

“These hard times gon’ kill you”: Black masculinity, racial and intimate violence, and the blues in the Mississippi Delta, 1918-1945

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Introduction

In the state of Mississippi between the years of 1882 and 1968, the NAACP estimates that 581 African-Americans were lynched, making Mississippi the lynch capital of all the southern states.¹ Between 1877 and 1950, approximately 12 people were lynched in Sunflower County, which despite this statistic, is a county legendary for its music above all else.² Between the towns of Cleveland and Ruleville is Dockery, Mississippi, home of the famous Dockery Plantation. The plantation earned its fame through the number of blues musicians who found their beginnings there, the most famous being Charley Patton. It is no coincidence that the state with the highest number of lynchings is also the one most renowned for its blues, nor that both blues musicians and lynching victims were overwhelming black, male, and working class. While the fear of lynching played a significant role in the daily lives of black men, music served an equally strong role as an opposition to this fear. Music became a form of release from the pain and violence of oppression.

No matter its form, music was prevalent in all walks of life, from work songs sung by labourers and chain gangs, to holy church music, and finally to the melancholy of the blues. In many ways, the poetry of music allowed for a coded means of communication that could escape the notice of whites. The blues especially, as a genre of music dedicated to expressing “troubles,” dealt with the unique suffering that southern blacks

¹ NAACP, “History of Lynchings,” NAACP, <http://www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/>, Accessed April 2, 2018.

² Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror – Supplement: Lynchings by County” 3rd ed., Equal Justice Initiative, 2017. <https://eji.org/sites/default/files/lynching-in-america-third-edition-summary.pdf>, Accessed April 2, 2018.

endured and through its performative aspects presents an opportunity to study the emotive outputs of black men as they performed for a black audience.

The purpose of this thesis is to deconstruct the ways in which black male Mississippians rebelled and expressed discontent with violently enforced white supremacy during the period of 1918-1945 by studying the life and works of blues musicians. Blues lyrics and culture provide a lens through which we can explore the relationship between the blues, racism, intimate violence and African American masculinity, by studying black men's own words and expressions. This thesis ponders four main questions related to these relationships. First, how did African-American men discuss racial violence, and how did bluesmen encode this conversation in their music? Second, how did black men construct their own perceptions of masculinity and their roles as men within their personal relationships? Third, how did racial violence impair the performance of these gender roles? Last, why was intraracial violence such a highly recorded phenomenon in juke joints, and how can this violence be considered an expression of rebellion and discontent against white oppression? By analyzing how rebellion against racial violence is expressed in blues music and how intimate violence is expressed in spaces in which blues is performed, my research attempts to uncover how white supremacy inspired violence in black relationships by violating men's ability to perform their perceived gender roles and responsibilities.

The main primary sources used in this thesis are primarily blues lyrics, autobiographies and interviews given by bluesmen. Accompanying these are some eyewitness accounts and recollections by African-American men who lived during this period, such as *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright. While academics in various fields have

conducted research as to the relationship between violence and blues music and on racial oppression and black masculinity, there is little discussion linking each of these fields. Therefore, this research bridges the conversation for a more complete analysis.

While the cultural significance of the blues is clear to any musical historian, its origins are less so. If you were to ask five different blues historians where the blues began, you would likely receive five different answers and assuredly a heated academic debate on the subject. Some place the beginning in the field hollers sung by slaves on plantations, or others even further back, originating in Africa itself. Ted Giola, author of *Delta Blues*, neatly sums up this debate: “every beginning seems to point back to an earlier reference point, every tradition to a previous one.”³ Perhaps more important than where the blues began were the conditions in the American South leading up to blues’s explosion in popularity in the early twentieth century. When Abraham Lincoln issued the emancipation proclamation in 1863, it seemed the dawn of a hopeful new era for African-Americans, and indeed, the period of Reconstruction that followed would see a slight upturn in the fortunes of blacks, including, for men, the right to vote and hold regional office. During reconstruction, the American South was going through a time of transition. While the South was rebuilding infrastructure in the wake of the Civil War, reconstruction was not limited simply to buildings and railroads. The legal structure of the nation was changing as well, allowing the newly freed slaves greater rights, and protection against discrimination. For African Americans, this was a period of optimism and growth, with many seeking out education and opportunity. Yet, the South’s white residents, who resented both the loss of slaves, and the granting of black rights, did not

³ Ted Giola, *Delta Blues: the life and times of the Mississippi masters who revolutionized American music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 7.

