

A MAN GIT DIS YELLA WATER IN HIS BLOOD¹: The Evolution of Blues Poetry and Performance

Sara Rutherford

A man in too-loose blue jeans and a half-buttoned maroon shirt, stretched wife-beater beneath, walks onto a makeshift stage and clears his throat. He grabs the microphone with a quick, assertive movement and his shoulder length dreadlocks sway. “I call this ‘Born a Nigger’ he says, and begins to recite in a slow, syncopated rhythm a poem about a young man who is trying to understand himself and his race in relation to what society has labeled him. The rough, melodic words intermingle with the soft din of glasses clinking and the muffled conversation of audience members in the back. “When I was a boy/rocks stuck in my shoes/because they had no sole (soul)/like me,” he says, gesturing wide with his free hand, “like me before I heard/words that sang my tune.” It is a Thursday night in a small coffee shop in Midtown Memphis, and you can hear music drifting in from other bars and restaurants lining the street – Coltrane, a jazz cover band with an overpowering lead guitarist, modern rock. The man’s voice drowns the music to a hush and his words make their own rhythm.

This is performance poetry, a “Poetry Slam” as it is contemporarily called, and usually consists of ten to fifteen poets performing and being judged on the quality and delivery of their original works. Most are regulars, African Americans in their late twenties or early thirties, and unknowns outside of the Memphis poetry circle. They come faithfully each week to this venue for both criticism and inspiration. The man is, from the looks he receives from the audience, just a beginner, but they offer encouragement and clap as he leaves the stage and another more respected poet takes his place. The night continues, and the subjects of the poems recited are age-

¹ This line is taken from a poem entitled “Riverbank Blues” by Sterling Brown. Brown’s poem is a prime example of the literary blues and focuses on the lives of those who live in the Mississippi Delta. This paper, while incorporating works from blues poets from around the United States, attempts to do the same and focuses mainly on blues poets with ties to the Mid-South region.

old: rejection, searching, good love, bad love. The poems have quick tempos, their words popping in sync with hand motions and facial expressions. Each has a noticeable rhyme structure and most use repetition as a form of emphasis. Each poem is uniquely expressed, as each poet has his or her own style, experiences, and reason for exhibiting their work and themselves, but there is a common denominator in the room which few, if any, recognize: they have all been influenced by the blues, and the beginnings of their work go back more than a hundred years.

"Blues poetry," a literary term coined in the late 20th century, is a genre of poetry which has its foundation in African American oral traditions. The literary blues developed in the early 1900s and shares many characteristics with the blues musical movement. Both have their origins in the Mississippi Delta region of the United States during the thriving days of the cotton market and the heyday of slavery. With the development of trade routes and the later migration of freed blacks to the north, the blues spread throughout the U.S. and eventually to other countries. Whereas blues as a musical form has been widely studied as an independent genre (and not just referred to as "black music"), the literary blues have been largely ignored and often slumped into the all-encompassing field of African American poetry. Traces of blues poetry, in both form and content, can be found in early slave narratives and dialect poetry from the Delta region.² Blues poetry, a concentrated, written expression of emotional turmoil, was a way for African Americans to communicate and face their problems during times of upheaval and isolation. A century of changing politics, wars, and social movements have shaped and varied the influences of the genre, but it is clear that the movement has its own identity, has never died, and has and will continue to evolve.

I. Before the Blues: The Poetic Roots of Blues Poetry

² As witnessed in "Voices from the Days of Slavery." Interviews with ex-slaves from the Mississippi Delta Region. Library of Congress. Found at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfstitle.html>. (Accessed 12 July 2005).

*African nature is full of poetry. Inferior to the white race in reason and intellect, they have more imagination, more lively feelings and a more expressive manner... Their joy and grief are not pent up in the heart, but find expression... with their imagination, they clothe in rude poetry the incidents of their lowly life, and set them to simple melodies.*³

The basic foundational elements for blues poetry are found in early slave narratives and oral tradition which migrated from West Africa to the American South. These spoken works reflect the main theme of hope in light of hardship and incorporate steady, rhythmic elements that are found in all blues poems. When the first slaves made their way to the United States, they brought with them the folklore and dialect of their native country. “Once mythology is formed, literature develops historically within a limited orbit of language, reference, allusion, beliefs...and shared tradition.”⁴ The musical blues and other vernacular traditions of early African Americans, including sermons, field hollers, spirituals, and “dozens⁵” served to curb the stings of hardship and misfortune, inspire hope for eventual deliverance, and acted as a way to celebrate and pass on a sense of cultural identity within the black community. The minstrel/work song “Ole Black Joe,⁶” is a prime example:

Gone are the days when my heart was young and gay,
Gone are my friends from the cotton fields away,
Gone from this world to a better world I know,
I hear their gentle voices calling Ole Black Joe.

Chorus:

I am coming, I keep a’coming, though my head is bending low,
I hear their gentle voices calling Ole Black Joe.

“Ole Black Joe” and other work and minstrel songs with similar storylines and characteristic title characters have connections to the Congolese concept of the “Great Ancestor,”

³ (Unsigned Article), “Songs of the Blacks,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, 15 November 1856, IX,: 7 51-52; reprinted 1859, XV 178-180.

⁴ Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto, *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1979), 17.

⁵ A type of taunting, call and response word game or verbal sparring which is usually held between male competitors. Also known as “woofin” or “signifyin.” It has roots in traditional West African cultures. Found at <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=dozens>. (Accessed 21 July 2005).

⁶ Credited in 1860 to Stephen Collins Foster, a well-known, white minstrel composer. Whether he composed the song purely on his own or was influenced by the songs of African American slaves is debatable among scholars, though the latter is more likely.

who watches over his descendants and acts as a source of strength in the light of adversity.⁷ The slaves who sang the song of Ole Black Joe became a group not unlike what is known in western Africa as the “Griot”: musicians whose job it is to perform tribal histories and genealogies in order to pass on knowledge of ancestors to future generations. “Ole Black Joe” and other songs like it were the precursors to ballads and blues-ballads. They taught African American youth about their ancestry and acted as a means of teaching first generation slaves how to adapt to the hostile conditions of their new environment without sacrificing their spirit. Even though the “young and gay” days are gone and Joe’s “head is bending low,” under the weight of oppression and injustice, he “keep(s) a’ coming.” He retains hope for a “better world” than the one he currently finds himself a part of, and never breaks beneath the burden of his load.

African American poetry published pre-19th century was chiefly religious or elegiac in subject matter and notably formal in versification. African Americans such as Jupiter Hammon and Phyllis Wheatley wrote during the 1760s and 1770s, the former focusing on spirituals and sermons and the latter writing “occasional verse—(poetry) written for some specific occasion, as a birth, or the death of a friend or member of the family.”⁸ Their poetry was undistinguishable in many respects, most notably style, from the poetry written by white Americans of the time. Wheatley and Hammon did, however, exhibit a consciousness of their position as removed entities from the white man’s world. In “To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works,” Wheatley writes “But when these shades of time are chas’d away/And darkness ends in everlasting day,/On what seraphic pinions shall we move,/And view the landscapes in the realms above?” One should note that Wheatley consciously makes a distinguishing statement about the artist’s race in her title. The fact that she puts great emphasis on the use of light/dark imagery (with light signifying redemption and righteousness and dark symbolizing unwanted, earthly

⁷ George Johnson, Mississippi 1942 “Voices from the Days of Slavery,” Library of Congress. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfstitle.html>. (Accessed 12 July 2005).

⁸ Lindsay Patterson, ed. *An Introduction to Black Literature in America: From 1746 to Present*. (New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1968), 3.

barriers), is also particularly interesting. Wheatley herself was a slave, albeit a formally educated one as per her master's consent. As a result, the literary devices she employs throughout her work reflect the prejudiced beliefs of white society; a prejudice she undoubtedly experienced in her position as a servant. These beliefs, with an extended amount of exposure, were internalized and reified in several of her works. There is, however, also a level of negritude, or celebration of black consciousness, throughout her writings that is similar to what would later be found in the blues poetry of artists such as James Weldon Johnson and Sterling Brown. For example, in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Wheatley writes "Some view our sable race with scornful eye,/ Their colour is a diabolic die...'" "Sable," a word referring most notably to her dark skin color, is also a breed of animal whose fur is quite valuable and desired. It is evident that Wheatley was aware of her race, her beauty, and her worth. George Moses Horton's poem "On Liberty and Slavery," written in 1829, exhibits a much more openly direct criticism of slavery but shares the internalized beliefs of white society just as Wheatley's poems do. He writes in the first and third quatrains of his ten quatrain poem:

Alas! And am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil and pain!
...
Oh heaven! and is there no relief
This side the silent grave—
To soothe the pain—to quell the grief
And anguish of a slave?⁹

Throughout this poem, Horton fervently questions the inequality and torment that befalls a man confined to an existence of nothing more than a slave, a piece of property, commenting that the ultimate and seemingly only plausible asylum is death and entering heaven. The poem uses an A-B-A-B rhyme scheme and is written in alternating iambic tetrameter (A lines) and iambic trimeter (B lines). This creates a sense of undulating urgency within the poem, yet not so

⁹ Patterson, *An Introduction to Black Literature in America*, 45.

much as a poem of full trimeter would. It is clear that the speaker is impassioned about the injustices and fetters of slavery, but there is also a sense that he or she is accustomed to this bondage. The forced caesuras after interjections such as “Alas!” and “Oh heaven!” which begin each stanza exhibit frustration, anger, and the unwillingness to accept that there is no escape. It should be noted that this “crying out” to a higher power would become a prominent feature of later blues poems.

The statement that the life of a slave is “this side the silent grave,” can be interpreted two ways. Firstly, Horton could simply be referring to the fact that he can find no relief in the living world, or the world opposite that of the “silent grave (death).” Another interpretation, however, is both ironic and paradoxical – the idea that the world of a slave is “the silent grave,” and thus a slave is not living at all, but at birth is sentenced to a quiet and unobtrusive death. Through his words, Horton protests this hushed demise, exclaiming later in his seventh quatrain, “Oh Liberty!...[is] the gift of nature’s God!” Slavery and blatant mistreatment of another human being is not a natural phenomenon nor an act that his God condones. The idea of poetry as an act of protest is carried on into the mid to late 1800s, during the Civil War and throughout Reconstruction.

