrying a little snakeskin bag, match her shoes" (50). Her representation of Shug is contradictory as well. She is fixated, at first, on Shug's outer appearance. Focusing initially on Shug's clothes, Celie takes a closer look, noticing Shug's short stumble as she gets out of the car, and seeing the truth of Shug's condition: "Close up I see all this yellow powder caked up on her face. Red rouge. She look like she ain't long for this world but dressed well for the next....Under all that powder her face black as Harpo. She got

a long pointed nose and big fleshy mouth. Lips look like black plum. Eyes big, glossy. Feverish. And mean. Like, sick as she is, if a snake cross her path, she kill it” (50). From afar Shug looks better, healthier. Up close, Celie can see the physical toll of Shug’s sickness; yet she continues to construct Shug’s biography in wide-eyed, romantic terms, luxuriating in what she identifies as Shug’s outlaw (blues) qualities. Shug’s outlaw nature is stressed when Celie comments on her mean disposition while simultaneously bathing Shug and ogling her breasts. Celie writes, “What you staring at? she ast. Hateful. She weak as a kitten. But her mouth just pack with claws” (53). Even though Celie characterizes Shug as “hateful,” her admiration for Shug’s inner strength and potential for violence, even when incapacitated, and her desire for Shug’s body, and to perhaps *become* Shug through absorption into her body, are barely concealed.

Later, when Shug feels well enough to play at Albert’s son Harpo’s new juke joint, Celie describes her: “Shug wearing a gold dress that show her titties near bout to the nipple. Everybody sorta hoping something break. But that dress strong” (81). For Celie, Shug’s clothing not only suggests economic advancement, but also enunciates rebellion, as Shug has the agency and social mobility to earn a lucrative salary despite being a black woman in the Jim Crow South. She is also comfortable with her sexuality, encouraging others to confront their own sexual feelings towards her. After Shug’s set, Celie describes the following scene:

Shug come over and she and Sofia hug. Shug say, Girl, you look like a good time, you do. That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk bout hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time. (82)

Given the time frame in which this story takes place, it is not surprising that Celie would view such sexual innuendo as the purview of men. When Shug talks about sex in public spaces with men and women present, Celie sees her as communicating “like a man” (82). And since Celie is used to men having all of the power in her community, she gravitates towards Shug and hopes for some of her enunciated maleness to rub off on her.

Shug’s rebellious nature becomes the site of much of the tension in the story and is fuel for Celie’s eventual self-empowerment, and even Albert’s shift from Celie’s abusive oppressor to her compassionate friend by the end of the novel. Shug’s audacious finery, as well as her sexuality, puts her in league with such larger than life characters as Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith. As Carby states:

The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere. For these singers were gorgeous, and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as Goddesses, as the high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith, as the Empress of the blues. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire. (“It Jus Be’s” 481)

Throughout the novel, female sexual desire is foregrounded mainly through the relationship between Celie and Shug. As Celie describes, “First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth. I thought I had turned into a man....I

wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (53). Here Celie's sexual feelings towards Shug are conflated with maleness. Only men feel such intense sexual feelings towards women. The romantic and sexual relationship that develops between Celie and Shug would not have been possible without Shug's easy relationship with her own sexuality, and it creates the opening for Celie's personal development. Shug also has sexual relationships with men in the novel including Albert. In fact, in one of Shug's moments of autobiographical expression later in the story, she recuperates Albert's image and shares his positive qualities that she originally fell in love with, including his sense of humor.

While Celie depicts Shug in romantic terms, she renders others' representations of Shug in much harsher and disdainful language. Many of the black people in Celie's community, including the local preacher and members of his congregation, view Shug as a whore and unrepentant sinner:

A woman at church say she dying—maybe two berkulosis or some kind of nasty woman disease....Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down. He take her condition for his text. He don't call no name, but he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner. (48-49)

Albert's father, Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, attempts to erase Shug entirely. He is, after all, responsible for Albert marrying his first wife, Annie Julia, instead of Shug. Albert's father sees Shug as a danger to his son and to their family's way of life, as she is a transgressive figure who refuses to adhere to normative gender behavior. Shug's biography comes into play here, as her lack of respectability is tied to her unclear lineage. Albert's father cannot understand his son's

fixation on Shug and states, “Nobody even sure exactly who her daddy is” (59). From Albert’s father’s perspective, a woman must know where she comes from to be good, clean, and respectable, so he deems Shug a whore. “Just what is it bout this Shug Avery anyway, he say. She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats....Why, say Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, she ain’t even clean. I hear she got the nasty woman disease” (58). This suggests there is just one “nasty woman disease.” In Albert’s father’s world, being a transgressive woman is its own disease. Judith Butler’s discussion of gender performativity in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” is helpful here. For Butler, gender is “performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (194). She does not believe in an innate or fixed concept or expression of gender. Butler instead argues that it is the performance of particular “acts, postures, and gestures” that creates the concept of gender (195). She also asserts that women who transgress traditional gender roles are severely punished in the public and private spheres: “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (195). Despite the dangers for women who incorrectly perform their gender, Butler believes these transgressions to be self-empowering. Shug Avery is one example of a blueswoman who stands as a figure of powerful feminist rebellion instead of abject oppression. Shug Avery’s status as a sexually dominant woman indicts her in polite society but helps boost her cachet as a blueswoman among the audiences who turn out to see her perform live. And her intimates, Celie and Albert, also respect her independence.

Eventually, Celie allows Shug to speak for herself. As Celie washes and combs Shug’s hair, Shug lets her guard down, reaches for a cigarette, and hums a tune (57). Celie writes:

First she say, hurry up and git finish. Then she melt down a little and lean back against my knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma. She reach for another cigarette. Start hum a little tune. What that song? I ast. Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention sing. She hum a little more. Something come to me, she say. Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my head. (57)

Here Shug uses music and memory to mine her own autobiography. The memory comes into focus as she tells her story. What is true is not immediately clear as Shug corrects her back-story as she goes along. At first, it is her mother combing her hair, and then it is her grandmother. This detail is important, as she is describing an intimate moment where she is feeling peaceful and vulnerable. If it is her grandmother, does that mean she could not feel as connected to her mother? Her intimacy with Celie grows as she tells her story. It is as if remembering these autobiographical details helps Shug to become more comfortable sharing her blues expression. The song—and Shug—are not “low down dirty” (57). Being a blueswoman is part of her identity, so she can only create blues music when she is at peace with herself, even if she is not safe in the world around her. She sings the blues as she remembers pieces of her back-story, as doing so is part of her life narrative. Telling her story allows her to continue adding threads to her life that will then become more autobiographical back-story.

In a long letter to God, Celie discloses her anger at Shug’s and Albert’s renewed closeness and then learns that Shug uses that relationship to discover that Albert has been keeping her sister’s letters from Celie. Celie is devastated to find out that Albert is capable of such cruelty, and Shug does everything she can to comfort the two of them. Shug sets out to

reframe her and Albert's back-stories, perhaps hoping to show Celie that circumstances made Albert the way he is and to justify choosing him as her mate and father of her children so long ago. Shug talks about the cold relationship between her and her mother, and how that motivated her desire for Albert:

One thing my mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck, she say. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching nobody, she say. I try to kiss her, she turn her mouth away....My daddy love me to kiss and hug him, but she didn't like the looks of that. So when I met Albert, and once I got in his arms, nothing could git me out.... Shug say, the last baby did it. They turned me out. I went to stay with my mama wild sister in Memphis. She just like me, Mama say. She drink, she fight, she love mens to death. She work in a roadhouse. Cook. Feed fifty men, screw fifty-five. (115-116)

Shug is unapologetic about her sexuality, though she acknowledges that it created a wedge between her mother and herself. No matter what others may think of her (and in this text the most negative responses come from men), she embraces her desire for sex and male companionship and celebrates those drives in her aunt. What is also striking about this diary entry is that Celie admits to being numb to what Shug is saying to her: "I don't even want to say nothing. Where I'm at it peaceful. It calm. No Albert there. No Shug. Nothing" (116). Her Zen-like reaction to Shug's autobiographical expression most certainly affects the way that Celie constructs Shug in this entry, though it is difficult to say whether her calm causes her to represent Shug's words inaccurately, or if Celie's distance allows her to record Shug's dialogue faithfully *because*, in that moment, she has no vested interest in advancing a romantic view of Shug.



As Shug talks, she becomes more despondent and even cries. “Nobody dance like Albert when he was young. Sometime us did the moochie for an hour. After that, nothing to do but go somewhere and lay down. And funny. Albert was so *funny*. He kept me laughing. How come he ain’t funny no more? she ast. How come he never hardly laugh? How come he don’t dance? she say. Good God, Celie, she say, What happen to the man I love?” (116). In this moment, Shug tries to convince Celie, and herself, of Albert’s inherent goodness, while demonstrating why, despite her love for him, she cannot be with Albert in the long term. Not only is his spirit dead in the present, but in the past he was unable to protect Shug from his father. As Celie writes about Shug’s relationship with Albert:

I was so surprise when I heard he was going to marry Annie Julia, she say. Too surprise to be hurt....His daddy told him I’m trash, my mama trash before me. His brother say the same. Albert try to stand up for us, git knock down. One reason they give him for not marrying me is cause I have children. But they *his*, I told old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. How us know? He ast. (116)

This goes back to the question of birth and patrilineage. According to Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Shug is “trash” because Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does not know for certain the identity of the father (or fathers) of her children. For Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and the others who condemn Shug for her non-feminine behaviors, the fact that Shug and Albert never married is proof of her children’s illegitimacy, even though she and Albert attest to Albert’s paternity. Shug’s gender renders her powerless in the face of Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s judgments, leaving her no choice but to tell her *own* story through autobiographical acts. For both Shug and Celie, storytelling creates a pathway to powerful self-representation and offers the opportunity for healing after years of racist and patriarchal oppression.

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*Corregidora* by Gayl Jones is a novel about a young, post-war blueswoman named Ursa Corregidora, who wrestles with emotional and physical trauma due to her place in a long line of enslaved and sexually abused black women. At the beginning of the story, Ursa is physically threatened by her husband Mutt Thomas when she refuses to leave the stage in the blues club where she is performing:

...it was in April 1948 that Mutt came to Happy's drunk and said if I didn't get off the stage he was going to take me off. I didn't move, and some men put Mutt out. While I was singing the first few songs I could see Mutt peeking in, looking drunk and evil, then I didn't see him and thought he gone on home and gone to bed to sleep it off. I always left by the back way. You go down some narrow steps and through a short alley and then you be to the Drake hotel, where Mutt and I was staying then. I said goodnight and went out back. 'I'm your husband. You listen to me, not to them.' I didn't see him at first because he was standing back in the shadows behind the door. I didn't see him till he'd grabbed me around my waist and I was struggling to get loose. 'I don't like those mens messing with you,' he said. 'Don't nobody mess with me.' 'Mess with they eyes.' That was when I fell. (3-4)

After Mutt pushes Ursa down the steps, she sustains damage to her reproductive organs necessitating a hysterectomy. Ursa pays a steep price for performing the music she loves. Remaining on stage against her husband's wishes is a transgressive act punishable by physical violence and sterilization. Shug Avery, in contrast, is fertile and has multiple biological children.

She does not lose her ability to reproduce because she is a blueswoman. Earlier in the novel Ursa narrates her conversation with Mutt about the importance of blues music in her life:

It was 1947 when Mutt and I was married. I was singing in Happy's Café around on Delaware Street. He didn't like for me to sing after we were married because he said that's why he married me so he could support me. I said I didn't just sing to be supported. I said I sang because it was something I had to do, but he would never understand that. (3)

Ursa does not sing only for economic gain; she sings for personal fulfillment. However, not only is Mutt disturbed by her act of defiance, but he also feels scandalized by the idea of her being on display for men's sexual gratification and emasculated by the perception that his wife must, and is able to, support herself financially. Under these circumstances, Mutt sees no other choice but to attempt to kill Ursa's spirit by doing extreme, sexual violence to her body.

As in *The Color Purple*, unconventional narrative structure is at the forefront of the work. In *The Color Purple* the telling of the story from Celie's standpoint through diary entries where there are no quotation marks around the dialogue attributed to others determines how Shug Avery is represented. Storytelling is also extremely important to the women of the Corregidora family; the act of telling one's story, through words or music, is a familial directive. The goal is to document orally what happened to each of them, ensuring that future generations know not only where they came from, but also what happened to their ancestors. In Ursa's case, this knowing becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Her knowledge of the history of sexual violence in her family resonates in her own life through her romantic relationships with Mutt and Tadpole McCormick, the owner of Happy's Café and her second husband. It is as if, through hearing and recounting her family's stories, she uses them to create her own life narrative:

My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn't live through and my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they'd burned everything to play like it didn't never happen. Yeah, and where's the next generation?....What my mama always told me is Ursa, you got to make generations. Something I've always grown up with. (9-10)

Ursa's family instructs her to "make generations" in order to keep the Corregidora name alive; however, the most important function of making generations is the life narration. It is not enough to simply reproduce; the Corregidora women must also document their victimization. Ursa's drive to record her family's trauma, as well as her own, is a burden that informs her blues expression. Throughout the novel, Ursa tells not only her autobiographical story, but the collective stories of the women in her family, and even the collective stories of all other black female slaves who were subjected to sexual violence. Ursa, like Celie, is an autobiographer and a biographer. And her voice, as speaker and singer, reflects her own trials, as well as those of the women who have come before her.

While Ursa recovers from her surgery, she spends time with her friend Cat Lawson. One evening when Ursa tentatively begins singing for Cat, they discover that Ursa's voice has changed: "*Trouble in mind, I'm blue, but I won't be blue always,*" I sang and stopped" (44). Cat reassures Ursa that her voice still sounds good even though it is different than it was before: "Your voice sounds a little strained, that's all. But if I hadn't heard you before, I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through

something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now. You know what I mean?” (44). Of course, what she went through is a variation of the sexual violence sustained by the other women in her family. Ursa’s familial inheritance is expressed through her musical performance, as well as in her narrative telling of those earlier women’s stories.

I started humming the part about taking my rocking chair down by the river and rocking my blues away. What she said about the voice being better because it tells what you’ve been through. Consequences. It seems as if you’re not singing the past, you’re humming it. Consequences of what? Shit, we’re all consequences of something. Stained with another’s past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. (45)

Their collective past here is key, and their past becomes hers through narrative. Over time, Ursa absorbs what she learns from their biographies into her own story. And, as happens with Shug Avery’s music as Celie combs her hair, Ursa’s music appears spontaneously while in the presence of a trusted friend. This expression, an example of one of Gilmore’s autobiographical “eruptions,” occurs because Ursa feels as though she is in a safe space, engulfed by female love and acceptance (42). It is important to note, however, that the sexual dynamic between Celie and Shug is very different from that of Cat and Ursa. While Cat is a lesbian, Ursa is heterosexual and exhibits extreme anger when Cat’s lover Jeffy makes a sexual advance towards her. So while romantic love or sex is not part of Cat and Ursa’s relationship, female emotional support and camaraderie are, as Cat advises Ursa to be careful about entering into a romantic relationship with Tadpole while she recovers from her emotional and physical trauma. Even with this female support system, Ursa remains focused on her male relationships and her inability to procreate. Ursa laments, “The center of a woman’s being. Is it? No seeds. Is that what snaps away my

music, a harp string broken, guitar string, string of my banjo belly. Strain in my voice” (46).

Ursa’s role as documenter of the Corregidora women’s sexual trauma and Cat’s support of Ursa’s creative expression situate both women within a feminist tradition; yet Ursa conflates her music making with her ability to “make generations” and participate in a heteronormative version of femininity. This approach causes Ursa to correlate Mutt’s violent act with the snapping of a string on a musical instrument, or perhaps the breaking of her musical spirit.

Ursa’s strained voice is aptly discovered when she sings “Trouble in Mind,” an 8-bar blues that was written by jazz pianist Richard M. Jones in 1922 (Broonzy and Bruynoghe 98). In *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture*, William Barlow states, “Jones based his piece on the well-known spiritual of the same name from the days of slavery; he also made liberal use of a few other common expressions from African-American folklore. The mixture gave birth to what must be considered the anthem of the classic blues genre” (142). In the Negro spiritual “I’m a-Trouble In De Mind,” the speaker asks the Lord to help with his emotional turmoil (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 30-31). In the earliest versions of Jones’ song, the speaker laments his or her misfortune and resolves to overcome it somehow, perhaps even through a suicidal act. An early recording of “Trouble in Mind” was released in 1924 by the singer Thelma La Vizzo with the composer, Jones, accompanying her on piano for Paramount. Other early recordings of the song were performed by classic blueswomen Bertha “Chippie” Hill in 1926, Georgia White in 1936, and Victoria Spivey in 1936 (*SecondHandSongs*). Given the ongoing conversation Ursa has in the novel about womanhood and “generations,” it makes sense that she would choose a song that a long line of classic blueswomen have performed and made their own.

Since the earliest recordings, “Trouble in Mind” has been covered by artists as diverse as Nina Simone, Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Conway Twitty, Sam Cooke, Johnny Cash,

Big Bill Broonzy, Marianne Faithfull, Randy Travis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Jimmy Smith, and Janis Joplin (*AllMusic*). The song is notable for both its popularity with recording artists across generations and its lyrical fluidity. As is common with many blues lyrics, each performer changes the words to fit the mood he or she is trying to convey. By choosing “Trouble in Mind,” Ursa is able to express her struggles autobiographically through personalized lyrical choices. The act of choosing which lyrics to use is a self-conscious act of self-representation. Most versions of “Trouble in Mind” contain some slight variation of the stanza: “Trouble in mind, I’m blue/But I won’t be always/The sun's gonna shine in my back door someday.” Below are two versions of “Trouble in Mind”: the lyrics for Bertha “Chippie” Hill’s 1926 release and those for Nina Simone’s 1961 release.

<b>Bertha “Chippie” Hill, 1926</b>	<b>Nina Simone, 1961</b>
<p>Trouble in mind, I’m blue</p> <p>But I won’t be always,</p> <p>The sun's gonna shine in my back door someday.</p> <p>I’m all alone at midnight</p> <p>And the lamps are burning low.</p> <p>Never had so much trouble in my life before.</p> <p>Trouble in love, come quit me</p> <p>And be sure you be my mind.</p> <p>Sometimes I feel like living, sometimes I feel like dying.</p> <p>I’m gonna lay my head</p>	<p>Trouble in mind, I’m blue</p> <p>But I won't be blue always,</p> <p>'cause the sun's gonna shine in my back door someday.</p> <p>Trouble in mind, I’m slow.</p> <p>My poor heart is beating so slow</p> <p>I never had so much trouble in my life before.</p> <p>I’m goin' down to the river</p> <p>Gonna get me a rockin' chair</p> <p>If the Lord don't help me</p> <p>I’m gonna rock away from here.</p> <p>Trouble in mind....</p>

On some lonesome railroad line,	Trouble in mind....
And let the 2:19 train satisfy my mind.	I'm goin' down to the river....
Trouble in mind...	Trouble in mind....

Both versions show the speaker's despair and his or her desire to enjoy happier times. And both sets of lyrics present suicide as an option. The early version of "Trouble in Mind" suggests that the speaker might lie down on train tracks, while the later version contains a subtler path to self-destruction, or perhaps salvation and transcendence: rocking one's self to oblivion down by the river.

When Ursa sings the tune, she starts with the couplet that appears unchanged in most versions of the song: "*Trouble in mind, I'm blue, but I won't be blue always...*" (44). And later, she refers to that rocking chair: "I started humming the part about taking my rocking chair down by the river and rocking my blues away" (45). Ursa's choice to refer to the rocking chair rather than the train tracks makes sense, as "rocking" denotes something swaying back and forth. The rocking can be gentle, or it can be powerful or even violent. In this case, given Ursa's need to tell the stories of the women in her family, as well as her own, this rocking back and forth down by the river is the physical manifestation of Ursa's temporal shifts during the storytelling act. As she goes in and out of a dream state, or flashes back and forward again in the novel, she moves between dream and waking states and past and present. So the rocking allows Ursa to tell her story. And the telling of her story can either, ultimately, lead her towards the river or heal her by "rocking [her] blues away" (45). The rocking chair is also where one might soothe a crying baby,



lulling it gently to sleep. Given Ursa's infertility, this lyric creates a way for her to explore her feelings about being the end of her ancestral line.

After realizing that Cat and Jeffy are lovers, Ursa leaves Cat's place to stay with Tadpole. The next evening, she returns to singing at Happy's Café. As Ursa sings, she refers again to "Trouble in Mind":

*They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you. I bit my lip singing. I troubled my mind, took my rocker down by the river again. It was as if I wanted them to see what he'd done, hear it. All those blues feelings. That time I asked him to try to understand my feeling ways. That's what I called it. My feeling ways. My voice felt like it was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain? (50)*

While at first Ursa is self-conscious about her new voice, she soon embraces it, as it allows her to express her "blues feelings," and it helps others to see her as the woman she portrayed to Mutt when they first met: "'I know my way around,' I said. I don't even know why I said it, it was just like it came out. I wasn't even sure it was true. It was just that I was singing in a place where a woman would know her way around" (50, 149). Ursa here invents a blueswoman identity for herself through language. Through her words, she suggests to Mutt that she is independent, street smart, and, perhaps, sexually experienced, like Bessie or Ma, though her actions in other parts of the novel show her to possess few of these qualities. After all, Ursa is different from the young black women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who migrated Northward, as she stayed in the South in close proximity to her family. However, after her assault, her voice helps to create a proper blueswoman biography, one that is filled with struggle and a troubled mind. What is striking, however, is the way in which Ursa and others describe her vocals throughout the text. It is as if

Jones, the author, when exploring the “strain” in Ursa’s voice, suggests that physical damage to the body affects the voice in a magical way (46). Jones approaches vocalization from the perspective of a non-singer. For Jones, the voice is connected to a bodily state rather than self-conscious vocal techniques. In “A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music,” Andrew Legg enumerates a series of descriptive terms for African American gospel vocalization. These techniques are available to anyone, regardless of race, class, or family history. Legg’s taxonomy includes six areas: the gospel moan, timbre, pitch, rhythm, lyrics, and structures in gospel improvisation and accompaniment (106). In the section on timbre, Legg discusses gravel and grunts:

The tonal characteristics of the African American gospel ‘voice’ are as rich and as varied as the number of singers. The ‘gravel’ in the voice (alternatively referred to as ‘rasp’ ‘grit’ or ‘hoarseness’) used by many singers is a commonly applied general vocal characteristic that also functions as a means of creating an impassioned emphasis and added intensity to a word or phrase. (108)

These vocal characteristics are found not only in gospel music but also in most forms of African American music. When Ursa sings for Cat, *Trouble in mind, I’m blue, but I won’t be blue always*, and *They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you*, at Happy’s Café, the gravel in her voice highlights one of the qualities that situates her within the blueswoman tradition. She no longer has to invent herself exclusively through speech, as she can now sing herself into the classic blues canon. As Max Monroe, owner of the Spider club where Ursa works in the second half of the novel, says to Ursa: “‘You got a hard kind of voice,’ he said now. ‘You know, like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath. Strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can’t explain it. Hurt you and make you still want to listen’”

(96). Perhaps this is the same kind of pain Ursa and Mutt talk about at the end of the novel. Reunited after 22 years, Ursa and Mutt have a sexual encounter. Afterwards he tells her, “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you” and she responds, repeatedly, “Then you don’t want me” (185). Mutt shakes her until she cries and says, “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither” (185). Mutt and Ursa have a history of harming each other; yet they come together, with the novel ending in their embrace. Like Ursa’s blues voice, their relationship is “strong and hard but gentle underneath” (96). While this gentleness will not necessarily prevent Ursa and Mutt from hurting each other again, Ursa’s inability to “make generations” may create an opening for her to disentangle herself from her matrilineal legacy of sexual violence and male domination (10). If Ursa is unable to bear children, she will not be charged with passing along narratives of sexual slavery to them. And if Ursa does not have the responsibility of recounting these collective histories, she may be able to avoid unconsciously replicating patterns of female victimhood.

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*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, a play by August Wilson, dramatizes Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s 1927 Paramount recording session that included iconic songs such as “Here Me Talking to You” and “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” Wilson keeps the studio unnamed and creates a fictional producer, Mel Sturdyvant, whose relationship with Rainey is strained at best. It takes a while for the audience to see that tension, however, as Rainey—the character—does not enter until about forty-five minutes into the play.

The real-life Ma Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia. As a teenager, Pridgett performed in a local talent show, *Bunch of Blackberries*, in Columbus. Will Rainey, a minstrel comedy singer, met and fell in love with Pridgett while in

Columbus, and married her in 1904 (Harrison 34). According to Harrison, “The couple did a song-and-dance act for many years billed as “Ma” and “Pa” Rainey, ‘Assassins of the Blues,’ with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, but her [Ma’s] blues singing soon became the drawing card of the performances” (34). Rainey started recording for Paramount Records, a prototypical “race” label, in 1923. Prior to this, she was virtually unknown outside of the South, though she had a faithful audience who followed her as she performed in rural, small town tent shows. Rainey joined the Theatre Owners’ Booking Association (TOBA) touring route around 1924 (Harrison 35). The TOBA (known sardonically by some of their black artists as “Tough on Black Asses”) “organized and scheduled appearances of black vaudeville and tent acts in sixty-seven theaters across the South and Midwest” (Harrison 17). Because of her connection to TOBA, in addition to performing for her Southern fans, Rainey was able to play shows for audiences in Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh (Harrison 35). Known alternatively as the *Mother of the Blues* and *Madame Rainey*, Rainey was successful as both a recording artist and a live concert performer throughout the 1920s. TOBA helped to expand the headlining Rainey’s audience; however, as Harrison notes,

It treated everyone below top billing poorly, subjecting performers to low salaries, inadequate or no housing accommodations, cramped and makeshift dressing areas, poor lighting and staging, cheating managers, racist managers, haphazard schedules, abandonment and so on. Artists often worked on stages that were so small there were no wings, no backstage, no dressing rooms. Some even had to dress underneath the stages and then slip on stage by climbing up through the orchestra pit when the house lights went down. (24)

There were also complaints made by black musicians against some of the white theatre managers they would encounter in the TOBA, underscoring the “continuing stranglehold whites had on blacks even when blacks owned the companies. Whites were stockholders in the TOBA; they owned and managed many of the member theaters; and they often controlled the concessions and living arrangements which the companies had to use. As could be expected, there would be some abuse of black performers as they battled for power over their own domain” (Harrison 26-27). This tension between white music industry power brokers and black artists exists just under the surface throughout *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, and it is exemplified in the relationship between Ma Rainey and Sturdyvant (and to a lesser degree Ma Rainey and her manager Irvin).

