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Blues and Jazz
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Blues and Jazz



4. BARNEY KESSEL

Somehow, picking impeccable runs and deftly stitched chords from the seemingly seamless warp and weft of worn standards—*My Old Flame*, *Embraceable You*—the right hand understands what the left one will do. . . . Picture spiffed up partners gracing a spotlit floor. Now “look” at this: that rug-cutting riff of *Let’s Cook!*

5. GRANT GREEN

Try transcribing even a single dexterous line of Hank Mobley’s *Workout* . . . or *Smokin’* (that session from ’61) and watch the inked nib flick, nimbly, glistening beads, quicksilver slick, across the staves. Precious gemstones? (Emeralds? Polished peas of jade?) Translucent black pearls . . . their sheen every shade of green.

6. WES MONTGOMERY

Twisted Blues, *West Coast Blues*, *Born to Be Blue*. . . . And yet those pulse-strong double-stopped strokes of pure callused pluck, his trademark thumb-strummed octaves, calling out rhyming, chiming overtones like a steepled, rope-hung bell swung with bronze-bright appeal. That clapping tongue—the gong, the hum—in *Naptown Blues* . . . no dark summoning knell.

The Things that Jes’ Grew? The Blues “I” and African American Autobiographies¹

Daniel Stein
Georg-August-University Goettingen

The blues were born in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, most music critics and cultural historians agree. As Steven Tracy observes, “[i]t wasn’t until . . . some time in the 1880s that the form we recognize as the blues first emerged, and until 1890 that Gates Thomas collected a lyric in South Texas that was somewhat like the blues. . . .”² Only after the shackles of slavery had been removed could Southern black musicians become professional entertainers, performing in jook joints and black minstrel troupes, transforming spirituals and work songs into a musical idiom that became culturally influential for its musical qualities—its rhythmic drive, harmonic progression, and vocal inflections—and for the point of view through which the singing blues musician most frequently tells his or her story: the first-person perspective. The turn from the communal “we” of the slave songs to the individual “I” of the blues lyric inscribes a liberated black self—“I woke up this morning with the blues three different ways”; “I done seen better days, but I’m putting up with these”; “I got de blues, / But I’m too damn mean to cry”—into the cultural fabric of a nation torn between progressivist impulses and racial segregation.

The blues performer’s introspective and simultaneously communicative mode of personal reflection and creative self-expression suggests an autobiographical as well as a poetic reading of the blues.³ Contrary to many early interpretations of the blues as the direct expression of a primitive folk-consciousness, the narrative perspective of the blues has emerged as a prominent signifier of a modern black aesthetic, allowing Houston Baker to stylize the blues “not as a function of formal inscription, but as a forceful condition of Afro-American inscription itself,” as an amalgamation of “work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament . . . [that is]

always . . . in motion—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World.”⁴ As both condition and consequence of African-American cultural inscription, the blues took on a particular form of self-expression that Ralph Ellison has famously described as “an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”⁵ According to Paul Garon, the blues is “a self-centered music” that “distinguishes itself from numerous other . . . folk song forms by its predilection for first-person presentation.”⁶ If the blues are lyrical evocations of a black self under siege in postbellum America as well as autobiographical stylizations of personal experience in a transitional era (1885-1925) in which, according to Henry Louis Gates, “[b]lack Americans sought to re-present their public selves in order to reconstruct their public, reproducible images,”⁷ then two questions arise: What exactly motivated and facilitated the turn to autobiographical self-assertion as it is captured in and expressed through the blues’ lyrical “I”? And how did the blues singer become a public persona, speaking autobiographically and poetically at a time when social forces not only labored hard to prevent African Americans from speaking up but sought to erase the sense of individuality and self-worth that the end of slavery and the promises of Reconstruction had begun to instill among African Americans in the South?