Songs and spirituals such as “God’s Gonna Set This World on Fire” and “No More Auction Block for Me” were exaltations of humanity and liberation, even though they were songs inspired by the everyday distress and brutality African Americans were exposed to in the post-emancipation days of the south. These religious chants and joyous songs, with lyrics such as “No more auction block for me,/No more, no more.../No more driver’s lash for me,/ No more, no more...”¹⁰ were popular in rural African American neighborhoods. The late 19th Century saw the beginnings of published African American literature with the first black literary journal, published in 1859 and 1860. It was called the *Anglo-African* and contained intellectual as well as

¹⁰ Patterson, *An Introduction to Black Literature in America*, 98.

creative writings from African American leaders such as James McCune Smith and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the author of the first short story to ever be published by an African American.¹¹ At this time, however, it was still illegal in the majority of the southern states to teach a black man or woman how to read or write. “Naturally, this stifled (the African American community’s)...development, forcing (them) to lean heavily on oral tradition.”¹²

In spite of these obstacles, some black poets were read during this time by both the black and white community. In more urban areas in the 1870s and 80s, dialect poetry was on the rise. These poems were written in irregular English, usually incorporating a softening or deletion of the *th* sound, representing the letter *v* as either a *d* or *b*, and sometimes dropping the last letters from a word (especially those ending in *ing*). Dialect poems were supposed to represent the actual “language of the negro” and often dealt with subjects like unrequited love and missed opportunities or told tall tales of infamous African American characters, such as “Mean O’ Stackolee,” a very popular character in African oral tradition. Dialect poetry was a way for African Americans to publish works of literature that would connect with the black community, but they were also popular among black poets because they could pass the censors at white publishing houses and “make African Americans acceptable to white America...(by) paint(ing) the race as servile lackeys or happy-go-lucky children,” thus rendering them harmless.¹³ Being able to label the poems as “black literature,” white publishers felt that dialect poetry was unthreatening and further proof that African Americans were intellectually inferior to whites. Paul Laurence Dunbar explores the use of dialect as a defensive mask in his 1895 poem “We Wear the Mask” in which he states “We wear the mask that grins and lies,/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—/This debt we pay to human guile;/With torn and bleeding hearts we

¹¹ Ibid., 33

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Joan R. Sherman. *American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 12-13.

smile.”¹⁴ In addition, consider the following excerpt from a poem by James Edwin Campbell entitled “Negro Serenade”:

O, de light’bugs glimmer down de lane,
Merlindy! Merlindy!
O, de whip’will callin’ notes ur pain—
Merlindy! Merlindy!
O, honey lub, my turkle dub,
Doan’ you hyuh my bawnjer ringin’?
...
My lub’ fur you des drib me wil’
Merlindy, O, Merlindy!
I’ll sing dis night twel broad dayligh’,
Ur bu’s’ my froat wid tryin’,
‘Less you come down, Miss ‘Lindy Brown,
An’ stop dis ha’t f’um sighin’!¹⁵

A typical example of dialect that black poets used in the late 19th century, “Negro Serenade” shows traces of later blues poetry in both form and content. The musical element of the serenade, with its fairly consistent rhyme pattern of A-B-A-B-C-D or A-B-A-C-D-C as shown in the second example stanza, combined with simplistic, internal rhymes such as “lub (love)” and “dub (dove),” is characteristic of many later works that would become recognized as blues poetry in the early 20th century. The repetition of the love interest’s name “Merlindy (Miss Lindy)” and the questioning of “Doan you hyuh my bawnjer ringin’?” mirrors the call (question) and response (answer) aspect of the blues which repeats the first line of a stanza twice and then counters with a final, rhymed last line. “I’ll sing dis night twel broad dayligh’/Ur bu’s my froat wid tryin;” is typical of the sort of response line one finds in a blues poem, which is often surprising and uses hyperbolic images and speech.

The African Diaspora in the American South in the late 19th and early 20th century were often vilified and caricatured in the American press as either thugs or imbeciles. In the Mississippi Delta region in particular, slaves were treated as inferior in nearly all respects

¹⁴ “Paul Laurence Dunbar”
<http://www.litfinder.com/search/worx.asp?R=777182795&act=A70&rothST=we%20wear%20the%20mask>.
(Accessed 15 July 2005).

¹⁵ Patterson, *An Introduction to Black Literature in America*, 94-95

besides physicality to white colonists.¹⁶ After the 1876 Hayes-Tilden Compromise withdrew federal forces from the southern colonies, many of the freed backs in the South found themselves in a distinctively prejudiced and antagonistic environment. They were not granted some of the most basic rights of citizenship such as an education or voting privileges. A generation later, the musical blues as we know it today emerged from the depths of the Delta region. At this time, the blues was an area-specific genre. It grew out of the segregated south and combined elements of African heritage and song with American experience. African Americans were and are still among the majority of blues poets for this reason.

II. The Birth of Blues Poetry: 1900-1930

*The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness...to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.*¹⁷

The coming of the 20th century brought little justice for the African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. By 1902, segregation was the law throughout the United States. In the Southern states, violence inspired by racial prejudice erupted. During the period from 1900-1925, lynching and race riots were common occurrences in the South. In what James Weldon Johnson, a popular African American poet of the time, coined as the “Red Summer of 1919,” 25 major riots broke out, leaving 38 people dead and 527 injured. Additionally, “eighty-three Negroes were lynched (in 1919), ten of them in the uniform of their country.”¹⁸ Southern African Americans who had fought in WWI and had gone abroad to Europe where blacks and whites were treated as social equals and could occupy the same restaurant counters and transportation systems, came home to a South that treated them as completely separate and in no way equal.

¹⁶ Arthur P. Davis. *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900-1960*. (Washington D.C: Howard University Press, 1974), 2.

¹⁷ Ralph Ellison. “The Blues Impulse.” Found at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR2/saul_4.html. (Accessed 15 July 2005).

¹⁸ Davis, *From the Dark Tower*, 2.

Poetry written by African Americans during this time reflects and responds to the general discontent and biting anger that resulted from these conditions. It also incorporates a significant level of caustic wit and irony, which instituted an edge that previously had not been experimented with. For example, Claude McKay's 1922 poem "If We Must Die" states "If we must die—let it not be like hogs/Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,/While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,/Making their mock at our accursed lot.../Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back."¹⁹

The tragic/comic nature of blues poetry by authors such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Jean Toomer exhibited the resilience of African Americans at the turn of the century. The blues "capture(d) the Southern inflected aesthetic tendency to meet disjuncture with a confrontation that subverts pain through laughter," and also acted as means by which to transfer and filter their negative energy into a more positive form that other African Americans could identify with and gain strength from.²⁰ Poems such as Brown's "Memphis Blues" fostered pride in being an African American, confronted the abuse of the black community, and curbed despondency with its simplistic irony. Brown's father was a Tennessee slave and Brown himself, once a professor at Fisk University in Nashville, was familiar with the racially tense environment of western Tennessee. Written in three movements, the narrator of "Memphis Blues" compares the city to the ancient cities of Nineveh, Tyre, Babylon, and finally to that of Memphis, Egypt.

Was another Memphis
Mongst de olden days,
Done been destroyed
In many ways....
Dis here Memphis
It may go
Floods may drown it;
Tornado blow;

¹⁹ Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 117.

²⁰ Barbara A. Baker. *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity in the Literature of the South*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 4.

Mississippi wash it
Down to sea—
Like de other Memphis in
History.²¹

Baring the same name as the first documented musical score of blues²², Brown's "Memphis Blues" uses many of the same literary devices that earlier black poets had initiated. In the excerpt above from the first movement, Brown uses a basic rhyme and rhythm pattern, dialect and black idioms, and integrates specific details that broaden to a universal meaning. His use of line breaks is particularly masterful in creating different levels of connotation and suspense. "Mississippi wash it", a line that invokes the idea of baptism or cleansing is quickly followed by the apocalyptic "Down to sea—," which creates a scene of utter destruction, but also one of final redemption. The poem has a distinctive melodic structure which abruptly ends with a strong emphasis on the last, unwaveringly line, "History." Blues musicians of the era, including Eddie James "Son" House and W.C. Handy, often used similar bold resolutions and sudden transitions from one key to the next in their music to create similar emphasis on the ending of a line of verse. This is seen in songs such as Son House's "Death Letter" in which he states "Well, I folded up my arms and I slowly walked away/I said, 'Farewell honey, I'll see you on *Judgment Day*.'"²³

In many of the blues poems of the first two decades of the 20th century, there is significant use of folk wisdom, a return of black consciousness to African roots, and aspirations for "downhome" reconciliation. The belief was that "if blues is an affliction, blues music (and

²¹James Weldon Johnson, ed. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. (San Diego: Harcourt Bruce & Company, 1950). 252.

²²"Mr. Crump," a blues song composed in 1909 and published in 1912, was written by W.C. Handy and was known more popularly as the "Memphis Blues." Used as a political campaigning device, "Memphis Blues" is considered to be the first blues song in history.

²³Eddie James "Son" House. Lyrics from "Death Letter." My italics. Found at http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/artistswithsongs/son_house_1.htm. (Accessed 23 July 2005).

poetry) is the antidote.”²⁴ The Delta was a thriving hub for blues musicians and several poets contributed to the musical movement by writing and/or co-writing lyrics with well-known blues singers. Langston Hughes co-wrote songs with W.C. Handy and during public readings of his poetry in the 1920s sometimes performed with a piano accompaniment.²⁵ James Weldon Johnson also prolifically wrote lyrics for popular minstrel-style songs of the time period including “If the Sands of the Seas Were Pearls,” “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and “Gimme de Leavins.”²⁶ These song lyrics sometimes focused on the goal of resolution between the white and black communities or leaned towards the Garvey “Back-to-Africa” mindset.

More often, however, poems and blues songs were storytelling devices which weaved deep emotion, terse wit, and subtle allusion into fluent, everyday narratives that spoke from the heart of an exploited society. The meaning of the stories was created through “a negotiation between oppositions”²⁷ with a considerable emphasis on contrast and the element of surprise.

As the following example shows, these poems were frequently rife with paradox and hyperbole:

I’m jes’ as misabul as I can be,
I’m unhappy even if I am free,
I’m feelin’ down, I’m feelin’ blue;
I wander ‘round, don’t know what to do.
I’m go’n lay mah haid on de railroad line,
Let de ol’ B. & O. come and pacify mah min’.²⁸

There was, and continues to be, a relative lack of any figurative language in blues poetry. As the unnamed author of the verse above shows, the language used within the genre is known to be straightforward and blunt. The truth that rings in the line “I’m unhappy even if I am free,” moves with a plaintive, crude swiftness that is seldom found in any other poetic form. Beginning

²⁴ Sherley Anne Williams. “Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry” in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, eds. Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto. 1 (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1979).

²⁵ Kalamu ya Salaam “Langston Hughes: A Poet Supreme” in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, ed. Joanne V. Gabbin. 68 (Charlottesville:University of Virginia Press,1999).

²⁶ “African-American Sheet Music, 1850-1920 (From Brown University)” Library of Congress. Found at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aasmquery.html>. (Accessed 20 July 2005).

²⁷ Baker, *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity*, 5.

²⁸ Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 15.

blues poets set the standard for the use of raw language, emotion, and an authentic narrative voice which they then expanded upon in order to create works of universal relevance. Instituting a rhymed couplet structure that more accurately parallels the 12-bar blues, the example stanza ends with a statement that is utterly resigned and hopeless, yet is also rendered sardonic and comical by the use of understatement. The idea of committing suicide via train in hopes of ending unbearable misery is referred to as something that will “pacify (the narrator’s) min(d),” and the vehicle of his destruction is fondly called “de ol’ B & O,” as if it were an old friend of the family. Blues musicians have incorporated this idea into many songs, the most closely related being “Trouble In Mind” written by Richard M. Jones (1926) which states “I’m gonna lay, lay my head,/on some sad, old railroad iron/I’m gonna let that 2:19,/pacify my mind.”²⁹

Blues poetry spread from the South and into the northern regions of the United States during the 1920s with the expansion of the transportation system in America and the migration of southern blacks to areas such as Chicago, Detroit, and Harlem. The implementation of the “chain-gang” also aided in spreading the blues as a musical genre, as prisoners who worked along the U.S. highway system often sang while toiling and were heard by passing motorists. The song “Southern Blues,” or “Mule Skinner Blues,” a song which has no identifiable author but has been sung wildly by artists such as Ma Rainey, Memphis Minnie, and country singer Jimmie Rodgers, was representative of the songs that were sung along the road and which circulated in the prison system of the early 20th century. Another typical work song was “Good Morning, Captain,” which bears some of the same lyrics of the “Southern Blues,” and which contains verses such as “Well, I like to work, I’m rolling all the time,/Yes, I like to work, I’m rolling all the time,/I can pop my initials on a mule’s behind.”³⁰ This follows the form of the standard three-line, four-beat blues, with the repetition of the first line (with some variants, such

²⁹ Bill Broonzy and Jimmy Witherspoon. “Trouble in Mind Lyrics.” <http://www.jazzblueslyrics.com/lyrics/big-bill-broonzy/trouble-in-mind-499.html>. (Accessed 24 June 2005).