Before Rainey’s arrival at the studio, her white manager and producer strategize about how they will manage Rainey during the recording session. Wilson does not provide any details, but it is clear from the context that Sturdyvant and Rainey have had power struggles in the past. Before we even see her or hear her voice, the men in the story frame Rainey as a problem to solve rather than an important artist with a large fan base that helps them make money. Within the first two minutes of the play, Sturdyvant has appealed to Irvin both to “keep her in line” and to accept responsibility for Rainey on three separate occasions (18). Sturdyvant states that he will not put up with Rainey’s “shenanigans” (18). Slowly we learn that Rainey is a proud and independent artist who, according to Sturdyvant, instead of accepting his authority, “marches in here like she owns the damn place” (18). This tension between Sturdyvant’s and Irvin’s expectations for Rainey’s behavior and her strong will creates much of the drama throughout the play:

STURDYVANT: She’s your responsibility. I’m not putting up with any Royal Highness...Queen of the Blues bullshit!

IRVIN: Mother of the Blues, Mel. Mother of the Blues.

STURDYVANT: I don't care what she calls herself. I'm not putting up with it. I just want to get her in here...record those songs on that list...and get her out. Just like clockwork, huh? (18)

The fact that Sturdyvant uses the wrong moniker for Rainey is important, as she uses those names as forms of self-representation. Rainey calls herself the “Mother of the Blues” because Paramount Records credited her that way when it released her first record: “Discovered at Last”— “Mother of the Blues,” but it also speaks to her place as an innovator in the classic blues world. After all, as Harrison asserts, by the time she was “discovered” by Paramount, she had been in show business for almost twenty-five years (35). When Rainey insists that she be called “Mother of the Blues” or “Madame Rainey,” it is not merely because she is playing the role of the spoiled diva. For Rainey, the use of her monikers, by herself and others, helps to tell more of her own story: The Mother of the Blues suggests that she gave birth to the blues style, or at least the classic blues, as well as “delivering” the younger artists she influenced, like Bessie Smith, into the blues fold.

After Rainey finally arrives at the recording session with her nephew Sylvester, girlfriend Dussie Mae, and a white police officer who wishes to arrest the entire group, she commands Irwin to tell the police officer who she is:

MA RAINEY: Tell him who he's messing with!

IRVIN: Okay! Okay! Give me a chance! Officer, this is one of our recording artists...Ma Rainey.

MA RAINEY: Madame Rainey! Get it straight! Madame Rainey! Talking about taking me to jail! (49)

Rainey here reminds the group of her second moniker. This is the first time that she speaks for herself in the play, and it is significant because underlying Rainey's interaction with Irvin and Sturdyvant is her need to reclaim not only her power as an artist and a woman, but also the power of other black artists who make the white-owned record labels successful. The policeman and Irvin have a side conversation where, after Irvin bribes him, the policeman agrees to forget about the charges against Sylvester and Rainey, as long as someone is "responsible for them" (52). Again, white men claim the authority to not only speak for, and about, black people, but they also place themselves in paternal roles in which they are responsible for taking care of wayward, misbehaving blacks.

Sturdyvant and Irvin are not the only men who speak for women in this play. The black musicians in Rainey's band also talk about women they have known—in most cases in sexualized terms. Cutler, the leader of the band, as well as the guitar and trombone player; bass player Slow Drag; and trumpet player Levee have an extended conversation about the sexually promiscuous women who frequent Lula White's, a New Orleans nightclub. This prompts a story about how Slow Drag got his name that begins with: "Slow Drag break a woman's back when he dance" (55). The story is ultimately benign: Slow Drag holds off the violent, jealous boyfriend of a woman he is dancing close with by convincing the man that his plan all along was to win the first prize in a dance contest so the woman can buy her man a gift; however, the opening line suggests a violent assault. The man physically dominates the woman as he dances with her, metaphorically "breaking her back." Wilson characterizes Rainey differently; while men are certainly foregrounded in this play—there are only two women in the play and Rainey, the character the action revolves around, is one of them—Rainey not only speaks for herself, but she is also the one in charge in her romantic relationship with Dussie Mae.

The real-life Ma Rainey was bi-sexual, and she sometimes sang songs with lyrics about lesbian relationships:

She [Rainey] also wrote and recorded ‘Prove it on Me,’ an explicit statement of her preference for women and willingness to be open about it. Rainey’s and Bessie Smith’s episodes with women lovers are indicative of the independent stance they and other women blues singers took on issues of personal choice. By addressing the subject openly, they show other women that there are other options available—the same option that Shug, the blues woman, offers to Celie in a tender, powerful encounter in *The Color Purple*. (Harrison 104)

In the play, her relationship with Dussie Mae is explicitly romantic, and Rainey treats Dussie Mae in a possessive manner. While the ladies wonder aloud about the current whereabouts of Rainey’s band, Rainey calls Dussie Mae over:

MA RAINEY: “Come here...let me see that dress. (DUSSIE MAE crosses over. MA RAINEY *tugs at the dress around the waist, appraising the fit.*) That dress looks nice. I’m gonna take you tomorrow and get you some more things before I take you down to Memphis. They got clothes up here you can’t get in Memphis. I want you to look nice for me. If you gonna travel with the show you got to look nice. (60)

Rainey has the financial power in her relationship with Dussie Mae. She says she wants Dussie Mae to look good for *her* before she suggests that she wants Dussie Mae to look good in her entourage. This is similar to the way a male sugar daddy might talk to his financially dependent female or male lover—the monetary gifts coming with strings and necessitating his lover’s relinquishment of control.



Rainey also manipulates the recording session by insisting that Sylvester perform the speaking intro to “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”—“All right, boys, you done seen the rest...Now, I’m gonna show you the best. Ma Rainey’s gonna show you her black bottom”—despite the fact that he is a stutterer. In this case, everyone (including Rainey’s black band) is united in their displeasure at Sylvester’s performance, and Sturdyvant attempts to persuade Rainey to record a different version of the song, with Levee’s musical intro supplanting the spoken one:

MA RAINEY: I’m gonna tell you something, Irvin...and you go on up there and tell Sturdyvant. What you all say don’t count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That’s what counts with Ma. Now, you carry my nephew on down there...tell Cutler he’s gonna do the voice intro on that “Black Bottom” song and that Levee ain’t messing up my song with none of his music shit. Now, if that don’t set right with you and Sturdyvant...then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, ‘cause I don’t like it up here no ways. (63)

Sturdyvant is interested in making money, and he sees danceable blues music as the wave of the future. For him, Levee represents an opportunity to get in at the forefront of the dance craze. Levee writes songs, and throughout the play he tries to persuade Rainey’s band to play his music. He also forms an alliance with Sturdyvant, convincing the producer to record some of his work. When it is clear that Sylvester stutters, Levee takes the opportunity to promote his own musical agenda. But Rainey immediately rejects his ideas:

MA RAINEY: I ain’t studying Levee nothing. I know what he done to that song and I don’t like to sing it that way. I’m doing it the old way. That’s why I brought my nephew to do the voice intro.

IRVIN: Ma, that's what the people want now. They want something they can dance to. Times are changing. Levee's arrangement gives the people what they want. It gets them excited...makes them forget about their troubles.

MA RAINEY: I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messin' up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it. Carry my nephew on down there and introduce him to the band. I promised my sister I'd look out for him and he's gonna do the voice intro on the song my way. (62)

It is striking that Rainey is insistent on Sylvester recording his *voice* on tape. As with Shug Avery and Ursa Corregidora, Rainey seeks power through using her voice as a self-representative tool—both her singing and speaking voices—alternatively withholding her vocal performance until she gets her way or speaking up for herself and her artistic worth during her vocal confrontations with Sturdyvant and Irvin. She also insists that her nephew is able to share his voice. Even though Sylvester is not a woman who is “talking back” to her negative biographical representation, his recitation at the beginning of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” celebrates Rainey and reminds everyone outside of her inner circle—Sturdyvant, Irvin, and the band—that she is “the best.” Rainey’s worth, as an artist and a black woman in 1920s American culture, is continually in question, motivating her need to counter Sturdyvant’s and Irvin’s claims that money alone is at the heart of their plans for the way the recording session should unfold.

Temporality becomes important, as Sturdyvant and Irvin frame their resistance to Sylvester’s involvement in the recording as a necessary concession to time constraints, while Rainey uses delaying tactics to frustrate Sturdyvant’s and Irvin’s plans. Rainey finds that her power is conferred through her subversion of the white men’s temporal intentions. In protest,

Rainey speaks of herself in the third person: “We’ll be ready to go when Madame says we’re ready. That’s the way it goes around here” (64). And while Irvin, Sturdyvant, and the band try again to convince Rainey to excise the talking intro for “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” Rainey digs her heels in:

IRVIN: He stutters, Ma. They say he stutters.

MA RAINEY: I don’t care if he do. I promised the boy he could do the part...and he’s gonna do it! That’s all there is to it. He don’t stutter all the time. Get a microphone down here for him.

IRVIN: Ma, we don’t have time. We can’t...

MA RAINEY: If you wanna make a record, you gonna find time, I ain’t playing with you, Irvin. I can walk out of here and go back to my tour. I got plenty fans. I don’t need to go through all of this. Just go and get the boy a microphone. (*Irvin and Sturdyvant consult in the booth, Irvin exits*).

STURDYVANT: All right, Ma...we’ll get him a microphone. But if he messes up...He’s only getting one chance...The cost...

MA RAINEY: Damn the cost. You always talking about the cost. I make more money for this outfit than anybody else you got put together. (74-75)

Rainey’s discontent can be traced to the fact that despite the money she makes for Sturdyvant and Irvin, she (like the real-life Rainey and other black artists on the TOBA route) is still marginalized in a racist and patriarchal culture. By insisting that her stuttering nephew does the intro to “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” and refusing to sing until a Coca Cola appears, Rainey uses the power she does have to take control of her self-representation and remind the men that she and her work have value:

Ma Rainey: You supposed to have Coca-Cola. Irvin knew that. I ain't singing nothing without my Coca-Cola! (*She walks away from the mike, singing to herself. Sturdyvant enters from the control booth.*)

Sturdyvant: Now, just a minute here, Ma. You come in an hour late...we're way behind schedule as it is...the band is set up and ready to go...I'm burning my lights...I've turned up the heat...We're ready to make a record and what? You decide you want a Coca-Cola?

Ma Rainey: Sturdyvant, get out of my face.

(*Irvin enters.*)

Irvin...I told you keep him away from me.

Irvin: Mel, I'll handle it.

Sturdyvant: I'm tired of her nonsense, Irv. I'm not gonna put up with this!

Irvin: Let me handle it, Mel. I know how to handle her. (76-77)

Irvin once again speaks as if Rainey is not there. Finally, Rainey gets to the crux of her need to reclaim her power. She is aware that the white recording industry is only interested in her as a commodity, not as a human being. She has control over her voice and her lover Dussie Mae, but she ultimately has little control outside of her weight as a popular artist. She understands that after they record her voice—after they gain the means to mass produce her words— she will lose whatever leverage she has. Her voice only works as a form of resistance in her conversations with Sturdyvant and Irvin while she has control over it in real time. In his role as spokesperson for Rainey's excellence at the beginning of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Sylvester will also cease to have any impact once the recording session is over and Rainey has signed her contract.

Ma Rainey: They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names...calling me everything but a child of god. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then. I know what I'm talking about. You watch. Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don't care nothing about me either. He's been my manager for six years, always talking about sticking together, and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends. (79)

Black musicians in a white-run recording industry have to recognize that no matter how much money they make for their label or their booking agency, they will remain second-class citizens in the eyes of mainstream white society due to their race. Rainey understands this, and so does her black band. After Cutler, Slow Drag, and Toledo tease Levee for uttering "Yessir" repeatedly in his conversation with Sturdyvant, Levee tells a story about the night a gang of white men attempted to rape his mother while his father, a successful farmer, was out of town. Levee was eight years old, and he grabbed a hunting knife and tried to kill one of the men. The man instead took the knife and slashed Levee across his chest. The men left because they thought Levee might bleed to death, and when his father returned he got the names of the men who terrorized his family. Levee explains that his father smiled in the face of one of the men who was there that night, and then sold his land to him. Levee's family moved in with relatives in another town, and then his father came back for the men. He killed four of them before he was hunted him down, hanged, and burned (69-70). He tells this story to illustrate that just because he smiles and says

“Yessir” to Sturdyvant, that does not mean he trusts him or wishes him well: “I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. I got time coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man” (70). The general distrust of blacks for whites serves as an undercurrent throughout the play. At the end, Rainey puts the song down on tape and leaves, knowing that the larger societal structures that oppress her and her bandmates will remain unchanged. However, through her determination to use her voice to take control of her representation, her autobiographical self-expression temporarily helped her to gain power over her life and her artistic output. Her voice—the sharing and the withholding of it—allowed Rainey to both reclaim her power and share in the collective frustration of being a black person in a racist culture.

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Amy Jade Winehouse was born on September 14, 1983 in Southgate, London, England, and she died of alcohol poisoning at 27 on July 23, 2011 in Camden, London, England. Her father Mitch was a taxi driver, and her mother Janis was a pharmacist. She grew up with music, as some of her maternal uncles were jazz musicians. At 12, Winehouse was accepted into the prestigious Sylvia Young Theatre School, an independent performing arts school in North London. At 16, a schoolmate passed her demo tape along to an A&R executive at Island/Universal Records. In 2003 Winehouse released her debut album, *Frank*, a mixture of jazz, soul, pop, and hip-hop, to critical acclaim and commercial success (*Frank* went double platinum). In 2006, she released her second, and last, album, *Back to Black*, an international critical and commercial success that has sold more than 20 million copies worldwide to date (Cordor; “Amy Winehouse”; Ritman).

Two days after Winehouse’s death—a tragic culmination of her years of substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors—Steve Kandell reflected in an article for Spin.com:

It's inevitable, really, that we'd eventually choke a bit on the rock mythology that's been crammed down our collective throats for most of our lives. The tortured genius, the hellion libertine, the martyr dying for the noble cause of nihilism — this is what we usually mean when we say “rock star,” and we're always on the hunt for fresh blood. And truth be told, that sort of bloodlust accounted for much of the initial, explosive response to Amy Winehouse in early 2007. The natural ability was never up for debate; combine that with an equally natural self-destructive bent, and the ensuing reception was predictably breathless. Not proud of this, but it's how your myth-making sausage gets made.

Kandell's statement speaks indirectly to the question of musical authenticity. In some genres authenticity is foregrounded more than others, rock in particular being a genre in which, historically, critics and fans have wanted to believe that the sentiments and stories expressed by the artists musically, as well as in performance and even off stage, are honest and “true”—that is, their personas and art are somehow aligned with their factual autobiographies. Blues music also evokes the desire of some scholars, critics, and fans to believe that its makers express, in song and even through their actions, a true representation of their life stories. Accordingly, Winehouse's personal excess generated as much of the media's interest as her music. In a February 2007 concert review in the *London Evening Standard* for a London Astoria show in which Winehouse was sober and focused, John Aizlewood asserts that:

She may still be painfully thin and she'll always have the most naff tattoos this side of David Beckham, but there were no too-short skirts, no smoking, no swearing, no projectile vomiting and unless looking reasonably happy counts, no signs of insobriety. This might be the moment she has chosen to refocus on her

day job rather than the bacchanalian debauchery which threatens to relegate her music to a sideshow, as it has for the walking cautionary tale that is Britney Spears. The inevitable irony of her understated professionalism was that it rendered the occasion less riveting than it might have been.

In one brief review Aizlewood supports everything Kandall accuses the media (including himself) of having done. Besides suggesting that a professional, drama-free Winehouse performance is not as engaging as her shambolic ones, the male critic cannot help commenting on Winehouse's usual "too-short skirts" (the message being that on her worst days Winehouse's unacceptable brand of sexuality is at the forefront). Even though this particular Winehouse performance is *not* transgressive in any way, Aizlewood mentions past failures lest audiences forget that she *really* is a mess. Winehouse's reception by media and fans had everything to do with the belief that her public persona was not artifice, but an authentic depiction of her personal, autobiographical narrative. Winehouse herself did define her work as autobiographical. In an April 2007 article for the *Lancaster New Era*, Judy Jarvis notes:

British singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse has decided to invert the equation. Her album "Back to Black" has one primary anti-hero: Amy Winehouse herself. "I only write about stuff that's happened to me - stuff I can't get past personally," Winehouse told Blender.com. "Luckily, I'm quite self-destructive." Winehouse, as she admits freely on the saucy album, is her own worst enemy.

In a March 2007 *New York Times* article, Jon Pareles considered the impact of Winehouse's autobiographical approach on her music:

She claims her lyrics are autobiographical, which would make her a real handful: a drinking, pot-smoking, compulsive cheater whose main excuse is the title of her



current single: “You Know I’m No Good.” But she also has pangs of conscience and moments of loyalty and longing. As knowing as she is about her attitude and her musical references, she also gives her songs a heart.

Given that Winehouse viewed her own work in autobiographical terms, my goal is to explore the ways in which she expresses herself onstage and on record that resonate with classic blues tropes, and predictably reaped opprobrium from the media. Since much of Winehouse’s musical, visual, and performance styles owed a debt to so-called “black” American culture, it will be useful to briefly situate Winehouse within a larger scholarly conversation about white-to-black passing and blackface minstrelsy.

Winehouse’s attempt to perform her version of black American music has a long tradition. In *Near Black: White-To-Black Passing in American Culture*, Baz Dreisinger treats white-to-black passing as a function of certain white Americans’ proximity to black Americans. As Dreisinger states, “Because ‘blackness,’ so to speak, is imagined as transmittable, proximity to blackness is invested with the power to turn whites black” (3). Members of Sharon Jones’ Dap-Kings played on six of the 11 *Black to Black* tracks, and Winehouse’s stage act included two African-British backup singer-dancers dressed in retro 1960s-era suits. Even though most of the members of the Dap-Kings are white, given Sharon Jones’ quasi-blues queen persona of her own, the white members of the Dap-Kings are the conduit through which Jones’ “blackness” flows to Winehouse. Winehouse’s *Back to Black* producer, Mark Ronson, similarly used the horn sections from the Dap-Kings and Antibalas, an interracial Brooklyn-based funk and afrobeat band for his hit “Uptown Funk.” Dreisinger’s text includes an examination of white musicians Johnny Otis and Mezz Mezzrow who famously lived and worked among black people and self-identified as black. Both of these musicians wrote compelling autobiographies in which they

sketch out their musical and personal transformations from white to black men. Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues* and Johnny Otis' *Upside Your Head* show white musicians' autobiographical self-invention as black musicians.

In *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* Gayle Wald also examines Mezz Mezzrow. Her study focuses on the inherently gendered nature of the passing narrative. For Wald, while black-to-white passing is feminized due to the disempowered position of blacks in American society, white-to-black passing is a “masculinized (and often masculinist) enterprise” (16). Both Wald and Dreisinger see a disparity in how overt white-to-black passers are *versus* black-to-white ones. Dreisinger states, “Black passing narratives are commonly, though not exclusively, fictional; white passing narratives, however, often merge the fictive with the factual and lean toward the autobiographical” (7). Dreisinger believes this is due in part to passing whites' full embracing of the powerful feeling racial transgression affords them (7). This is why Mezz Mezzrow and Johnny Otis proudly display their “blackness” through the vehicle of the autobiographical narrative. Winehouse does the same through her lyrics, visual presentation, and performance style.

Winehouse's song “Some Unholy War” contains the following lyric: “If my man was fighting/Some unholy war/I would be behind him.” And in “Me and Mr. Jones,” she declares, “Nobody stands in between me and my man/It's me and Mr. Jones,” with the last part of that lyric an allusion to Billy Paul's 1972 soul hit about an extramarital affair, “Me and Mrs. Jones.” Winehouse's repeated use of the phrase “my man” to refer to her lover, or a man she respects, has its roots in black American working-class lingo. As Davis suggests, “African-American working-class argot refers to both husbands and male lovers—and even in some cases female lovers—as ‘my man’ or ‘my daddy’” (13). Not only did Winehouse cross musical

racial lines, but she also pushed gender boundaries. Her sexually provocative lyrics, as well as her public battles with both substance abuse and her then-husband Fielder-Civil, subverted ideas about how a young female artist should behave, even in 2007. Like Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, Winehouse regularly transgressed acceptable forms of gender performance. In fact, in an August 2007 article in the *Daily Mail* Kathryn Knight states, “Such antics have occurred with such regularity that the celebrity magazine Heat has taken to running a regular feature called Where's Wino?” In the United States, a December 2007 issue of the *St. Petersburg Times (Florida)* ran this headline after Winehouse was arrested for interfering in Fielder-Civil’s criminal case: “WINO ARRESTED; POP HATES ON DOHERTY.” In the article, the unnamed author referred to Winehouse as “Wino,” and offered this comment: “Amy Winehouse was arrested Tuesday in connection with an investigation into ‘perverting the course of justice,’ British authorities said. (We’ll pause a minute to let that one sink in.)” The joke here is that Winehouse is already so clearly perverse that the writer cannot understand why the authorities even need to investigate. In the article, Winehouse’s father complains that his daughter is friends with Pete Doherty, formerly of the rock band *The Libertines* and another figure who at that time waged a public battle with substance abuse. Winehouse’s father was worried that Doherty would be a negative influence on his daughter. Beyond Winehouse’s transgressions of public propriety, she also tries on “blackness” through her lyrics in which she occasionally adopts a black male persona.

Furthering Wald’s argument, due to Winehouse’s white privilege, her transgression of racial roles confers power. Because she is white, she can always fall back on her whiteness if it is more convenient. Like Mezzrow and Otis, the lessened risk inherent in her racial passing allows her a powerful freedom that most blacks who pass for white do not enjoy. Her musical passing

also offers masculinist elements, despite her being very clearly a woman. In fact, in “‘This Voice Which is Not One’: Amy Winehouse Sings the Ballad of Sonic (Blues)face Culture,” Daphne Brooks situates Winehouse within what she calls “sonic (blues)face culture, a vocal phenomenon pioneered by black and white female entertainers in early twentieth century popular culture” (37). Brooks also states, “Listen to Amy Winehouse in critical hermeneutic stereo and one hears her conjuring a secret history of sonic black feminist praxis first captured on wax in the voice of Mamie Smith in 1920” [on “Crazy Blues” – seen by many scholars to be the first blues recording] (49). Yet she also suggests that Winehouse evokes a masculine sensibility through her lyrics:

But perhaps, more than anything else, “blackness” on Winehouse’s album is a sign of masculine musicality. Whether declaring to her man that she’d “rather be at home with Ray” (Charles) than in rehab, hatin’ on a suitor for having gotten in the way of her and her “man, Mr. Jones” (aka rapper Nas, Nasir Jones), spitting remorse for having “missed the Slick Rick gig,” or perhaps most cryptically, telling a confidant that, “Next to Sammy, you’re my best black Jew,” Winehouse may be musically invoking black female vocality, but her lyrical identifications, her performative posturings are so, so def, pop ya collar, hip hop masculinist gestures, all the way down to her weirdly inverted “you my nigga” bonding reference to Sammy Davis Jr. (54)

While Brooks finds Winehouse’s masculine pose to be confounding, it is perhaps a way for Winehouse to reclaim the power taken away from her given the media’s control over her image. By adopting a black, male pose, she participates in the tradition of blues self-

fashioning. She is a white woman, but she uses a black, male persona in some of her work. This is not different from Bessie Smith assuming the role of a gin peddler in 1928's "Pickpocket Blues" or Robert Johnson suggesting he is being pursued by hell hounds in 1937's "Hellhound on my Trail." As Brooks continues,

Well beyond merely singing as a "white woman" about her desire for black men, Winehouse, in what is perhaps her real innovation, has created a record that chronicles the passions and perils of a white female subject longing to be a black man – and an imaginary one at that, stitched together from hip hop and bebop and juke joint mythologies. She's a "ride or die chick" from another era, the Jewish English lass who's rolling with the boys, who morphs into the j-hova gangsta driving the Jag herself. All hail the retro-soul Jolson in a dress who, it seems, is really our first hip hop drag king, "a thug 4 life" indeed, and one who, these days, seems frighteningly ready to die. (54)

And it was Winehouse's seeming determination to die young that brings us back to her vulnerability. Brooks's argument makes sense, as Winehouse's version of a black man, as well as her take on the black blues queen, is mired in stereotypes and snippets of fictional blues tropes. However, I would argue that the concept of blues authenticity is rooted in narrative fictionality to begin with, so Winehouse is merely contributing to that tradition.

Through all of the sensationalistic media exposure, her lyrics revealed her vulnerable side and acted as a counter to one-dimensional representations of her life and work. As Pareles suggests, Winehouse herself pushes her image as a sexually promiscuous woman in songs like

“You Know I’m No Good,” in which the narrator admits to being an untrustworthy sexual partner who cheats on her man while submitting to his demeaning sexual interrogation:

Meet you downstairs in the bar and heard/Your rolled up sleeves in your skull T-shirt/You say, “What did you do with him today?” And sniffed me out like I was Tanqueray/’Cause you’re my fella, my guy/Hand me your Stella and fly/By the time I’m out the door/You tear me down like Roger Moore/I cheated myself like I knew I would/I told you, I was trouble/You know that I’m no good.

The narrator (Winehouse) plays the role of the immoral, debased woman with abandon and even seeks out and receives the punishment she feels she deserves. Rather than telling her man to back off, she allows his attempt to smell the scent of another man on her body. In that moment, her body is no longer hers. She submits to him as if she is his property. But, why not, since she is “no good?” In this case, both the narrator and her lover articulate a version of her personality. The boyfriend asserts that she is a lying whore who cannot be trusted (biography) and the narrator agrees (autobiography).

In “Wake Up Alone,” the narrator (Winehouse) shows another, often overlooked, side to her personality, mourning the loss of her lover and focusing on the quotidian in the hopes of forgetting her pain:

It’s okay in the day, I’m staying busy/Tied up enough so I don’t have to wonder where is he/ Got so sick of crying, so just lately/When I catch myself I do a 180/I stay up, clean the house, at least I’m not drinking/Run around just so I don’t have to think about thinking/That silent sense of content that everyone gets/Just disappears soon as the sun sets.

The narrator's focus in this song is on finding peace amidst her heartbreak, and she attempts to quiet her restless mind through cleaning the house. What is striking is that she wants to feel better. She stays awake rather than collapsing into a depressive sleep. She avoids drinking, even though a drinking problem is inferred. This part of the narrator's autobiography shows what is at stake. Not only does her loss subject her to a possible deep depression, but it also puts her physical health at risk. Winehouse was known for her tough anti-rehab talk in her hit "Rehab." In this song, Winehouse brags, "They tried to make me go to rehab but I said, 'No, no, no' / Yes, I've been black but when I come back you'll know, know, know / I ain't got the time and if my daddy thinks I'm fine / He's tried to make me go to rehab but I won't go, go, go." Yet in "Wake Up Alone" she avoids alcohol and engages in housework to shut her worried mind off. Digging deeper into "Rehab," it is also evident that the reason Winehouse does not want to go to rehab is not merely due to childish defiance; it is because she believes she engages toxic substances because her man is gone. If he would only return to her, she would stop drinking: "I don't ever wanna drink again / I just, ooh, I just need a friend / I'm not gonna spend ten weeks / Have everyone think I'm on the mend / It's not just my pride / It's just 'til these tears have dried." According to this narrative, it is Winehouse's broken heart that renders rehab ineffective, not her poor character or perverse nature. Winehouse drinks because she feels unloved, and she has the insight to recognize that perhaps she should love herself. In "Tears Dry on Their Own" Winehouse's narrator sings, "I shouldn't play myself again / I should just be my own best friend / Not fuck myself in the head with stupid men." This verse demonstrates Winehouse's genuine vulnerability as a counter to her unsympathetic media portrayal. Through her lyrical rendering of her autobiography, Winehouse successfully adds her voice to the record. She was more than simply a self-destructive mess. She was also a talented and sensitive singer-songwriter

who attempted to assuage her unrelenting loneliness with drugs and alcohol. And she was a white, female performer who participated in the narrative blues tradition by utilizing, alternatively, black female and black male personas as an act of self-creation. In order to participate in so-called authentic black American musical expression, she used blues tropes, personas, and vocal styles—with these devices ultimately allowing for her autobiographical self-expression.