This essay discusses the evolution of an autobiographical perspective through a narrative and poetic form that may be termed “blues autobiographics.” The concept of “autobiographics,” in distinction to “autobiography,” is based on the work of feminist autobiography scholar Leigh Gilmore. “[W]riting an autobiography can be a political act because it asserts a right to speak rather than to be spoken for,” Gilmore observes, and she urges critics to consider texts that have not usually been read as autobiographies.⁸ “The autobiographical subject is produced not by experience but by autobiography. This specification does not diminish the autobiographer; rather, it situates her or him as an agent in autobiographical production” and foregrounds “the rhetorical dimension of autobiography [as an] indicat[or of] performative agency.”⁹ In the blues, this performative agency does not result so much from the factual recollection of the singer’s supposed life story; it is the lyrical *evocation* of personal experience in contexts shared by the community that the singer transforms into song and delivers to the audience.¹⁰ This essay takes a somewhat unconventional approach in that it is less interested in the specific tales and experiences told in particular blues songs than in the very fact that black working-class musicians and later composers like W. C. Handy and Perry Bradford appropriated the first-person perspective as a prominent narrative frame in order to underscore the singer’s agency in cultural production. For this reason, I turn to literary evocations and recollections of the blues and pre-modern black music by writers such as James Weldon Johnson and blues composer W. C. Handy rather than providing a survey of themes and topics presented in blues lyrics.¹¹

The connections between Gilmore’s “autobiographics” and the blues are

obvious: Blues lyrics do not normally count as proper autobiographies even though they are largely centered on the singer’s personal experience. Unlike minstrel performers in blackface, however, blues musicians were speaking for themselves rather than being (mis-)spoken for by others. Moreover, the notion of autobiographical enunciation as an act of announcing the singer’s agency to the public applies to musicians striving for self-possession while living “under a kind of sentence of death” by lynching and other acts of racial violence, as John Dollard has described the post-bellum South.¹² “Autobiographics” indicates the repeated insistence in the blues on the self as a site of meaning and on the singer’s “will to persevere, the disposition to persist and perhaps prevail,” as Albert Murray has written.¹³ While blues singers have routinely acknowledged the music’s ability to transcend its historical context—Eileen Southern mentions an old New Orleans fiddler’s statement that there “Ain’t no first blues! The blues always been”—they have also recognized the significance of the poetic frame of the blues as a means of commenting publicly on issues relevant to the singer and the black community.¹⁴ The blues singer’s turn to a poetic autobiographics can thus be seen as an act similar to the slave narrator’s turn to life writing, a way of asserting an independent self and negotiating the conflict between dispossession and self-possession by means of autobiographical self-inscription.

As Dennis Jarrett points out, this autobiographical self-inscription—like all forms of autobiographical presentation—is “clearly the presentation of a kind of fictional self—whom [we may] call the *bluesman*.”¹⁵ This view is crucial because it recognizes the creative and intellectual skills involved in the autobiographics of the blues. In contradistinction to early blues criticism, Jarrett’s notion of a “blues persona” not only demonstrates a specifically modern aesthetics but further reinforces an understanding of the blues musician as a master storyteller whose art and craft are not expressions of an un-self-conscious folk mind but the result of a self-reflexive and self-aware cultural practice. Jarrett is correct to emphasize “the highly stylized, contrived context of music” and to stress the predominance of artifice over any naïve form of blues realism. The messages conveyed by the blues “must be embodied in the bluesman,” who speaks as an autobiographer and utilizes the narrative agency afforded by this narrative mode to construct a poetic image of self: the blues “I.”¹⁶

The blues singer’s turn to an autobiographical perspective can be seen as a response to social changes in the post-bellum South as well as a creative reaction to the continuation of minstrelsy’s frolicking slave. Thomas D. Rice’s famous “Jump Jim Crow” (ca. 1928)—“Weel [sic] about, and turn about / And do jis so; / Eb’ry time I weel [sic] about, / I jump Jim Crow”—and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s popular abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* proposed a notion of black musical performance in song and text as something that offers itself for consumption but denies the black subject a personal story and communal history.¹⁷ The black stableman who supposedly inspired Rice’s song-and-dance routine remains nameless and indistinct in all historical

accounts, and Stowe's major comic creation, the black child Topsy, is equally deprived of a parental lineage and life story. Stowe's novel provides an especially rich example of minstrelsy's detrimental influence on the public presentation of black selfhood, and it equally serves as a testament to the romanticization of racial difference that characterized nineteenth-century ethnography and folk collecting.¹⁸