³⁰ Patterson, *An Introduction to Black Literature in America*, 121.

as the addition of introductory words like “well” or “said”) followed by a response in the third line.

The formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910 under the leadership of W.E.B. Du Bois was quickly followed by the beginning of the New Poetry Movement of 1912. This movement involved the founding of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* and brought to light the works of American poets such as T.S. Eliot, Carl Sandburg, and Ezra Pound.³¹ The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Renaissance and the Blues Age, is thought by many critics to have begun shortly after in 1923 with the publication of Jean Toomer’s volume “Cane,” which included both fiction and poetry. Arna Bontemps, a well-known poet of the 1940s and 50s who wrote in standard English verse stated, “Reviewers (of ‘Cane’)...were generally stumped. Poetry and prose were whipped together in a kind of frappe” that mixed realism with mysticism.³² Within the Harlem poetry circle developed both pride in the African American identity as well as the desire to testify the past in order to gain a better understanding of the self. It is important to note, however, that not all African Americans approved of or embraced the blues during its beginnings when “black intellectuals stressed the similarities between the races.”³³ Blues was viewed as a degenerating form of literature and music, and one which interfered with the need to follow and blend in with the societal norms of white society.

Poems with a blues influence that sprung from the New Negro Renaissance included “Bound No’th Blues,” “Cultural Exchange,” and “Cross” by Langston Hughes, “Oh Black and Unknown Bards” by James Weldon Johnson, and the poem entitled “Yet Do I Marvel” by Countee Cullen that ponders in its last couplet, “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:/To make a poet black and bid him sing!” “The Weary Blues,” perhaps the most renowned blues poem by

³¹ Davis, *From the Dark Tower*, 5.

³² Patterson, *An Introduction to Black Literature in America*, 128.

³³ Baker, *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity*, 71.

Langston Hughes and the title of his first book of poetry published in 1926, shows the fusion of blues poetry with modernist poetry and perhaps best exhibits the early evolution of the blues form.

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
...
He did a lazy sway
He did a lazy sway
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key,
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
...
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more --
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied --
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."

The form of "The Weary Blues" is progressive and integrates aspects of both rural and urban blues as well as more modern, stylized versification³⁴. There are two sections of the poem which quote the blues singer that the narrator encounters. The one listed above, "I got the Weary Blues/And I can't be satisfied...And I wish that I had died" is a standard verse of a 12-bar blues which has been modified from a three-line structure of A-A-B to that of a six-line verse. In altering the form from a tercet to a sestet, Hughes prolongs the feeling of despair within the poem. With this modification, he also ties the lines back to the dream-like, lulling state that is created by the repetition of "He did a lazy sway..." earlier in the poem. The sections of the poem

³⁴ Urban blues is more electrified, having a distinctly more jazz-like sound than that of the folksy rural blues.

which are not dialogue are somewhat irregular and pulse with syncopation, placing emphasis on words that could be considered “down beats” such as in the line that begins with “Rocking back and forth...” Its use of onomatopoeic words like “croon” and “thump thump thump,” combined with dramatic verbs like “moan” and “droning,” establishes it as an aural experience as well as a visual one. It mirrors urban blues music with its command of internal as well as end rhyme, alliteration, and the complex use of assonance as shown in words like “piano” and “melody” in line ten and “sad” and “raggy” in line thirteen. With all of its mastery, “The Weary Blues” emulates the Delta blues in its seeming simplicity with rhymes such as “stool” and “fool” and its rhythmically delivered lines such as “Coming from a black man’s soul.” Hughes’s interjections of “Sweet Blues!...O Blues!” echo musicians such as Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter who sang lines like “Oh, oh Black Betty!/Bam-ba-lam/Oh, Oh Black Betty!”³⁵ “The Weary Blues” is an illustration of exactly how a poet is able to transform the energy found in music to formal literature.

The Harlem Renaissance came to a close in the mid 1930s with the onset of WWII and the economic instability caused by the Great Depression. Although the cultural progress branch of the U.S. Government’s Work Progress Administration funded several African American fine arts and literary works into the 1940s, the growth of artistic production came to an unexpected halt in 1935. As Arthur P. Davis put it:

Harlem, ‘Nigger Heaven,’ that joyous city of jazz and night life, experienced a devastating riot. As a result, its inhabitants came to realize that it, too, was just another festering black ghetto, with all of the frustrations which poverty and/or the lack of employment opportunity foster.³⁶

The South suffered similar race-related chaos and setbacks. The Works Project Administration (WPA) often refused jobs to African Americans and in April 1937, a harsh

³⁵ Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter “Looky, Looky Yonder/Black Betty/Yellow Women's Doorbells” |Audio cd, “LeadBelly - Absolutely The Best.” Transcribed by Sara Rutherford.

³⁶ Davis, *From the Dark Tower* 10.

struggle over an anti-lynching bill took place in the House of Representatives. The resolution was passed in spite of the opposition from all but one Southern member, but the bill was later withdrawn in February of 1938.³⁷ Racial discrimination was entrenched in the belief system of Southerners as well as the political and social systems of the time. The blues, though not as well-publicized, continued to be written by African American poets who endured and chose to “give voice to [their] survival [in order to] enhance [their] audience’s understanding of life.”³⁸

³⁷ “Race Relations in the 1930s.” <http://xroads.virginial.edu/~ug02/NewYoker/Race.html>. (Accessed 9 July 9 2005).

³⁸ Baker, *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity*, 64.

III. The Mid-Century Blues: Everyone's Invited

*We had little confidence in our power to make any long range or significant changes. That was the 50s, you see. It seemed that bleak... Our choices seemed entirely personal existential lifetime choices that there was no guarantee that we would have any audience, or anybody would listen to us; but it was a moral decision, a moral poetic decision...*³⁹

Until the 1940s and 50s, the blues was primarily an African American mode of expression. In the mid 20th century, however, elements of the blues style were adopted by a number of poets from different ethnicities, orientations, and poetic backgrounds. Most notably among these new blues poets were the Beats of the 1950s. Embracing the ideals of Walt Whitman, white poets such as Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac began using resonant, blues language and took up incorporating blues rhythms and its jazz variants in their work. Creeley recalls hearing Kerouac once stating that he wanted “to be considered as a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jazz session on Sunday.”⁴⁰ In his poem, “Bowery Blues,” Kerouac accomplishes this feat by blending the blues with progressive, poetic thought. He writes:

The story of man
Makes me sick
Inside, outside,
I don't know why
...
I am hurt
I am scared
I want to live
I want to die

Using direct language and simple diction, Kerouac is known for exploring the rawness of the human condition. The speaker of the “Bowery Blues” steadily develops an awareness of himself, noting paradoxical emotions and longings like the wanting to live which is immediately

³⁹ Gary Snyder. 1974 interview in *The Beat Vision*. Found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beat_Generation. (Accessed 24 July 2005).

⁴⁰ Annie Finch and Katherine Varnes, eds. *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 193.

countered with the want to die. Kerouac delves into the human psyche in the very beginning of the poem with the deeply personal and somewhat cathartic statement “man/makes me sick.../I don’t know why.” Exposure of the self is a key element in most blues poems and suggests that the speaker is willing to confront and question his own belief structure. The use of imagery in “Bowery Blues” is close to non-existent, as is any sort of metaphor, simile, or other form of figurative language. It employs a simple and effective approach. The extensive use of the pronoun “I” calls attention to the idea of understanding the self and conveys a sense of underlying desperation. The reader notices that there is no set rhyme scheme like much of the Beat poetry, yet the uneven pattern of iambic lines and slant rhymes such as “outside” and “why” result in the formation of a loose cadence. Kerouac’s lines flow with the same intensity that is a foundational element in the blues musical movement, and, in fact, Kerouac later went on in 1959 to record a blues/beat poetry album. Entitled “Blues and Haikus,” the album consisted of Kerouac performing his original works with the accompaniment of a saxophone and piano.⁴¹

The Beats took the subject of condemning discrimination further to include denouncing intellectualism, the status quo, and current political institutions. They avidly fought for the freedom of thought and poems such as Ginsberg’s “Howl” and “Haddish,” Charles Bukowski’s “Young in New Orleans,” and Bob Kaufman’s “Round About Midnight” all exhibit strong blues and jazz influences. At this point in history, African American blues poets were also experimenting with expanding the blues form. The musical blues had spread to the far reaches of the United States by the early 1940s and had also made its way across the ocean and into Europe. The slow blues notes had long since developed into a livelier, more upbeat tune, and a jazz sensation could be witnessed around the world. The literary blues was much the same, with the influence of poets such as Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes crossing continents. Most blues

⁴¹ Thus, successfully taking the idea that Langston Hughes had in the 1920s to a new level.

poets evolved with the era and began writing more jazz-style verse while still continuing to incorporate traditional blues verse for poignancy and effect.

Black Nationalism and the NAACP gained momentum after the end of WWII in 1945. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in favor of the integration of public schools resulted in the accelerating of positive social changes that were already in progress, but also caused a number of race-related violent outbreaks. There was “surface and token integration in many areas, but the everyday pattern of life for the overwhelming majority remained unchanged.”⁴² African American blues poets acknowledged this fact and continued to make discrimination a subject of their poetry, sometimes using dramatic calls for action interspersed with biting humor to stress the need for protest. The brutal murder of Emmett Till in 1955 sparked the Civil Rights revolution. Till, a fourteen-year-old African American who was a native of Chicago, was visiting his extended family in the small town of Money, Mississippi when he whistled at a white woman in a store. Her husband and several other members of white society later abducted him from his cousin’s home and subjected him to a series of torturous games before succeeding in killing him. Till’s body was dumped into a river and when it was finally found, he became the “sacrificial lamb of the Civil Rights movement.”⁴³ Outrage from African Americans in the Mississippi Delta spread to other areas of the United States and many blues poets later went on to reference this horrendous act of unnecessary violence in their work. Jerry W. Ward’s poem “Don’t be Fourteen (In Mississippi)” showcases the feelings that many black Americans felt during this time. Ward writes, “Don’t be fourteen/black and male in Mississippi/they put your mind/in a paper sack, dip it/in liquid nitrogen.../when white boys ask/why you don’t like them/spit on them/with your mouth closed.”⁴⁴

⁴² Davis, *From the Dark Tower*, 138.

⁴³ “The Lynching of Emmett Till” <http://www.heroism.org/class/1950/heroes/till.htm>. (Accessed 20 July 2005).