share this enthusiasm. Therefore, during the 1870s when home rule was violently and effectively re-established in the southern states and federal troops removed, the rights gained by African Americans were systemically and brutally stripped away by southern whites, and Jim Crow became king. The 1896 Supreme Court ruling on *Plessy vs. Ferguson* would be the first and most damning nail in the coffin of black citizen's hopes for equality, cementing segregation rules already in place in public facilities such as trains, declaring them officially constitutional.⁴

Neil R. McMillen notes Mississippi was unique out of the Southern states for its less formal segregation laws, but was characterized by a "radical negro-phobia" that exceeded that of its neighbors. McMillen adds that long-standing social rules and habits were usually sufficient to keep the races separated, with white opinion quick to dictate custom where official signage failed.⁵

In addition to increasing efforts by white supremacists to regain a stranglehold on Mississippi's race relations, the 1890's were also significant for a marked increase in the occurrence of lynchings. McMillen identifies two periods where incidents of lynching spiked dramatically. The first, 1889-1908, occurred in conjunction with efforts by both state government and white citizens to solidify their dominance and keep blacks firmly under heel, with lynching employed by whites, especially in rural communities, to punish those blacks who did not obviously submit to those efforts. While whites used lynching as a tool to maintain their dominance and discourage rebellion, a white mob occasionally instigated a "nigger hunt" for a much simpler reason; because of the

⁴ Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 7-8.

⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

excitement provided by the event.⁶ The second spike in lynchings occurred just after World War I, when young black men were returning from military service in Europe, where race relations were more relaxed.

Upon their return, white Mississippians were keen to reinforce the status quo, and remind black soldiers of their place in the social hierarchy, regardless of their service to the nation. Additionally, encountering better circumstances abroad made returning black soldiers more intolerant of the physical, emotional and economic assaults of southern whites and more likely to speak or act out against abuse. Willie Walker, biological father of preacher C. L. Franklin, abandoned his family and headed north after returning from the war, now finding the “southern farm situation” intolerable.⁷ Not all black veterans left Mississippi, however, and the lynching increase during this period correlated with heightened racial tensions between hopeful returning soldiers, and other blacks who felt their service earned them the rights of democracy, and uneasy whites who violently insisted that this was not the case.

Regardless of the gradual decline in lynching following 1922, its impact on the collective black cultural memory was strong, and while the practice became more infrequent, the threat it posed persisted well into the Civil Rights movement. Richard Wright, author of groundbreaking autobiography *Black Boy*, calls lynching, “the white death,” and states that the fear of lynching hung over the head of every Southern black male.⁸ An ever-present awareness of the consequences of deviance from established

⁶ Ibid, 226.

⁷ Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church and the Transformation of America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 7-8.

⁸ Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1st Perennial Classics Ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 172.

social expectations dominated interactions between the races, with blacks defensively adopting a docile, subservient demeanor in their speech and body language. Adopting a grinning, cheerful deference in the presence of whites was a survival strategy. By manipulating whites with a display of willful, chipper, “incomprehension,” blacks reassured them of their perceived racial superiority and caused whites to be more inclined to dismiss those who were successful at this deception.⁹

When questioned in later years, many black men revealed the suffocating effect that white supremacy had on their emotional and mental states. During the years of Jim Crow, however, outlets for expressions of discontent of this kind were limited. While some found legal ways to fight back against white oppression, and rebelled against white supremacy through education, the courts, or the press, many more found this nearly impossible. Others found solace in the church, and hymns, prayers and spirituality provided comfort, community, and a mode of expression. Where these methods fell short, the less reputable institutions of juke joints, bars, and blues music offered an outlet for the kind of expression that was unacceptable elsewhere.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the racial and economic climate of the Delta and discusses black men’s encounters with racism and violence in both boyhood and adulthood and how bluesmen articulated these events in their music. It argues that bluesmen used metaphorical language and coded expressions of their feelings surrounding these conditions and experiences within their music.

The second chapter explores black men’s commentary on masculinity and societal and peer pressure to adhere to a conceived ideal of manhood. By analyzing the

⁹ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 31, 38-39.

“bad man” mythos and other masculine themes as bluesmen present them in their music; this chapter connects the significance of manhood in the lives and presentations of blues musicians to themes and reports of violence. The last chapter analyzes black “intimate violence” as defined by Adam Gussow as expressed in black social spaces such as juke joints, barrelhouses and bars.

The blues is much more than a timeless and powerful musical genre that speaks to the strength of the musicians that produced it; it presents a microcosm of the complexity of human emotion and struggle that characterized the lives of black men between reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement. By studying it, we have a chance to understand the nature of violence in black communities and in its later manifestations in rap music and “gangsta” culture, and for the ways in which we understand black masculinity today.