The transgressive fictional and real-life blueswomen in this chapter reclaim their power and use their personal agency through autobiographical acts. Their self-expression is not limited to book form, as in many cases they share details about their backgrounds through musical performance. What ties all of these narratives—literary and musical—together is the importance that voice plays in the women's movement towards self-realization. In all of these texts, the women's strengths are found in their words, and they use those words to effectively reject their negative representations in the larger culture.



## Note

1. See Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, Chapter 5.

## Chapter 3

### “The Blues Apprenticeship”

This chapter interrogates the role of apprenticeship in the development of a black blues persona. The literary texts I examine in this chapter include *Mister Satan’s Apprentice: A Blues Memoir* by Adam Gussow, the novel *Mojo Hand: An Orphic Tale* by J.J. Phillips, and the short stories “1955” by Alice Walker and “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin. I also consider performances by black American blues-rock performer Gary Clark Jr. and the Irish rock band U2 during their *Joshua Tree* tour and in their subsequent tour documentary *Rattle and Hum*. The interactions described in the various literary and musical works highlight the symbiotic relationship between the young blues acolyte and the (usually) willing mentor. In my study, the master-apprentice relationship is based on musical interactions, and documented in autobiographical narratives forged by fictional and real-life masters and apprentices in reaction to their mutual engagement. These stories interrogate the role blues authenticity plays in the master-apprentice dynamic, necessitating a focus on the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants. One already understands that the blues master is so because this is an authentic exemplar of the blues; in most cases race, gender, class, and even geographical background are significant. In *Journeyman’s Road: Modern Blues Lives from Faulkner’s Mississippi to Post-9/11 New York*, Gussow offers:

The blues benefit, particularly in our postmodern moment, from being narrated and theorized in as many different registers as possible. Counterpoise jam session shop-talk with Black Atlantic histories, dirty South witness-bearing with trauma theory, practical electroacoustics with Faulkner bibliography, and you’re more likely to honor blues dialectics than if you insist, as both purists and general issue

blues fans do, that the most authentic blues voice is a scarred old black sharecropper telling a tale of hardship within spitting distance of his shotgun shack. (xiv-xv)

Gussow recognizes that there are multiple blues histories, some of them even interracial, and a critic must consider diverse, and sometimes unconventional, paths of blues apprenticeship. In some of the texts I analyze, such as *Mister Satan's Apprentice: A Blues Memoir* by Gussow himself—describing U2's brief collaboration with the late bluesman B.B. King—the novice is young, white, and male and the experienced bluesman is a black father figure. Clark, alternatively, had white mentors, such as guitarist and former Fabulous Thunderbird Jimmie Vaughn, who helped Clark find his way as a young blues musician in Austin, Texas, thus complicating the usual white male acolyte/black male master paradigm. In Walker's "1955" the student is a white, male rock 'n roller and the teacher is a black, female blues musician, while the apprentice participants in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" are two black brothers with a significant age difference. Finally, the master in Phillip's *Mojo Hand* is an older black male blues guitarist, while the apprentice is a young black female guitar player. A fundamental question I ask in this chapter is how the racial, gender, and class fluidity in the blues apprenticeship relationships affects our reading of the black blues figure in general. I also ask whether differing racial and gender dynamics in the master – apprentice relationship change the character of the narrators' autobiographical and biographical acts. I argue that the fictional and real-life narrators and characters engage the authenticity paradigm that is built into the blues apprenticeship. Their consideration of the politics of blues authenticity allows the narrators and characters who face racism, sexism, and classism in mainstream white culture to assert their power and regain control over their stories in the context of their interactions, if not in the larger culture.

Adam Gussow is Associate Professor of English and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi and a blues harmonica player who was part of the blues duo Satan and Adam. In their collaboration, Satan (born Sterling Magee) who is African American played guitar and Adam who is white played the harp. Gussow recounted his time working with Satan, his solo busking experiences in the United States and Europe, and his thoughts about racial dynamics in the larger contemporary blues scene in *Journeyman's Road* (2007) and *Mister Satan's Apprentice: A Blues Memoir* (2009). In the preface to the new edition of *Mr. Satan's Apprentice*, Gussow states:

To imagine that such a white boy— a prep-school townie, off to the Ivy League— would ultimately transform himself into a blues performer with any legitimate claim on the music was counterintuitive, to put it mildly. But here I was, Mister Satan's sideman, a touring pro with a Harlem pedigree and the respect of my peers. How had that happened? Did I, in fact, have a legitimate claim on the blues? Or was I one more cultural thief, a ravenous and suspect racial adventurer of the sort eviscerated by bell hooks in her well-known essay “Eating the Other” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation?* (x-xi)

Gussow is self-conscious about his potential role as white male cultural appropriator and is forthright about his fear that he will remain outside of what he plays, culturally and politically, no matter how inside of the music and the tradition he may *feel*. While I do not view Gussow as a cultural appropriator—throughout his work he makes a good case for the existence of an interracial blues tradition—because of the body he is in, he has to grapple with the problem of blues authenticity. Gussow's simultaneous desire to subvert entrenched ideas about racialized and classed blues authenticity, and to be accepted as a “legitimate” blues player, bubble under

his stories of time with Satan, as well as his first master, African American blues harmonica player Nat Riddles:

An admirer of Du Bois, a child of the Civil Rights movement, I found myself painfully and unwillingly at odds with the black cultural nationalism that had emerged in the late 1960s with Larry Neal's call for “the destruction of the white thing” and that had persisted in various forms through my college years and beyond. I was happy to see the white thing destroyed, god knows, but not if it included my harmonica and me! The most deliberate affront I could offer to ideologies of blackness and whiteness, particularly when they sought to render my experience invalid or invisible, was to write of the Creole blues culture I knew.

The white-boy-lost-in-the-blues story was familiar, but certain complications had been left out. (xiv)

Gussow's experiences within the contemporary blues scene are indeed different from those that outsiders might suspect, particularly given the stream of unconventional apprenticeships that defines his social relations. Gussow was not only part of an interracial duo, but his two black masters claim two white men as significant influences, and Gussow himself has taught multiple black people to play the blues harp:

Both Nat Riddles and Sterling Magee are African American bluesmen animated, in part, by white musical exemplars— Kim Wilson in Nat's case, Elvis Presley in Sterling's. I give blues harmonica lessons to an older black man who pays me for my services. “Thunky Fing,” an original composition dating from my Harlem years, begins as another flipped script: an unconscious inversion of the Sanford and Son theme song that I recast on the harp in an innovative way and then bring

down to 125th Street to try out. Sterling matches me with backing chords, then flips the script again by renaming my— now our— song. Where, precisely, is “black music” in all this? Or “white blues”? (xiv)

For this reason, Gussow’s work serves a dual function in this chapter. As the lone generically marked autobiography in this chapter, his work allows me to examine his musical autobiographical expression is a more direct and straightforward way than I handle the other texts. The fact that Gussow is also an academic—an English and Southern studies scholar—allows him to also offer a critical perspective on his own work and the larger contemporary blues scene.

With Gussow’s investment in a “Creole blues culture” in mind, I will explore how race, authenticity, and the blues apprenticeship shape the narrators, characters, and real-life blues makers’ autobiographies through an examination of a wide variety of texts. First, I will analyze “1955” and “Sonny’s Blues,” two short stories with a setting or publishing date during the 1950s, the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. In both texts, the masters—Gracie Mae in “1955” and Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues”—are reluctant to participate in their apprentice relationships, opting instead to remain silent in the face of their apprentices’ questions about their musical approaches and their back stories, or autobiographies. Their silences allow others to fill in the narratives behind their music. I will then engage another unconventional master-apprentice relationship in *Mojo Hand*, where there is little musical interaction between master and apprentice. Rather than seeking musical guidance from Blacksnake Brown, the main character, Eunice Prideaux uses her relationship with Blacksnake to explore her romantic ideas about the blues. She ultimately takes a gendered, classed, and geographically-based approach to situating herself within that tradition. Next, I examine Gussow’s memoir that portrays the most traditional

blues apprentice relationship in this chapter. His text describes a fateful encounter with the Irish rock band U2 during the film shoot for their 1988 concert documentary *Rattle and Hum* while Satan and Adam busk on a Harlem street during the late 1980s. This interaction is notable, as U2 also participated in a quasi-apprentice relationship for a song and subsequent live performances with BB King. The chapter ends with Clark who—unlike Gussow who is comfortable with, and benefits from, the interracial apprentice relationship— is ultimately suffocated by it.

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“1955” by Alice Walker is a two-character story with Gracie Mae Still acting as a stand-in for blues singer Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton (with a nod to classic blues icon Ma Rainey) and Traynor for the young Elvis Presley. Traynor buys one of Gracie Mae’s rhythm and blues songs—the tune is unnamed, but bears a striking resemblance to the Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller song “Hound Dog”—and he becomes a massively successful recording artist. However, according to Gracie Mae, he never finds true peace of mind and happiness because he plays black music, and due to his whiteness he is unable to *feel* it.

Here it is important to provide some background information about Thornton and Presley, and the origins of the song “Hound Dog” in order to contextualize their fictional interaction. Willie Mae Thornton was born on December 11, 1926 in Ariton, Alabama, and was raised in Montgomery. She left home at 14 to perform as a member of Atlanta-based impresario Sammy Green’s “Hot Harlem Revue,” a travelling variety show for which Thornton, billed as the “New Bessie Smith,” sang, danced, and worked as a comedienne. She quit the troupe in 1948 because, according to her, they owed her “quite a bit of money” (Neff and Connor 50). In 1951 she signed a recording contract with Peacock Records in Houston, Texas. In 1952 Thornton joined bandleader Johnny Otis’ troupe; in that same year she recorded “Hound Dog,” a 12-bar

blues written for her by the young songwriting duo Leiber and Stoller and featuring Otis on drums. “Hound Dog” was a hit in 1953, selling approximately two million copies, though Thornton saw little of the profits (Dreisbach, Mahon). Elvis Presley’s extremely successful 1956 rock & roll version was more popular than Thornton’s, and earned him a hefty paycheck (Dreisbach). Thornton’s expressed displeasure at watching Presley, a white man, receive accolades and ample financial remuneration for his version of a blues song that was written specifically for her has become part of a larger narrative of Thornton as a victim of cultural theft. In her article “Listening for Willie Mae ‘Big Mama’ Thornton’s Voice: The Sound of Race and Gender Transgressions in Rock and Roll,” Maureen Mahon notes, “In many popular music histories, Thornton has been reduced to a symbol: the ripped-off African American musician on whose unacknowledged shoulders subsequent generations of rock and rollers stand” (4). Thornton did not receive her rightful share of the fame or financial rewards stemming from her artistic output— “Ball and Chain,” a song she wrote helped make blues-rocker Janis Joplin a breakout star at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival. However, Thornton’s limited representation as the perpetually mistreated and long-forgotten blueswoman overshadows her contributions to American popular music generally, and rock and roll, in particular. Standing at nearly six feet tall, and weighing close to 200 pounds, Thornton’s “Big Mama” nickname was given to her by Apollo Theater manager Frank Schiffman—due to both her imposing physical presence and her powerful voice (Mahon 6). Thornton flouted gender norms by foregoing so-called feminine gowns and heels on stage, and opting, instead, for plaid work shirts, slacks, and, occasionally, men’s suits. Thornton’s unusual gender bending visual presentation set her apart from her contemporaries, and paved the way for future women in rock to take a bold, individualistic approach to their performance styles:



These choices are evidence of an unconventional, transgressive, and liberated form of black femininity that rejects prevailing expectations of how women should comport themselves to secure respectability. Steeped in working-class, African American blues culture and possessing a powerful sense of self, Thornton followed her muse in terms of musical, interpersonal, and sartorial choices—a textbook example of rock and-roll attitude and speaking clearly in one’s own voice. (Mahon 5)

It is in this spirit that the fictional version of Thornton and Presley’s interaction helps Gracie Mae to maintain ownership over the song and lay claim to her rightful place in rock and roll history. Even though, throughout the narrative, Gracie Mae does not receive the credit she thinks she deserves, her belief in her impact on Traynor’s career and on rock & roll more generally lies in sharp contrast with the real-life Thornton’s portrayal by music critics and scholars (and to a lesser degree by herself) as a victim. This is not to suggest that Thornton did not believe in her worth as an artist when she was alive; Gracie Mae simply has regular interactions with Traynor that allow her to redress the injustice in real-time. She has power over Traynor’s future—by not telling Traynor the meaning behind his biggest hit she slowly erodes at his confidence as a performer. Thornton never had any power over Presley’s career. Gracie Mae’s first person narrative perspective is also significant, as she is the only fictional master character in this chapter who speaks for herself. The fact that she is a black woman holding sway over a white man in the American South between 1955 and 1977 is remarkable, but even more importantly we hear her thoughts directly instead of having them filtered through a narrator or another character.

Throughout the short story, Traynor attempts to engage Gracie Mae in an apprentice relationship, where she, in the master’s role, teaches him how not only to sing the blues—in this

case rhythm and blues or rock and roll— but to understand it or inhabit it in some way. To this end, Traynor showers Gracie Mae with expensive cars and houses, but she remains unimpressed and slightly bemused by his efforts to make up for basing his successful career on her unique sound. This notion of a white man being unable to truly understand black music is an obvious example of racial essentialism. It is difficult to know for certain if these are Walker’s personal views. If they are, what would she make of Adam Gussow who, unlike Traynor, enjoys an easy apprenticeship relationship with his two black masters? From Walker’s perspective, would this mitigate Adam’s whiteness? What is more compelling about this narrative than the question of racial essentialism, is the way Traynor repeatedly engages Gracie Mae in an effort to learn the *real*, autobiographical stories behind her song. For Traynor, this is the key to unlocking the powerful feelings inside of the song that are heretofore unavailable to him. Throughout the story Gracie Mae proves unwilling to share her personal stories with Traynor, leading him to speculate about her life and, over time, to create his own version of her biography. During one of Traynor’s visits at Christmas, he tries to persuade Gracie Mae to tell him the meaning behind the song that has made him so famous:

I done sung that song seem like a million times this year, he said. I sung it on the Grand Ole Opry, I sung it on the Ed Sullivan show. I sung it on Mike Douglas, I sung it at the Cotton Bowl, the Orange Bowl....I’ve sung it and sung it, and I’m making forty thousand dollars a day offa it, and you know what, I don’t have the faintest notion what the song means. Whatchumean, what do it mean? It mean what it says. All I could think was: These suckers is making forty thousand a *day* offa my song and now they gonna come back and try to swindle me out of the

original thousand. It's just a song, I said. Cagey. When you fool around with a lot of no count mens you sing a bunch of 'em. I shrugged. (8)

Gracie Mae purposely conceals the true meaning of the song, and the autobiographical details of her life that inspired it, in part because she wants to maintain a degree of possession over her own work—after all, she signed the rights away for a relative pittance—but also because she believes that both Traynor and his audience will never fully understand the song anyway. Some of this is due to their race, and the predominantly white audience's inability to notice that Traynor's version of her song is a mere copy also motivates Gracie Mae to hold on tightly to her personal stories. These details are the key to her unique musical expression, which drives her sense of self, so her silence serves as protest. Traynor is convinced that he is a perpetual outsider whose work has little meaning without a deeper understanding of the music's context. If he cannot tell an audience or a journalist what the song that made him famous means, his contribution to American popular music is marginal, at best. Traynor *needs* the apprentice relationship to give his work and life meaning. Gracie Mae's resistance to Traynor's attempts to affiliate with her and legitimize himself in the process provides the dramatic tension in this story.

As the years pass, Traynor writes letters to Gracie Mae asking her for the meaning behind the song, but she will not relent. When he sees her several years later, he confronts her with bits of the “truths” behind the song that he has pieced together over time:

You wrote that song while you was still on the farm, didn't you, or was it right after you left? You had somebody spying on me? I asked. You and Bessie Smith got into a fight over it once, he said. You *is* been spying on me! But I don't know what the fight was about, he said. Just like I don't know what happened to your second husband. Your first one died in the Texas electric chair. Did you know

that? Your third one beat you up, stole your touring costumes and your car and retired with a chorine to Tuskegee. He laughed. He's still there. (13)

The real-life Thornton was only 11 years old when Bessie Smith died in 1937. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that Thornton and Smith would have fought over any song, let alone the real-life “Hound Dog,” written fourteen years after Smith’s death. Ma Rainey, on the other hand, was in a real-life apprentice relationship of sorts with Smith, who joined Moses Stokes’ minstrel troupe in 1912 while Rainey—still married to Pa Rainey—was a member (Barlow 165). Smith did not stay with Stokes’ troupe for long, and she went on to even greater commercial success than Rainey enjoyed. The invocation of Smith’s name makes sense in this context, as she became friends with Rainey and was certainly influenced by her recording two of her songs: “Moonshine Blues” and “Boll Weevil Blues” (Barlow 165-166). Working in the troupe with Rainey also gave Smith an opportunity to hone her voice and performance style. In “1955,” instead of seeking musical mentoring from Gracie Mae, Traynor desires a cultural education that will help him to understand his hit song. Despite Traynor’s wealth and fame, he is insecure and feels that his version of the never-named song is inferior to Gracie Mae’s.

Gracie Mae’s silent protests go unheeded, while Traynor digs out the details of her life. Rather than becoming angry, Gracie Mae reacts with pity to Traynor’s invasion of her privacy, as she knows Traynor cannot have the thing he wants most: the ability to express himself musically in a so-called authentic manner. After Traynor takes Gracie Mae on the Johnny Carson show to introduce his audience to the black woman who wrote and originally sang his most popular song, and they respond with polite indifference, Traynor becomes enraged. Gracie Mae offers, “I can see this pisses him off. But I smile out there at ’em. Imagine squealing for twenty years and not knowing why you’re squealing? No more sense of endings and beginnings than

hogs” (18). Her reception at the Johnny Carson show confirms Gracie Mae’s suspicion that Traynor’s audience is ignorant about black people’s contributions to American popular music, particularly given the story’s 1950s setting. Traynor’s audience’s reaction suggests that they do not understand that rock and roll evolved out of the blues and rhythm and blues, styles of music featuring predominantly black performers. Instead the audience members demonstrate their love for the secondhand white product.

At the end of the story, Traynor dies fat and alone, and Gracie Mae admonishes his mourning fans. She laments, “They was crying and crying and didn’t even know what they was crying for. One day this is going to be a pitiful country, I thought” (20). For Gracie Mae, Traynor’s inability to understand the ways in which the unique struggles of black American women, and black Americans more generally, inform the blues, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll is reflected in his fans’ blind, uncritical, hero-worship. Traynor at least knew that his work was limited, but his fans did not even notice. Gracie Mae purposely held Traynor at bay—refusing to share her life story with him and rejecting him as her apprentice—as a way of asserting her power in a larger culture that did not respect her as a person or an artist.

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Like Traynor in “1955,” the unnamed narrator in “Sonny’s Blues” struggles to understand the meaning behind someone else’s musical expression. However, rather than trying to decipher a rhythm and blues song, he courts an apprentice relationship with his brother in order to make a connection in the language Sonny speaks most fluently: jazz. Strikingly, the barrier to that understanding does not occur due to racial difference; it is instead cultivated through the differences between the socio-cultural orientations of the two brothers. At the beginning of the story, the narrator, a high school math teacher, acknowledges the anger his

young black male students feel at their constriction in a racist culture. He states, “These boys, now, were living as we’d been living then and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage” (171). Sonny is one of these young men. He too is angry about the world that devalues him because he is black and poor. His way of handling his alienation is by shooting heroin. The narrator, who also bears the burden of racism, manages his pain by working hard and striving for middle-class respectability. While home on a furlough from the army for their mother’s funeral years earlier, he is dumbfounded when a teenaged Sonny tells him he wants to play jazz piano for a living. The narrator states:

Well, the word had never before sounded as heavy, as real, as it sounded that afternoon in Sonny's mouth. I just looked at him and I was probably frowning a real frown by this time. I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor. It seemed—beneath him, somehow. I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called ‘good-time people.’ ‘Are you *serious*?’ ‘Hell, yes, I'm serious.’ He looked more helpless than ever, and annoyed, and deeply hurt. I suggested, helpfully: ‘You mean—like Louis Armstrong?’ His face closed as though I'd struck him. ‘No. I'm not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap.’ ‘Well, look, Sonny, I'm sorry, don't get mad. I just don't altogether get it, that's all. Name somebody—you know, a jazz musician you admire.’ ‘Bird.’ ‘Who?’ ‘Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you nothing in the goddamn army?’ (183-184)

After this exchange, Sonny retreats into silence. He goes within and retreats into silence to protect his fragile sense of self, as he is desperately afraid of being mocked. He accepts that he is having a musical conversation that his brother does not understand. And even though they are brothers, Sonny is skeptical about what he sees as his brother's old-fashioned, middle-class aspirations. After all, the first jazz musician the narrator names is Louis Armstrong, who during the early-mid 1950s, the timeframe of the story, was viewed as an Uncle Tom-figure and a mere entertainer by the younger generation who preferred the updated sounds and rebellious attitudes of bebop musicians like Charlie Parker. There are only seven years dividing the brothers, but a gulf exists between their value systems. Withholding information about his hopes and dreams allows Sonny to maintain control and power over his subjectivity.

After the exchange with his brother, who then reports back to army duty, Sonny moves in with the narrator's new wife, Isabel, and her middle-class family. Sonny anticipates a lack of understanding by the adults around him, so he retreats into his own musical world. Since Isabel's family has a piano, Sonny obsessively practices after school, after dinner, and on weekends. The narrator states:

Well, I really don't know how they stood it. Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them—naturally. They began, in a way, to be afflicted by this presence that was living in their home....They certainly couldn't throw him out. Neither did they dare to make a great scene about that piano because even they dimly sensed, as I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life.  
(187)

This music, a wordless protest, is a way for Sonny to survive as a poor black man in America, while Gracie Mae Still, a black woman, survives by holding back the stories behind her music. In each case, these characters resist others who wish to crack the secret code behind their musical expression. Then finally, after Sonny is confronted by Isabel and her family for skipping school and taking their hospitality for granted, he disappears, leaving Isabel and her family in a literal silence. The narrator states,

The silence of the next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began. One morning, before she went to work, Isabel was in his room for something and she suddenly realized that all of his records were gone. And she knew for certain that he was gone. And he was. He went as far as the navy would carry him. (188)

While, at first, Sonny's silence came in the form of musical sounds instead of words, later his resistance is marked by a silence made possible by his absence.

At the end of the story, Sonny invites his older brother to watch him sit in with a jazz band at a Greenwich Village jazz club. The narrator acquiesces, sensing that this might be his opportunity to be brought more fully into Sonny's musical world, and by extension his life.

When the narrator and Sonny arrive, they are greeted by Sonny's bandleader, Creole:

"Hello, boy" said the voice and an enormous black man, much older than Sonny or myself, erupted out of all that atmospheric lighting and put an arm around Sonny's shoulder. "I been sitting right here," he said, "waiting for you." He had a big voice, too, and heads in the darkness turned toward us....Creole shook my hand. "I'm glad to meet you, son," he said and it was clear that he was glad to meet me there, for Sonny's sake. (195)



The narrator's feeling that Creole wanted him there for Sonny's sake speaks directly to the insight that Creole has into Sonny's character—specifically, Sonny's need for his brother's love and acceptance as a person and an artist. The narrator also knows that seeing his brother in his own element, among his musician friends, will help him to learn what motivates Sonny as a musician. As the narrator is introduced to each of the band members, the fact that Sonny is not only part of a world that he knows little about, but is also a star in that world, is reinforced. As the narrator states, "Here, I was in Sonny's world. Or, rather: his kingdom. Here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood" (196). The narrator is happy to recede into the background, as doing so gives Sonny the space to express himself artistically and it allows the narrator to learn about music from his brother.

It is here where the narrator begins an unconventional apprenticeship with Sonny that instead of leading to musical mastery, causes the narrator to gain knowledge of, and appreciation for art. As the narrator listens to his brother play the music he loves, he learns a tremendous amount about the art of music-making and the deeper meaning behind the listening experience:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations....I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do. (196-197)

In "1955," what is at stake is the artist's ability to understand what the music means culturally, as well as his or her opportunity to experience commercial success while performing the music. "Sonny's Blues" addresses the former; the narrator is unable to perform the music, but he

eventually understands its cultural impact and personal meaning for Sonny. The narrator recognizes that this musical “battle” between musician and instrument serves as a metaphor for Sonny’s personal struggle with heroin addiction, and his and the narrator’s larger struggle as black men living in a racist culture. Traynor, alternatively, can perform the music, but he cannot understand it because he is unable to connect with the blues master—Willie Mae.

And Sonny hadn’t been near a piano for over a year. And he wasn’t on much better terms with his life, not the life that stretched before him now. He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked, marked time, started again; then seemed to have found a direction, panicked again, got stuck. And the face I saw on Sonny I’d never seen before. Everything had been burned out of it, and, at the same time, things usually hidden were being burned in, by the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there. (197)

Sonny’s performance harks back to Ursa Corregidora’s vocals after her hysterectomy. Here is the same trope of the physically and emotionally damaged musician whose sound is marked by scars of struggle. Their sound might not be aesthetically pleasing, but in light of their trauma the work is more honest and truthful.

Towards the end of the set the narrator is taken aback by Sonny’s tentative and self-conscious performance: “Yet, watching Creole’s face as they neared the end of the first set, I had the feeling that something had happened, something I hadn’t heard” (197). When the band plays “Am I Blue,” a song written by Tin Pan Alley composers Harry Akst and Grant Clarke in 1929 that was made famous by Ethel Waters and covered by Billie Holiday, the narrator finally sees

the very best of Sonny, and the power of musical expression and its ability to heal both the maker and the listener (*AllMusic*).

While meeting Sonny's bandmates and seeing Sonny celebrated in his central role in the band helps the narrator to fully respect his brother as a man and a musician, it is the extended musical performance at the end of the story that allows the narrator to understand jazz as a communal experience.

The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old. Then they all came together again, and Sonny was part of the family again. I could tell this from his face. He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. (198)

This performance employs call and response, and can evoke a blues feeling while serving as a metaphor for the socio-cultural blues of young black men in 1950s America, as well as the existential sadness experienced by a young Sonny. It also highlights a key way that jazz is different from the blues: Jazz is normally played by a band, while the blues usually expresses the singular vision of an artist alienated from the larger society. Sonny's involvement in a jazz family is crucial to his development as an artist and as a man:

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction,

madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. (198)

This passage speaks to the idea that at the heart of jazz is the blues. As Elijah Wald states, “Blues and jazz have been intertwined since before either style had a name” (“The Blues” 81). In this story, the blues feeling is derived from Sonny’s struggles caused by personal problems and systemic racism and classism.