⁴⁴ John Oliver Killens and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., ed. *Black Southern Voices: An Anthology of Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Nonfiction, and Critical Essays*. (New York, Meridian Publishing, 1992), 296.

With the onset of the Civil Rights movement and escalation of racial tension, many African American poets and writers began to look back at the history of their race and compose works which highlighted black achievement. These poems share many characteristics with the traditional African oral tradition of praise songs which were chants of self-naming that identified a person's ancestors, community, and regional affiliations. "In communal performance, the lines of the praise poem would be called by the chanter, and audience-participants would be expected to respond as a chorus at regular, rhythmic intervals," much like the call-and-response of a traditional blues poem.⁴⁵ These songs were taught to small children in order to inspire a sense of belonging and connection to their ancestry that would, in turn, bind them to their family and environment. Blues poets such as Melvin B. Tolson, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker wrote praise poems of this nature which assimilated black consciousness and inspired pride in the black race. Consider this excerpt from Tolson's poem "Lamda:"

Where, oh, where is Bessie Smith
with her heart as big as the blues of truth?
Where, oh, where is Mister Jelly Roll
with his Cadillac and diamond tooth?
Where, oh, where is Papa Handy
with his blue notes a-dragging from bar to bar?
Where, oh, where is bulletproof Leadbelly
with his tall tales and 12-string guitar?
...
Old Satchmo's
gravelly voice and tapping foot and crazy notes
set my soul on fire.
If I climbed
the seventy-seven steps of the Seventh
Heaven, Satchmo's high C would carry me higher!
...
Oh Judgment Day, Gabriel will say
after he blows his horn:
"I'd be the greatest trumpeter in the Universe,
if old Satchmo had never been born!"⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "African Praise Songs: Tradition African Oral Arts."
<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/CoursePack/praisesongs.htm>. (Accessed 9 July 2005).

⁴⁶ Stephen Henderson. *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic Reference*. (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973), 149.

Much like a praise song, the first stanza is a basic catalog of African American ancestry. It focuses specifically on blues and jazz musicians of the early 20th century, with Tolson showing an increasing amount of reverence and awe with each name. Bessie Smith is first and is depicted as a kindhearted protector – the mother of the blues. Next, Jelly Roll Morton is given the title of “Mister,” adding a level of respect to his title. “Papa” Handy follows, the survivor and provider, who toils on, “a-dragging,” refusing to break and holding strong. Tolson paints a picture of an invincible African hero, the “bulletproof Leadbelly” whose 12-string guitar is akin to John Henry’s sledgehammer. In the final stanza, he places Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong, arguably the most distinguished trumpet player of the 1940s-60s, on an ethereal pedestal, giving him powers greater than even the archangel Gabriel. “Where, oh, where,” Tolson’s narrator repeatedly cries, are his people? Where have the heroes, the men and women who could set “soul(s) on fire” and rouse spirits the world over, gone? “Lamda” is as much a praise song celebrating famous blues artists as it is a blues song of despair and a call to arms that was aimed at the creative black community.

Power to the People: The Blues of the 1960s and 70s

Black Poets publish thru Black Publishers for Black people. Simple as that. On the other hand-- at this point--I see very little wrong with lesser (in terms of reputation) poets allowing their poems to appear in ofay/mixed anthologies. Because you can bet, wherever whitey is (including anthology readers) there'll be some brainwashed brothers, and perhaps the Black poems will pierce their red, white, and blue brains.⁴⁷

The time encompassing the 1960s and 70s in American history is a whirlwind of events and new ideas. The Civil Rights movement, Vietnam War, and the ascension of rock and roll as the leading musical genre were among the many things that influenced blues poetry during this time period. The Black Arts Movement (BAM) which lasted from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s was the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” and produced

⁴⁷ Etheridge Knight. *Belly Songs and Other Poems* .(Detroit: Broadside Press, 1973). Introduction, from a letter to his “Lady,” dated November 7, 1968.

some of the most resonating and effective protest poetry that the world had ever seen.⁴⁸ With the blues form as a foundation, African American poets integrated new rhythms, tones, and images of black supremacy into their work. These dramatic works were often unabashedly anti-white and were sometimes used in group meetings of organizations like the Black Panther Party in order to rally its members into action against the confines of white society. Poets like Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Clarence Major, and Larry Neal often wrote poems which were meant to speak with the voice of the collective black community. Etheridge Knight, a Mississippi writer who discovered the power of poetry while imprisoned for robbery, wrote in his poem “A Poem for 3rd World Brothers,”

...white/america know that fire eyes glow
that Blk/muscles are strong
and that if brothers dance together
freedom won't be long--
you diggit--you diggit?

Knight links the words “white” and “america,” making them one entity, just as he does with “Blk” and “muscles.” By leaving the “A” in “America” lowercase, he weakens and belittles it, and in doing so, makes it no match for the “Blk (uppercase “B”)/muscle” which it is trying to tyrannize. Knight gives the African Americans “fire eyes” and inverts the power structure by suggesting that white society is afraid of the strength and inevitable overthrow of their supposed “authority.” The narrator presses for an immediate joining of forces, of his “brothers” who could overthrow white America by merely dancing. His use of harmonious syntax and simple end rhyme create a textual as well as aural dance for the reader. Knight uses dialect, or what was then called “street talk,” to connect with his readers, questioning “you diggit – you diggit?.” The repetition of the inquiry adds a sense of urgency as well as an

⁴⁸ Larry Neal. “The Black Arts Movement.” <http://authors.aalbc.com/blackartsmovement.htm>. (Accessed 21 July 2005).

element of coaxing. Knight is selling the idea of “Blk/muscles,” to his brothers, and later states in the poem that if action isn’t taken soon, “white/america will kill the cat in (them).”

The push for racial equality in the 1960s began peacefully with sit-ins and freedom rides, but escalated to riots in nearly every major Southern city by 1965. The popularity of revolutionary leaders like Malcolm X, who embraced the idea of obtaining equality by any means necessary (even extreme violence), resulted in an unstable atmosphere that teemed with anxiety. A temporary ease from this pressure resulted from the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but this was quickly offset by the assassination of Malcolm X in February of 1965. Three years later, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis caused comparable pandemonium. Blues poetry that dealt with these subjects confronted issues such as police brutality, Black Muslim ideology, and where the African American race was headed in light of the death of its leaders. “The blues accommodate(d) fragmentation [and] discontinuity,” as well as the frequent use of radically violent language and vulgarity.⁴⁹ The following excerpt is from the poem “Black Art” by Amiri Baraka and displays a number of the previously mentioned elements:

... We want “poems that kill.”
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
politicians Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrrrr
. . . rrrrrrrrr . . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh ...⁵⁰

The poems that are the subject of the above segment are personified into beings whose duty it is to independently serve the Civil Rights movement by aggressive means. Baraka christens them “Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/guns,” and they are consciously created to neutralize and quickly overpower persons and deep-rooted belief systems that African

⁴⁹ Finch and Varnes, *An Exaltation of Forms*, 191.

⁵⁰ Amiri Baraka. *Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*. (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1979).

Americans were battling during the time period, including the real assassins who murdered their leaders. With a more cerebral than lyrical feel, “Black Art” is a direct response to the environment Baraka found himself in. This notion of confronting that which is causing distress is a staple of blues poetry. The use of “we want” instead of “I want” is a notable change from the ever-personal blues, yet the sense of intimacy in the poem is not lost because of the deep emotional stance the speaker takes. The desperation and rage of the narrator, who is so distressed that he asks for “poems that kill/...knockoff poems for dope selling wops” is almost endearing in its honesty. There is no longer time for “poems that shake hands” or “poems that allow you to swim in the same pool.” The build-up of hate and subjugation have led to the need for “Airplane poems” that whirl overhead and open fire on the oppressor with a loud “...rrrrr...tuhtuhtuh.”

The Black Nationalist Movement, which had its foundations in the 1920s under the direction of Marcus Garvey, was revived in the late 1960s. Supporters and followers of the movement believed African Americans should obtain absolute independence from all government, economic, and cultural influences.⁵¹ Poets of the time undertook the “painful task of self examination and self-purgation as prelude to the construction of a Black Aesthetic, a Black value system, (and) a Black Nation.”⁵² The slogans “black power” and “black is beautiful” originated with the movement, and these ideas were adopted by poets who were unified under it. Don L. Lee (a native poet of Arkansas who later changed his name to Haki R. Madhubuti when reestablishing his African roots) was one of the most widely influential African American poets of the 1970s. His poems were often written in dialect and characteristically confronted social injustices while praising African American culture. His poem “The Wall (43rd & Langley, Chicago, Ill.) speaks of a wall that was painted by African American artists and photographers from the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) in August of 1967. “whi-te people

⁵¹ Davis, *From the Dark Tower*, 142.

⁵² Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 183.

can't stand/the wall,/killed their eyes, (they cry)/balck beauty hurts them--/they thought black beauty was a horse--/stupid muthafuckas, they run from/the mighty black wall.”⁵³ His splitting of the word “white” into “whi-te (whitey)” acts as a mocking device, with the tone of deep contempt flowing through the rest of the poem, especially in the lines “they thought black beauty was a horse--/stupid muthafuckas...” An example of a contrasting poem which deals with the Black Nationalist Movement and incorporates blues elements is Kenneth Carroll’s “something easy for Ultra Black nationalists.” Carroll writes:

so you wanna kill white people...
love your family
love your people
love your culture
love Africa
love to learn
love yourself.

it jes' *kills*
them when you
do that.⁵⁴

The repetition of “love” throughout the first stanza mirrors the call of a blues poem and the second and final stanza masterfully accomplishes the ironic, and usually surprising, response one finds in the third line of a blues verse. Carroll’s use of simple language and dialect also reflect a blues influence.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered reprisal bombings on North Vietnam. The attitude toward the war was not a positive one on the home front and a “lack of faith in the objectives became more common among the servicemen” as the years passed, people died, and little was being accomplished.⁵⁵ Blues poets who wrote poems concerning the war were generally of the same mindset. Clarence Major, an African American poet, wrote a series of poems about Vietnam. In the poem “Vietnam #4,” the speaker questions the validity of a rumor

⁵³ Ibid., 334.

⁵⁴ Keith Gilyard, ed. *Spirit & Flame: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ “The Vietnam War.” <http://www.vietnampix.com/hippie.htm>. (Accessed 2 July 2005).

that says more African Americans were dying in the war than white men. "...it just/don't make sense," he says, "unless it's true/that the honkeys/are trying to kill us out/with the same stone/they killing them other cats/with/you know.../two birds with one stone."⁵⁶ Cacophonous words such as "honkey," give the poem a rough, grainy texture and a distinctive narrative voice. The pace of the poem is slow and ponderous, but accelerates toward the end with the revelation and developing of the "two bird with one stone" notion. This idea of a white conspiracy involving the war in Vietnam became a common thought among some African Americans of the time, especially those who were involved with the Black Power Movement and anti-war protests.

Although the use of modified blues forms and elements was common during this time, poetry which stuck more closely to the classic blues format was still being written. Lamont B. Steptoe's "Mississippi Blues," A.B. Spellman's "The Joel Blues (for and after him), and Etheridge Knight's "A Poem for Myself (or Blues for a Mississippi Black Boy)," are examples of blues poems which retained the classic three-line, call-and-response structure. In "A Poem for Myself," Knight speaks of his departure from his home in Mississippi when he was only twelve years old and leaving "that place for good." He goes on to recall his travels in northern cities with their "funky avenues," adding the comment, "I'm still the same old black boy with the same old blues." He ends the poem with the lines "Going back to Mississippi/This time to stay for good/Going back to Mississippi/This time to stay for good-/Gonna be free in Mississippi/Or dead in the Mississippi mud."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Arnold Adoff. *Black Out Loud*. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1970).