Chapter 1

Jim Crow Blues

“The blues ain't nothing but a lowdown shaking chill, If you ain't had 'em I hope you never will”, sings blues legend Son House in 1930 at Paramount Record’s Grafton recording session.¹⁰ Eleven years later, Muddy Waters, who was in turn inspired by House himself, echoed a similar sentiment in his song “Country Blues:”

A well now, some folks say they worry, worry blues ain't bad
That's a misery feelin' child, I most, most ever had
Some folks tell me, man I did worry, the blues ain't bad
Well that's a misery ole feelin', honey now, well gal, I most ever had.¹¹

For these musicians, the blues was something beyond merely being sad or low; it was a state of crushing, hopeless despair, which was so deeply troubling that it seemed a physical sensation. Adam Gussow expands on this argument by stating that not only was the blues a physical sensation, but that having the blues was a metaphor for the subconscious damage caused by everyday white violence, surveillance and, oppression.¹² From 1918 onwards, while lynching had become less prevalent in Mississippi, the practice was not yet extinguished and the threat of mob violence still hung over the heads of African Americans on a daily basis. In his autobiography *Black Boy*, Richard Wright states that organizing with other blacks to fight white oppression was hopeless, “Outright black rebellion could never win. If I fought openly, I would die

¹⁰ Son House, *Delta Blues*, “The Walking Blues” Shout! Factory, a Division of Retropolis, LLC, 2003. Spotify.

¹¹ Muddy Waters, “Country Blues” Plantation Recordings, Alan Lomax, 1941.

¹² Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 27.

and I did not want to die. News of lynchings were frequent.”¹³ The looming spectre of lynching lingered in the cultural imaginations of blacks, discouraging rebellion, and ensuring the continued endurance of the everyday indignities of life in the American South.

Open rebellion against segregation or white social rules often resulted in violent attempts by whites to “keep the nigger down” by any means necessary.¹⁴ While many blacks chose to display outward acceptance of white supremacy for the sake of their safety, in many cases this was little more than an intentional ploy concealing deep discontent and feelings of rebellion, both of which bluesmen expressed in their music. While historians debate the extent to which lynching was discussed in blues music, Gussow maintains that fear of lynching and white violence are one of the prime topics of blues, often unintentionally coded within lyrics, yet recognizable and relatable to other blacks living under the same conditions. Furthermore, he argues that “lynching blues” often dealt with the theme of white violence unconsciously, and that the terror lynching produced, and the daily stress of living under white supremacy manifested itself into the blues as a form of creative expression.¹⁵

The blues, a condition directly related to living under Southern white supremacy, was such a part of the black experience, that bluesman Brownie McGhee, in his recording session with Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Terry, states that, “I never had the blues, the blues always had me.... The blues was in the cradle with me, rocking.”

¹³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1st Perennial Classics Ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 252.

¹⁴ Ida B. Wells and Alfreda M. Duster, eds., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida. B. Wells* (University of Chicago: Chicago Press, 1970), 64

¹⁵ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 22-23.

Broonzy adds that the blues is not a simple emotion that results from the lack of money or food, but a result of existing when every day is suffering, concluding that if you don't live the blues, "you don't have it."¹⁶ The comments of these musicians establish that the blues exceeded hardship, poverty, and sadness, it is a fact that results from the knowledge that even money and status symbols such as a new Cadillac, will not erase the fundamental state of being unequal.

After escaping the south and relocating to Chicago, Richard Wright worked alongside white women for the first time, and he states that he considered them to lack a certain depth of feeling in comparison to blacks. He states that they lacked the "emotional equipment" to empathize with blacks because their experience of America had been so different; in short, they lacked the blues. Yet, when discussing the shallow emotions of white women, Wright compares his own experience in which he felt as though the strength of his emotions defined his life because of the suffering he endured as a black man.¹⁷ Wright's commentary displays the strength of emotion and range of feeling that black men were capable of, and the determination of southern whites to prevent that emotion from ever being shown.

Blues historian Elijah Wald is quick to dismiss the image of the miserable, poor, oppressed blues singer, and calls into question blues' image as the "heart-cry of a suffering people."¹⁸ Wald argues that instead, intelligent, professional, moneyed, well-dressed men wrote blues music, and it was this image of success that attracted black

¹⁶ Blues with Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, produced by Studs Terkel, 1912-2008 (Folkways Records, 1959), 3:40 – 6:35

¹⁷ Wright, *Black Boy*, 272.