At the end of the story, the connection between the brothers is clear: “There was a long pause, while they talked up there in the indigo light and after awhile I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded” (199).

In “Sonny’s Blues,” Sonny silently protests America’s racist power structure. The meaning behind the music-making is of paramount importance, with the narrator hoping to use the apprentice relationship as a vehicle to getting Sonny to uncover his autobiographical narrative. Sonny too wants to connect, but he refuses to give up pieces of himself to be seen. Instead he participates in a dance with his brother who wishes to possess his story, moving closer to him and then away again, protective of his selfhood. And through this concealment Sonny takes back his power and asserts his personal agency.

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The novel *Mojo Hand: An Orphic Tale* by J.J. Phillips focuses on Eunice Prideaux, an 18-year-old, black, upper-middle-class debutante who leaves her home in San Francisco to travel to Raleigh, North Carolina to meet older black blues guitarist Thomas Jefferson Blacksnake

Brown. Eunice is also light-skinned, and on more than one occasion she is mistaken for white in the novel. Prideaux first hears Blacksnake on “Bakershop Blues,” a 78 r.p.m. record that she listens to while drinking heavily with her friend the night before her cotillion. Blacksnake’s Orphic voice and guitar playing attracts her as in the classical Greek Orpheus myth in which he plays the lyre and sings so beautifully that his music moves all living things, even drowning out the Sirens’ sinister song. When his beloved wife Eurydice is stung by a poisonous viper on their wedding day and ends up in the Underworld, Orpheus offers music so sad and moving that Hades and Persephone allow him to bring Eurydice back with him. The only condition: Orpheus must walk ahead of Eurydice and not look back at her until they have both reached sunlight. Orpheus lets his enthusiasm get the better of him, and looks back at Eurydice. She is forced to stay in the Underworld—this time forever. It is important to note that the cotillion is the social event where a girl of marriage age is introduced to society. The debut is the beginning of a process that should culminate in a wedding, so Eunice leaving home on the day of her cotillion is similar to Eurydice’s death on her wedding day.

Eunice plays guitar, so it makes sense that she would seek a musical mentor in Blacksnake. However, it soon becomes obvious that Eunice has an attraction to Blacksnake that is confusing to her and culminates in a sexual relationship. It is rare to see depictions of black female guitarists in blues narratives, so Eunice’s character is unique; however, the gender dynamic between her and Blacksnake (and really all of the men in the story) is familiar. Eunice is objectified and victimized by virtually all of the men in the novel, and an important part of her journey includes learning to stand up for herself. When Eunice is in Blacksnake’s presence, particularly early on, it is as if she is hypnotized. In fact, when she first meets him, she finds herself both attracted to and repulsed by his body: “He was extremely thin, his skin mere tissue

paper stretched on a rack of bones; it looked as though if he dared to articulate a joint he would rip like a spiderweb. He opened his full lips to speak, and there sparkling in the light was a complete set of gilt teeth, and set directly in the middle of the two front gold caps was a small diamond” (8). As Blacksnake greets Eunice, she realizes that she cannot concentrate on anything except Blacksnake’s mouth: “All of Eunice’s strength was being drawn out of her and into the sparkling diamond in his teeth” (8). Her mind—and sometimes her body—wants her to get as far away from Blacksnake as possible, but she keeps returning to him. As the story continues, it becomes clearer that she is as enamored with the idea of living the life of a blueswoman as she is interested in Blacksnake. In this sense, the blues community serves as a collective Orphic figure: The entire blues tradition—featuring men and women who both play the blues and lead lives filled with struggle—sings a song that is beautiful and enticing enough to drown out the Sirens:

Until this night she had been outside of the cage, but now she had joined them forever. The wizened jiving man had been the instrument by which she acknowledged her kinship to him and all those others who daily were squeezed into nonexistence, and nightly, in the ripe heat, violently asserted their being. His music was the music of such nights, the music of the evening resurrection of an entire people. (17)

Eunice sees the blues as a collective experience among black people, so by becoming part of a blues community, she is able to have a connection with other blacks. Her inclusion in the cage is a way for Eunice to construct a new autobiography. By entering the Raleigh blues community and aligning herself with Blacksnake, she is able to re-invent herself as the blueswoman reflected in the many blues songs about (and sometimes by) women whose men have done them wrong:

She had been looking for this night and knew that by her verbal ascension she could never return to her former mode of existence. She knows that now it was for her to jive, cry, and fall in the night, yet she did not know how, for she had not been born to it. Never had she been forced to her knees to beg for the continuation of her existence, nor fight for both God and the devil ripping at her soul; never had she been forced to fight to move in the intricate web of scuffle; never had she been forced to fight a woman for the right to a man, nor fought out love with a man. She had never fought for existence; now she would have to. (17)

This list of authenticating behaviors that are necessary for one to fully participate in the world of the blues, relies largely on stereotype. For Eunice, in order to be a blues musician, one must “jive, cry, and fall in the night”; however, she experiences anxiety due to her class position—after all, she was not “born to it” (17). Eunice sees blues expression as the domain of the black working class. She also suggests that in order to join the club, she must be prepared to beg for her life on her hands and knees, fight the internal warring forces of God versus the Devil, have a physical altercation with a woman over a man, and struggle and argue with a man in a love relationship. All of these ideas are the stuff of blues lyrics, so it is fitting that italicized blues lyrics appear throughout the novel. These lyrics are sometimes sung by someone in the narrative; other times they exist on the page as a way of introducing a new part of the story, almost like an epigraph. The lyrics also work the way one might tell a story to a friend, like expository discourse. Of course, exposition is generally used to give background information on the setting and characters before the actual story begins, so it is frequently biographical in nature. These lyrics, therefore, work as mini-narratives that represent mythologized blues self-expression.

Early in the story, during one of his performances, Blacksnake invites Eunice onstage. It is the only moment in the story where their interaction is reflective of a traditional blues apprenticeship. Even though Blacksnake does not provide music lessons for Eunice or ask her to join his band, he is an experienced performer who, in the master role, encourages his apprentice to perform in front of his audience for the first time:

Eunice picked up the guitar and stared at it. She couldn't think of anything to do and people began to get impatient. 'Get with it, baby,' they were saying. 'Hurry up, we wants music....' Suddenly it came out and she could not stop it; her fingers moved and her voice cried against her will, giving birth to the song.

*Mmmm, blacksnake crawling 'round my room, mmmm, blacksnake crawling 'round my room, won't some sweet daddy come and get this blacksnake soon. And it flew on. Mmmm, it must have been a bedbug, 'cause a chinch couldn't bite me that hard, but somebody told me it was a blacksnake come in from the front yard.*

She quickly looked up to see where Blacksnake was, and he was standing behind her doubled over with laughter. (26-27)

Eunice's "naming" of Blacksnake in a song is a familiar blues trope, where a lyric invokes the name of an individual as in a conversation. He responds favorably to her tune; and hypnotized by the diamond between his teeth, she makes up another song: "*You black and evil, you make me so mad, 'till I don't know what to do, I would go stand on the corner and find me somebody cripple and blind who wouldn't act to me like you do*" (27). To which Blacksnake responds: "*Listen, baby, don't, please don't do me no wrong, I's just a little old blacksnake, and I don't mean no harm*" (27). This musical conversation, the call and response, is another standard feature of the blues tradition. It can be musical—between two instruments, between a voice and an



instrument—or it can be between two voices on stage. This call and response can also be represented in the relationship between the master and apprentice.

Eunice struggles against her curious attraction to Blacksnake, engaging in a frustrating push and pull dance. Right after the performance, she leaves the juke joint and rushes into the city streets, ending up eventually in the mud outside of Blacksnake's window:

‘What in the goddam hell is you doing in the mud, woman? You’s stone drunk.’

Eunice looked dully about. It was Blacksnake. ‘I been looking all over for you, you done left your pocketbook, and I figured you might be needing it, so I went to find you. But, shit, you out here laying under my window in the mud. You must be crazy.’ Eunice wiped the mud and tears from her mouth and face. ‘Why don’t you just kiss my ass and leave me alone!’ she screamed, and fought to drop back to the ground. (28)

At the beginning of their relationship there are multiple interactions like this one between Eunice and Blacksnake. Eunice engages in these almost hysterical behaviors in part because she is under some sort of Orphic spell, but also because she wants to actively engage the blues world as she imagines it. In this world, men and women engage with each other in a highly emotional manner—drinking and warring with one another. Questions about Eunice's racial identity cause Blacksnake to move with caution and allow Eunice more latitude in her public displays of drunkenness. Eunice is not white, but it is important to note that her skin color and class do afford her privileges that a darker-skinned, working-class woman might not enjoy. Her class and skin color aid her in her quest to become a blueswoman. After all, she is able to afford a trip from San Francisco to Raleigh to track down a blues musician she heard one time on a record;

and because she can pass for white, she is able to exhibit certain behaviors for which a darker-skinned black woman might be ostracized by those in the white power structure.

Right after this scene, Eunice is picked up by the police who assume she is a drunk, white prostitute. The male officers admonish her for being in the black section of town, and assume she must just “like a black dick,” but they do not physically harm her (29). It is likely that the police would have treated Eunice differently—perhaps more violently—if she appeared to be phenotypically black. The officers arrest Eunice and put her in a black cell as punishment. She spends several days in jail with other black women; and when she returns to freedom several days later, Blacksnake’s harmonica-playing sidekick X.L. quips, “Well, you sure as shit is one of us now” (60). Eunice’s decisions to leave her comfortable middle-class lifestyle behind, to track Blacksnake down at his boarding house and then refuse to speak to him, and to get drunk and spend time in jail—making herself a target of Blacksnake’s scorned wife—are all ways in which Eunice rewrites the details of her autobiography to fit into Blacksnake’s world. Through her early adventures in the novel, she turns herself into a woman she believes will be more legible to Blacksnake. In this way, Eunice’s approach to autobiography is invested in mythologized self-invention rather than objective reality. Of course, given the novel’s subtitle, this is only fitting.

Eunice sees Blacksnake as a model for what she could possibly be, if she were to learn from him. Rather than a sheltered and inexperienced young woman, she might become through her apprenticeship with Blacksnake a stronger, more confident woman who is battle-tested and able to find and express her voice. As Eunice watches Blacksnake walk across the room, she recognizes in him a sense of pride that she wishes to cultivate in herself:

Then he got up and walked to the closet. And somehow, just then, she could see the proudness in his body. It terrified her. It was not a youthful proudness like

hers—green and unknowing—it was a battered pride that almost unwillingly showed itself. It was the proudness of having weathered innumerable battles and uncountable years. It was the sinewy proudness of raw being, showing the stress grandly, not yielding, so instead of dissolution the fibers tightened around one another and the being moved as a whole. He seemed almost ashamed to let it show, for he moved slowly. But it was like a cat stalking its prey and when the moment came he would strike swiftly as a cat and then calmly return to the slow stalking of the sun with his music. (6)

Eunice plays close attention to Blacksnake's movements. Her observations are erotically charged and suggest that his power, born of vast worldly experience, is embodied. A similar treatment occurs in Gussow's memoir, where he focuses on the bodies of his masters. As Gussow admits in the preface to *Mr. Satan's Apprentice*, "The youthful white blues apprentice imaged on these pages takes notice of the bodies of his two older black masters at various points in ways that deserve to be called erotic. I did not expect that dynamic to surface when I sat down to write, but I allowed it and I'm okay with it" (xii). Gussow too reads his masters' bodies as thrilling sites of hard-earned power. In this passage, Blacksnake is positioned as the Orpheus-figure whose presence and music are so powerful that he can lazily and innocuously "stalk" the sun one moment and attack it with ferocity the next. However, he has the power to attack the sun. In fact, the sun is frequently represented as an oppressive force in this story. This could be because the mythic Orpheus is known to possibly be the son of Apollo. It could also be because after Orpheus attempts to rescue Eurydice from the Underworld, he fails to follow instructions and eagerly looks back at her while he is in the sun and she is still in the darkness.

Instead of finding her voice, as Eunice enters into a volatile romantic and sexual relationship with Blacksnake, she begins to lose herself. The night they get together, Eunice plays the guitar and sings multiple songs, some sexually suggestive, some humorous, and Blacksnake supports her musical self-expression, but over time he becomes distrustful of her, and accuses her of sexual infidelity. Unlike Gracie Mae Still in “1955,” the only other black female character in this chapter, Eunice is repeatedly sexually objectified by men she does not know, as well as men who are closer to her, such as Blacksnake, X.L., and Pullum, her employer at the Raleigh Palace Bar. When Eunice first arrives in Raleigh, she is even the victim of sexual violence. A man she meets in a beer parlor takes her to meet Blacksnake and then follows her back to her boarding house room and forces himself on her sexually.

Other men on the streets ogle her and repeatedly try to sleep with her; she is employed at a bar with lodging upstairs where the female staff work as prostitutes with the customers; and even Blacksnake, her lover, speaks about her body parts in a crude manner in front of X.L.: “‘Yeah, all them womens is so fine and they worries my mind, but you knows...’ He laughed and poked at her breasts. ‘I just might get sharp for Eunice here one of these nights, and if I do, I let you be my judge, I be having this woman wishing to her shoe soles she hadn’t never met me. And if I was to put my mojo on her, shit, she be the craziest milk cow ever been hit’” (61). Here Blacksnake brags about his sexual prowess, another popular blues lyrical theme. He talks about the prospect of having a sexual relationship with Eunice, and what profound impact that would have on her, in future terms. Yet his confidence that his “mojo” has the power to make Eunice crazy is related to his past experiences, presumably making other women lose their heads while in romantic relationships with him. In this moment, Blacksnake shares his backstory or autobiography with X.L. and Eunice.

Eunice accepts her mistreatment by the men in the novel, as a natural part of the blues experience: “She knew she was falling into some deep abyss but dared not incite her mind again to the sense of innocent mystery in this new life she was living for fear she would completely succumb to the hard dictates of it” (102). Blacksnake and Eunice play their roles within the “My Man Done Me Wrong” blues lyric paradigm perfectly. Blacksnake is the master, the wizened bluesman who has put his mojo on more women than he can count; Eunice is the spellbound woman with little personal agency. Her approach to this new life counters her parents’ approach. As the omniscient narrator offers:

Since her parents had built and waged life within their framework, in order to obvert it fully she, too, had to build or find a counterstructure and exist within it at all costs. The difference lay in that theirs was predicated on a pseudo-rationality whereas the rational was neither integral nor peripheral in hers; she did not consider it at all. To her the excesses of the heart had to be able to run rampant and find their own boundaries, exhausting themselves in plaguing hope. (109)

As Eunice and Blacksnake spend more time together, they inevitably come up against their individual boundaries. As Eunice leaves the house every day to go to work, Blacksnake becomes convinced that his young girlfriend is seeing other men. And soon Eunice longs for her freedom: “Every day now Eunice expanded to the freedom of being outside, even for a moment, and she looked, as did Blacksnake, for any excuse to leave for a while. Every day when she was away she cursed herself for going back to a man with a diamond in his teeth” (103).

At the end of the novel, after Eunice and Blacksnake eventually part, a pregnant Eunice flees by train to Lake Charles, Louisiana. She then travels to South Bay to find Blacksnake. Even though he is there to see his girlfriend Sally Mae, Blacksnake flirts with Eunice and happily

takes whatever money she is willing to give him. In these interactions, he acts simultaneously as the Orpheus-figure and the mythical poisonous viper. In the end, Sally Mae kills Blacksnake after he goes to see Eunice one too many times. After finding out that Blacksnake is dead, Eunice sits on her bed and begins to play the guitar: “*They says when a man gets the blues, he catch a train and rides, and when a woman gets the blues, she hang her head and cries, but when this woman gets the blues, she puts on her black wings and flies*” (177). She then makes the decision to find Blacksnake’s mother. As Eunice is poised to become a mother herself, her connection with her lover’s mother—and her baby’s grandmother—is crucial, as it gives her a sense of belonging to a community of empowered mothers. Eunice finds herself when she makes the decision to fly instead of run (177). She has learned how to stand proud, as she once observed in Blacksnake, and she has turned the blues struggles she courted in order to legitimize her blues expression into a resolve to not only survive but to grow stronger and finally find her voice.

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In *Mister Satan’s Apprentice*, Adam Gussow details his journey from young, white, prep-school blues harmonica aspirant to experienced Harlem busker to successful touring blues artist. Adam tells his story as a dual narrative where one thread begins in 1974 when he is 16 years old, and the other begins in 1985, when at 27 he meets his first black blues master on 118<sup>th</sup> Street and Amsterdam Avenue: fellow harp player Nat Riddles. According to Adam, Nat saw something in his playing immediately: “You’ve got the music in you,” he said, selecting another harp. “All you need are a few of the subtleties” (11). And here is where Adam’s first blues apprenticeship begins—with a black bluesman on a Harlem street corner who is only a few years Adam’s senior but is more confident and accomplished:

We stood on the corner of 118th Street and Amsterdam in the cold wind for forty minutes while he recapitulated the stylistic evolution of American blues harmonica. John Lee Williamson— the first Sonny Boy, not to be confused with Rice Miller— was our honored forefather. You wanna build a mansion, you gotta pour some concrete. Little Walter and Junior Wells were blowing straight John Lee stuff before amplifiers came along and shook everything up. Kim Wilson of the Fabulous Thunderbirds is an awesome motherfucker and blows some shit that would spin your head. Not to mention Sugar Blue, the baddest street blues harmonica player ever to come out of New York. (11)

The first, earlier thread of Adam's narrative is of interest given his awkward search from a young age for a blues mentor. As a high school student he naively sought out a school janitor as a possible candidate because he was older and black: "Mr. Foreman, as far as I could tell, knew nothing about blues. He didn't sing while he was working or play an instrument. So he was a dead end" (22). However, this section will mainly explore Adam's experiences as a man in his late twenties working under two separate black, male blues masters, with a special focus on his collaboration with Mr. Satan. Adam focuses on the interracial nature of his blues apprenticeships. As he notes in his preface to his memoir, much of the text questions his own legitimacy as a blues artist. While many of the acceptable markers of blues authenticity in Adam's narrative involve race, other important elements include class and geographical background. In Adam's introduction, Nat's race is foregrounded:

He'd been president of the student government at Long Island University, a Tae Kwon Do adept, a trophy-winning disco dancer, a graphic artist at Pratt. He'd freebased cocaine in the days before crack. He was perpetually on the verge of

becoming the blues world's Next Big Thing. A young black harp-player with the Sound. White guys who loved blues couldn't get enough of him. "Nat!" they'd yell. "Hey, Nat!" He called all waitresses "darling" and made the older ones melt where they stood. He was my master. One of two. (10)

It is important to mention not only that Nat is talented and highly regarded, but that his blackness makes him even more attractive to white men who long for so-called authentic blues. Nat becomes Adam's teacher, giving him harmonica lessons, and he invites Adam to busk with him and his guitarist Charlie. A week after his first street gig with Nat and Charlie, Adam runs into the duo while strolling with a girlfriend. Nat shares his geographical origins with the crowd, knowing that region plays an important role in blues authenticity:

He was preaching to a small crowd, telling them how the blues was American music, Southern music, and how he and Charlie were from the South— Charlie from southern Staten Island and he, of course, from the South Bronx. "If we don't have the blues," he laughed, "don't nobody have the blues. Ain't that right, Charlie?" (17)

Nat adopts a humorous tone, but he is also working wryly within the contours of blues legitimacy. Even though Nat and Charlie are from New York City, far from the American South, they lay claim to the blues not because of the joke they tell about being from the South of Staten Island and the Bronx, but because they come from working-class, economically depressed neighborhoods. And for many, the authentic blues is a music produced by those oppressed by racism, patriarchy—in the case of the classic blueswomen, and capitalism. Nat and Charlie "rewrite" their autobiographies to include alternative origin stories. They may not be from the American South, but they face the same class oppression experienced by other historical



bluesmen. Nat hands the mic to Adam after he gives him a Heineken: “Don't be playing like no white boy, now,” he admonishes, putting on a black Southern accent as he waved his beer. “Nooooo. Show the peoples how well Uncle Nat done taught you, son” (17). Nat imitates a “black Southern accent” in order to fit into stereotypical ideas about blues legitimacy, while simultaneously critiquing the blues authenticity paradigm (17). Furthering the stereotype, he refers to himself as Uncle Nat, inverting the popular terms in the antebellum master-slave lexicon—older black male slaves were frequently called “Uncle.” Paradoxically, in this 1985 context, the blues *master* calls himself Uncle Nat conflating his assumed black Southern blues persona with that of a black Southern slave. Given Nat’s powerful position in his apprenticeship with Adam, his self-representation as a disempowered slave is striking. Nat’s contradictory self-portrayal makes some sense, however, given that much of the early part of this memoir focuses on Adam’s self-consciousness about his race and what that means for his inclusion in the contemporary American blues scene. After all, many blues scholars, critics, and fans see blues music as essentially black, a style of music evolving out of the field hollers and work songs of black American slaves. An example from the childhood thread of the Adam’s narrative is illustrative here. As he is learning to play the harmonica, he equates playing well with being black:

Blues was harder. You had to wrestle with the airstream inside your mouth, lasso and choke it, feel the sadness in your throat, make the thing cry and wail. It had something to do with being a black guy. Tony “Little Sun” Glover was white—the back-cover photo had him squinting at the camera, a cigarette dangling from his lips— but every other picture in *Blues Harp* was of a black guy, either smiling or sucking on a harmonica: James Cotton, Jimmy Reed, Little Walter, Sonny Boy

Williamson. Sonny Boy was standing outdoors between a guitar player and a drummer, glaring at the camera like an old buzzard, blowing harp into a big chrome mike. (18)

This focus on his whiteness continues through the first section of the book. Adam attempts to cheer up Nat, who has endured a particularly brutal stretch of days driving his taxi, by playing for him on the street in front of Dan Lynch's, a popular blues bar: "'Now who taught you all that stuff?' he said, beaming. I stopped playing and deadpanned in a breathless earnest whiteboy voice. 'Why, you did, Nat.'" (24). Adam once again signals his whiteness the first time he sees his second master, blues guitarist Satan (Sterling Magee), play:

Helen and I stood there, watching. I was transfixed. The groove was deathless.

Three angels had descended like messengers from another galaxy. Grits and greens and smoking-hot barbecue. Rock me baby, all night long. Heart fluttering, I fingered the battered harp in my hip pocket. Who had the nerve to pull it out? I suddenly felt very young and very white. (32-33).

Adam's ideas about blackness are reflected in the *black* blues performance elements—implicit and explicit. Even though later in the text Adam asserts, "Groove isn't a black or white thing," he racializes much of his playing in the early sections of the memoir. As a teenager he decides that the blues has "something to do with being a black guy" and in other sections he describes his attempts to emulate the techniques of the black harp players he admires. These renderings leave the reader no choice but to think that, to the narrator's mind, the groove, much like soul food, is inherently black (107). The music conjures "Grits and greens and smoking-hot barbecue," foods enjoyed by plenty of Southerners—black and white alike—though Adam conflates them with so-called blackness. For the narrator, these foreign black elements place his access as a white male

to the world in peril. Adam needs to roam freely through the “black” world, as his legitimacy as a blues artist depends on it. And the second time he sits in with Satan, he works to find a musical way into this exclusive black world:

Once again a crowd flowed to a stop, surrounding us. I did what I always did: try to make my harmonica sound as though an older black man— Nat, Little Walter, James Cotton— were playing it. My throat ached. I worked my flatted thirds hard, yanking them into the bittersweet spot between major and minor. Every note out here had to cut deep. (45)

It is striking here that Adam consciously attempts to sound like “an older black man,” given that his first mentor was around his age. And it was Nat who mentioned Kim Wilson of the Fabulous Thunderbirds, a white male harmonica player. Even though Wilson is an example of a successful white blues harp player, Adam attempts to reinvent himself, at least aurally, as an “older black man” (45). This tendency most likely has something to do with his early blues idols being black, and certainly older, by the time he discovered them. Satan is also an “older black man” from Mississippi, with an impressive blues pedigree (“King Curtis, Marvin Gaye— all them dead bastards played with me. Etta James, Little Anthony and the Imperials, Jordy and the Starlighters, Noble 'Thin Man' Watts. Not one of 'em worth a so-and-so”), making the relationship all the more attractive to the narrator (55).

After this performance, Satan and Adam’s new musical relationship is fomented as a suit-wearing manager type from the Harlem mall next to their makeshift stage invites Satan and Adam into his office:

“Here he come,” the guy said. “Sit on down, Satan. Ease your feet.” He outlined grand but obscure plans. Everybody loves a salt and-pepper act. Y'all sound too

good. The Apollo is waiting. “Well,” he finally said, rustling a few papers. “Satan and I have some business to discuss. I’ll be calling you soon.” (46)

This businessman suggests that the interracial nature of the duo will capture an audience’s attention. As in the apprenticeship relationship in “1955,” this collaboration is informed by racial dynamics. Adam, as an individual, is scrutinized on the Harlem and Times Square Street corners due to his whiteness and his choice to play the blues, while Satan and Adam, the duo, are an attraction in part because of their unusual interracial dynamic. Adam is aware of the uniqueness of their act, particularly given the time period and the location for their busking. Not only is he aware of his duo’s sometimes incredulous reception, but he also welcomes the challenge of winning black audiences over:

The beauty of working the streets is the flicker of surprise that passes across the faces of people who suddenly lift their heads and catch sight of you, the two of you. What are you doing here? I am singing “Sweet Home Chicago” and Mister Satan is hurling lightning bolts; on this song he is backing me up, shadowing me so subtly that our two voices have become one. We are entrancing you, disturbing you, rephrasing an old question. You are looking at us and thinking: Huck and Jim. This is not how we see ourselves. We don’t see ourselves. We play ourselves. (57)

While it appears on the surface that Adam means that they represent themselves authentically through music, the choice of the word “play” can have multiple meanings. Obviously, they are playing instruments; to play also evokes childhood. However, the word “play” in this context might have a theatrical meaning. Satan and Adam are performing their roles as blues mentor and mentee. Just as Adam, individually, self-consciously plays the harmonica as if he were an “older

black man” in order to claim an authentic blues autobiography, Satan and Adam together play their parts as blues mentor and mentee as authentically as they can (45). Nonetheless, the members of the duo are still *playing* roles. The Harlem natives who eye them curiously react to them based on their racial dynamic, and so do audiences who come from outside of the neighborhood:

White tourists in Harlem were good tippers, especially if they photographed us. I always assumed their guidebooks had warned them against stealing native souls without giving payment in return. Being treated like a native was a curious sensation. I didn't mind the money but felt, to be honest, a certain earned distance from whitefolks with cameras. (171-172)

For Adam, his earnest desire to play authentic blues music with local black musicians makes him, if not closer to black, at least farther away from white. On this same day, Adam encounters other white men who wish to move away, temporarily, from whiteness:

This particular afternoon there were more than Nikons coming at us. There was a film crew— two or three cameras, soundmen with headphones and shouldered battery-packs, the whole ensemble flowing down the sidewalk in our direction. Its attention was focused less on us than on the four young men following just behind, who eased to a stop and stood quietly as we played. They were skinny, unshaven, dressed mostly in black leather despite the heat; one of them was wearing a bowler hat. He nodded in time. The cameras homed in on us, then swiveled slowly toward our quartet of fans, lovingly tracking their wandering gazes. A sound guy aimed his shotgun mike at me, eyes dropping to the V.U. meters on his hip. The song we were playing was new: recently worked up and

completely out of our usual line. “Freedom for My People” wasn't a blues at all, or funky, or jazzy. It was a folk-soul ballad, a protest song without anger. (172)

Satan and Adam did not know it at the time, but they were being filmed for “Rattle and Hum,” U2’s 1988 *Joshua Tree* tour documentary. Later Adam and Satan signed a deal where they would each receive \$1,000.00 to appear in the film, and an additional \$250.00 for the small sample of “Freedom for My People” on the soundtrack. Satan and Adam would also split the songwriting royalties (174-175). Adam’s music industry friend is unimpressed when Adam tells him the news: “‘U2 is gonna be making millions,’ he said. ‘Tens of millions. If you guys are on the album, you should be getting some kind of a point deal, not a shitty little one-time buyout.’ ‘You think so?’ ‘You guys are real. U2 is desperate for Real or they wouldn't be calling. They need you more than you need them’ (175). It is entirely appropriate that Adam’s friend uses the word “Real,” as during this time U2 *were* searching for an authentic American roots music experience. They were four young men from Dublin, Ireland who fell in love with America and its music. Given their newfound superstardom, they had the resources to cultivate their version of authentic black American music. Because of U2’s whiteness, like Traynor in “1955, they enjoy commercial success with “black music” but lack an understanding of the cultural meaning behind the music. Ironically, they seek a connection with an authentic blues duo that includes an Ivy-League educated white man.