Halfway through *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851/52), Stowe introduces Topsy, "a little negro girl, about eight or nine years of age," "one of the blackest of her race," "goblin-like" and "heathenish."¹⁹ Topsy is a female incarnation of Sambo, minstrelsy's happy singing slave, an expression of the author's ambivalent perception of the "otherwordliness" and "oddity" of slave singing as fascinating and inexplicable as well as undignified and un-Christian.²⁰ Topsy's appearance and behavior reiterate prominent plantation stereotypes and minstrel conventions while, at the same time, describing a girl in need of Christian redemption and proper education:

The black, glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery, and the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning around, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race. . . .²¹

Not only is Topsy rendered a primitive exotic Other—she is simultaneously revolting ("shrill," "wicked," "odd") and fascinating ("fantastic")—she is also constructed as a music-producing "thing." Significantly, she is given a voice but no language, no agency. All she produces are "guttural sounds" said to cast racial characteristics into sonic form. Miss Ophelia's reaction to this spectacle is telling: She "stood silent, perfectly paralyzed with amazement," mystified as to the origins of Topsy's performative exuberance.²² Seeking to get to the bottom of this bewildering performance, she asks the little girl:

"How old are you, Topsy?"

"Dun no, Missis," said the image, with a grin that showed all her teeth.

"Don't know how old you are? Didn't anybody ever tell you? Who was your mother?"

"Never had none!" said the child, with another grin.

"Never had any mother? What do you mean? Where were you born?"

"Never was born!" persisted Topsy with another grin. . . . Never had no father, nor mother, nor nothin' . . ."

"Do you know who made you?"

"Nobody, as I knows on," said the child, with a short laugh. . . . "I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody ever made me."²³

Topsy knows no mother and father; she is a "thing" and "image" and has simply "grow'd." While Stowe recognizes and appropriates the elusive power and mystique of Topsy's act, she is unable or perhaps unwilling to grant Topsy a life story and connect her singing and dancing with the cultural context—African-American folk culture, learned and polished for the appreciation of white slaveholders—from which it sprang. It would be difficult to find a more concise image of early reactions to African-American musical performance and their defining influence on the development of the blues.

After slavery, the communal "we" of the slaves and the ventriloquist "I" of blackface minstrelsy gave way to the first-person accounts of what might be called the "blues I."²⁴ LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka links the notion of black performativity as something that simply "grow'd" like Topsy with the autobiographical mode of the blues: "A slave cannot be a man. . . . Primitive blues-singing actually came into being because of the Civil War. . . . The emancipation of the slaves proposed for them a normal human existence, a humanity impossible under slavery."²⁵ Distinguishing the newly emerging blues from the communal focus of the spirituals, he continues: "[T]he insistence of blues verse on the life of the individual and his individual trials and successes . . . is a manifestation of the whole Western concept of man's life. . . ." ²⁶ Only once slavery's dispossession gave way to the black sharecropper's and migrant worker's sense of self-possession could the blues emerge as an autobiographical mode.

Following the new sense of self-possession and economic opportunity, however, were the socio-political throwbacks after the failure of Reconstruction. Pondering the resurgence of racial violence and the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws, Adam Gussow interprets the "simultaneous emergence of men's and women's blues . . . as a social response to the grievous spiritual pressures exerted on working-class black southerners by the sudden eruption of lynching-as-spectacle."²⁷ If the blues played a recuperative role in the lives of black musicians and their audiences by instituting a black autobiographical perspective, and if they "affirm[ed] the somebodiness of black people [by] preserv[ing] the worth of black humanity through ritual and drama,"²⁸ then they were an answer to the most horrific public erasure of the black "I": lynching, incarceration, and the exploitation of sharecroppers and workers on plantations and in levee camps, all of which Memphis Slim, Big Bill Broonzy, and Sonny Boy Williamson recall vividly on Alan Lomax's recording *Blues in the Mississippi Night* (1946).²⁹ Just as Stowe had alleged that the "native music" of Topsy's race had sprung from an unknown source and that it carried the sound of racial difference, lynching brutally reinforced the loss of African-American self-possession: Personal freedom and individuality—prerequisites for autobiography—were uncertain at a time when the rationale of levee camp owners was, "If you kill a nigger, I'll buy another one," as Memphis Slim remembered.