⁵⁷ Oliver and Ward, *Black Southern Voices*, 246.

IV. Blues, You Know You've Been Here Before⁵⁸ : The Scattering of the Blues

The blues is like the novel. People keep saying it's dead, yet it turns up everywhere, in a variety of forms. I think it's ability to continue on is related to its simplicity...yet it can become more complicated and develop into other things...Blues...will always astonish because it will always sound – in both lyrical content and musical arrangement – new to the novice...⁵⁹

Over the past three decades, blues poetry has branched out in several different directions. Poets such as Nikki Giovanni, Sterling Plumpp, and Ishmael Reed have returned to the roots of the genre and gathered wisdom from the early literary and musical blues of the 1920s and 30s. Reed's "Oakland Blues," written in 1989, is an elegiac work which explores modern loss and the hope for ultimate resolution. Written in perfect, 12-bar format, the final stanza moans

O, it's hard to come home, baby
To a house that's still and stark
O, it's hard to come home, baby
To a house that's still and stark
All I hear is myself
thinking
and footsteps in the dark⁶⁰

The emphasis in this section lies heavily on the word "thinking," which has a forced caesura before and after it, and which is placed on its own line. The speaker in the poem (a woman), is unable to detach herself from thoughts of her lost "daddy" who was buried, according to the first stanza, earlier that day "in the shadow of a vine." The absence of any punctuation conveys a sense of vulnerability and also shows the lack of closure the speaker feels. Her emotions are still raw and unsure. It is clear that Reed made a sincere effort to imitate both the traditional form as well as the content of the blues. He accomplished his objective flawlessly.

Other contemporary blues poets include Kevin Young and Mae Jackson, who have chosen to continue experimenting with the sound and structure of the blues form to better fit their individual styles. Jackson's poem "The Blues Today" ironically chastises the singers and

⁵⁸ "Big Bill" Broonzy. From "Conversation with the Blues." Lyrics found in *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*. Oliver, Paul, ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960). Pg. 288.

⁵⁹ Thomas S. Williams. E-mail conversation. Dated July 11, 2005.

⁶⁰ Finch and Varnes. *An Exaltation of Forms*. Pg. 194.

songwriters of modern blues music for doing exactly what she has done with the literary form of the blues:

rhythm and blues
ain't what it use to be
blues done gone and got
americanize
tellin' me that i should
stay in school
get off the streets
and keep the summer cool

i says
blues ain't nothing like it use to be
blues done gone and got
americanize

blues done gone and lost its soul
and the folks singing it
ain't singing for me
no more⁶¹

Lesser known poets such as Marc Smith and Talaam Acey perform Slam poetry. Smith is said to have initiated the slam movement in Chicago in the 1980s when he grew weary of the consistently bland poetry readings he witnessed in one of the coffee shops he frequented.⁶² A way to express oneself briefly yet with powerful emotion, Slam poetry also has its roots in the blues, though it more closely resembles the hip-hop genre of music in regards to structure and beat. Slam relies heavily on the elements of rhythm and fluidity and also has an aspect of improvisation to it, as all live performances do. It is an urban phenomenon whose subject matter deals primarily with inner-city life, with the struggles of Slam poets being expressed in what could be characterized as “verbalized social dissonance.”⁶³ A popular form of artistic expression from 1980 until the mid-to-late 1990s, the Slam movement has died down considerably in the past 5 years. In Memphis in 1997, “there (was) hardly a night of the week that you (couldn't) go

⁶¹Adoff. *Black Out Loud*. Pg. 55.

⁶²“Slam Poetry” <http://www.slampapi.com/>. (Accessed 27 June 2005).

⁶³ Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 41.

out and see spoken-word poetry,”⁶⁴ but now, one would be very fortunate to find a true Slam scheduled more than once or twice a month.

VI: Putting the Six-String Away: A Conclusion

In an 1845 satirical article countering an inquiry as to why there appeared to be no true “American” poets, J. K[innard], Jr. wrote:

If it be so desirable, as some people think, that poetry should smack of the locality in which it is written, then...we must keep our poets at home, give them a narrow education, and allow them no spare money by which they might purchase books, or make excursions into other ranks of society than their own. If we could only pick out the born poets when they were a fortnight old, and subject them to this regimen, the nation would be able to boast of original poets in plenty...⁶⁵

By applying this idea to the atmosphere of America in the 19th century, Kinnard goes on to question his readers as to which class best fits the description of the ideal candidate to become a poet -- Which class is the most secluded from outside influences, has the least access to education and travel, is poverty stricken, and can be raised in an environment of isolation and ignorance yet still survive? Which class could be the future of American poetry? With a derisive quip, he ends the article by exclaiming “Our negro slaves, to be sure!”⁶⁶

It is unlikely that anyone in 1840s America, either black or white, would have guessed that Kinnard did, in fact, get a fair bit of it right. African Americans of the South, and more specifically the Delta region, invented one of the longest-standing and most influential genres of poetry and performance the world over. The musical blues, once considered exclusively for African-Americans by African-Americans, spread over the globe in just a little over three decades, with the literary blues close on its heels. Though still predominately an African

⁶⁴ Jim Hanas. “Verse Versus Verse” *Memphis Flyer*. 1-26-1998. http://weeklywire.com/ww/01-26-98/memphis_socvr.html. (Accessed July 11, 2005).

⁶⁵ J. K[innard] “Who are Our National Poets” *Knickerbocker Magazine* XXVI October 1845, 331-341.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

American genre, blues has been embraced by persons of all ethnicities and is considered one of the greatest contributions the Delta regions has made to America and that America has made to the world.

A time-specific mirror of the environment, blues poetry is not just a group of simple rhymes written in a sorrowful tone, nor is it just a formulated intermingling of jagged words and smooth rhythm. The blues is human: erratic, fiery, and unfettered. It echoes the pains of reality and humanity, and because of this, will never pass from civilization's scope of self-expression. "At its heart, (the blues) is about the simple and timeless theme of existence, much more than any other form."⁶⁷ Cultural and social controls have and will continue to modify and inspire changes in the form of blues poetry, but because the human condition will always be one of yearning, searching, and confronting, the feeling and content of the blues will remain a constant.

⁶⁷ Thomas S. Williams. E-mail conversation. Dated July 11, 2005.

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APPENDIX OF POETRY

The following group is a small sampling of blues poems and those early forms of verse which have traces of the foundational elements of the blues. I have chosen a variety of poets and works, spanning from the late 1700s to the present, which exhibit rural as well as urban blues poetry. I chose these poems on the basis of diversity of style, poetic quality, and subject matter. They are listed in chronological order to exhibit the evolution of the form.

~ Sara B. Rutherford

To S.M., A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works

Phyllis Wheatley (1773)

To show the lab'ring bosom's deep intent,
And thought in living characters to paint,
When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,
How did those prospects give my soul delight,
A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the painter's and the poet's fire
To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire!
And may the charms of each seraphic theme
Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!
High to the blissful wonders of the skies
Elate thy soul, and raise thy wishful eyes.
Thrice happy, when exalted to survey
That splendid city, crown'd with endless day,
Whose twice six gates on radiant hinges ring:
Celestial Salem blooms in endless spring.
Calm and serene thy moments glide along,
And may the muse inspire each future song!
Still, with the sweets of contemplation bless'd,
May peace with balmy wings your soul invest!
But when these shades of time are chas'd away,
And darkness ends in everlasting day,
On what seraphic pinions shall we move,
And view the landscapes in the realms above?
There shall thy tongue in heav'nly murmurs flow,
And there my muse with heav'nly transport glow:
No more to tell of Damon's tender sighs,
Or rising radiance of Aurora's eyes,
For nobler themes demand a nobler strain,
And purer language on th' ethereal plain.
Cease, gentle muse! the solemn gloom of night
Now seals the fair creation from my sight.

* * *

On Liberty and Slavery

George Moses Horton (1828)

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil and pain!

How long have I in bondage lain,
And languished to be free!
Alas! and must I still complain --
Deprived of liberty.

Oh, Heaven! and is there no relief
This side the silent grave --
To soothe the pain -- to quell the grief
And anguish of a slave?

Come Liberty, thou cheerful sound,
Roll through my ravished ears!
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,
And drive away my fears.

Say unto foul oppression, Cease:
Ye tyrants rage no more,
And let the joyful trump of peace,
Now bid the vassal soar.

Soar on the pinions of that dove
Which long has cooed for thee,
And breathed her notes from Africa's grove,
The sound of Liberty.

Oh, Liberty! thou golden prize,
So often sought by blood --
We crave thy sacred sun to rise,
The gift of nature's God!

Bid Slavery hide her haggard face,
And barbarism fly:
I scorn to see the sad disgrace
In which enslaved I lie.

Dear Liberty! upon thy breast,
I languish to respire;
And like the Swan unto her nest,
I'd to thy smiles retire.

Oh, blest asylum -- heavenly balm!
Unto thy boughs I flee --
And in thy shades the storm shall calm,
With songs of Liberty!

* * *

Wild Negro Bill (a folk song)

Unknown Author (early -mid 1800s)

I'se wild Nigger Bill
Frum Redpepper Hill
I never did wo'k an' I never will.

I'se done killed de Boss
I'se knocked down de hoss.
I eats up raw goose widout apple sauce!

I'se Run-a-way Bill
I knows dey mought kill;
But ole Mosser hain't cotch me, an' he never will

* * *

God's Gonna Set This World on Fire (a spiritual)

(mid 1800s)

god's gonna set this world on fire
god's gonna set this world on fire
and all you sinners gonna turn up missing
and all you sinners gonna turn up missing

god's gonna set this world on fire
one of these days
god's gonna set this world on fire
one of these days
one of these days

i'm gonna walk and talk and pray with jesus
i'm gonna walk and talk and pray with jesus
i'm gonna climb, climb, climb jacob's ladder
i'm gonna climb, climb, climb jacob's ladder

god's gonna set this world on fire
one of these days
god's gonna set this world on fire
one of these days
one of these days

god don't want no part-time soldiers
god don't want no part-time soldiers
god don't want no part-time soldiers
god don't want no part-time soldiers
god don't want no part-time soldiers
one of these days

i'm gonna climb, climb, climb jacob's ladder
gonna climb, climb, climb jacob's ladder
gonna climb, climb, climb jacob's ladder
gonna climb, climb, climb jacob's ladder

god's gonna set this world on fire
one of these days
god's gonna set this world on fire
one of these days
one of these days

* * *

No more Auction Block (a spiritual)
(mid 1800s)

No more auction block for me
No more, no more
No more auction block for me
Many thousands gone

No more driver's lash for me
No more, no more
No more driver's lash for me
Many thousands gone

No more whip lash for me
No more, no more
No more pint of salt for me
Many thousands gone

No more auction block for me
No more, no more
No more auction block for me
Many thousands gone

* * *

Old Black Joe (a work/field song)
Accredited to Stephen Collins Foster (1860)

Gone are the days when my heart was young and gay,

Gone are my friends from the cotton fields away,
Gone from the earth to a better land I know,
I hear their gentle voices calling "Old Black Joe."