Adam describes his experience of seeing Satan and himself in the film in a Manhattan movie theatre. In this section of the book, he juxtaposes his performance with that of Bono’s, another white man who serves as an apprentice to an older black bluesman from Mississippi: B.B. King:

Then, suddenly, the screen begins to bleach— freezing the two Harlem street musicians in mid-gesture as their song slowly fades. Dissolve to blinding white light. You're squinting, blinking, caught in the glare of floodlights as the camera angle shifts to reveal: U2 in concert before thousands of screaming fans with lit matches and cigarette lighters held up in the darkened house. Bono is wearing a white Western-style hat. He's a rock star; it looks good on him. His legs don't bounce. He grimaces as though he feels the music. The man is cool. (176).

At that time, Bono was a rock star at the height of his powers; yet he took his band into an entirely new, and for some of the members, confusing musical direction. It will be useful here to discuss U2's foray into black American music, given its place in Adam's narrative, and some of the striking similarities between U2's brief blues mentorship and Adam's longer-term blues apprenticeship with Satan.

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When U2 first emerged in Dublin's, and later London's, post-punk rock scene, they had more to do with British punkers like the Clash or Television than they did with black American music. After U2's initial American breakthrough with their 1983 album *War*, singer Bono slowly started to align the band publically with black American historical events and music. According to de la Parra, during the *War* tour Bono talked about his distaste for what he called "wallpaper music," music that is beautiful and popular but empty (51). Bono states, "We do make, and we will continue to make, soul music. Not soul music with black singers – soul music is not about the instruments you play. Soul music is when you reveal, rather than conceal. Soul music is when you bring what's on the inside to the outside" (qtd. in de la Parra 51). It is important to note that U2 were a self-consciously Christian band at this point, so for Bono soul had a religious

dimension too. Even though Bono is careful to define soul music in non-racialized terms, he does not make the choice to invoke black music randomly.

Bono had considered the connection between the black American civil rights struggle and the ongoing sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland as early as his teenage years, but he did not learn about the history of the American civil rights movement until U2's early success. In *U2 by U2* Bono discusses his introduction to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. during a *War* tour stop in Hawaii:

“Pride in the Name of Love” came out of a soundcheck in Hawaii, the melody and the chords. Around about that time I met a journalist from *Rolling Stone* who had been really pivotal in breaking the band in America. His name was Jim Henke; he had given me a book called *Let The Trumpet Sound*, a biography of Dr. King, and another on Malcolm X. They were covering different sides of the civil rights discussion, the violent and non-violent. They were important books to me. The next album started there in Hawaii, with thoughts of man's inhumanity to his fellow-man on my mind, and Dolphins swimming past my window. (145)

The members of U2, like many other Irish nationals, saw obvious similarities between the oppression of the Irish in Europe and the oppression of blacks in America. U2 guitarist, the Edge, explains, “Because of the situation in our country, non-violent struggle was such an inspiring concept. Even so, when Bono told me he wanted to write about King, at first I said, ‘Woah, that’s not what we’re about, what we understand.’ Then he came in and sang the song and it felt right, it was great” (Uncut 45). It is clear from the first part of the Edge's statement, that it was (and mostly continued to be) Bono's idea to move the band into this direction, but soon the other members followed suit.



During the *Joshua Tree/Rattle and Hum* era, U2 infamously performed what they believed to be American black music in the *Rattle and Hum* documentary. In the film, U2 play a gospel version of their rock hit “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” in a Harlem church with a black choir, and they collaborate with B.B. King on their song “When Love Comes to Town.”

The scenes at the Harlem church during a taping of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" are compelling. Before the performance begins, The Edge sits, knees pulled up to his chest, in what appears to be an un-renovated loft, in front of a large glass block window that is cracked and shattered, perhaps strategically, in places. It is here that the Edge introduces the motivation behind their decision to approach their rock hit a bit differently: “We wrote the song ‘I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,’ which is a gospel song. It doesn’t sound much like a gospel song the way we do it. But if you look at the lyric, the basic music. That’s exactly what it is.” For U2, the opportunity to highlight their inspirational Christian lyrics in a black context is very attractive. All of the members of U2, except bassist Adam Clayton, have publically identified as Christian, but they have hesitated to make their spirituality the focal point of the band. Their music has always been straight-ahead rock, and their Christian-tinged lyrics are often brief sketches rather than full renderings. According to Bono in *U2 by U2*, “We had this notion, early on, that we didn’t want to be the band that talks about God” (120). The reconceptualization of “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” as a black gospel tune reinforces U2’s desire to participate in black American music-making and to perhaps find a safe outlet to give voice to their spirituality. Given that they did not want to be seen as a Christian band, a one-off gospel remake of one of their rock songs for a documentary allowed them to avoid that label.

As the scene continues, the audience is shown requisite scenes of black American urban life. Filmmaker Phil Joanou gets the requisite inner-city exterior shots, including the 124th Street sign outside of the brick church. Strangely, despite The Edge's story about the church choir having sent a cassette of their gospel version of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" to U2's label, prompting their visit, there is little interaction on camera between U2 and the predominantly black choir. Only a few members of the choir seem genuinely excited and moved by the music, with one young woman beaming throughout, suggesting she may be a fan. As Bono sings his heart out, his body is contorted as he stands on one leg while his dislocated left arm rests in a sling. Once the choir jumps to their feet, the band stops playing, allowing the choir to sing a capella. People can be seen at the back of the church, unmoving, as if they do not know how to react. It is as if they are having difficulty reconciling the white rock singer from Ireland earnestly belting gospel music in a black church in Harlem. As the camera finds various band members in the church, The Edge, Bono, and bassist Adam are all clapping and bobbing their heads to the beat. Drummer Larry Mullen Jr., however, sits with his arms crossed and a bored, checked out look rests on his face. The camera returns twice and Larry remains frozen in the same position as if he has no idea he is being filmed. Perhaps he, too, sees U2 and black church music as an incongruous pairing.

As awkward as Larry's obvious disinterest in the Harlem choir's take on "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" is, the scene after is even more fraught. Bono, The Edge, and childhood friend Gavin Friday stand on 125<sup>th</sup> Street watching an older black man singing and playing the guitar with his young, white, harmonica playing apprentice—Satan and Adam. The three Dubliners stand awkwardly as the camera zooms in for close ups. They started the journey into blackness and they cannot turn back. The image of the wizened black man and the young

white blues aspirant he has taken under his wing is, of course, riveting for them. The three young Irish men appear to seek the same thing from the authentic American bluesman, though it appears in this moment they feel uncomfortable with the dynamic. Lauren Onkey in her essay “Ray Charles on Hyndford Street: Van Morrison’s Caledonian Soul” states that for U2:

Playing music with African Americans became a way to define themselves as an authentic alternative to prepackaged bands created by record companies, to stage a racialized sincerity. But such identifications can reinscribe African Americans as noble savages, naturally more in tune with truth and soul than whites who have “progressed” into postmodernity. In this process, the Irish can use African Americans as a tool to become authentically Irish, to get in touch with their authentic suffering, or their pre-colonial ethnic authenticity; but the definition of Irishness that emerges is as retrograde and limiting as depicting blacks as noble savages. (Negra 163)

It is clear that U2 in this moment look at the black street performer as a vessel for the “truth and soul” described by Onkey, and their interactions with B.B. King exemplify the exoticization of the black bluesman (Negra 163). It turns out that Adam’s music business friend was right.

When Bono introduces King in Tarrant County Arena in Ft. Worth, Texas, he wears a cowboy hat on his head signifying his newfound appreciation for Americanness generally, while letting it slip that he has only been listening to King’s music for “the last year or so.” Despite that, Bono claps loudly when King hits the stage and even bows down before him. It is a gesture of respect, as he stands in front of a real, live African American bluesman. The rest of the segment between King and U2 switches back and forth between their performance of “When Love Comes to Town” and King and Bono talking about Bono’s lyrics. Bono unabashedly seeks

King's approval, asking at one point in a near whisper, "I hope you like the song." Bono perks up when King tells him, "You mighty young to write such heavy lyrics." The interaction continues in that vein. Bono reads his lyrics aloud, pauses for dramatic effect, and waits for King's approval. Bono is thrilled to have his lyrics, that speak to struggles wholly unfamiliar to him ("I ran into a juke joint when I heard a guitar scream"), validated by a black American musical icon. At the end of the song, King applauds Bono once again, "A lot of emotion right there. That's alright young man. That's alright." In this moment, Bono and U2's music is transformed into the soul(ful) work to which they aspire—the opposite of "wallpaper music" (de la Parra 51).

U2 faced a critical backlash after their *Joshua Tree/Rattle and Hum* era forays into associational blackness—what Baz Dreisinger would refer to as "proximity to blackness" — and in retrospect it seems that some members of U2 were uncomfortable even in that historical moment (3). In *U2 by U2* the Edge states:

I enjoyed some of what we were doing but it really did feel like an excursion down a dead-end street. There are certain things that we've done over the years that have borrowed heavily from the blues but as a general rule we'd be coming to the blues through a very different kind of filter to someone like B.B. King, so it was a challenge to play in that idiom and make it fresh. I'm not sure we actually pulled it off, to be honest. (213)

Larry put it this way: "B.B. King is a legend and I'm very proud to have played with him. There was a lot of fun on that tour but it compounded the criticism of the movie and album, which was basically 'U2 go to America and discover the Blues and are telling us all about it, as if we didn't know.' Although audiences were clapping, you felt people were confused" (U2 213). Given

Larry's reaction during the "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" performance in Harlem, it is probably safe to say that he counted himself among the confused at the time. It is important to note that despite the awkwardness and the confusion, U2 continued their exploration of black American music during the entire eight month *Joshua Tree* tour.

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U2 admits to feeling awkward about their *Joshua Tree*-era work in retrospect, and in his memoir Adam acknowledges his occasional unease as a white man in the Harlem blues world circa 1980s. Even so, Adam's concerns are mostly centered on his acceptance by black audiences as a blues musician rather than as a white person. Toward the end of the memoir, however, Adam confronts the anger of black Harlemites who are resentful about the manslaughter verdict in the Howard Beach trial, a particularly controversial and racially sensitive case that unfolded in New York City in 1987. Up until this point, Satan and Adam had been a mere curiosity; however, after the jury fails to convict the three white teenagers who were part of a group of 10 that severely beat two black men—with one fleeing and subsequently being killed by an oncoming car—their relationship sparks anger:

I was anxious that summer. I'd known for a long time that my Harlem visa was provisional, subject to communal pressure. The Howard Beach verdict in December 1987—manslaughter rather than murder for Lester, Ladone, and Kern—had infuriated black New York; Mister Satan had called me a few days after his Lincoln Center recital, troubled but firm. "This Howard Beach mess got my people up in arms," he'd said. "I think you better stay away from Harlem for a week or two and let things cool off." "I didn't do anything," I'd protested. "It ain't about you or me. Hell, we gonna be together forever, anyhow. I just can't take

responsibility for every no-good bastard out there. My people got a right to be upset, you know.” (300)

Adam’s reaction demonstrates his regret that after he had worked so hard to gain musical acceptance, he collided with a racial and cultural barrier he simply could not overcome. This interracial alliance, threatened due to racial violence in the larger culture, is reminiscent of what happened at Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Satan, through Adam, speaks up for the members of the black community who are angry, disappointed, and scared:

I’d been so preoccupied with proving my musical right to play with Mister Satan— mastering and elaborating the “black” sound Nat had passed along to me— that I’d missed the point. The more soulfully I played, the deeper I blew from, the more seamlessly our sounds meshed, the more I was an affront to those who insisted that black and white were warring opposites, that hatred and separation were the only solution. Mister Satan and I had found common ground. I hadn’t understood this until seeing U2’s Rattle & Hum the previous fall. Joined at the hip on “Freedom for My People,” projecting one hybrid sound and look, we worked. (306)

During the 1990s Satan and Adam became successful international touring artists— opening for Bo Diddley in the UK—and they released three albums. They have performed as recently as 2013. Their apprenticeship was successful personally and professionally, and Adam’s blues apprenticeship experience involved an interracial exchange that benefited both master and apprentice. While receiving mentoring from Satan, Adam gave harp lessons to white and black students. When describing what he, a young white ivy-league educated man with a suburban

upbringing, might have to offer a black man who wants to play blues harmonica, he ponders his black male student Johnny Mills' motivations:

Maybe what he hungered for was what Nat and Mister Satan had pulled out of me. What [blues harp teacher] Bob Shatkin— a brainy Brooklyn Jew— had pulled out of Nat, when Nat was starting out. What an old black guy out on Ocean Parkway had pulled out of Shatkin when he was starting out, according to Nat. An endless chain we'd forged. Masters and apprentices, a labor of love. Pass it along.  
(326)

The “Creole blues culture” that Adam references at the beginning of this chapter is central to his narrative, so it is fitting that he would end his memoir with an illustration of how he participated in that interracial culture beyond his apprenticeship. For Adam, these short- and long-term apprentice relationships are positive and they support his musical goals; however, as we will see if the final section his experience is not necessarily representative of other contemporary blues apprentices. Adam's race most certainly plays a role, as his whiteness offers him privileges outside of Harlem and in mainstream American culture that the majority of the subjects in this chapter do not enjoy. Adam's memoir is written in the first person point of view, so the audience does not have access to Nat's and Satan's voices, except through Adam's subjectivity. In the epilogue, Adam addresses this concern, specifically regarding the dialogue he attributes to Satan:

One afternoon in the fall of 1997, while he was driving us home from a gig in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, I asked Mister Satan if he'd like me to read him a few pages. The finished manuscript had been accepted for publication; I was anxious about his reaction, particularly to those moments where I'd let his voice speak through me. In the academy this was called “ventriloquizing,” a particularly

suspect practice when engaged in by white male writers, who had— it was generally agreed— an unconscious need to burlesque, caricature, and otherwise fatally misrepresent the speaking black subject. (395)

Adam's experience as a scholar allows him to anticipate possible critical objections to his creative work. It is clear that he is anxious about the book's critical reception, as well as Satan's personal reaction to his work (Nat died in 1991). In the car Adam reads a passage to Satan: "Read that back again!" he said after I'd finished. "Yes sir! That's the life we lived" (396). Granted this exchange is constructed by Adam. However, his willingness to not only share some of the book with Satan but to also document the moment, demonstrates Adam's commitment to depicting Satan as honestly and fairly as he can. Even though Nat and Satan do not speak for themselves directly, Adam allows space for their voices.

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In this final section, I sum up by theorizing the complexities of the blues apprenticeship as constructed around the work of Ralph Ellison and contemporary African American blues rocker Gary Clark Jr. While Adam enjoys and benefits from the racial dynamics of his apprenticeship with Satan, Clark has a more racially complicated experience. First I will provide a background on Ellison's seminal debates with LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) about what constitutes legitimate black blues expression and, by extension, authentic blackness, as well as Ellison's theorizing of the musical apprenticeship. Next, I will turn to Clark's 2010 star-making performance of "Bright Lights" at Eric Clapton's Crossroads Guitar Festival and his appearance with Beyoncé in the Stevie Wonder GRAMMY special on February 16, 2015. Through Ellison's discussion of the power of the musical apprenticeship to undermine stereotypical representations of black people, and these live performances by Clark, I examine how Ellison's exploration of



the unconventional jazz apprenticeship resonates in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century vis-à-vis Clark. It is important to note here that even though Ellison talks explicitly about the jazz apprenticeship, he frequently conflates jazz with the blues, so I will use his frame to discuss the *blues* apprenticeship. I do acknowledge, however, the differences in jazz and blues performance, notably their ensemble versus solo nature respectively. Ultimately, I argue that Clark takes an Ellisonian approach to undermining stereotypical ideas of monolithic black artistic expression, first through the use of a cross-racial blues apprenticeship model, and later through experimentation with diverse musical genres and transgressive collaborative projects.

Ralph Ellison's essay "Blues People" in 1964's *Shadow and Act* directly engages Jones' 1963 seminal blues study *Blues People*, in which Jones correlates the dilution of black art to the emergence of a black American middle class at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that wanted to move away from so-called authentic blackness. According to Jones, "They did not even want to be 'accepted' as *themselves*, they wanted any self which the mainstream dictated, and the mainstream *always* dictated. And this black middle class, in turn, tried always to dictate that self, or this image of a whiter Negro, to the poorer, blacker Negroes" (130).

Ellison questions Jones' conflation of social class with both black cultural legitimacy and black reception of art made by other blacks (125). Ellison takes issue with the idea that the mainstream merely influences African Americans instead of acknowledging black people's impact on the mainstream. As Ellison argues, "Negro musicians have never, as a group, felt alienated from any music sounded within their hearing, and it is my theory that it would be impossible to pinpoint the time when they were not shaping what Jones calls the mainstream of American music" (129). Ellison does not recognize the same strict divisions between black and white cultural expressions as does Jones. He also sees the humanity in the black American slave,

while Jones boldly asserts, “A slave cannot be a man. A man does not, or is not supposed to, work all of his life without recourse to the other areas of human existence” (60). For Jones, the slaves’ work songs were pre-primitive blues and “they could not assume the universality any lasting musical form must have.... Primitive blues-singing [country blues] actually came into being because of the Civil War, in one sense. The emancipation of the slaves proposed for them a normal human existence, a humanity impossible under slavery” (60-61). Even so, Jones argues for the primitive blues evolving directly out of black people’s post-slavery oppression: “But if the blues was a music that developed because of the Negro’s adaptation to, and adoption of, America, it was also a music that developed because of the Negro’s peculiar position in this country” (66). Ellison disagrees with Jones’ stance that blues music exists primarily due to black people’s racial, socio-economic, and political oppression, seeing blues music as a special artistic achievement that is available even to the slave. Ellison states, “But his [Jones’] version of the blues lacks a sense of the excitement and surprise of men living in the world—of enslaved and politically weak men successfully imposing their values upon a powerful society through song and dance” (130). Ellison argues that the slaves who sang the blues in the act of creative expression asserted their selfhood: “A slave was, to the extent that he was a *musician*, one who expressed himself in music, a man who realized himself in the world of sound....For the art—the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom” (128-129). He advocates for the power of artistic expression and its ability to create and support a person’s identity. And I would argue that the power such personal expression bestows on the artist allows for his or her personal agency, or freedom, to be, to become, and to create whatever he or she desires.

This agency also allows for a more fluid approach to a black racial identity. After all, underlying the concept of blues authenticity is a belief in a limited range of acceptable ways to express blackness. Only those who are legitimately black create authentic black music. Of course, these entrenched ideas of *real* black expression are reinforced by whites as well. These ideas would not exist without whiteness. In a 1971 letter to his friend white Charles Davidson, owner of the still extant Andover Shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ellison praises New York-based African American cabaret singer Bobby Short's recent memoir *Black and White Baby*. He decries black and white public intellectuals who advance limiting representations of black Americans:

As for those sociologists and half-assed politicians who've been filling the bookstores with vapid, dehumanized nonsense about what they term '*The black experience*,' Short's account of the background of an individual Negro American of Mid-Western origins gives a richer sense of the general Negro experience than all their pronouncements. It restores some of the sense of complexity, wonder and diversity which I recognize as part of my own life. Against the dreary, reductive, paper-thin images of Negro American life-style and personality that are now so fashionable it was a pleasure to recall many of the details of my own life in Oklahoma. (251-252)

When Ellison refers to the "sociologists and half-assed politicians" who present static, debased images of black people, he is referring to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 article "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," otherwise known as the "Moynihan Report." In the text, Moynihan determines that the growing number of households headed by black women poses a serious threat to the black family and contributes to the social, economic, and political problems

facing the black community. Moynihan states, “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (“Negro”). At the end of his letter to Charles Davidson, Ellison takes a humorous parting shot at Moynihan, suggesting that he will recommend Short’s autobiography to “literary intellectuals who take their ideas of black Americans from such as Pat-of-the-monkey-hand” (253).

Although Ellison invokes Moynihan’s name in an almost lighthearted way, in much of Ellison’s non-fiction he passionately argues for the existence of black artistic expression, particularly in the areas of music and literature, disseminated in an interracial context, allowing for cross-cultural influence between blacks and whites. Ellison writes about this cross-racial engagement in a way that echoes the classic apprenticeship where a master craftsman teaches a young acolyte his or her trade. He frequently acknowledges the literary mentoring he received from white poets and writers such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Mark Twain. In “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” Ellison asserts:

I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance....I knew the trickster Ulysses just as early as I knew the wily rabbit of Negro American lore....And a little later I could imagine myself as Huck Finn (I so nicknamed my brother) but not, though I racially identified with him, as Nigger Jim....My point is that the Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature, and this might well be more important to him than his living folk tradition. (58)

As an “heir” to literature, the black American writer, even at a distance, is apprenticed to those great poets and novelists who came before, regardless of race or nationality. Thanks to recording and dissemination technologies from sheet music and the vaudeville circuit to CD and iTunes, musical apprenticeships can be similarly unconventional. In his essay “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday” published in 1969 in Washington, DC’s *Sunday Star*, Ellison suggests that an established black musician can be a mentor for an aspiring one, even if they do not meet face to face. In fact, Ellison regards Ellington as a mentor.

And then Ellington and the great orchestra came to town; came with their uniforms, their sophistication, their skills; their golden horns, their flights of controlled and disciplined fantasy; came with their art, their special sound; came with Ivy Anderson and Ethel Waters singing and dazzling the eye with their high-brown beauty and with the richness and bright feminine flair of their costumes, their promising manners. They were news from the great wide world, an example and a goal; and I wish that all those who write so knowledgably of Negro boys having no masculine figures with whom to identify would consider the long national and international career of Ellington and his band, the thousands of one-night stands played in the black communities of this nation. (81)

Ellison responds a second time to the Moynihan Report with a reminder that a musician, even from the stage, can act as a stand in for a missing parent or be, as Ellison suggests, “an example and a goal” (81). In this case, his or her mere presence can prove inspirational and show the mentee what is possible. Ellison’s invocation of the musical apprenticeship is transgressive, as it allows for a diversity of experiences in black family life and demonstrates the different ways that young black children can receive positive mentorship.

The musical apprenticeship is particularly significant in Clark's development. Clark was born on February 15, 1984 in Austin, Texas. At age 12 he taught himself to play the guitar. At 15, he started playing gigs in downtown Austin with his friend Eve Monsees. As teenagers, the duo played shows at clubs along 6<sup>th</sup> Street, finally catching the eyes and ears of Clifford Antone, owner of the legendary Austin blues club Antone's. Antone invited Gary and Eve to open for blues guitarist Jimmie Vaughan—Stevie Ray Vaughan's older brother and a member of the Fabulous Thunderbirds—at an anniversary show. At 17, Clark was fully entrenched in the Austin blues scene, with Vaughan serving as his mentor (Mongillo; Doyle). In some ways, Clark's decade-plus apprenticeship with Jimmie Vaughan was every bit as unconventional as Ellison's with his distant literary mentors. While Clark enjoyed a traditional, face-to-face relationship with Vaughan, their apprenticeship took the cross-racial element featured in Ellison's mentorships much further. Not only is Vaughan white, but the same can be said for the Austin blues scene in general. Given the continued foregrounding of racialized blues authenticity, it is significant that a young African American blues musician would have been shepherded through the process of becoming a professional musician by white mentors. And to give you a sense of how white the blues scene in Austin, Texas is, in a 2012 interview with Neil McCormick in the *Daily Telegraph* Clark told a story about a black school friend who asked him why he played the guitar. According to Clark, "He said, 'Black people don't play the blues.' It kind of blew my mind." Clark turned down a full scholarship at University of Texas at Austin to tour with Vaughan and promote his first LP, *Worry No More* (Doyle). Clark had already achieved a good deal of notoriety in his hometown. When Clark was just 17, the Mayor of Austin declared May 3, 2001 "Gary Clark Jr. Day" (Smyth; Richards). However, it was his performance at the 2010 Crossroads Guitar Festival that proved to be his coming out party (Chinen).

It was Clapton's guitarist, Austin native Doyle Bramhall II, who recommended Clark to Clapton, and it is Bramhall's voice at the beginning of the excerpt from the *Crossroads Eric Clapton Guitar Festival 2010* DVD. He states, "I'm so happy that Gary Clark Jr. was invited to be on this festival. I think he's a player that doesn't exist anymore. He has a voice that's just phenomenal. He can sing soul music. He can sing Delta. He can sing Chicago blues. And he's *really* authentic." Bramhall speaks of Clark in romantic terms. He describes him as "a player that doesn't exist anymore." In other words, Clark is the embodiment of a cultural myth. He is the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century blues figure come back to life. Bramhall gives Clark the ultimate accolade, "authentic," a term that may be meant positively, but can become a trap for an artist who is then tasked with creating within its narrow confines.