Blues composer W. C. Handy's autobiography *Father of the Blues* (1941) captures the interconnectedness of early blues music, autobiographical

subjectivity, and Southern racial violence. Handy recalls many instances in which he struggled for self-possession and negotiated between a need "to submit to certain hard conditions long enough to fight my way out and yet be considered sufficiently 'submissive' by those who held the whip hand."³⁰ He locates the threat of lynching and the public erasure of African-American selfhood as the points of origin for his drive to popularize the blues and insists on self-assertion ("to fight my way out") while at the same time acknowledging the significance of racial submissiveness in the age of Jim Crow. *Father of the Blues* is most instructive in its portrayal of Handy's transformation from black minstrel musician to blues composer and entrepreneur. The narrative begins with a depiction of a moment of disarray in the American South. As Gussow notes, Handy "represents the world of pre-blues black entertainment in the state of crisis that preceded and accompanied [the] process" of transforming and transcribing what Handy calls "primitive music" into successful popular songs loosely based on the idiom of the blues, like "Memphis Blues" (1912) and "St. Louis Blues" (1914).³¹ As a member of Mahara's Minstrels between 1896 and 1903, the young Handy witnesses the aftermath of a brutal lynching, only barely escapes his own death, and generally lives through a time he refers to as "the nightmare of those minstrel days."³² Not only is he forced to subject to his white audiences' whim at will, but he is condemned to live a blues life irreconcilable with the racial burlesque of black minstrelsy. Gussow poses a series of crucial questions: "[C]an the rapid decline of black minstrelsy after the turn of the century be traced to ... a painful and finally insupportable disjunction between the comic materials from which the minstrel show was assembled and the southern nightmare the black minstrels ... were forced to endure?" That is, "can the ... emergence of [the] blues ... be attributed ... to the music's provisional resolution of this disjunction: the supplanting of the minstrel grin, in the American popular imagination, by the bittersweet sadness... but also the stoic pride" of the blues singer?³³ Handy and fellow black minstrels "were blues subjects in need of the release only blues songs could provide."³⁴ Since they could not fight racial violence directly, they sought an outlet for their blues by changing minstrelsy's racial politics from comic stereotype to serious blues autobiographics.

Father of the Blues documents the calculated embrace of a musical sound and narrative perspective by a self-conscious modernist. Handy becomes acquainted with the Southern folk blues, discovers their commercial potential, and is the first to commit to writing, in the form of sheet music, the autobiographics of the blues. One night in Tutwiler, Mississippi, while waiting for a train, Handy meets the prototypical bluesman:

A 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... 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.³⁵

Later, Handy's orchestra is playing a white society dance in Cleveland, Mississippi, when the audience demands "some of 'our native music'" and Handy yields the stage to a local blues band:

They struck up one of those over-and-over strains that seem to have no very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all. The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on and on it went, the kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps. Thump-thump-thump went their feet on the floor ... [I] commenced to wonder if anybody ... would go for it. The answer was not long in coming. A rain of silver dollars began to fall around the outlandish, stomping feet. The dancers went wild ... Then I saw the beauty of primitive music.... The music wanted polishing, but it contained the essence. Folks would pay money for it That night a composer was born, an *American* composer.³⁶

Handy presents this "primitive music" as "disturbing" and "weird" (note his indebtedness to the discourse of folk collecting) but recognizes his chance to escape the masks of minstrelsy by reinventing himself as an *American* composer. By "polishing" the blues, mobilizing its rhythmic infectiousness, and creating an audience for the music's autobiographical perspective, he did much to introduce the first-person language of the blues to the attention of a national audience. As Gussow's analysis shows, both "Memphis Blues" and "St. Louis Blues" make reference to Handy's experiences in the Deep South. In "St. Louis Blues," the lines "I hate to see de eve'-nin' sun go down / 'Cause ma baby, he done lef' dis town" are channeled through the perspective of a blues woman abandoned by her man, but the danger of nightly violence at the hands of white Southerners was a very real one for traveling black musicians and Handy himself. The line "I'll pack my trunk and make mah get-away," while part of the lover's lament, also establishes a reference to Handy's narrow getaway from a lynch mob one night when he forsook the minstrel mask and fought back against a white Southerner.³⁷ Accordingly, we may argue that the blues simultaneously negotiate personal and social experience while catering to and shaping a market of "race music." They speak autobiographically, most often in terms of lost love and longing for companionship, while at the same time announcing a personalized social subtext underneath the lover's lament. Gussow speaks insightfully of the blues as an instance "of economic self-making in which the radically decapitalized (i.e., 'worthless,' lynchable) black body ... is preserved, enriched, [and] reclaimed" through what I call the poetic autobiographics of the blues "I."³⁸