CHORUS

I'm coming, I'm coming, for my head is bending low;
I hear their gentle voices calling "Old Black Joe."

Why do I weep when my heart should feel no pain
Why do I sigh that my friends come not again,
Grieving for forms Now departed long ago?
I hear their gentle voices calling "Old Black Joe."

(CHORUS)

Where are the hearts once so happy and so free?
The children so dear that I held upon my knee,
Gone to the shore where my soul has longed to go.
I hear their gentle voices calling "Old Black Joe."

(CHORUS)

* * *

Pick a Bale of Cotton (a work/field song)

(mid – late 1800s)

Bend down turn around,
Pick a bale of cotton
Bend down turn around,
Pick a bale a day

Oh lordy, pick a bale of cotton
Oh lordy, pick a bale a day

Gonna jump down, spin around,
Pick a bale of cotton
Gonna jump down, spin around,
Pick a bale a day

Oh lordy, pick a bale of cotton
Oh lordy, pick a bale a day

* * *

A Negro Love Song

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1870s-80s)

SEEN my lady home las' night,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hel' huh han' an' sque'z it tight,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh,
Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,
An' a smile go flittin' by –
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Hyeahd de win' blow thoo de pine,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
Mockin'-bird was singin' fine,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
An' my hea't was beatin' so,
When I reached my lady's do',
Dat I could n't ba' to go --
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Put my ahm aroun' huh wais',
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
Raised huh lips an' took a tase,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
Love me, honey, love me true?
Love me well ez I love you?
An' she answe'd, " 'Cose I do" --
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

* * *

John Henry (a folk ballad)

Author Unknown (late 1800s – early 1900s)

Some say he's from Georgia,
Some say he's from Alabam,
But it's wrote on the rock at the Big Ben Tunnel,
That he's an East Virginia Man,
That he's an East Virginia man.
John Henry was a steel drivin' man,
He died with a hammah in his han',
Oh, come along boys and line the track
For John Henry ain't never comin' back,
For John Henry ain't never comin' back.
John Henry he could hammah,
He could whistle, he could sing,
He went to the mountain early in the mornin'
To hear his hammah ring,
To hear his hammah ring.
John Henry went to the section boss,
Says the section boss what kin you do?

Says I can line a track, I kin histe a jack,
I kin pick and shovel too,
I kin pick and shovel too.
John Henry told the cap'n,
When you go to town,
Buy me a nine pound hammah
An' I'll drive this steel drill down,
An' I'll drive this steel drill down.
Cap'n said to John Henry,
You've got a willin' mind.
But you just well lay yoh hammah down,
You'll nevah beat this drill of mine,
You'll nevah beat this drill of mine.

John Henry went to the tunnel
And they put him in lead to drive,
The rock was so tall and John Henry so small
That he laid down his hammah and he cried,
That he laid down his hammah and he cried.
The steam drill was on the right han' side,
John Henry was on the left,
Says before I let this steam drill beat me down,
I'll hammah myself to death,
I'll hammah myself to death.
Oh the cap'n said to John Henry,
I bleeve this mountain's sinkin' in.
John Henry said to the cap'n, Oh my!
Tain't nothin' but my hammah suckin' wind,
Tain't nothin' but my hammah suckin' wind.
John Henry had a cute liddle wife,
And her name was Julie Ann,
And she walk down the track and nevah look back,
Goin' to see her brave steel drivin' man,
Goin' to see her brave steel drivin' man.
John Henry had a pretty liddle wife,
She come all dressed in blue.
And the last words she said to him,
John Henry I been true to you,
John Henry I been true to you.
John Henry was on the mountain,
The mountain was so high,
He called to his pretty liddle wife,
Said Ah kin almos' touch the sky,
Said Ah kin almos' touch the sky.
Who gonna shoe yoh pretty liddle feet,
Who gonna glove yoh han',
Who gonna kiss yoh rosy cheeks,
An' who gonna be yoh man,
An' who gonna be yoh man?

Papa gonna shoe my pretty liddle feet,
Mama gonna glove my han',
Sistah gonna kiss my rosy cheeks,
An' I ain't gonna have no man,
An' I ain't gonna have no man.
Then John Henry told huh,
Don't you weep an' moan,
I got ten thousand dollars in the First National Bank,
I saved it to buy you a home,
I saved it to buy you a home.
John Henry took his liddle boy,
Sit him on his knee,
Said that Big Ben Tunnel
Gonna be the death of me,
Gonna be the death of me.
John Henry took that liddle boy,
Helt him in the pahm of his han',
And the last words he said to that chile was,
I want you to be a steel drivin' man,
I want you to be a steel drivin' man.
John Henry ast that liddle boy,
Now what are you gonna be?
Says if I live and nothin' happen,
A steel drivin' man I'll be,
A steel drivin' man I'll be.
Then John Henry he did hammah,
He did make his hammah soun',
Says now one more lick fore quittin' time,
An' I'll beat this steam drill down,
An' I'll beat this steam drill down.
The hammah that John Henry swung,
It weighed over nine poun',
He broke a rib in his left han' side,
And his intrels fell on the groun',
And his intrels fell on the groun'.

All the women in the West
That heard of John Henry's death,
Stood in the rain, flagged the east bound train,
Goin' where John Henry dropped dead,
Goin' where John Henry dropped dead.
John Henry's liddle mother
Was all dressed in red,
She jumped in bed, covered up her head,
Said I didn't know my boy was dead,
Said I didn't know my boy was dead.
They took John Henry to the White House,
And buried him in the san',
And every locomotive come roarin' by,
Says there lays that steel drivin' man,

Says there lays that steel drivin' man.

* * *

Stagolee (a folk ballad)

Author Unknown (late 1800s - early 1900s)

It was early, early one mornin',
When I heard my bulldog bark.
Stagolee and Billy Lyons
Was squabblin' in the dark.

Stagolee told Billy Lyons,
"What do you think of that?
You win all my money, Billy,
Now you spit in my Stetson hat."

Stagolee, he went a-walkin'
In the red-hot, boilin' sun—
Says, "Bring me my six-shooter,
Lawd, I wants my forty-on."

Stagolee, he went a walkin'
Through the mud and through the sand.
Says, "I feel mistreated this mornin',
I could kill most any man."

Billy Lyons told Stagolee,
"Please don't take my life,
I've got three little helpless chillum
And one poor, pitiful wife."

"Don't care nothin' about your chillum,
And nothin' about your wife,
You done mistreated me, Billy,
And I'm bound to take you life."

He shot him three times in the shoulder,
Lawd, and three times in the side,
Well, the last time he shot him
Cause Billy Lyons to die.

Stagolee told Mrs. Billy,
"You don't believe yo' man is dead;
Come into the bar-room
See the hole I shot in his head."

The high sheriff told the deputies,
"Get your pistols and come with me.

We got to go 'rest that
Bad man Stagolee."

And the deputies took their pistols
And they laid them on the shelf—
"If you want that bad man Stagolee,
Go 'rest him by yourself."

Hugh sheriff ask the bartender,
"Who can that bad man be?"
"Speak softly," said the bartender,
"It's that bad man Stagolee."

He touch Stack on the shoulder,
Say, "Stack, why don't you run?"
"I don't run, white folks,
When I got my forty-one."

The hangman put the mask on,
Tied his hands behind his back
Sprung the trap on Stagolee
But his neck refuse to crack.

Hangman, he got frightened,
Said, "Chief, you see how it be—
I can't hang this man,
Better set him free."

Three hundred dollar funeral,
Thousand dollar hearse,
Satisfaction undertaken
Put Stack six feet in the earth.

Stagolee, he told the Devil,
Says, "Come on and have some fun—
You stick me with your pitchfork,
I'll shoot you with my forty-one."

Stagolee took the pitchfork,
And he laid it on the shelf.
Says, "Stand back, Tom Devil,
I'm gonna rule Hell by myself."

* * *

Sweet Potato Man (a street cry)
Author Unknown (late 1800s – early 1900s)

See dese gread big sweet pertaters

Right chere by dis chicken's side?
Ah'm de one what bakes dese taters,
Mankes dem fit to suit yo' pride.

Dere is taters an' mo' taters,
But de ones Ah sell is fine;
Yo' kin go fum hyeah to yondah.
But yo' won't get none lak mine,
'cause Ah'm de tater man!
(Ah mean!)
De sweet pertater man!

* * *

O Black and Unknown Bards

James Weldon Johnson (1917)

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?
Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he
That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?
What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.

Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars
How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir
The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
That helped make history when Time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You -- you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting paean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
You touched in chord with music empyrean.
You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live, -- but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

* * *

If We Must Die

Claude McKay (1919)

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned, in an inglorious spot,
Wile round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
Of we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

* * *

Harvest Song

Jean Toomer (1923)

I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown. All my oats are cradled.
But I am too chilled, and too fatigued to bind them.
And I hunger.

I crack a grain between my teeth. I do not taste it.

I have been in the fields all day. My throat is dry.
I hunger.

My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a blind man who stares across the hills, seeking stack'd fields of other harvesters.

It would be good to see them . . . crook'd, split, and iron-ring'd handles of the scythes. It would be good to see them, dust-caked and blind. I hunger.

(Dusk is a strange fear'd sheath their blades are dull'd in.)
My throat is dry. And should I call, a cracked grain like the oats...eoho--

I fear to call. What should they hear me, and offer me their grain, oats, or wheat, or corn? I have been in the fields all day. I fear I could not taste it. I fear knowledge of my hunger.

My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other harvesters whose throats are also dry.

It would be good to hear their songs . . . reapers of the sweet-stalk'd cane, cutters of the corn...even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me.

I hunger. My throat is dry. Now that the sun has set and I am chilled, I fear to call. (Eoho, my brothers!)

I am a reaper. (Eoho!) All my oats are cradled.
But I am too fatigued to bind them. And I hunger.
I crack a grain. It has no taste to it.
My throat is dry...

O my brothers, I beat my palms, still soft, against the stubble of my harvesting. (You beat your soft palms, too.) My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn. It will not bring me knowledge of my hunger.

* * *

Portrait in Georgia
Jean Toomer (1923)

Hair – braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher's rope,
Eyes – fagots,
Lips – old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath – the last sweet smell of cane.
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.

* * *

Epitaph for a Lady I Know

Countee Cullen (1925)

She thinks that even up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores.

* * *

Bound No'th Blues

Langston Hughes (1926)

Goin' down the road, Lawd,
Goin' down the road.
Down the road, Lawd,
Way, way down the road.
Got to find somebody
To help me carry this load.

Road's in front o' me,
Nothin' to do but walk.
Road's in front o' me,
Walk ... an' walk ... an' walk.
I'd like to meet a good friend
To come along an' talk.

Hates to be lonely,
Lawd, I hates to be sad.
Says I hates to be lonely,
Hates to be lonely an' sad,
But ever' friend you finds seems
Like they try to do you bad.

Road, road, road, O!
Road, road ... road ... road, road!
Road, road, road, O!
On the no'thern road.
These Mississippi towns ain't
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.

* * *

The Weary Blues

Langston Hughes (1926)

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.

Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway
He did a lazy sway
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan --
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more --
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied --
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

* * *

Southern Blues

Author Unknown (1920s-30s)

House catch on fire and ain't no water 'round
If your house catch on fire, ain't no water 'round
Throw your trunk out the window, building, burn on down

I went to that gypsy to have my fortune told
I went to that gypsy to have my fortune told
He said, "Doggone you girlie, doggone your bad luck soul"

I turned around, went to that gypsy next door
I turned around, went to that gypsy next door
He said, "You'll get a man anywhere you'll go"

Let me be your rag doll until your Chinee comes
Let me be your rag doll till your Chinee comes
If she beats me ragging, she's got to rag it some

* * *

Song for a Banjo Dance

Langston Hughes (1920s-30s)

Shake your brown feet, honey,
Shake your brown feet, chile,
Shake your brown feet, honey,
Shake 'em swift and wil'—
 Get way back, honey,
 Do that low-down step.
 Walk on over, darling,
 Now! Come out
 With your left.
Shake your brown feet, honey,
Shake 'em, honey chile.

Sun's going down this evening—
Might never rise no mo'.
The sun's going down this very night—
Might never rise no mo'—
So dance with swift feet, honey,
 (The banjo's sobbing low)
Dance with swift feet, honey—
Might never dance no mo'.

Shake your brown feet, Liza,
Shake em' Liza, chile,
Shake your brown feet, Liza,
 (The music's soft and wil')
Shake your brown feet, Liza,
 (The banjo's sobbing low)
The sun's going down this very night –
Might never rise no mo'.

* * *

Riverbank Blues

Sterling Brown (1920s- 30s)

A man git his feet set in a sticky mudbank,
A man git dis yellow water in his blood,
No need for hopin', no need for doin',
Muddy streams keep him fixed for good.

Little Muddy, Big Muddy, Moreau and Osage,
Little Mary's, Big Mary's, Cedar Creek,
Flood deir muddy water roundabout a man's roots,
Keep him soaked and stranded and git him weak.

Lazy sun shinin' on a little cabin,
Lazy moon glistenin' over river trees;
Ole river whisperin', lappin' 'gainst de long roots:
"Plenty of rest and peace in these . . ."

Big mules, black loam, apple and peach trees,
But seems lak de river washes us down
Past de rich farms, away from de fat lands,
Dumps us in some ornery riverbank town.

Went down to the river, sot me down an' listened,
Heard de water talkin' quiet, quiet lak an' slow:
"Ain' no need fo' hurry, take yo' time, take yo'
time . . ." Heard it sayin'--"Baby, hyeahs de way life go . . ."

Dat is what it tole me as I watched it slowly rollin',
But somp'n way inside me rared up an' say,
"Better be movin' . . . better be travelin' . . . Riverbank'll
git you ef you stay . . ."

Towns are sinkin' deeper, deeper in de riverbank,
Takin' on de ways of deir sulky Ole Man--
Takin' on his creepy ways, takin' on his evil ways,
"Bes' git way, a long way . . . whiles you can." Man got his
sea too lak de Mississippi Ain't got so long for a whole lot longer way,
Man better move some, better not git rooted Muddy water fool you, ef you stay .
. . ."

* * *

Cabaret

Sterling Allen Brown (1932)

Rich, flashy, puffy-faced,
Hebrew and Anglo-Saxon,
The overlords sprawl here with their glittering darlings.
The smoke curls thick, in the dimmed light
Surreptitiously, deaf-mute waiters
Flatter the grandees,
Going easily over the rich carpets,
Wary lest they kick over the bottles
Under the tables.

The jazzband unleashes its frenzy.

Now, now,
To it, Roger; that's a nice doggie,
Show your tricks to the gentlemen.

The trombone belches, and the saxophone
Wails curdingly, the cymbals clash,
The drummer twitches in an epileptic fit

Muddy water
Round my feet
Muddy water

The chorus sways in.
The 'Creole Beauties from New Orleans'
(By way of Atlanta, Louisville, Washington, Yonkers,
With stop-overs they've used nearly all their lives)
Their creamy skin flushing rose warm,
O, le bal des belles quarterounes! *
Their shapely bodies naked save
For tattered pink silk bodices, short velvet tights,
And shining silver-buckled boots;
Red bandannas on their sleek and close-clipped hair;
To bring to mind (aided by the bottles under the tables)
Life upon the river--

Muddy water, river sweet

(Lafitte the pirate, instead,
And his doughty diggers of gold)

There's peace and happiness there
I declare

(In Arkansas,
Poor half-naked fools, tagged with identification numbers,
Worn out upon the levees,
Are carted back to the serfdom
They had never left before
And may never leave again)

Bee--dap--ee--DOOP, dee-ba--dee-BOOP

The girls wiggle and twist

Oh you too,
Proud high-stepping beauties,
Show your paces to the gentlemen.
A prime filly, seh.
What am I offered, gentlemen, gentlemen. . . .

I've been away a year today
To wander and roam
I don't care if it's muddy there

(Now that the floods recede,
What is there left the miserable folk?
Oh time in abundance to count their losses,
There is so little else to count.)

Still it's my home, sweet home

From the lovely throats
Moans and deep cries for home:
Nashville, Toledo, Spout Springs, Boston,
Creoles from Germantown;--
The bodies twist and rock;
The glasses are filled up again. . . .

(In Mississippi
The black folk huddle, mute, uncomprehending,
Wondering 'how come the good Lord
Could treat them this a way')

shelter
Down in the Delta

Along the Yazoo
The buzzards fly over, over, low,
Glutted, but with their scrawny necks stretching,
Peering still.)

I've got my toes turned Dixie ways
Round that Delta let me laze

The band goes mad, the drummer throws his sticks
At the moon, a papier-mache moon,
The chorus leaps into weird posturings,
The firm-fleshed arms plucking at grapes to stain
Bending, writhing, turning

My heart cries out for
M U D D Y W A T E R

(Down in the valleys
The stench of the drying mud
Is a bitter reminder of death.)

Dee da dee D A A A H

Southern Road

Sterling Brown (1932)

Swing dat hammer--hunh--
Steady, bo';
Swing dat hammer--hunh--
Steady, bo';
Ain't no rush, bebbly,
Long ways to go.

Burner tore his--hunh--
Black heart away;
Burner tore his--hunh--
Black heart away;
Got me life, bebbly,
An' a day.

Gal's on Fifth Street--hunh--
Son done gone;
Gal's on Fifth Street--hunh--
Son done gone;
Wife's in de ward, bebbly,
Babe's not bo'n.

My ole man died--hunh--
Cussin' me;
My ole man died--hunh--

Cussin' me;
Ole lady rocks, bebbly,
Huh misery.

Doubleshackled--hunh--
Guard behin';
Doubleshackled--hunh--
Guard behin';
Ball an' chain, bebbly,
On my min'.

White man tells me--hunh--
Damn yo' soul;
White man tells me--hunh--
Damn yo' soul;
Got no need, bebbly,
To be tole.

Chain gang nevah--hunh--
Let me go;
Chain gang nevah--hunh--
Let me go;
Po' los' boy, bebby,
Evahmo' . . .

* * *

Minstrel Man

Langston Hughes (1930s-40s)

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long?

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter,
You do not hear
My inner cry?
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing,
You do not know
I die?

* * *

One Way Ticket

Langston Hughes (1949)

I pick up my life,
And take it with me,
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is
North and East,
And not Dixie.

I pick up my life
And take it on the train,
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake
Any place that is

North and West,
And not South.

I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them

I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket-
Gone up North
Gone out West
Gone!

* * *

Harlem Gallery: Book 1, The Curator: Lamda
Melvin B. Tolson (1950s)

From the mouth of the Harlem Gallery
came a voice like a
ferry horn in a river of fog:

“Hey, man, when you gonna close this dump?
Fetch highbrow stuff for the middlebrows who
don’t give a damn and the lowbrows who ain’t hip!
Think you’re a little high-yellow Jesus?”

No longer was I a boxer with a rain bruised
against its walls by Tyche’s fists,
as I welcomed Hideho Heights,
the vagabond bard of Lenox Avenus,
whose satiric legends adhered like beggar’s-lice.

“Sorry, Curator, I got here late:
my black ma birthed me in the Whites’ bottom drawer,
and the Reds forgot to fish me out!”

His belly laughed and quaked
the Blakean tigers and lambs on the walls.
Haw-Haw’s whale of a forefinger moncked
Max Donachie’s revolutionary hero, Crispus Attucks,
in the Harlem Gallery and on Boston Commons.
“In the beginning, was the Word,”
he challenged, “not the Brush!”
The scorn in the eyes that racked the gallery

was the scorn of Ozymandias.

The metal smelted from the ore of ideas,
his grin revealed all the gold he had stored away.
“Jew came from a jam session
at the Daddy-O Club,” he said.
“I’m just one step from heaven
with the blues a-percolating in my head.
You shoul’ve heard olg Satchmo blow his horn!”
The Lord God A’Mighty made no mistake
the day that cat was born!”

Like a bridegroom unloosing a virgin knot,
from an inner pocket he coaxed a manuscript.
“Just given Satchmo a one-way ticket
to Immortality,” he said. “Pure inspiration!”
His lips folded about the neck of a whiskey bottle
whose label belied its white-heat hooch.
I heard a gurgle, a gurgle—a death rattle.
His eyes as bright as parachute light,
he began to rhetorize in the grand style
of a Doctor Faustus in the dilapidated Harlem Opera House:

*King Oliver of New Orleans
has kicked the bucket, but he left behind
old Satchmo with his red-hot horn
to syncopate the heart and mind.
The honky-tongs in Storyville
have turned to ashes, have turned to dust,
but old Satchmo is still around
like Uncle Sams’ IN GOD WE TRUST.*

*Where, oh, where is Bessie Smith
with her heart as big as the blues of truth?
Where, oh, where is Mister Jelly Roll
with his Cadillac and diamond tooth?
Where, oh, where is Papa Handy
with his blue notes a-dragging from bar to bar?
Where, oh, where is bulletproof Leadbelly
with his tall takes and 12-string guitar?*

*Old Hip cats,
When you sang and played the blues
the night Satchmo was born,
Did you know hypodermic needles in Rome
couldn’t hoodoo him away from his horn?
Wyatt Earp’s legend, John Henry’s, too,
is a dare and a bet to old Satchmo
when his groovy blues put headlines in the news
from the Gold Coast to cold Moscow.*

*Old Satchmo's
gravelly voice and tapping foot and crazy notes
set my soul on fire.
If I climbed
the seventy-seven steps of the Seventh
Heaven, Satchmo's high C would carry me higher!
Are you hip to this, Harlem? Are you hip?
Oh Judgment Day, Gabriel will say
after he blows his horn:
"I'd be the greatest trumpeter in the Universe,
if old Satchmo had never been born!"*

* * *

Battle Report

Bob Kaufman (1950-60s)

One thousand saxophones infiltrate the city,
Each with a man inside,
Hidden in ordinary cases,
Labeled FRAGILE.

A fleet of trumpets drops their hooks,
Inside at the outside.

Ten waves of trombones approach the city
Under blue cover
Of late autumn's neoclassical clouds.

Five hundred bassmen, all string feet tall,
Beating it back to the bass.

One hundred drummers, each a stick in each hand,
The delicate rumble of pianos, moving in.

The secret agent, an innocent bystander,
Drops a note in the wail box.

Five generals, gathered in the gallery,
Blowing plans.