In the contemporary blues scene, black musicians face expectations from largely white critics and fans to perform the blues in a particular fashion. Adam Gussow in *Journeyman's Road* states,

White blues hunger is epitomized by the creepy phrase 'keeping the blues alive,' the mantra of more than a few well-intentioned, white-run blues organizations. What many white folks want to keep alive, to be blunt, is what might be called the Pristine Black Folk Subject, the postmodern reincarnation of the Old-Time Negro. Aging Old-Time Negroes are great—the real bluesy deal from Chulahoma, Mississippi!—but Young Old-Time Negroes are even better. (111)

In recent years, Clark has expressed a desire to disentangle himself from critical and audience expectations. In 2012, his major-label debut, *Blak and Blu*, disappointed some critics and fans who thought it too slick and who were unhappy with Clark's embrace of post-blues genres such as hip-hop and neo-soul. In a 2013 *London Evening Standard* article he states, "There's definitely

a blues police who will come and write you up for not staying in the structure. It just seems like a natural thing to branch out and find your own place, knowing at the same time that what you do is held down by those blues roots.” If Clark’s cross-racial apprenticeship was not Ellisonian enough, the quotation that follows reveals Clark’s frustration with reductive audiences and critics who have little imagination for diverse black experiences and methods for black musical expression. Clark’s quotation is reminiscent of a passage from Ellison’s “Blues People” essay. In a 2013 *Rolling Stone* article by Patrick Doyle that is appropriately titled: “Gary Clark Jr.: The Chosen One,” Clark states:

If it were up to everybody else, I would do Hendrix covers all the time. I saw this comment from somebody online the other day, saying, “We need you to play more Chicago or Louisiana blues – we want the raw shit.” Well, I’m not from Chicago or from Louisiana. I’m not from that time period. There was segregation. That music was the popular music at the time. People were doing what they did in that moment in time to express themselves. It’s a different time. So why am I going to pretend? I’m not some poor kid who grew up in the middle of nothing.

Compare this with Ellison’s:

One would get the impression that there was a rigid correlation between color, education, income and the Negro’s preference in music. But what are we to say of a white-skinned Negro with brown freckles who owns sixteen oil wells sunk in a piece of Texas land once farmed by his ex-slave parents who were a blue-eyed, white-skinned, red-headed (kinky) Negro woman from Virginia and a blue-gummed, black-skinned, curly-haired Negro male from Mississippi, and who not only sang bass in a Holy Roller church, played the market and voted Republican



but collected blues recordings and was a walking depository of blues tradition? Jones's theory no more allows for the existence of such a Negro than it allows for himself; but that 'concord of sensibilities' which has been defined as the meaning of culture, allows for much more variety than Jones would admit. (126)

Clark's reaction to audiences and critics who attempt to place him in a suffocating blues box has been to keep taking musical chances, as he proclaimed to *Fader* in 2013: "Someone said something to me the other day: 'People like to keep you where they found you,' Mr. Clark said. 'I'm totally comfortable shaking that up.'" "Shaking that up" has included performing at the 2014 NBA All-Star Game with popular soul singer-songwriter Janelle Monae and singing "Higher Ground" with Beyoncé at the Stevie Wonder GRAMMY special in February 2015. This last performance, in particular, was in line with what Clark calls "shaking" things up. After all, authentic blues performers do not often appear on television with high-profile, commercially successful pop divas. It is also useful to compare this assured performance with Clark's debut at the Crossroads Festival. In 2010, Clark was still a timid apprentice, wearing a black short-sleeved t-shirt and jeans and hiding behind his dark sunglasses. In this performance he is tentative, aware of Bramhall's role in getting him onstage. In the 2015 performance he wears a stylish, casual, long jacket and skinny jeans with a black fedora. His shades are gone, and he appears to be much more confident.

Clark takes an Ellisonian approach to the musical apprenticeship and, like Ellison, deploys artistic individuality against stereotypes of monolithic black artistic expression. But he still faces an ongoing struggle for artistic freedom within the dominant paradigm of authentic blues expression. While risky, Clark's willingness to take creative chances is what will allow him to free himself from the rigid expectations of his fans and critics. In this case, his

reclamation of his factual autobiography allows him to speak for himself and stay true to his artistic vision. Rather than allowing himself to be persuaded to take on a persona that does not interest him—the out of time and place Chicago Bluesman—he proudly shares details about his middle class upbringing.

The various characters, narrators, and real-life blues people in this chapter use autobiographical expression to “write” themselves into (and out of) various blues apprenticeship relationships. The racial, gender, and class backgrounds of the masters and apprentices influence the apprenticeship dynamics, and the participants who face racism, classism, and patriarchy use autobiography to reclaim their power. Gracie Mae Still in “1955” withholds her autobiography, refusing to relinquish ownership of her song to Traynor, while Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues” teaches his brother to appreciate the beauty and power of music by communicating his autobiography through musical performance. Eunice in *Mojo Hand: An Orphic Tale* learns how to be an independent, powerful woman within a patriarchal culture and sub-culture and transcending instead of running away from her pain. Adam in *Mr. Satan’s Apprentice* makes a strong case for the existence of interracial blues communities, while also giving Satan and Nat voices within the narrative to tell stories about their lives. Finally, Clark takes back his power through the expression of an autobiography that runs counter to notions of blues authenticity.

## Chapter 4

### “Jack White: A Study in Blues Self-Invention”

"Anything involved in presenting yourself onstage is all a big trick. You're doing your best to trick those people into experiencing something good, something they haven't thought about before or haven't thought about in a long time. I'm doing my best to be that vaudeville trickster, to help that happen. But the image stuff all stemmed from the music-just the childishness and how it relates to anger and innocence and these colors and what they mean to us, and us being children together. It all comes from that childishness, really."

--Jack White (July 2002)

“If you can't get past the stage of, ‘Oh, this is a gimmick.’ OK, if you think it's gimmick, you're not possibly gonna be able to come any deeper with us. So it's good. It weeds out people who wouldn't care anyway.”

--Jack White (November 2004)

Jack White is a singer, a songwriter, and a guitarist whose former band, blues-rock duo the White Stripes, enjoyed immense critical and commercial success during the aughts and into the first few years of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He is also a member of two other critically acclaimed rock bands: the Raconteurs and the Dead Weather. In 2012, White released his debut solo record, *Blunderbuss*, and his second solo record, *Lazaretto*, was released in June 2014. White is a producer and a record label executive, and in 2009 he broke ground on the brick and mortar location for his Nashville-based Third Man Records.

White has always been uncharacteristically straightforward about his conflicted feelings around being a white man playing blues-based music. He has expressed this sentiment in various interviews over the years (including a moment in the 2009 documentary *It Might Get Loud* where he frankly admits to trying to “get away with” being a white man who sometimes plays in a traditional Delta Blues style). In a March 2010 interview in *The Observer*, White admits that one of his strategies was aesthetic misdirection: “with the White Stripes we were trying to trick people into not realising we were playing the blues. We did not want to come off like white kids

trying to play black music from 100 years ago so a great way to distract them was by dressing in red, white and black” (Manzoor). White, who came of age in Detroit during the 1990s, used costuming and graphic design to construct an image for the White Stripes that invoked childhood innocence, and created a fictionalized autobiographical back-story for himself and drummer Meg White, with the goal, in part, to pre-emptively insulate the band from charges of cultural appropriation. Given cascading debates about racialized blues authenticity, John Gillis, in his guise as blues revivalist “Jack White,” an artistic persona developed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has an awareness of the politics of blues legitimacy in a way that the previous generation of musicians did not. In the 1960s, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and other young British blues rockers were in the self-consciously odd position of introducing American blues music to a generation of young white American audiences. Given that most white American teenagers had little exposure to blues music and that black American youth, attracted to rhythm and blues and then soul, had long deemed it old-fashioned, the British were not, at first, accused of cultural appropriation and inauthenticity (though these attacks would later come in droves).<sup>1</sup> Jack White, in contrast, had to anticipate such charges from the very beginning.

White's construction of a highly stylized image for the White Stripes was certainly motivated by his desire to avoid the scrutiny of critics who might accuse him of cultural theft, but it is also important to note that White has never been shy about his interest in image and persona and the necessity for a musician to tell a story that relies on both art and artifice. In 2007 White told the *New York Times*, “Everything from your haircut to your clothes to the type of instrument you play to the melody of a song to the rhythm — they’re all tricks to get people to pay attention to the story. If you just stood up in a crowd and said your story — ‘I came home, and this girl I was dating wasn’t there, and I was wondering where she was’ — it’s not

interesting. But give it a melody, give it a beat, build it all the way up to a haircut. Now people pay attention” (Light). White extends this trickery into the realm of his autobiography. His deliberate fabrication of key autobiographical details about the nature of his relationship with Meg White is one obvious example; however, in this chapter I will extend my reading of White’s autobiographical obfuscations to his musical performances on record, in concert, and in music videos. I also read his interviews as texts at the site of many of those fabrications. I also examine the ways in which White’s autobiographical misdirection has helped him to invent (and re-invent) himself in different phases of his career. All of this leading to my larger argument: -that White self-consciously, and quite adeptly, through his blues self-invention, inserts himself into the tradition of blues self-mythologization.

For this chapter, I continue to use term *autobiography* in an unconventional manner. In order to demonstrate White’s deliberate distancing of himself from other white bluesman from an earlier generation, I will include a discussion of contemporary autobiographies by Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, and Keith Richards. When analyzing these generically marked autobiographies in the first section of this chapter, I will read those works both as examples of the autobiographical genre and as vehicles for artistic blues self-invention, allowing that the subjective details delivered in these works may or may not be independently verifiable as “truth.” Similarly, when Jack White defines the White Stripes’ visual aesthetic, he is inventing personalities for himself and band-mate Meg White, thus performing an autobiographical act (or considering the subterfuge involved, it might be more accurate to call it an *anti*-autobiographical act) that allows him to participate in traditional blues self-fashioning.

This chapter will explore White’s ever-evolving identity: from John Anthony Gillis, a young, self-conscious, white blues disciple determined to stand apart from his contemporaries,

and the white bluesmen who preceded him, to “Jack White,” a solo artist, producer, and businessman who takes an unapologetically postmodern approach to his work as a musician and as a music industry executive. In the first section of the chapter I examine the visual presentation White constructed for himself and Meg White during the White Stripes-era. In the second section, I analyze, using music scholar Andrew Leggs’ gospel taxonomy, sonic aspects of White’s blues self-fashioning through his vocal performance in “Ball and Biscuit” from the 2003 White Stripes album *Elephant*. And in part three, I look at postmodern pastiche in White’s solo work, specifically in his 2011 collaboration with Insane Clown Posse on W.A. Mozart’s scatological 1782 vocal canon “Leck mich Im Arsch” and in his video for *Blunderbuss*’ “Freedom at 21.”

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### **The White Stripes’ Great Art Project**

Jack White’s concerns about blues authenticity motivated his use of visual aesthetics as an antidote to his racial and temporal misplacement. White, through a deliberate clash of visual and musical signifiers, turned his White Stripes persona into a postmodern, Pop art performance. This extended *anti*-autobiographical performance demonstrates the arbitrariness of black blues signifiers and allows White to signify on long-held, entrenched ideas by some blues scholars, critics, and fans of how an authentic blues figure should look.

To advance the argument, I will situate White within the circle of some of the country blues musicians with whom he is in conversation, focusing on Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson. Next, I will analyze autobiographies by Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and Bob Dylan, which serve as a foil to White’s disruption of a conventional white blues autobiography.<sup>ii</sup>

I will continue to build my argument through a reconstruction of White's biographical transformation from John Anthony Gillis to Jack White. I will follow this with a discussion of precedents for White's use of bright colors and modern style as a distraction from, and perhaps also a blurring of, the color line, in addition to a brief discussion of white English responses to American black music and American black style. Given that a large number of pre-eminent English blues rockers (Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Eric Burdon, Eric Clapton) either attended art school or were part of a London art school crowd, I will examine the connections between British Pop art and popular music, focusing specifically on the Who (Walker 15).

In the final part of the first section, I will analyze Jack White's anti-autobiographical performance in the White Stripes' live versions of "Seven Nation Army" and "Death Letter Blues" at the 2004 GRAMMY Awards telecast; the official video for "Hardest Button to Button" from *Elephant*, which was directed by French filmmaker Michel Gondry; and a 2006 *The Simpsons* homage to the "Hardest Button to Button" video.

### **Charley Patton, Tommy Johnson, and W.C. Handy—Three Jack White Ancestors**

When asked about his blues influences, Jack White most consistently mentions three loosely related Delta legends— Charley Patton, Son House, and Robert Johnson— and one Atlanta-based contemporary, Blind Willie McTell. In fact, in *It Might Get Loud*, which features three generations of iconic guitar players (Jimmy Page, the Edge of U2, and White), he declares Son House's "Grinnin' in Your Face" his favorite song. In 2013, White's Nashville-based Third Man Records label, in collaboration with Document Records, reissued recordings by Charley Patton, Blind Willie McTell, and the Mississippi Sheiks exclusively on vinyl. At the end of 2013, a partnership between Third Man Records and American Primitive blues guitarist John Fahey's Revenant Records yielded the first volume of a projected reissue of every race recording ever

issued by Paramount Records in a sprawling archival box made to resemble a portable Victrola, and featuring early recordings by classic black American artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, and Ma Rainey in both vinyl and digital formats. Given White's fetish for historical revival and accuracy, and in order to place White's goals for his blues music expression in its proper context, it is important to explore the artists who have directly or indirectly influenced him.

Despite what White's predominantly white contemporary rock audiences might assume, his imagistic gymnastics—his playfully unorthodox approach to his self-presentation—do not wholly set him apart from the Delta blues players. Some of these musicians share White's love of on- and off-stage showmanship and a propensity towards autobiographical trickery. Blues pioneers like W.C. Handy, Robert Johnson, and Tommy Johnson laid the groundwork for White to construct an invented biography for the White Stripes. One of the enduring legends about Robert Johnson is that he sold his soul to the Devil at midnight at a crossroads deep in the Mississippi Delta in order to become a guitar virtuoso. And Tommy Johnson, at least a decade earlier, supposedly did the same. Similarly, White maintains to this day that he and Meg White are siblings, despite the fact that the press uncovered both their marriage and divorce certificates more than a decade ago. As White admits, “Nothing that is said in an interview or onstage into a microphone—just like nothing in the Bible—should be taken literally” (Mulvey). Like blues harmonica player Aleck Miller, who re-named himself Sonny Boy Williamson even though there was already a famous blues harmonica player from Tennessee with the same name, and blues musicians such as Muddy Waters, Son House, and Leadbelly who allowed themselves to be presented by record industry professionals as more rural and “exotic” than they actually were, White effectively places himself within the tradition of the self-mythologizing bluesman through



his use of autobiographical fabrication. The representation of Jack and Meg's relationship as a natural sibling bond, rather than a grown-up, post-divorce business partnership, helped White to create an image for the White Stripes that subverts conventional notions of blues authenticity. This approach helps White sidestep charges of cultural appropriation, while the masking of his musical intentions through visual misdirection propels his anti-autobiographical performance forward.<sup>iii</sup>

Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson were both consummate Delta performers who took pride in their ability to entertain crowds in juke joints, barrel houses, and outdoor country dances. Most likely born "in April 1891 in the area between Bolton and Edwards, Mississippi," Patton was an extremely important Delta blues originator (Gioia 49). Not only would Patton have a huge influence on the work of Son House, Tommy Johnson, Bukka White, Howlin' Wolf, and Muddy Waters, but he was also a progenitor of what now are seen as commonplace, even clichéd, rock and roll stage antics. According to Ted Gioia, "Patton played the guitar behind his back, or between his legs, sometimes flipping it over, or snapping the strings, or tapping on it like a big drum. All the strutting and flaunting we associate with rock stars since Jimi Hendrix were already part of Patton's repertoire in the 1920s" (51). Patton was a passionate entertainer, but his flamboyant style carried over into his personal life in the form of numerous run-ins with law enforcement (mostly having to do with public drunkenness), multiple marriages, fighting, and general hell-raising.

Patton's stage shenanigans, his bold personality on- and off-stage, and the conflicting accounts of his biography make him in many ways White's spiritual ancestor. As Gioia states, "Casual acquaintances often surmised that Patton came from the North. His brashness and assertiveness seemed so out of character for a black man from Mississippi" (49). Apparently,

Patton was full of confidence or, depending on one's view, braggadocio, particularly about his sexual exploits—Son House once complained about Patton, “You could hardly get a word in edgeways yourself, not when Charley [was] around. His woman yesterday, the day before yesterday, all what he done to the woman” (qtd. in Davis 102)—and that confidence represented a sense of freedom that most other blacks, facing stultifying oppression on many fronts, could admire. Patton's braggadocio also served as his autobiographical expression, given his lack of access to print media. Instead of writing a book, Patton orally narrated his story.

Tommy Johnson was another Delta blues singer who was heavily influenced by Charley Patton. He told his brother LeDell Johnson that he went to the crossroads with his guitar just before midnight and sold his soul to the Devil to become a better player (Palmer 59–60). And, according to Robert Palmer, Johnson “affected a trickster's personality. He took to carrying a large rabbit's foot around with him and displaying it often, and his performances were spectacularly acrobatic” (60). White, too, has a bit of the trickster in him, as he gleefully lies about his biography to the media and shape-shifts into a wild man onstage. Though he does not twirl his guitar or play it between his legs or behind his back, during live performances his body is in perpetual motion. He lunges forward and back, kicks out his legs, bows like a spasmodic folding chair, and bobs his head, occasionally quite violently, to the music. At times he attacks the guitar so viciously, that his guitar ends up covered in blood. This sanguine sacrifice serves as a signification of his commitment to the music, all the while cementing his own legend. White's larger-than-life onstage persona also plays out in music videos and on-camera interviews, effectively serving as postmodern pastiche, an unruly mix of traditional blues mythology and (as we will see) 1960s British visual aesthetics.

As one of the few blues pioneers to write an autobiography, W.C. Handy left traces in print of the self-conscious mythologizing tendency that would later inspire Jack White. Widely known as the “Father of the Blues,” Handy was a black American bandleader, composer, and music publisher whose 1914 song “Saint Louis Blues” has been recorded by almost every significant jazz and blues artist in American history. There have been short and feature films about the song, and even a National Hockey League team, the St. Louis Blues, bears its name. Handy’s assumption of the title “Father of the Blues” came with a certain amount of controversy, since many of his compositions are more jazz or pop than 12-bar blues. He also famously claimed in his 1941 book *Father of the Blues, An Autobiography* to have “discovered” the blues accidentally at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi in or around 1903:

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly. Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog. The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. (78)

This written-down story is the inverse of the unwritten legends that surround Johnson and Patton, narrated from the perspective of the trained urban musician rather than the itinerant country entertainer. (Handy hardly needed to sell his soul for musical knowledge: he had had lessons on the pipe organ at church). The lyrical form that Handy describes certainly sounds like the blues, and in his autobiography he makes no attempt to hide the fact that he merely committed to paper a music that was already in existence and that proved to be popular with white and black

audiences. Handy, a successful bandleader, was a talented businessman before anything else and he understood that this largely unknown regional music could cross over to a national audience, particularly with the right amount of romantic myth attached.

The veracity of many details in Handy's books have been called into question by people who knew him before his great success, as well as by a handful of journalists and scholars along the way. According to Davis, "All the best stories are apocryphal, especially any told by Handy, who wasn't just one of the new century's most important bandleaders, composers, and musical publishers, but also, in common with men like Henry Ford, a bootstrap entrepreneur savvy enough to know that the creation of personal myth came with the territory" (26). In fact, a controversy about the location where Handy composed "St. Louis Blues" flared up in 1947 when Robert C. Ruark, a *Scripps-Howard* staff writer, suggested that Handy even lied about where he wrote down the song in his autobiography. In *Father of the Blues* Handy paints a dramatic, even cinematic picture: "I could feel the blues coming on, and I didn't want to be distracted, so I packed my grip and made my getaway. I rented a room in the Beale Street section and went to work. Outside the lights flickered" (123). The legend went that Handy rubbed elbows with the rough characters on Beale Street, Memphis' famous red-light district, allowing him to write authentic blues music. After staying up all night to complete the song, he continues, "The same day on Pee Wee's cigar stand, I orchestrated the number and jotted down scores for the men of my band" (126). But, according to Ruark, in an interview published with Handy in 1947 with the headline, "Legend Takes Beating on Conditions Under Which Handy Wrote His Blues," Handy tells him, "I didn't write St. Louis Blues in Peewee's Café on Beale Street. I wrote it in 1914 on the second floor of the Solvent Savings Bank in Memphis, where I had set up the Pace & Handy Music Co" (Ruark). Ruark professed to be disappointed that Handy had not hung "around the

low dives in Memphis, notably a place called Peewee's Café, consorting with gamblers and sweet men and easy ladies" (Ruark). When Ruark laments at the end of his article that "Handy's melodies reek of the easy streets, but Handy is a hardheaded businessman who toots his cornet for fun," he misses the point (Ruark). It is possible to be a businessman and an artist simultaneously. It is also possible to be an authentic musician who takes his or her art seriously, while also holding loosely to the objective truth of an autobiography.

### **Musical Autobiographies**

In recent years, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, and Keith Richards have all published critically acclaimed autobiographies. Each was heavily influenced by blues music and, in the case of Richards and Clapton, they aspired to be what they perceived as so-called "authentic" bluesmen. Unlike Jack White, who relied on misdirection and artistic tricks to free himself from the waiting charge of white blues appropriator, these earlier revivalists engaged the black bluesman tropes directly, participating in historical practices of racial mimicry.

*Chronicles: Volume One* by Bob Dylan (2004), *Life* by Keith Richards (with James Fox, 2010), and *Clapton: The Autobiography* by Eric Clapton (2007) begin as *bildungsromane* about the early formation of white blues players. Each book details the moment when the young blues acolyte discovers Robert Johnson. On the one hand, Dylan describes the "stabbing sounds" emanating from Johnson's guitar and the numbness he felt after taking it all in (282–83). Clapton, on the other hand, experiences a sense of revulsion during his first exposure to Johnson's music: "At first the music almost repelled me, it was so intense, and this man made no attempt to sugarcoat what he was trying to say, or play" (40). Jack White describes a similar response to Johnson's music and the impact it had on his musical development in an interview with Kurt Loder on MTV.com – but unlike Clapton and Dylan, who worry about this later, he is

immediately consumed by fear of being labeled “inauthentic: “Somehow Robert Johnson really snapped something in my brain. I really felt like I had to find a way that I could play this music that felt so real and so cathartic for me, and figure out how I could attack that and share it with other people without getting this ‘white-boy blues’ thing labeled on me.” In these accounts, the writers use words like “repelled,” “numb,” and “snapped” to describe the visceral effect the blues sounds have on the listener, suggesting that the music provokes physical disorientation. This disorientation correlates with tropes about how *real* black music is dangerous to whites. In *Near Black: White-To-Black Passing in American Culture*, Baz Dreisinger casts white-to-black passing as a function of white Americans’ proximity to black Americans. For Dreisinger, many of the white subjects in her study were able to take on a shroud of blackness due to living or working near or among Black people. Dreisinger states, “Because ‘blackness,’ so to speak, is imagined as transmittable, proximity to blackness is invested with the power to turn whites black” (3). And the idea that blackness might be transmitted through art, specifically jazz music, caused a significant amount of anxiety among many whites during the 1920s and 1940s: “When critics and medical experts argued that the sound of jazz would bring out the barbarian in white listeners, they were essentially declaring that jazz could transform white to black” (94).

Keith Richards is explicit throughout his book about his youthful desire to be not only a bluesman, but a black bluesman, indicating that this was the goal for his Rolling Stones bandmates as well: “Chicago blues hit us right between the eyes. We’d all grown up with everything else that everybody had grown up with, rock and roll, but we focused on that. And as long as we were all together, we could pretend to be black men. We soaked up the music, but it didn’t change the color of our skin” (103–04). Even though Richards admits to wanting to change his whiteness at the start of his career, he acknowledges that he learned over time that it

is unnecessary to be black to play the blues (104). In contrast, Eric Clapton appears to be particularly concerned about his authenticity as a blues musician, and he is stuck in racially essentialist notions about what constitutes blues authenticity. In his autobiography, Clapton reveals acute anxieties about his whiteness in the context of playing blues music, and his actions serve as a cautionary tale for what can happen to a white blues artist who endeavors to function within the narrow confines of blues authenticity rather than subverting it. His self-consciousness is clear as he states, “The fact is, of course, that through my playing people were being exposed to a kind of music that was new to them, and I was getting all the credit for it, as if I had invented the blues” (64). He also shares his experience when Hendrix sat in with Cream in London in 1966: “It scared me, because he was clearly going to be a huge star, and just as we were finding our own speed, here was the real thing” (80). To Clapton, Hendrix was real because he was black. Clapton, assuming, perhaps unawares, the position that Norman Mailer had notoriously called the White Negro<sup>iv</sup>, is fixated on black visual appearance as an indicator of musical authenticity. According to Ulrich Adelt, “Although Clapton began to identify with what he considered a white sound during his Cream stint, his search for a white identity coincided with his pseudo-Afro hairstyle, an imitation of either Jimi Hendrix or Bob Dylan, whose Jew-fro did not need artificial enhancement, whereas Clapton had to resort to perms” (68). Clapton did what he could to override his whiteness, but his interventions were unsustainable. Clapton tried to change his physical image, particularly his straight hair, to appear phenotypically black. White, on the other hand, embraced his own pale skin and long, floppy, phenotypically Caucasian mane, leaving only aesthetics and invocations of childhood innocence to deflect attention away from his manifest whiteness.

## **John Anthony Gillis Becomes Jack White**

Of course, *White* wasn't his real name. Jack White, née John Anthony Gillis on July 9, 1975, grew up the youngest of ten children (as he reports the seventh son<sup>v</sup>) in a Catholic family in the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Mexicantown in Southwest Detroit, far away from the American South, the putative birthplace of American blues music. Thus, according to White, his high school, Cass Tech, was "90 per cent black kids," and his peers at school and in his local community were more likely to listen to hip-hop or house music than countrified Americana like the blues (Perry, Fricke, Scaggs).

At fifteen, Gillis apprenticed to a local upholsterer and family friend named Brian Muldoon. Muldoon introduced White to garage and punk bands like the MC5 and the Cramps, and the duo formed a band called Two Part Resin (and later the Upholsterers) with Muldoon on drums and White on guitar. In 2000 they released a 7" single called "Makers of High Grade Suites." When Gillis's apprenticeship with Muldoon ended, he formed his own upholstery business, Third Man Upholstery, for which he created a yellow, black, and white visual aesthetic where everything from the van he drove to his business cards bore those colors. By this time, Gillis was familiar with electric blues artists Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon and blues-rock band Led Zeppelin; as we saw above, though, blues music did not resonate deeply with him until he heard acoustic country styles from the Mississippi Delta (Perry; Loder; Scaggs; "Jack White").<sup>vi</sup>

When Gillis was still a teenager, a friend introduced him to the music of Son House:

He played me 'Death Letter', and then this a cappella song, 'Grinnin' In Your Face'. I heard the song I'd been waiting to hear my whole life. It said, 'Don't care what people think. Your mother will talk about you, your sister and your brothers



too. No matter how you try to live, they're gonna talk about you still.' We had a big family, I didn't have that many friends, and I was paranoid. I thought everybody was talking about me all the time. (Perry)

It was Gillis's introduction to Southern roots artists like Son House and Robert Johnson, rather than the kind of electrified blues one could have found on any weekend even in turn-of-the-century Detroit, that White says inspired him to play blues music: "If people really love music, they're going to start being drawn toward honesty, and if they're drawn to that, it's a direct line right back to Charley Patton and Son House. I'm very skeptical of musicians who say they love music and don't love the blues" (Phipps). However, not only was he tentative about playing amplified country blues music from his 21<sup>st</sup>-century, white, urban subject position, but he was loathe to be lumped in with aging 1960s-era white blues rockers Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Jimmy Page, and Jeff Beck, or worse, find himself tethered to a deeply uncool contemporary white blues revivalist like Joe Bonamassa.