Such recollections and the blues lyrics composed in response to the repeated attempts to erase African-American life stories from the historical

record attest to the complex power of what may be called the “jes’ grew” strain in representations of African-American performance. The lyricist, poet, essayist, and novelist James Weldon Johnson imagined “jes’ grew” as a signifier for the pre-modern and elusive character of black folk expression: “The earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, ‘jes’ grew’.... I remember that we [Johnson, his brother J. Rosamond, and Bob Cole] appropriated about the last one of the ‘jes’ grew’ songs. It was a song which had been sung for years all through the South.” Like Handy, Johnson describes himself as a central figure in the transition from folk material to modern musical expression: “The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody. We took it, re-wrote the verses, telling an entirely different story from the original, and published the song.”³⁹ For Johnson, whose politics of racial uplift and sophistication shaped his image of the blues as a “primitive form” and “the philosophical expression of the individual contemplating his situation in relation to the conditions surrounding him,” the ingredients that “g[ave] to good Jazz [sic] music its peculiar power of excitation to motor response was not consciously designed; it, like Topsy, just happened and grew.”⁴⁰ The process Johnson outlines is the transformation of “unprintable” and un-owned (“belonged to nobody”) folk lyrics into a modern—that is, self-consciously constructed and copyrighted—presentation of a black speaking subject, a transition from elusive “jes’ grew” to a culturally specific and economically viable blues autobiographics. While Johnson taps into the strain of racist mythology that led nineteenth-century collectors of the slave songs to romanticize exotic blackness and compelled minstrel and “coon” performers to indulge in comic blackness, he makes a crucial distinction between the unknown and elusive folk sources of the past (“not consciously designed”) and the transformation of these sources in modern and self-consciously composed cultural products (“took it, rewrite the verses ... and published the song”).⁴¹

What began with Handy’s “Memphis Blues” and “St. Louis Blues” reached a greater audience in the 1920s through the work of classic blues singers like Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey. Songs such as Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” (1920), Bessie Smith’s “Young Woman’s Blues” (1926), or Rainey’s “Lawd, Send Me a Man Blues” (1924) rejected any notion of a female blues persona created unself-consciously and featured singers whose performances turned them into queens and empresses of the blues instead of confining them to the role of undistinguished folk musicians. Angela Davis notes that the singers opposed the “saccharine and idealized nonsexual depictions of heterosexual love relationships” common to popular songs and instead “articulated a new valuation of [female] emotional needs and desires” at a time when “new psychosocial realities [emerged] within the black population.”⁴² “I ain’t no high yella, I’m a deep killer brown / I ain’t gonna marry, ain’t gon’ settle down,” Bessie Smith proudly declares, while Ma Rainey boldly demands: “Send me a Zulu, a voodoo, any old man / I’m not particular, boys, I’ll take what I can.” Mamie Smith is defiantly violent: “I’m gonna do like a Chinaman, go and get me some hop / Get myself a gun, and shoot myself a

cop / I ain’t had nothin’ but bad news / Now I’ve got the crazy blues.”⁴³ Again, it is the continuation of the blues’ narrative perspective—the insistence on the blues “I” and its power to exert personal and cultural agency—that is as important as the actual contents of the lyrics. By the late twenties and early thirties, country bluesmen carried on the autobiographics of the blues queens. Blind Lemon Johnson, Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, Robert Johnson: The list of male musicians singing of personal exploits and stylizing the socio-economic conditions of the depression South is long, and all of them insist on the blues as a poetic form and on the blues singer as an autobiographical speaker announcing the prevalence of the blues “I.”