At last, the secret code is flashed:
Now is the time, now is the time.

Attack: The sound of jazz.

The city falls.

* * *

Watts

Conrad Kent Rivers (1950s-60s)

Must I shoot the
white man dead
to free the nigger
in his head?

* * *

We Real Cool (The Pool Players Seven at the Golden Shovel)

Gwendolyn Brooks (1960)

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Think gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

* * *

Vietnam #4

Clarence Major (1960s)

a cat said
on the corner

the other day
dig man

how come so many
of us
niggers

are dying over there
in that white
man's war

they say more of us
are dying

than them peckerwoods
& it just
 don't make sense

unless it's true
that the honkeys

are trying to kill us out
with the same stone

they killing them other cars
with

you know, he said
two birds with one stone

* * *

**After watching B.B. King on T.V. While Locked in No. 8 Cell, No. 5 Cage of the
Bridgeport, Conn., State Jail**
Etheridge Knight (1960s-70s)

And now man
as you stand there
in the white glare
the sound I hear
from your tuxedoed frame
somhow ain't the same
that's filled my belly and ears
for so many years
yet the pain on your face is the same
despite the gloss and the glitter and the fame
and the new name:
CULTURE
and now man
with the sound
of your songs still ringing round
these bars in sad procession
I think of some lines from a sonia/poem:
*"Blues ain't culture--
they sound of oppression--
of the game the man's been running
all these years."*

* * *

Feeling Fucked Up
Etheridge Knight (1960s-70s)

Lord she's gone done left me done packed / up and split

and I with no way to make her
come back and everywhere the world is bare
bright bone white crystal sand glistens
dope death dead dying and jiving drove
her away made her take her laughter and her smiles
and her softness and her midnight sighs--

Fuck Coltrane and music and clouds drifting in the sky
fuck the sea and trees and the sky and birds
and alligators and all the animals that roam the earth
fuck marx and mao fuck fidel and nkrumah and
democracy and communism fuck smack and pot
and red ripe tomatoes fuck joseph fuck mary fuck
god jesus and all the disciples fuck fanon nixon
and malcom fuck the revolution fuck freedom fuck
the whole muthafucking thing
all i want now is my woman back
so my soul can sing

* * *

Taxes

Don L. Lee/Haki Madhubuti (1960s-70s)

Income taxes,
 every year – due
Sales taxes,
 I pay these too.
Luxury taxes,
 maybe – one ore two,
Black taxes,
 on everything I do.

* * *

Heroes

Karl Carter (1973)

Sometimes I sit up at night
Listening to myself cry
My sobs for those we lost
In the battle with the beast,
And thoughts flash my mind
Realizing that I am somewhere between battles
Counting those we lost;
 Rap five years in the internal concentration camps,
 Cleve five years in the belly of the beast,
 Stokely silenced by the belchings of racism,

Dan Massey paralyzed by a racist cop's shot gun blast in the back in
Nashville,
Malcolm by an assassin's bullet
Martin the same

Places come back like shadow figures upon a darkened
stage and bodies lie strewn there
soaking the ground red with their blood;
Orangeburg, Jackson, Memphis,

New York, Nashville,

The funeral pyres of an era breath forth their stench
And I sit lost myself weeping inwardly
Riding somewhere in my mind with Eldridge Cleaver
Through the streets of Nashville on an April night
During a riot

"Keep the Faith Blues" by Henry Dumas pg. 370

They say if you ain't got no faith

you keep the blues most all the time

If you ain't got no faith, you keep the blues most all the time

Mist be the reason I'm almost bout to lose my mind

I'm trying to hold on, people, tryin to keep what I got

Yeah, trying to hold on, trying to keep what I got

But you know the man is steadyin pressin me

bout to bust my natural back

Heard a man say once, you better hold on and keep the faith

He said hold on baby, and keep the faith

People, I swear I'm hold on and all I got *left* is faith

Yes the world gone crazy, they even talk about God is dead

Yes the world is gone crazy, some say worship the Devil instead

Well, I'm keeping my own faith, people

Can't let religion

bust open my head.

* * *

Mississippi Blues

Lamont B. Steptoe (1970s)

I've

seen the Mississippi River

flowin' all big and wide

musclin' down the continent

blues all in its stride

I say

I've seen

the Mississippi River
flowin' all big and wide
musclin' down the continent
blues all in its stride
Bustin' out at "Nawlins"
headed for the wide, wide, sea
Bustin' out at "Nawlins"
headed for the wide, wide, sea
back to Africa baby
with a blue song from me
back to Africa baby
with a blue song from me

* * *

A Poem for Myself (or Blues for a Mississippi Black Boy)

Etheridge Knight (1980)

I was born in Mississippi;
I walked barefooted thru the mud.
Born black in Mississippi,
Walked barefooted thru the mud.
But, when I reached the age of twelve
I left that place for good.
My daddy chopped cotton
And he drank his liquor straight.
Said my daddy chopped cotton
And he drank his liquor straight.
When I left that Sunday morning
He was leaning on the barnyard gate.
Left my mama standing
With the sun shining in her eyes.
Left her standing in the yard
With the sun shining in her eyes.
And I headed North
As straight as the Wild Goose Flies,
I been to Detroit & Chicago
Been to New York city too.
I been to Detroit & Chicago
Been to New York city too.
Said I done strolled all those funky avenues
I'm still the same old black boy with the same old blues.
Going back to Mississippi
This time to stay for good
Going back to Mississippi
This time to stay for good-
Gonna be free in Mississippi
Or dead in the Mississippi mud.

* * *

The Blues Don't Change

Al Young (1982)

And I was born with you, wasn't I, Blues?
Wombed with you, wounded, reared and forwarded
from address to address, stamped, stomped
and returned to sender by nobody else but you,
Blue Rider, writing me off every chance you
got, you mean old grudgeful-hearted, table-
turning demon, you, you sexy soul-sucking gem.

Blue diamond in the rough, you are forever.
You can't be outfoxed don't care how they cut
and smuggle and shine you on, you're like a
shadow, too dumb and stubborn and necessary
to let them turn you into what you ain't
with color or theory or powder or paint.

That's how you can stay in style without sticking
and not getting stuck. You know how to sting
where I can't scratch, and you move from frying
pan to skillet the same way you move people
to go to wiggling their bodies, juggling their
limbs, loosening that goose, upping their voices,
opening their pores, rolling their hips and lips.

They can shake their bodies but they can't shake you...

* * *

Another Poem for Me (after recovering from an O.D.)

Etheridge Knight (1986)

what now
what now dumb nigger damn near dead
what now
now that you won't dance
behind the pale white doors of death
what now is to be
to be what you wanna be
what your spozed to be
or what white/america wants you to be
a lame crawling from nickel bag to nickel bag
be black brother/man be black
and blooming in the night
be black like your fat brother
sweating and straining to hold you

as you struggle against the straps
be black be black like
your woman her pained face floating
above you her hands liding
under the sheets
to take yours be black like
your mama sitting in a quiet corner
praying to a white/jesus to save her black boy

what now dumb nigger damn near dead
where is the correctness
the proper posture
the serious love of living
now that death has fled these quiet corridors

* * *

and sometimes i hear this song in my head

Harriet Jacobs (1980s-90s)

we have always heard music
found ways to smooth back the edges
of madness
stretched our voices
to the slap of oar against water
heard blues in the snap of cotton breaking
from stem
we always been a music
people
sometimes lost in a jungle of tears
but we keep finding our way back
to that
clearing
at the center
of our selves
where the trees still talk to us
and our tongues keep remembering the rhythm
of the words we forgot
swaying on the backs of buses
and in hot kitchens
crooning
in pool halls and shared bathrooms
yeah/we carving a heartspace
and starting down the darkness some call our future
and they saying it be just dope and more dope
and no hope
and they don't even see we all the time
standing in the middle of the trees

and steady singing
you can't
you can't
you can't
touch this

* * *

5 Minutes, Mr. Salaam

Kalamu Ya Salaam (1980s-1990s)

some
times
i
get
so
lone
ly
for
u
i
feel
like
calling
up
the
devil
and
making
a
deal
-you
know
like
take
my
soul
i
just
want
her
to
hold
me
for
five
minutes

* * *

The Joel Blues (after and for him)

A.B. Spellman (1980s-1990s)

i know your door baby
better than i know my own
i know your door baby
better than i know my own
 it's been so long since i seen you
 i'm sure you done up and gone

in the morning, in the enveing
in the daytime & the nighttime too:
in the morning, in the enveing
in the daytime & the nighttime too:
 it don't matter what i'm doing
 all i got to think about is you.

well the sun froze to the river
& the wind was freezing to the ground.
o the sun froze to the river
& the wing was freezing to the ground.
 if you hadn't heard me calling
 i don't think I ever could be found.

o i ain't no decon baby,
i ain't never been a praying man.
o i ain't no decon baby,
i ain't never been a praying man.
 but i had to call to someone
 you the only one was close to hand.

i'm a easy riding papa,
i'm your everloving so & so.
i'm a easy riding papa,
i'm your everloving so & so.
 don't think i don't hear you calling
 cause i'm coming when you want to go.

it's a pity pretty mama
that i go to look for you at all.
it's a pity pretty mama
that i go to look for you at all.
 but if it wasn't for the looking
 i'd be climbing up & down the wall.

* * *

The Blues Today

Mae Jackson (1980s-1990s)

rhythm and blues
ain't what it use to be
blues done gone and got
americanize
tellin' me that i should
stay in school
get off the streets
and keep the summer cool

i says

blues ain't nothing like it use to be
blues done gone and got
americanize

blues done gone and lost its soul
and the folks singing it
ain't singing for me
no more

* * *

Oakland Blues

Ishmael Reed (1989)

Well it's six o'clock in Oakland
and the sun is full of win
I say, it's six o'clock in Oakland
and the sun is red with win
We buried you this morning, baby
in the shadow of a vine.

Well, they told you of the sickness
almost eighteen months ago
Yes, they told you of the sickness
almost eighteen months ago
You went down fighting, daddy. Yes
You fought Death toe to toe.

O, the egrets fly over Lake Merritt
and the blackbirds roost in trees
O, the egrets fly over Lake Merritt

and the blackbirds roost in trees
Without you little papa
what O, what will become of me

O, it's hard to come home, baby
To a house that's still and stark
O, it's hard to come home, baby
To a house that's still and stark
All I hear is myself
thinking
and footsteps in the dark

* * *

**Tougaloo Blues (on a visit to my grandparents' graves at Tougaloo College Cemetery,
May 1994)**

Kelly Norman Ellis (1994)

For many years I did not make migration
To this mound and ash
This intersection of my flesh
But at thirty my womb is tender
So I have made this pilgrimage
To sacred ground

This is where I meet
Woman boy
Girl man
An ancient embryo
Where waters meet is me

In these wombs of tombstone
I ebb and flow
A cross currnt
That speaks my names
In plantation moss
And Choctaw refrain

Tougaloo
Tougaloo
Tougaloo
Come home girl

The we and I
Congregate in this guilted ground
Of magnolia fig and muscadine

These be my people singing ancestor blues
And Choctaw croons

Tougaloo
Tougaloo
Tougaloo
Come home girl

My names intersect
Under plantation bone and tear
Where waters meet
I am before I am born
And shall be when I am gone

Tougaloo
Tougaloo
Tougaloo
Come home girl