Gillis's wariness of the "white-boy blues thing" played a significant role in his approach to his own band, the White Stripes (Loder). After teaching his then-wife, Meg White (after their marriage ceremony in 1996, Jack White took Meg's racially-inflected last name as his own) a simplistic drumming style, White saw an opportunity to form an under-the-radar blues duo. He hypothesized that evoking the cultural innocence of childhood might circumvent charges of cultural appropriation: "I would feel really fake sitting down, adopting a black accent, and singing about trains or something. My easy way out of that is to just go into childhood, because that honesty seems to reflect the same nature that the blues was reflecting. That's my way of getting involved in that tradition" (Phipps). When White talks about the blues, he frequently uses variations of the words *truth* and *honesty*. As self-consciously constructed as the White Stripes

were, White places a high value on, if not a purist's view of blues authenticity, then perhaps a punk rock truthfulness, according to which brashness, immaturity, and raw emotion are privileged commodities. White's focus on childlike honesty also reinforces the idea of the country blues as a simple, incorruptible, and perhaps more innocent music. In this context, the blues emerges during the "childhood" of American popular music. White here shows a tendency to racially essentialize the country blues and its practitioners. That blues musician that Handy "discovered" in Tutwiler, Mississippi immediately comes to mind. Handy's description of the "primitive" young man ("A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages"), harks back to the racist image of the childlike, happy darkie or Uncle Tom figure from the antebellum South. Handy and White both invoke this image. The man on the platform is not a child, but his ability to "happily" play music, in spite of his oppressive circumstances, suggests a level of unsophistication befitting a child. While few scholars would disagree with the notion that formal blues structure is simple, more than a few would offer the caveat that the musical form is deceptively simple, with originators, like Patton, laying the groundwork for completely new musical forms such as rock and roll (Palmer 18–19; Davis 3–5).

White's alignment with the Delta blues players, in particular, placed him in a unique quandary. The country blues, which emerged early in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century but was not recorded until the 1920s and 1930s, emerged largely among field hands in the agrarian Jim Crow South amidst extremely harsh socio-economic circumstances. Even the natural environment could be dangerous, unpredictable, and destructive, as evidenced when both country blues artist Charley Patton and classic blues artist Bessie Smith notably memorialized the deadly Great Mississippi

Flood of 1927 in “High Water Everywhere” and “Homeless Blues,” respectively. In contrast, amplified blues is the sound of the African American Great Migration: not only a transition from Southern country to Northern city life, but the sound of African Americans definitively entering modernity (Wilkerson 10). Coming from Detroit, a key destination for that black Northern migration, White had to figure out how to not only cross race-based boundaries to achieve blues authenticity, but he had to also overcome regional and class boundaries.

### **White Stripes and Colored Sounds**

Rather than attempting to emulate the visual style of black Delta blues figures, White constructed an image that appears antithetical. White takes this approach to offset what Les Back, in his discussion of the “coloring” of the sound made by the predominantly white Stax and Muscle Shoals house bands, refers to as “the visual regimes of racism” (255). Given that most people thought the Muscle Shoals band was black, the musicians themselves and the black artists they worked with did not go out of their way to disabuse unsuspecting audiences of that notion. Back states, “In [recorded] sound there was the potential for expression in which the strictures of racial categories were partially transcended. This was not a matter of ‘passing as black,’ but rather of becoming more than white and, in so doing, creating music that could not be reduced to racial categories” (255). Back glosses over an element of white privilege here: After all, it was no doubt easier for the Muscle Shoals musicians to become “more than white” than it would have ever been for black musicians, even in the studio, to become “more than black.” (Perhaps only ace Wrecking Crew drummer Earl Palmer, laying down the groove for the Monkees, got close.) Even so, the fact that the session players were largely hidden did make it possible for audiences to listen for so-called authentic blackness with their ears rather than their eyes. Muscle Shoals drummer Roger Hawkins admits to being self-conscious when playing in a more public

setting. Hawkins states, “‘I’m not comfortable unless I have my own little corner to play in and my own set of headphones. On stage I feel like an insurance salesman playing all those hot grooves’” (qtd. in Ware and Back 257).

Jack White could never have been “more than white,” given his place in a post-MTV musical landscape where sound and visual image go hand in hand. He sidesteps the passive visual indicators of the “unmarked” racial interloper by avoiding casual, everyday clothing that on his white body would be categorized as white and male. He instead makes the proactive gesture of moving as far away as he can from either a white working class or a black American Delta blues persona. With 1960s Pop art rockers the Who, the 1920s Dutch De Stijl Arts movement and the Western Pop art movement as foundational models, and his own artistic background in upholstery and furniture restoration as a precedent, White rigidly controlled the fabric of his band’s identity, cultivating a highly stylized red, white, and black visual aesthetic.<sup>vii</sup> This color palette is used not only for the White Stripes’ stage clothing, but also for their instruments, stage gear, backdrops, lighting, and marketing materials. White explains:

[T]he White Stripes’ colors were always red, white and black. It came from peppermint candy. I also think they are the most powerful color combination of all time, from a Coca-Cola can to a Nazi banner. Those colors strike chords with people. In Japan, they are honorable colors. When you see a bride in a white gown, you immediately see innocence in that. Red is anger and passion. It is also sexual. And black is the absence of all that. (Fricke)

White’s inclusion of the Coca-Cola can and the Nazi banner (the former the premiere symbol of Western capitalism and consumer democracy, the latter equally symbolic of Western totalitarianism) as two historical examples of the use of the red, white, and black color palette is

notable, as both feature the kind of highly abstract, mass-produced sign language that Pop art would later mine for formal cues. White was very clear about the political and psychological power of this color combination *itself* as a sign, so it follows that by choosing it he challenged his audience to recognize the essentially political, manufactured nature of even the most “traditional” blues signifiers.

### **Jack White Goes Pop!**

The Pop art elements of White Stripes-era performances are striking because they provide a framework wherein Jack White negotiates questions of racial authenticity. Pop art began as separate movements in the United States and Britain. Pop art in the United States was spearheaded by two important exhibitions – *Art 1963: A New Vocabulary* in Philadelphia and *The New Realists* in New York – and included Pop artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. In Britain, the movement began with artist Richard Hamilton, an instructor at the Royal College of Art; art critic Lawrence Alloway; and artist and teacher Eduardo Paolozzi serving as important conduits. All three were members of the Independent Group, a collective of young London visual artists, art critics, and architects who challenged entrenched ideas about modern art. Emerging in Britain in the late 1950s and in America in the early 1960s, Pop art, according to Simon Frith and Howard Horne, took “seriously as artists the people involved in designing cars and furniture, producing packages and pop stars.” It advocated that “fine artists too should apply the aesthetic lessons learned from a study of mass culture, using in their own work the organization of colour and shape found on the streets and the billboards, incorporating mass produced images into their own individual statements” (104). By the end of the 1950s, Pop art theory had made its way into British art schools. The British art school system profoundly affected a generation of British rock musicians who came of age during the 1960s.

Even a partial list of soon-to-be-famous British musicians who attended art school during the heyday of Pop art in the late 1950s and 1960s is a Who's Who of rock royalty: Syd Barrett (Pink Floyd); Ray Davies (the Kinks); Pete Townshend (the Who); Charlie Watts, Ron Wood, and Keith Richards (the Rolling Stones); Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin); Jeff Beck; John Mayall; Eric Clapton; and John Lennon (the Beatles). Not only did a significant number of British rock stars (many of them blues rockers) attend art school, but some (the Who, the Rolling Stones) took the Pop art ethos to heart as they sought control of their own commercial images.

By the late 1950s and 1960s, fashion became, for the first time, an important pathway for the successful manipulation of rock and roll visual presentation. According to Frith and Horne:

The history of rock, in Britain at least, is a history of image as well as sound, a history of cults and cultures defined by clothes as well as songs. Whether in pursuit of authenticity or artifice, romantic truth or postmodern paradox and pastiche, musicians use the language of fashion, and this may be the point at which art schools have their most important musical impact. (18)

The teddy boys and the mods were important British working-class youth subcultures that emerged during this timeframe and impacted fashion trends that resonated with future rockers. Both demonstrated an affinity for black American music, while crafting a bold visual style through fashion. In the 1950s, the teddy boys, whose name derived from the updated take on aristocratic Edwardian Saville Row suits they wore, became infatuated with rock and roll, a form of crossover music that had sprung in part from rhythm and blues, a musical form played predominantly by black musicians. The mods emerged in the 1960s; they appreciated black American music, including soul and r & b. Style was also important to this group, though there was a stark contrast in dress. According to Dick Hebdige, "Unlike the defiantly obtrusive teddy

boys, the mods were more subtle and subdued in appearance: they wore apparently conservative suits in respectable colours, they were fastidiously neat and tidy. Hair was generally short and clean” (52). The mods were more respectable than the teddy boys, though they still fell into disfavor with the older generation, particularly parents and the media. The Who, a self-professed mod band with Pop art sensibilities, became an important model for Jack White and the White Stripes.

The Who titrated their embrace of black music and culture with a heavy dose of art-school theory. (The very name *mod* pointed towards a theoretical acceptance of modernism in visual and performance culture.) Frith and Horne state, “Townshend himself ... saw his own musical activities in terms of performance art, which meant seeing the Who’s stage act itself as the moment of artistic creation and exploring the constraints on this.... Townshend was a remarkably self-conscious pop performer, unusually able to articulate what his shows were about” (101). Townshend’s course of study at art school exposed him to Pop art theory, and he often referred to the Who as a Pop art band, blurring the lines between high and low culture, art and commerce:

The importance of Townshend’s use of Pop art rhetoric (and what distinguished him from the r & b bohemians) was that it referred not to music-making as such—to the issue of self-expression—but to commercial music-making, to issues of packaging, selling and publicizing, to the problems of popularity and stardom.

(Frith and Horne 101)

This is the similarity between Townshend and White; both white artists are fascinated with music played predominantly by black people, and neither musician is conflicted about being an artist

and a product at the same time, as long as they are firmly in control of their own images and cultural production.

The Who and the White Stripes, however, faced generationally different concerns when it comes to racialized musical authenticity. The Who took a commercial approach to what can be seen as commercial music (Motown/soul). Berry Gordy and Motown were themselves somewhat mod, taking a contemporary pop (secular) approach to gospel music, so the Who's "maximum r & b" did not face the same problems of canon and authenticity that Jack White did with the White Stripes' mythologized version of the blues. In this context, framing Motown's Sound of Young America as European-style Pop art was no different than Andy Warhol's infamous work with Brillo boxes and Campbell's Soup cans. As Pop visual artists incorporated mass produced images into their work, the Who were emboldened to incorporate those types of images into their own efforts—or even commodify themselves. The White Stripes were engaging an iteration of blues music that was neither contemporary nor commercially mainstream in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban context. White's attempt to evade the role of the white appropriator by copying 1960s Pop art performance – by 1997, a historical gambit that was no longer even slightly mod – while playing even older blues music was thus much more of a gamble.

White also displays a specific self-consciousness about his visual presentation. The White Stripes' second record *De Stijl* is named after the post-WWI Dutch art and design movement that prized formal simplicity, relying only on the use of primary colors, along with white and black. White has noted the De Stijl movement's influence on the Whites Stripes' approach to their performance and their music:

We walked into a drugstore and saw this bag of peppermint candy and I said  
'That should be painted on your bass drum because you've been drumming like a



little kid' ... I was really into furniture design for that [his time as an upholsterer] and I liked Gerrit Rietveld—he did a red-blue chair for De Stijl. And it really had meaning to me and to the band and the music and the aesthetic of our live performance. (Harrington)

The White Stripes' visual aesthetic exists on a continuum. It starts with De Stijl, a Dutch offshoot of Dada, with Dada being one of the incubators of Pop art.<sup>viii</sup> According to McCarthy, “Dada’s irreverent and iconoclastic attitude, as well as its willingness to accept almost anything into the realm of art, certainly aided in the development of Pop” (17). And it is Pop art that invokes the Who as an artistic precedent for the White Stripes and Jack White’s “irreverent and iconoclastic” autobiographical performances (McCarthy 17).

### **The White Stripes in Performance**

When the curtain rises on the White Stripes' performance of their hit “Seven Nation Army” at the 2004 GRAMMY Awards telecast in Los Angeles, the audience hears the now familiar bass-register riff from White’s down-tuned, octave pedal reinforced 1950s Kay hollow-body archtop (White is well known for his love of off-brand vintage instruments). In a theater-in-the-round at the Staples Center, Jack White wears a plain black t-shirt, trousers with one red leg and one black one, and red shoes. Meg White is dressed in a black sleeveless top and white pants. Strobing black and white circular targets bounce off the black scrim behind them. Meg’s kit, notably the heads on her snare and bass drums, features red and white peppermint swirls: the amplifiers, too, are red. “Seven Nation Army” is an up-tempo, contemporary rock song with little

in the way of blues or even blues-rock flourishes, so the bottleneck on White's left pinky finger, at first, seems incongruous.

From the beginning of the GRAMMY performance, the band's color palette is on full display through their instruments and light show, but the Pop art cartoonishness of the Stripes' appearance is captured most starkly by their clothing. On this occasion, the Stripes mainly wear black and white with a hint of red (Jack's pants leg), but in other performances the color red might predominate. The style of clothing also changes depending on the venue (stage performance, interview, promotional materials, album cover). For instance, instead of a t-shirt and trousers, Jack might wear a Grand Ole Opry Nudie suit during a photo shoot.<sup>ix</sup> When Frith and Horne discuss clothing as an important component of British rock music, with musicians speaking the "language of fashion" (18), the argument can certainly extend to American bluesman Robert Johnson's iconic pinstriped suit and fedora and White's emulation of that style during his tenure in the White Stripes and in his solo career. The White Stripes' art school conceptualization, by way of De Stijl and Pop art, is expressed through bold primary colors, along with black and white, and a playful, yet stylish sensibility.

After two verses of "Seven Nation Army," something quite unexpected happens. The White Stripes launch into a frenetic version of Son House's "Death Letter Blues," initiating a spectacular clash of musical and visual signifiers. The Son House tune is traditional, rural, Mississippi Delta: *acoustic*. The simple fact that Jack White is plugged in while playing the song presents a stark contrast between pre-modernity and technology. White plays his vintage Kay guitar (a favorite, along with his red JB Hutto Montgomery Airline guitar), and given that artists like Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf played the same guitar, a blues music signifier; Son House, though, never played electric. Since White is playing House's acoustic blues with a sound that is

associated with amplified Chicago blues artists, the signifiers are all mixed up. The bottleneck slide fits more easily in a song that originated in a Delta blues framework, as it is a signifier of both Delta and urban blues (Blind Willie McTell, Son House, Muddy Waters, and Elmore James all used a bottleneck at one time or another). Over time, the slide became a rock signifier with Duane Allman of the Allman Brothers Band serving as an important conduit, so the fact that White plays with it during the “Seven Nation Army” guitar breaks makes sense in retrospect. White’s use of the Kay and the slide, signifiers of old or vintage equipment, as well as the blues, suggest that White is playing in a legitimate blues style. These items are signs of blues authenticity.

But every other signifier at play systematically dismantles any claim to blues legitimacy. The corporate GRAMMY crowd and the theater-in-the-round staging in the middle of the Staples Center—a 20,000-seat arena that houses NBA and NHL sports teams and hosts world-famous pop, rock, country, r&b, and hip-hop acts—are certainly at odds with this early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, rural song that in its time period was commercially unsuccessful. On stage, the peppermint swirl on Meg’s drums signifies candy, which evokes both childhood innocence and consumer goods. The swirl also raises the specter of advertising, of the colorful toys incessantly marketed to children of all ages. Although White himself equates the honesty of children with the truth he sees emanating from the blues, childlike imagery (or crass commercialization) was never a standard element of the blues tradition (Phipps). It was not commonplace, for instance, for Delta or urban blues musicians to sing about children or childhood or to wear clothing that evoked the same.

But it is through the color and lighting that the White Stripes’ GRAMMY performance highlights their postmodern, Pop art style. The swirling black and white targets, alternating

between circular and square-shaped, turn red, as does the entire backdrop, as soon as the opening riff of “Death Letter Blues” begins. The red is blinding and the now colorful targets are reminiscent of Jasper Johns’s 1955 neo-Dada painting *Target with Four Faces*. The painting features four faces (from the nose down) above a green and yellow target set against a red background (McCarthy 18). According to McCarthy, Johns’s piece paved the way for Pop because he “painted these shapes in a gestural, though nonetheless representational style, that simultaneously emphasized the painted and objective, or created and factual, qualities of the resulting work” (19). This juxtaposition between what is *real* and what is constructed is the undercurrent of much of Jack White’s creative output during the White Stripes era. Peter Blake, an important Pop artist painted another target in 1961 as homage to Johns’s impact on Pop called *The First Real Target?* That painting has a black, white, blue, red, and yellow target set against a brown background, with the title of the painting at the top (McCarthy 19).

Just as “Seven Nation Army” contains musical signifiers of modern rock, including White’s use of 1990s-era effects pedals like the DigiTech Whammy, the guitar solo at the end of “Death Letter Blues” speeds up so fast that it almost sounds like hardcore rock rather than Delta blues, or even most urban blues. White’s willingness to mix and match the visual and musical signifiers in this GRAMMY performance apparently offended some blues purists. According to White:

When we played our first shows, a lot of people were really mad at the colours we wore. To me, how we presented ourselves was to show people how stupid it is for them to think that, to play authentic blues, I’d have to dress like I’m from fucking Mississippi. Eric Clapton, for example, said he didn’t like The White Stripes. He thought we were having a laugh about Son House, playing ‘Death Letter’ on the

Grammys. People in that Stratocaster white blues scene didn't understand that we could dress in red and white and black, play in the simplistic way we did, and still be the blues. (Mulvey)

White's use of the red, white, and black color scheme while playing a Delta blues cover on a national (even international) stage was deliberately designed to demonstrate just how arbitrary the signifiers of so-called authentic blues are. For White, the blues is, above all, about honest self-expression, and as long as he and Meg are delivering their version of the truth—in this case, passionately playing the music they love—to an audience, they are “the blues” (Mulvey). What they wear (and specifically how region affects their fashion) or how their stage is set up has no bearing on their ability to play blues music.

In the White Stripes' official video for “Hardest Button to Button,” Jack White wears the same outfit he had on for the GRAMMY show. Additionally, he is pretending to play his red Airline guitar instead of the Kay. Meg, however, is dressed differently. She is barefoot, wearing a red tank top and black pants. The video utilizes stop-motion animation and shows Meg and Jack playing music in the streets of New York City and in the PATH train station. In this uniquely self-referential video, the stop editing visually simulates the song's musical sounds, as Jack and Meg move forward a step on each beat, with multiple Jacks and Megs appearing and disappearing in time to the music. The video's director, Michel Gondry recalls, “When I heard the song, it was so incredible, I knew I had to do the video. It's the shape of the song that gave me the idea. The pattern, how it goes ‘doot-doot-doot, doot, doot, doot, doot, doot.’ This makes me think of 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 4, 8, 12, 16 ... 2, 4, 8, 16, 32” (Kaufman). The colorful and playful nature of the visuals draws attention to the constructedness of the video, underscoring the Pop art

dichotomy of the concrete and the imaginary. Due to the stop motion effect, Jack and Meg are rendered blues-rock fantasy figures.

Even more striking than the video is animated television program *The Simpsons*' homage to the "Hardest Button to Button" video in the "Jazzy and the Pussycats" episode (airdate: September 17, 2006). This episode signifies wittily on the source material, underscoring Jack White's and the White Stripes' self-conscious visual presentation in service to showing their audience the precarious nature of blues authenticity. Bart Simpson becomes obsessed with practicing the drums. One day while drumming in the street, as "Hardest Button to Button" plays in the background, Simpson literally runs into the White Stripes. The episode mimics the stop motion animation from the original video, and because Meg and Jack are also drumming in the street, the trio crash into each other at an intersection. Meg and Jack are wearing the same outfits from the video, while Bart is wearing an orange t-shirt with blue shorts and blue shoes. His drum kit is blue. It is notable that the show's director gave Bart a color scheme as well. At the start of the clip, Bart drums from home to the school bus (the driver comments: "Ooh trippy") to school and beyond, multiplying on the beat like the original video. The concept of arty cartoonishness evolves from Hamilton's, Lichtenstein's, and Warhol's use of cartoons as Pop art, to the White Stripes' cartoonish live show, to Gondry's decision to use stop motion— a cartoon animation technique— in his video, to that same technique being mimicked in an animated television series in which the White Stripes become cartoon characters.

### **The White Stripes, Pop Art, and Aesthetic Depoliticization**

Within the context of Pop art, the White Stripes' trajectory from cartoonish live action figures to animated figures on an iconic television program is the logical next step. Given that an important element of Pop art is the artist's embrace of mass culture, the White Stripes'

cartoonish self-representation for a mass audience falls neatly within Pop art principles. And it is the White Stripes' Pop art performance that helps them forge a blues identity, despite their complicated racial and historical challenges. White discovered that his band could overcome a potential political obstacle with an art project. The White Stripes used Pop art to playfully appropriate (and depoliticize) extremely powerful techniques of persuasion and control in order to "resolve" the complicated racial history of the blues. After all, behind the discourse of blues authenticity stands genuine racial, political, and socio-economic oppressions.

When White asserts that red, white, and black are "the most powerful color combination of all time, from a Coca-Cola can to a Nazi banner," should audiences be alarmed that White can casually invoke a fascist regime that similarly set out to glamorize the politics of racial authenticity with a powerful visual aesthetic that encompassed fashion, propaganda, and mass media? In her 1975 article, "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag laments Nazi Party filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's then recent social and political rehabilitation. She believes that audiences are willing to accept whitewashed accounts of Riefenstahl's past due, in part, to the Pop art movement. With the erosion of the division between high and low culture, audiences are able to view "Nazi art with knowing and sniggering detachment, as a form of Pop art." Sontag continues: "The ironies of pop sophistication make for a way of looking at Riefenstahl's work in which not only its formal beauty but its political fervor are viewed as a form of aesthetic excess." Pop art's apolitical orientation allows for audiences to engage with images that in other contexts may be unpalatable. As a result, a Coca Cola can or a Nazi banner can be aesthetically pleasing to an audience if a Pop artist inserts the image into a larger work of art or an audience member decides to read the image through a Pop art lens.

Did the White Stripes' use of Pop art visuals distract their audience from pertinent concerns about race and the blues, or did they simply enact a liberating freeplay of musical and visual signifiers? When Clapton suggested that the White Stripes were "having a laugh" at Son House, he missed the point entirely (Mulvey). They were not laughing at Son House; they were responding to the joke of signification around race and blues authenticity.

White once asserted, "I always said that if you can't handle how the White Stripes looked, then we can't be in this room together sharing this same music. Don't bother with us, go find a different band" (Mulvey). Jack White invented himself as a postmodern hybrid of the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century blues figure as seen through the lens of a 1960s British visual aesthetic, creating a new type of white blues band. The White Stripes' visual presentation did not disrupt their fans' positive reception of the music, as the band's raw, stripped-down musical style supported popular notions of the simple, but passionate nature of the blues style. White's efforts allowed him to sort out the audience members who did not get the joke, and that tactic served the band well during their fourteen-year run.

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### **The White Stripes' "Ball and Biscuit" and the Fictional Outlaw Bluesman**

During the White Stripes era, Jack White enunciated a sustained autobiographical performance through a highly self-conscious visual presentation and intentional fabrication of his biography through the music press—but how is White's autobiographical self-invention expressed *musically*? In a short article White wrote about Charley Patton for *The Observer* in November 2003, he stakes out an unequivocal position: "The blues are closer to honesty than the sort of music that's been going on for the past 20 or 30 years. Patton, Robert Johnson, Bukka White were doing honest, truthful music 80 years ago - it's the most beautiful music ever made.



It's the 20th century art form that will never be surpassed" (25). When White speaks of the blues it is clear that he holds very specific ideas about what is at the root of both *the blues* generally—as a tradition, as a feeling—and blues as a form of musical performance.

In the January 2010 issue of *Rolling Stone*, White claims that Jay-Z's music is resonant for him because it is suggestive of the blues: "I think that what he's saying in his lyrics is honest. His ideas about metaphor are really reflective about what struggle is" (Hiatt par. 11). At first glance it may seem as if Son House or Blind Willie McTell has little to do with hip-hop, but for White it is the element of struggle (both in the life of the artist as well as in their music making process) that is most compelling. For White, the blues *is* struggle, and he does all he can during his own performances to ensure he experiences and evokes that experience. As Jack White explains in the documentary film *The White Stripes: Under Great White Northern Lights*:

I like to do things to make it *really* hard on myself. Like, for example, if I drop a pick, to get another pick I've gotta go all the way to the back of the stage to get another one. I don't have picks all taped to my microphone stand. I put the organ just far away enough that I have to leap to get to it to play different parts of a song. It's not handy to jump from one thing to the next. I always try to push it a little bit farther away, so I have to work harder and get somewhere.

This view of the blues as a form borne of struggle goes hand in hand with the privileging of the rural, primitive, mysterious, and dangerous bluesman archetype. As Elijah Wald ticks off the clichés associated with the "popular [white] image of an old-time blues singer" in his book *Escaping the Delta*: "He is male and black, of course. He plays guitar. He is a loner and a rambler, without money or a pleasant home. He is a figure from another world, not like the people next door, or anyone in your family, or anyone you know well. And his music is

haunting, searing, and cuts you to the bone” (221). This might be the image White has in mind when he states in his *Observer* article, “Listening to Patton's music may be difficult for some nowadays. It requires a certain bit of attention to, or ignorance of, minute scratches, and whistles to really feel the emotion of his music. But when it clicks, you are entranced, and are drawn into a new mysterious world, where Patton is the reporter of the troubled times” (25). White is correct, of course, to mention the difficult historical context from which these early blues artists emerged. What can be problematic is when a given historical context or the specific origin stories of some early blues artists becomes a fixed, timeless, essential identity that is applied to all. Or at least to the so-called *authentic* blues artists.