In his critique of Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Ronald Radano criticizes an “ahistorical devotion to a ‘vernacular’ grounding [of black writing and music] that is reformulated in the postmodern lexicon of elusiveness.”⁴⁴ When Baker approaches the blues as African-America’s cultural “matrix” and “the blues singer and his performance ... as codifiers, absorbing and transforming discontinuous experience into formal expressive instances that bear only the trace of origins, refusing to be pinned down to any final ... significance,” he privileges the notion of “jes’ grew” as something that is anchored in the blues performance as an elusive signifier.⁴⁵ Evidently, the lack of information existing on the beginnings of the blues—that is, the lack of recordings until decades after the music first emerged—gives the blues much of its mythical potential and literary appeal. While Radano correctly criticizes Baker’s tendency to elevate the blues to a transhistorical (and thus frequently decontextualized and romanticized) codifier of African-American spirituality and creative resistance, Baker’s “blues matrix” can be understood on a different level as the example of a literary and cultural critic’s creative projection of meaning onto the sounds of the blues as they travel—are imagined to travel—through the “blues geographies in the New World.”⁴⁶ Baker’s academic turn to the blues follows literary evocations such as Handy’s *Father of the Blues*, Langston Hughes’s “The Weary Blues” (1925) and *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Sterling Brown’s “Ma Rainey” (1932), Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), and August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1981), and it prefigured works like Walter Mosley’s *RL’s Dream* (1995) and Clarence Major’s *Dirty Bird Blues* (1996). Blues literature recognizes the very elusive “jes’ grew” element in the music as a productive site for employing it as trope and theme for ever-new celebrations of a black aesthetic. Virtually all of these works access the cultural and mythical potential of the blues by way of the autobiographical: It is almost always the blues musician, either fictionalized ones like Jones’ Ursa Corregidora and Mosley’s Soupspoon, actual players through whom writers and critics create meaning far beyond the blues’ historical specificity, or the many blues singers who have spoken autobiographically through their music and oral histories.⁴⁷

Notes

- ¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented in Pittsburgh, Northeast Modern Language Association, May 5, 2004. I thank Jermaine Singleton and Daniel Hartley for critical suggestions.
- ² Steven C. Tracy, introduction to *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 2-3.
- ³ On the blues as poetry, see Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Avon, 1970); Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (1975, San Francisco: City Lights, 1996).
- ⁴ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), 4-5.
- ⁵ Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," 1945, in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 129.
- ⁶ Garon, 9.
- ⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (1988): 129.
- ⁸ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 40.
- ⁹ Gilmore, 25.
- ¹⁰ Tracy notes: "Blues performers may not . . . always be describing solely their own experiences. . . . Sometimes they spin out narratives of the experiences of relatives, friends, neighbors, or other community members, or experiences that any community member *could* have had, or experiences that reflect a symbolic rather than a literal reality, but almost all the songs are in the first person . . . as if the experience had been the singer's own" (7).
- ¹¹ For a sociological analysis of blues themes and lyrics, see Paul Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues* (1960, New York: Collier, 1966).
- ¹² John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1935, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 305.
- ¹³ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (1976, New York: Da Capo, 2000), 10. According to Murray, "the blues musician . . . [is] an agent of affirmation and continuity in the face of adversity," and the blues lyric is a poetic stylization of the blues singer's individual voice (38).
- ¹⁴ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (1971, New York: Norton, 1983), 330.
- ¹⁵ Dennis Jarrett, "The Singer and the Bluesman: Formulations of Personality in the Lyrics of the Blues," in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 195.
- ¹⁶ Jarrett, 195-196. Jarrett identifies "first-person rhetoric," "verbal stylization," and an "oral-formulaic tradition" (197) as the means through which the blues musician gains speaking authority and conveys a particular attitude toward his or her subject.
- ¹⁷ Qtd. in Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1974), 82.
- ¹⁸ This is neither meant to downplay the tremendous momentum the novel created for the abolitionist cause nor to deny the originality of Stowe's sympathetic and humanizing portrait of Uncle Tom. On nineteenth-century ethnography and folk collecting, see Ronald Radano, "Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 506-544.
- ¹⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851/52), ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: Norton, 1994), 206-207.