¹⁸ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, 1st Amistad Paperback Ed. (New York: Amistad, 2005), 3-4.

audiences to the music, rather than the personal melancholy of the lyrics. Wald refers specifically to the famous photograph of Robert Johnson, in his pressed suit, tie pins, and pocket handkerchief, stating that this image runs counter to that of the impoverished musician strumming a guitar on “ramshackle” porches.¹⁹ Yet, Wald’s assessment is somewhat simplistic, and dismisses the idea that Bill Broonzy discusses, that material wealth and success, and having the blues are not mutually exclusive. The blues results from a state of oppression that exists regardless of wealth, success, or popularity.

Wald furthers his argument by observing that bluesmen and their songs were often full of humor and wit. One only needs consider Robert Johnson’s “Hot Tamales,” or “I Believe I’ll Dust my Broom,” or Charley Patton’s popular antics on stage to see the truth in this statement. However, lighthearted songs such as “Dust my Broom” appear alongside Johnson’s other more solemn tracks, such as the disturbing and haunting “Crossroad Blues,” which describes the risk and terror of being an unknown black man in a new town after dark.²⁰ Although many bluesmen were successful, charming, quick-witted jokers who dressed well for promotional photos, they were also black men who played in juke joints and were as susceptible to white oppression and violence as any other. To consider them as anything less than both simultaneously is limited and one-dimensional.

Blues songs dealing with white violence generally took one of three forms. The first of these, what Adam Gussow terms “lynching blues,” address lynching and white violence in metaphorical terms. These songs describe the fear associated with

¹⁹ Ibid, 9.

²⁰ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 410-411

interactions with whites, whether in general terms, or for example, the anxiety associated with the whims of a cruel overseer, or the actions of a hostile stranger. The second codes the effects of white violence within the world of “women troubles,” substituting loneliness and the unfaithful lover as a more easily addressed source of pain, and the pleasure of taking a lover as a way of healing the pain of white oppression. The final form manifests in the theme of rambling, most often via railroad or Greyhound Bus, and represents a core, fundamental desire to escape the South and the everyday violence and stress of living there.

While some musicians explicitly chose to address white violence in their lyrics, these songs were less frequent than those that discussed love and rambling. Perhaps the most famous of these “lynching blues” are Robert Johnson’s “Hellhound on My Trail” and “Cross Road Blues.” Although Elijah Wald deems Johnson a “non-entity” in black popular music and debates the relative popularity of Johnson during his lifetime, his popularity is less important than the relatability of the experiences he describes.²¹ “Hellhound on My Trail,” clearly describes the feeling of being hunted and the pressures of ever-present, hostile surveillance with the lyrics “I gotta keep movin’/Blues fallin down like hail” and, “the days keeps on worryin me/there’s a hellhound on my trail.”²² The apocryphal myth that Johnson sold his soul to the devil for talent is perhaps less true than the fact that Johnson felt like a wanted man, hounded by the pressures of white supremacy, and afraid of being the victim of a lynch mob. Furthermore, the image of the hound hunting Johnson takes on yet a more literal meaning in a conversation between

²¹ Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, xxvi.

²² Robert Johnson, *The Centennial Collection*, “Hellhound on My Trail,” Columbia Records, 2011. Spotify.

Memphis Slim and Bill Broonzy, where the two men explain that prison guards used dogs to track down runaways.²³

“Cross Road Blues” reinforces this fear, narrating the unease of being a black man caught in a county where he is unknown after dark. Alan Lomax, the foremost recorder of country blues in the 1930s and 1940s comments on this phenomenon in his book *The Land Where the Blues Began*, noting the presence of signs on some county lines that read, “Negro, don’t let the night catch you in this county, keep moving.”²⁴ Knowing this, Johnson’s lyrics suddenly take on a different light:

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
 Asked the Lord above, “have mercy save poor Bob, if you please.”
 Standin’ at the crossroad I tried to flag a ride.
 Didn’t nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by
 Mmm, the sun goin’ down, boy, dark gon’ catch me here.²⁵

These lyrics, when taken in context with this signage, shift from being a song describing the lonesomeness of rambling, to the fear of being stranded in an unwelcome county. Litwack too, recognizes this connection in Johnson’s lyrics, stating that the language blacks used to describe life in the south reflected the language of war. One can easily visualize the parallels, Johnson in a “virtual warzone,” on his knees praying for mercy while he is surrounded by enemies who wish him harm.²⁶

²³ Bill Broonzy and Memphis Slim, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. Features Memphis Slim, Big Bill Broonzy, and Sonny Boy Williamson, as told to and recorded by Alan Lomax. Notes by Alan Lomax. Salem, Mass.: Rykodisc, 1990.