In her article “Hear Me Talking to You: The Blues and the Romance of Rebellion,” historian Grace Hale rejects the idea, implicit in accounts as far back as Handy’s 1947 autobiography, of the blues as a primitive music made by a primitive people. She sees the blues as an artfully constructed form of music that allowed an oppressed people agency through the power of self-invention:

With their sounds and words, blues musicians created a rebel persona, a romanticized black figure who said no to hard work and yes to personal pleasure. The blues rebel announced that transformation was possible, that individual black lives could not be contained and controlled by whites. It is more than ironic, then, that later white fans understood the music as the somehow pure, “outside of history” voice of rural black southern “folk.”... Rather than an artistic and commercial creation, the blues rebel became a “real” black identity, proof that African Americans—especially southern rural people “uncontaminated” by

modernity—lived and felt more deeply than modern whites repressed and alienated by modern life. (239-240)

When White asks, “Can the modern listener used to albums recorded on computers let down his or her guard enough to hear Patton's story?” he is using a general fear of technological alienation to reinforce a rarely challenged concept of the unspoiled, authentic black blues performance (25). And in “Ball and Biscuit,” from the Whites Stripes record *Elephant*, White, through his vocal performance and his lyrics, does his best sonic impersonation of an authentic, hypersexual, and potentially violent black bluesman. But rather than merely a simple exercise in racial mimicry, White’s track layers, through his music and lyrics, elements of his own, always questionable, autobiography on top of the pre-constructed blues narrative, extending the archetype while signaling White’s acceptance of the fiction involved in even the most “honest” autobiographical tropes of the bluesman.

Exploring White’s blues self-invention, I will examine White’s vocals while listening through the horn of what is commonly referred to as a Delta blues style of singing. In his seminal work *Deep Blues*, Robert Palmer writes, “The Mississippi Delta blues musicians sang with unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to field hollers than it was to other blues” (44). Wald adds, “There is no mistaking the traces of traditional moans and hollers in popular blues songs, and still more so in the performance styles of many, if not most of the singers” (71). These “moans” and “hollers” are such a mainstay in modern American popular music that they are largely taken for granted; however, an early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Northerner like Jack White must self-consciously adopt the styles for songs like “Ball and Biscuit.” I will also rely on Andrew Legg’s detailed taxonomy of gospel

vocal styles as a way to engage White's voice, since Legg draws close connections between the sounds of gospel and other popular music forms:

As one of the most articulate expressions of history, culture and community, African American gospel music seems without obvious parallel as a musical and social phenomenon of the twentieth century. Furthermore, researchers are beginning to now credit African American gospel music as being one of the key underpinning influences in the development of the juggernaut that has become contemporary popular music throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

(103)

Legg, like many other scholars, sees gospel vocals as closely tied to blues singing styles and a common link from early moans and hollers to the sounds of the blues, r&b, rock & roll, and other popular vocal forms.

White's vocals in "Ball and Biscuit" have a distinct gritty, almost dirty tone. Legg refers to this as *gravel tone*. According to Legg, "The tonal characteristics of the African American gospel 'voice' are as rich and as varied as the number of singers. The 'gravel' in the voice (alternatively referred to as 'rasp' 'grit' or 'hoarseness') used by many singers is a commonly applied general vocal characteristic that also functions as a means of creating an impassioned emphasis and added intensity to a word or phrase" (Legg 108). This gravelly sound is a characteristic of White's singing voice in a general sense, but it is more pronounced when he sings quieter blues numbers rather than screamed-out rock tunes. For White, the gravel serves as a mark of passion, feeling, and struggle. As we've seen, White positions struggle as an index of blues authenticity, so whether he is attempting to represent or to participate directly in struggle through vocal or guitar performance (or even by non-ergonomic stage set-ups), the feeling of

struggle is his self-conscious, expressive goal. One of White's favorite Delta blues artists, Son House, sings with a gravel tone in songs like "Grinnin' in Your Face" and "John the Revelator." It is not difficult to hear the similarities in vocal inflection between White and Son House, but it is most pronounced when White adds what musicologists identify as a *blues inflection* to selected words throughout "Ball and Biscuit."

According to Legg, "Gospel singers will often superimpose a 'blues inflection' or minor pentatonic improvised embellishment on a gospel melody that is of a predominantly major tonality, resulting in a marked shift in both sound, intent and affect that recalls the 'down home' sound of the blues" (118). When Legg says "down home," he refers to stereotypical notions of blues legitimacy: the "down home" blues sound is possible only if produced by black, rural socio-economically oppressed people. At 00:26 White sings the first two lines: "It's quite possible that I'm your third man, **girl**/But it's a fact that I'm the seventh **son**." In addition to the gravel already present in White's voice, he adds a blues inflection to the bolded last word of each line ("girl" and "son" at 00:29 and 00:33 respectively). It is this blues inflection that comes closest to a reproduction of that elusive sound of struggle that so many would-be blues performers strive for, and within the narrow confines of blues authenticity, fail to capture. White adds emphasis on those words that help add emotion and a sense of pain to the song. His voice serves as an aural representation of grief or sadness as it reveals a small catch, like the crack that comes at the onset of tears. It rather faithfully mimics the "gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style" Palmer praises (44). White places emphasis on the exact same words as he repeats the same lines three more times during the song. White makes a conscious choice about which lyrics to emphasize, and throughout the song he uses the blues inflection for the words "girl" and "son" without exception. He also adds the blues inflection to the lines "Ask

your girlfriends and see if they **know**” at 02:40-02:42 and “And I'll find me a soapbox where I can shout **it**” at 01:40-01:43. Why does White choose those words to emphasize and imbue with emotional resonance? It is probable that he sees himself as a narrator (and character) and the people he sings about as characters in a story. He speaks directly to a female character whom he calls “girl” and speaks about himself alternately as a “man” and a “son.” By emphasizing “girl” and “son,” he communicates who the two most important people in the story are to the audience. These two words (“girl”; “son”) hark most directly back to childhood, although, of course, the blues are not normally correlated with children. He uses the blues inflection for the words “know” and “it.” Both, given the context of the sentence, can refer to either the narrator’s sexual prowess or perhaps his supernatural powers. It is important for those words to stand out as they point toward the narrator’s unique masculine gifts: He is either a regular human who happens to be an outstanding lover — the best this girl will have to date, or perhaps ever — or he is an otherworldly being who will cast a love spell over her.

Another vocal inflection White uses in most of his songs, live and on record, is the soft grunt. Legg states,

The use of the ‘grunt’ ... is in evidence in two early field recordings of ‘Jumpin’ Judy’ from the 1930s (Afro-American Spirituals, Work Song, and Ballads). In the liner notes, [Wayne D.] Shirley writes; ‘The rhythmic grunts on this record indicate the work blows of the pick or axe’. The Arkansas version illustrates a constant drum-like pulse underlying the work song, whilst the Mississippi version of the same tune includes a wider-spaced, more punctuating percussive ‘grunt’ to which Shirley refers. In its gospel context, the grunt occurs less frequently and is

usually a loud, short expulsion of air on a non-specified pitch which punctuates sentences and phrases, underlining the pulse or beat within the phrase. (110)

When White grunts (“yeah”), he uses it as punctuation, but his grunts tend to both punctuate a sentence and introduce a new one, a musical one. Most of the time, White’s grunts occur just before or in the middle of an extended guitar solo, as at 01:46 where his “yeah” comes before his first guitar solo. Rather than being reminiscent of the “work blows of the pick or axe,” his grunts, are seductive and alluring (qtd. in Legg 110). He uses his voice to almost hypnotize his intended. If she is not intrigued by his words, perhaps she will be won over by his voice or his guitar.

These grunts also sometimes blur into longer raps or a line of talk-singing. Legg refers to this as *song-speech*. According to Legg, “Song-speech is similar to operatic recitative where the gospel singer delivers a lyric that is either half sung/half spoken or vacillates between a melodic and a spoken phrase” (112). It can be argued that White exhibits song-speech throughout most of the song. His style is a hybrid with talking for most of a line and the feel of singing coming through the blues inflection at the end of the line. Even so, his overall vocal performance is still reminiscent of singing when compared to his extension of grunts that turn into entirely spoken lines. When White says “Yeah. No doubt about it” from 00:39-00:43, he uses the spoken words as an aural form of swagger, in line with the “rebel persona” Hale discusses (239-240). Like a peacock, he struts in front of the woman he is trying to impress and coerce into bed. He also bookends his guitar solo with such spoken lines, giving the guitar a chance to speak for him and his erotic power when words fail him. White says, “Yeah, I can think of one or two things to say about it... Ah Listen” at 03:46-03:49 before the second guitar solo and then after, at 04:58-04:59, he asks, “You get the point now?” Not only does he use his vocal in a call and response with the guitar, but he also uses it to reinforce his masculine power. And when the song is winding down

and the last lines have been talked/sung, White warns his prey in spoken word at 07:02: “Yeah, you just wait/You stick around/You’ll figure it out.” Here he is the potentially violent bluesman who is willing to do whatever it takes to assert his masculinity, to be known as an outlaw or a *bad* man, including conjuring up the old racial stereotype of the hyper-sexed, black male rapist. If the girl does not catch his drift, i.e., will not sleep with him, he just may have to force her, harm her, or even kill her. Here the threat of violence is interchangeable with sexual coercion, as White’s voice contains all of the suggestive sexual energy and menace he can muster.

Lyrically, there are plenty of lines that point to sexual innuendo, coercion, and possible violence, but for all of the obvious and amusingly crude innuendo (“Ask your girlfriends and see if they know/That my strength is tenfold, girl/I’ll let you see it if you want to before you go”), there are some more subtle double entendres. The first example is the title of the song. The “ball and biscuit” is the nickname of a vintage condenser microphone, the 1935 Standard Telephones and Cables 4021. White’s fascination with vintage instruments and recording processes is well documented, so the title makes perfect sense. After all, if he uses a vintage ball-and-biscuit microphone and records, if not on wax discs, at least on analog tape, he might be able to replicate the sound of those great black bluesmen. Fittingly, the title evokes some sort of sexual liaison plus a snack (“Let’s have a ball and a biscuit, sugar/And take our sweet little time about it”), as numerous blues songs, across generations, contain such references. It is through the self-conscious construction of a title of a blues song with such a double meaning that illustrates White willingness to add to an existing fictional bluesman narrative. Writing a song called “Ball and Biscuit,” which is, on the surface, about a vintage microphone with a funny shape, but is really about sex, death, and braggadocio, allows White access to the pantheon of blues players



whose wild, studio-constructed personas did not necessarily have much to do with their regular lives.

White writes his own entry in the ledger of bluesman mythology when he adds a purportedly true, but—given White’s propensity for tall tales—possibly fictional autobiographical reference in a line he repeats in the song: “It’s a fact that I’m the seventh son.” This line, like many of White’s lyrics, is a biblical reference, which fits with elements of White’s stated autobiography: White grew up the youngest of 10 children in a Catholic family; both of his parents worked for the Catholic Church. These are undisputed facts, but White does have a reputation for fictionalizing pieces of his biography in the vein of rock stars before him like Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan. Despite audiences and the press being fully cognizant of White’s marriage to and divorce from Meg White, White continued to refer to her as his “big sister” until the White Stripes disbanded. As a result, many fans and members of the media assume embellishments of other elements of White’s autobiography could be found.

White did a series of interviews right around the time of the release of *Elephant* that suggest that his statements about his upbringing are accurate. When he was interviewed on 60 Minutes in 2004, he tells Mike Wallace that he almost chose a different career path: “I’d got accepted to the seminary in Wisconsin, and I was gonna become a priest, but the last second I thought, ‘I’ll just go to public school.’” When Wallace asked him what made him change his mind, he replied, “I had just gotten a new amplifier in my bedroom, and I didn’t think I was allowed to take it with me” (Leung). And in an interview in a 2004 issue of Britain’s *The Observer*, when talking about what he was like as an adolescent, White states, “I wouldn’t let myself enjoy anything. And remnants of that are still there. I don’t do drugs, I don’t get drunk, I don’t vote. Girls I don’t do. With this whole band, it’s obvious how much we’re forcing ourselves

and limiting ourselves all the time” (Harris). If White is truthful in both interviews, then he certainly understands the necessity of coming up with a suitably rebellious bluesman character in “Ball and Biscuit,” in service to good, dramatic storytelling. If White almost went to a seminary at 14 and did not have sex, do drugs, or get drunk as a 29-year-old rock star, then in “Ball and Biscuit” he has no choice but to construct an alter ego just like the bluesmen before him.

White is known to be obsessed with the number three, an eccentricity that continues to pique the curiosity of fans and critics alike. The first line of “Ball and Biscuit”: “It’s quite possible that I’m your third man, girl” is just one in a long (but hardly exhaustive) list of autobiographical references to the number three: He uses “Jack White III” in his production credits; his record label is called “Third Man Records”; his production company for his concert documentaries is called “Third Man Films”; and his publishing company is called “Third Man Books.” Both the White Stripes and the upholstery company he owned in Detroit (Third Man Upholstery) used a three-color scheme. White also changed his name for the duration of his 2005 UK tour to “Three Quid.” When White brings his tripartite obsession lyrically into “Ball and Biscuit” it marries a persona he created as part of his verifiable autobiography to the blues tradition of autobiographical self-fashioning. When White renames himself Three Quid, he participates in the type of self-invention that Herbert Leibowitz, Timothy Dow Adams, and Paul John Eakin discuss in their texts as the necessary and inherent fictions within the autobiographical genre. And White also takes part in the tradition of blues self-fashioning by artists like W.C. Handy, Robert Johnson, and Tommy Johnson.

White is probably *not* the seventh son born into his nuclear family: Since he has older sisters and is the youngest child it is almost impossible that he was the true seventh son in an unbroken line of male children (this is where the true power lies). Also, in blues mythology it is

the *seventh son of a seventh son* that is supposed to be endowed with special powers by God or by Satan. But this fiction, so handy for Muddy Waters (In his lyrics for “Hoochie Coochie Man,” the narrator claims: “On the seventh hour/On the seventh day/ On the seventh month/The seven doctors say/He was born for good luck/And that you'll see/I got seven hundred dollars/Don't you mess with me...”) and others, is useful for White’s fictional rock star persona as well as his fictional blues persona. As the true seventh son of a seventh son, he would have otherworldly powers that would awe his would-be woman in the bedroom and outside of it.

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### **‘I Respect the Art of the Show’: Jack White and the Art of Self Invention**

Jack White is seen by many as a man out of step with the current music scene, privileging musical production and dissemination techniques that eschew digital technology (though, according to Josh Eells in his 2012 New York Times article, “Jack Outside the Box: Jack White Is the Coolest, Weirdest, Savviest Rock Star of Our Time,” “White famously doesn’t own a cellphone, but he isn’t the Luddite he’s often made out to be. He has an iPod; he knows how to Skype. His friend Conan O’Brien says he’ll occasionally e-mail to say he laughed at a tweet.”). He prefers vintage instruments and analog recording practices. Yet, as a post-White Stripes solo artist and producer, he has collaborated with mainstream recording artists Jay-Z, Alicia Keys, and Insane Clown Posse, and the video for “Freedom at 21” utilizes standard hip-hop and grindhouse video tropes with a dash of 1980s hair metal aesthetics thrown in. It is important to note that even though “Freedom at 21” is a rock song, for White, the blues is the foundation for all of his music, regardless of style: “With The White Stripes, I wanted to have a new blues... ‘Seven Nation Army’ has become a soccer chant to some people, but to me it’s a blues song, a struggle of one person against the world. The sound, the rhythm, is not what

someone would label blues, and I think that happens with a lot of songs on this album as well [*Blunderbuss*]. I consider all of it to be the blues, but I'm trying to present it in a way that shakes it up for me and the listener" (Mulvey).

It is precisely White's manipulation of image and autobiographical fabrication that keeps the audience and media off balance and allows him to form a hybrid musical and personal identity as an iconoclast who is equal parts Pop sell out and indie hipster. Rather than viewing him as inauthentic, I believe it is more useful to see White's autobiographical self-invention as a self-conscious pastiche that has allowed for an unruly yet productive artistic expression. His post-modern approach to his creative and business affairs gives White the freedom to approach blues music as an art project while he was in the White Stripes, and this approach enables White to have a career as a label head, producer, and solo artist that defies musical categorization and subverts White's reputation as a humorless *artiste*. That label has been so entrenched that in 2006, the hipster music blog *Stereogum* published an entry with the headline: "Jack White Does Have a Sense of Humor," in which the author relays a story of White's friendly and relaxed interaction with fans during a Raconteurs video shoot (Lapatine).

In "Posing: Autobiography and the Subject of Photography," Paul Jay states, "Visual memory, the 'reading' of images from the past—be they fixed in a photograph or fluid in the mind's eye—can often be integral to the construction of identity in autobiographical works" (191). For Jay, a photograph does not have to be literal; it can instead be an image that the mind conjures up. And autobiography does not have to be a conventional, book-based enterprise. I will take this argument further and suggest that a photograph does not necessarily have to be in the distant past to create a memory; the memories can be created in real time with each camera click. In this final section, I will analyze a brief teaser for Jack White's collaboration with Insane

Clown Posse on Mozart's bawdy "Leck Mich Im Arsch," which literally translates to "Lick Me in the Arse" (or ass) and an excerpt from his video clip for "Freedom at 21" created by Hype Williams, a renowned hip-hop director who has helmed music videos for Tupac, Biggie Smalls, L.L. Cool J, Jay-Z, and Kanye West. I will read these works as a series of photographs that together offer White an opportunity for self-representation and, ultimately, self-invention, even reinvention. And it is White's inventiveness with postmodern pastiche that demonstrates the fluidity of his hybrid artistic expression. He is an artist and a businessman. He is selling an image, but he is also in control of that image; he is both the product *and* the producer.

In the trailer for "Leck Mich Im Arsch," White, dressed in a black t-shirt, pea coat, and bowler hat, is straight faced while a member of his crew, similarly dressed in a black suit and matching hat, playing the role of a reporter, asks him about Third Man Records' upcoming projects. White feigns ignorance as Joseph Utsler, *aka* Shaggy 2 Dope, and Joseph Bruce *aka* Violent J, of Insane Clown Posse, sneak up on him and his interviewer. ICP walks all the way up to the camera, until they are in extreme close up.

White's (semi-serious) grim face, as Shaggy 2 Dope and Violent J, wearing full clown makeup, loom in the frame, signifies on his reputation as a serious artist who only collaborates with fellow critical darlings. This trailer upends White's reputation as a humorless hipster and shows his playful side. In fact, this clip allows the audience to watch White transform, in real time, from an indie artist, producer, and label head who, in certain circles, enjoys a god-like status, to a transgressor who is willing to put his name on an unholy collaboration between Mozart and Insane Clown Posse no matter how many fans and critics he alienates.

In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin argues that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and,

further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). The editing in the trailer, with its cuts on the beat as the duo move ever closer to the camera, are reminiscent of a series of still camera clicks with the resultant snap shots acting as autobiographical puzzle pieces, with each pose moving White’s evolving identity and personality forward in real time. Additionally, White’s black coat and hat and ICP’s clown makeup support the fictional element of autobiography. In an interview with Camile Doderro in the *Village Voice*, Violent J talks about his experience working with White:

The one thing that was really interesting? When it came time to film the pictures? We put our make-up on. He put his hat on. You know what I’m saying? He put on his black hat and his black coat and we put on our makeup. We both had our thing....We went back to the studio, and we put our normal clothes back on, and we took our make-up off. He had [his] shtick and we had ours. He has to have his black hat everywhere.

By the end of the teaser, we know White has unapologetically produced a hybrid of high and low culture through his pairing with ICP, while offering a meta experience of the same, with Mozart’s “Leck Mich Im Arsch” itself being an example. The transgressive potential of such hybridity was not lost on Violent J: “People are tripping out because the respected meets the non-respected in every way. That’s what the whole news about this is” (Doderro).

In “Freedom at 21,” after the grindhouse-style title screen with the names of the song and video director, we see two of White’s public selves. One self is more or less the persona he has held to since the formation of the Dead Weather in 2009. He is wearing a black leather jacket with a boa on one of the lapels, black print trousers, and mirror sunglasses. The other White is an outlaw, perhaps the outlaw in the White Stripes’ blues song “Ball and Biscuit” come to life. This

White wears a black pinstriped suit and a fedora, like an out-of-context Robert Johnson, living in a different temporal, regional, racial, and gendered moment. (The protagonist of “Ball and Biscuit,” a stand-in for a Delta or Chicago bluesman, would likely not be in an interracial sexual situation, driving that car, and getting arrested by a *female* police officer). In the video, both Whites are glam, wearing heavy eyeliner, perhaps as homage to 1980s hair metal videos, complete with a video vixen on the hood of the car. Both Whites wear pancake makeup, but the outlaw’s powder is heavier. The outlaw’s look makes him seem more otherworldly, even more of a fictional autobiographical self.

In this part of the video, White poses as he sings, without his guitar, in front of a wall. His movements are playful; he even sticks out his tongue. The stuttering video effect on the beat, is similar to the cutting on the beat in the ICP video. This effect serves as a series of still photographs, capturing White’s expression as his identity and autobiography evolve. It is unlikely White would have made this video ten years ago. In fact, he was public in his disappointment in the Sophia Coppola-directed video for the White Stripes’ cover of Bert Bacharach’s “I Just Don’t Know What to do With Myself.” The video featured a pole dancing Kate Moss, and White deemed the video too sexy.

The video for “Freedom at 21,” a rock song, with its hip-hop and grindhouse features, including the video vixens, a fast car, outlaw behavior, and even White singing in front of a wall, 1990s hip-hop style, once again demonstrates his musical hybridity. And his mixing and matching of high and low culture in “Leck Mich Im Arsch” and multi-genre signification in “Freedom at 21” support White’s postmodern pastiche. White is truly a postmodern figure, as he does not strive for conventional notions of authenticity.

In the White Stripes, Jack White, recognizing the unresolvability of the problem of blues authenticity, circumvented it. And post-White Stripes, in his other artistic work, as well as in his business dealings, White's identity has remained fluid. He is as comfortable producing and performing with Alicia Keys or Jay-Z as he is working with Loretta Lynn or Wanda Jackson. He can play the role of the anti-technology-hipster-blues-rock icon, or he can blithely produce an obscene Mozart canon for Insane Clown Posse, one of the most reviled musical acts of this generation. For White, it does not really matter, as he heartily embraces the fictions behind the construction of a self.

In "Posing: Autobiography and the Subject of Photography," Jay examines photographer Cindy Sherman's self-portraits as works of autobiography. In a 1987 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City, Sherman offered a three-part series in which the first set of photographs evoke familiar pop culture images. According to Jay, "Each pose confronts the viewer with banal forms of subjectivity utterly familiar from a mass culture in which not only dress and gesture but personality itself is constructed out of a social nexus of commodified images and ideal types" (195). For instance, in one photo from the first set called "Untitled #90," Sherman poses in shadow with light illuminating her face and one of her legs. A cigarette dangles from her mouth, and her head is slightly cocked back in a haughty, rock star pose. In the second part of her series, her self-portraits turn those mass-marketed, socially desirable images on their head. For example, in "Untitled #137," Sherman faces forward, in muted light, wearing a V-neck shirt under a rumpled robe. Her hair is unkempt and she appears pale and dazed. Jay states, "In the first series the underlying sense that her subjects are dominated by subtle and not-so-subtle forms of social and cultural discipline—which erases any trace of individual subjectivity—surfaces in the second series in an explicit way as Sherman poses herself as a



woman profoundly disturbed, disoriented, and defeated” (196). In the final series of images, body parts are photographed in a chaotic manner, as in “Untitled #167” where a nose, an ear, and a hand, are strewn across a patch of dirt (196). Jay sees the evolution of the self in these three sets of photographs as, if not an unfolding conventional autobiography, a set of images that can “be construed as recording her ‘life,’ even her experience and her likeness” with the larger narrative arc speaking to the inevitability and consequences of objectification (199). Jay explains, “The self starts out in these photographs as a wholly commodified object, descends into images that bespeak the eventual horror such a situation can lead to, and finally explodes the individual amidst a pile of rubble” (196-197). In the video for “Freedom at 21,” White revels in his commodification, and he does not show any obvious signs of regret over his participation in the various hip-hop, hair metal, and grindhouse tropes, including the highly sexualized female images. And in his collaboration with Insane Clown Posse, White gleefully “explodes the individual [his own hipster icon image] amidst a pile of rubble” (197). All of these actions constitute a process of autobiographical self-invention (and re-invention) for White, and Jay further clarifies how an autobiography can unfold, even unintentionally, during the act of artistic expression:

[Sherman’s] portraits examine the cultural conditions in which identity is fashioned, and as selected and shown by Sherman they are given the shape of a narrative about that investigation. Seen from this perspective, her self-portraits take the shape of something like an autobiographical metanarrative about the course of one artist’s investigation of subjectivity, scrutinizing the very concepts of identity and subjectivity in a way that turns that act into a memoir of itself. (199)

In White's case, I argue that his autobiographical (and sometimes anti-autobiographical) acts are enacted in a conscious manner. However, the general idea of an artist telling an autobiographical story about him or herself simply through the act of selecting his or her art materials or making a decision about how to dress or how to present him or herself in a music video or in a *Rolling Stone* interview is also valid. Jack White enunciates his evolving autobiographical identity through all of these processes, with a full understanding of, and apparent comfort with, his fluid subject/object position.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> In the late 1950s and into the mid-1960s, blues music was not popular with mainstream, white audiences. Rather, it was popular mainly among white American folk revivalists who focused on acoustic, country blues to the exclusion of amplified, urban blues. Urban black audiences were interested in urban blues, and Jones's *Blues People* and Ellison's *Shadow and Act* were two books that also demonstrated early 1960s interest in blues music.

<sup>ii</sup> There is a body of autobiographical literature by black American blues musicians, including *Father of the Blues* by W.C. Handy and *Blues All Around Me* by B.B. King and David Ritz. An earlier generation of white musicians like Mezz Mezzrow (*Really the Blues*, written with Bernard Wolfe) has also engaged the blues in their autobiographies.

<sup>iii</sup> White masks himself *out* of blackness as opposed to the literal and figurative blacking up discussed, for example, in Lott's *Love and Theft* and Lhamon Jr.'s *Raising Cain*.

<sup>iv</sup> In 1957 Norman Mailer wrote a controversial essay for *Dissent* called "The White Negro." He defines a white hipster persona whose interest and participation in black American music is a way of solving his existential crisis: life versus death, rebellion versus conformity. Mailer claims: "So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro." Mailer further suggests that whites are attracted to black cultural expression and black style out of the recognition that black people are somehow more alive and, therefore, have better access to their emotions. It follows that this black core, uncontaminated by modernity, makes for a less inhibited artistic expression. The idea that, due to their collective experience with racial, socio-economic, and political oppression, black Americans can teach white people how to live

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authentically, to stand apart rather than succumbing to conformity, still undergirds white reception of black artistic production. Proximity to black bodies is an important part of the equation. In the hipster model, it is not enough to enjoy jazz or blues music; hipsters also desire a unique physical proximity to blacks, leading to a closer imitation of their cultural style.

<sup>v</sup> In African American folklore, the seventh son of a seventh son is blessed with the gift of clairvoyance. See *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois.

<sup>vi</sup> See also Wald, *The Blues*; Davis, *The History of the Blues*; Palmer, *Deep Blues*; Murray, *Stomping the Blues*.

<sup>vii</sup> Pop art is now viewed as one “large, Western movement in the arts” (McCarthy 8–14). So when I discuss the movement, I will talk about it as one Western movement rather than differentiating between the British or American versions.

<sup>viii</sup> As McCarthy notes, Dada “dated to the years of World War I and often embraced nihilism and an anti-art aesthetic in protest against the civilisation that gave birth to the war” (16).

<sup>ix</sup> Nudie Cohn was a tailor who designed country and western suits for Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, among many other celebrities.

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