- ²⁰ For a detailed analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and minstrelsy, see Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005).
- ²¹ Stowe, 207.
- ²² Stowe, 207.
- ²³ Stowe, 209-210.
- ²⁴ As Frederick Douglass recalls the slaves singing: "We raise de wheat, / Dey gib us de corn; / We bake de bread, / Dey gib us de cruss; / We sif de meal, / Dey gib us de huss; / We peal de meat, / Dey gib us de skin, / And dat's de way / Dey takes us in. / We skim de pot, / Dey gib us de liquor, / And say dat's good enough for nigger. . . ." *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855, in *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 290.
- ²⁵ LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963, New York: Quill, 1999), 60-61.
- ²⁶ Jones/Baraka, 66.
- ²⁷ Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002), 3-4.
- ²⁸ James Cone, "The Blues: A Secular Spiritual," in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 236.
- ²⁹ Alan Lomax, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, 1946, Rykodisk (RCD 90155, 1990).
- ³⁰ William C. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 4.
- ³¹ Gussow, 69.
- ³² Handy, 51.
- ³³ Gussow, 91-92.
- ³⁴ Gussow, 69.
- ³⁵ Handy, 73-74.
- ³⁶ Handy, 76-77.
- ³⁷ Lyrics reprinted in William C. Handy, ed., *Blues: An Anthology* (1926, New York: Da Capo, 1990), 143. For further analysis, see Gussow, 66-119.
- ³⁸ Gussow, 75.
- ³⁹ James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), 12-13. See also Brent Edwards, "The Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form: James Weldon Johnson's Prefaces," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 580-601.
- ⁴⁰ James Weldon Johnson, *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking, 1926), 20, 17.
- ⁴¹ See also Ishmael Reed's engagement with "jes' grew" in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972, New York: Scribner, 1996).
- ⁴² Angela Y. Davis, "I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity," in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 470, 471. Gussow insightfully reads Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" as "social text." See 159-194.
- ⁴³ Bessie Smith, "Young Woman's Blues," reissued on *Nobody's Blues but Mine* (Columbia CG 31093, 1972); Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Lawd, Send Me a Man Blues," reissued on *Queen of the Blues* (Biograph BLP-12032, no date); Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds, "Crazy Blues," reissued on *Rhino Blues Masters*, vol. 11, *Classic Blues Women* (R2 71134, 1993).
- ⁴⁴ Ronald Radano, "Soul Texts and the Blackness of Folk" *Modernism/Modernity* 2.1

(1995): 73.

⁴⁵ Baker, *Blues* 3, 8.

⁴⁶ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), xviii.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Willie Dixon with Don Snowden, *I Am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story* (New York: Da Capo, 1989); B.B. King with David Ritz, *Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King* (1996, New York: Avon, 1999); Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford's Own Story* (New York: Oak, 1965); William Broonzy, as told to Yannick Bruynoghe, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story* (1955, New York: Da Capo, 1992).

The My Coxcomb Don' Fi' Me No Mo' Blues: An Analysis of "Come Away" in *Twelfth Night* and a Conjectural Performance Aesthetic

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At first glance, there would seem to be very few similarities between the character of Feste in *Twelfth Night* and the early twentieth century delta blues men such as Robert Johnson, yet here I will argue that a performance aesthetic that figures Feste as a delta blues musician significantly encapsulates a register of meaning that would have read easily to an early modern audience, but is lost to a contemporary audience. The history of criticism of *Twelfth Night* has shown marked reservation regarding the songs of Feste. In the 1623 Folio, the earliest textual authority, Feste sings a wide variety of songs from drunken catches to doleful ballads. As Karen Greif has pointed out, "To past audiences Feste was not compellingly enigmatic. He was simply baffling and all too often tiresome."¹ Songs such as "Come Away" (2.4),² which I will focus on for the purposes of this essay, have been reassigned to Viola based on the perception of an authorial revision within the text,³ or as an attempt to curtail Feste's multiple functionality within a performance of the play.⁴ The music is seen by these critics and producers not as a method to propel the narrative of the play but as a moment John Barton describes as a "pause for lovely song."⁵ Yet, at least one song—"Come Away"—is indeed propelling the narrative of the play by transforming Orsino's Petrarchan view of desire into an Ovidian erotic view of desire. This transformation, which an Early Modern audience would recognize as participating in the metamorphic ability of Ovidian verse, a contemporary audience can recognize through the accreted myth of transformation that surrounds the Blues. Further, the liminal location of the original singer of "Come Away" is analogous to the location occupied by the early twentieth century blues singers, who were able to criticize the establishment with only limited fear of reprisal. Though this paper looks specifically at one song, by bringing the blues man into a North American