²⁴ Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1993), 20.

²⁵ Robert Johnson, *The Centennial Collection*, “Cross Road Blues,” Columbia Records, 2011. Spotify

²⁶ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 410-411.

While Robert Johnson's lyrics clearly and hauntingly encapsulate the fear of living under threat of white violence, Lead Belly is more concerned with the injustice of it. In addition to speaking on white violence, he boldly addresses segregation in "Jim Crow Blues."

I been traveling, I been traveling from toe to toe
Everywhere I have been I find some old Jim Crow

One thing, people, I want everybody to know
You're gonna find some Jim Crow, every place you go.²⁷

Where Johnson's songs on oppression are sorrowful, Lead Belly's lyrics burn with anger, and nowhere is this more apparent than in "Duncan and Brady," which describes a violent confrontation between a white police officer and a black bartender. "Mr. Brady," the white cop walks into the bar and arrests Duncan, keen to start a fight and "shoot somebody jus' to see them die." Yet, Duncan responds to the threat of arrest by shooting Brady in the chest. Lead Belly's lyrics appear to take a certain amount of satisfaction from Brady's death, "Shot King Brady, goin' shoot him again," and respect for Duncan, who took revenge on the unjust white cop.²⁸

"Duncan and Brady" is Lead Belly's commentary on police brutality, and the injustice of the Southern penal system, but many of his songs also comment on incarceration, murder charges, and "the pen."²⁹ His songs also widely address black on black violence as well, and domestic violence more than once, a subject we will cover in more detail in the second chapter. Robert Johnson and Lead Belly are two examples of men who were more candid when discussing the effects of white supremacy and

²⁷ Lead Belly, *The Smithsonian Folkways Collection*, "Jim Crow Blues," Smithsonian Folkways, 2015. Spotify.

²⁸ Lead Belly, *The Smithsonian Folkways Collection*, "Duncan and Brady," 2015.

²⁹ See "John Hardy," "Ain't Goin' Down to the Well No More," "Governor O.K. Allen."

violence; however, they both also record their fair share of songs about love, loneliness and lust.

Unlike Johnson and Leadbelly, most blues artists chose subject matter more closely related to what Bill Broonzy terms “women troubles” when expressing the pain associated with white oppression.³⁰ These songs generally describe a range of emotions associated with love, lust and female companionship that range from jealousy and possessiveness to sexual prowess to abandonment and loneliness. For example, Robert Johnson’s “Kind Hearted Woman Blues,” which was originally recorded in 1936, is a key example of one of these songs,

I got a kindhearted woman
do anything in this world for me
But these evil hearted women,
man they will not let me be
I love my baby
my baby don't love me

This song describes the loneliness and pain of unrequited love, a common theme in blues music. Johnson further laments that, despite her treatment of him, he cannot “stand to leave her be.”³¹ Sonny Boy Williamson, in Alan Lomax’s *Blues in the Mississippi Night* recording, sings a short song with a similar theme,

Now, I know you don't love me, don't love me no more
I believe you lyin' to me when you say you love me
I believe yo love Mister-So-and-So³²

³⁰ Blues with Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, 11:45 - 12:05

³¹ Johnson, *The Centennial Collection*, “Kind-hearted Woman Blues.” Spotify.

³² Bill Broonzy, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. Features Memphis Slim, Big Bill Broonzy, and Sonny Boy Williamson, as told to and recorded by Alan Lomax. Notes by Alan Lomax. Salem: Rykodisc, 1990. CD.

Charley Patton's "Some of These Days" describes a man who leaves his lover, who takes him for granted, telling her "you'll be sorry."³³ Son House, a man who in his life was a preacher, a musician and an inmate, was not immune to women troubles. He describes the pain of unrequited love and of having a woman who treated him badly in his song "Downhearted Blues."³⁴ Finally, Skip James, in his mournful voice, manages to be both ironic and heart wrenching simultaneously in "Devil got My Woman,"

The woman I love, woman that I loved
 Woman I loved, took her from my best friend
 But he got lucky, stoled her back again
 And he got lucky, stoled her back again³⁵

Each of these songs, while written by different musicians about different women, share several themes: abandonment, unrequited love, unfaithfulness, and loneliness. During his recording with Terry and McGhee, Broonzy discusses the popularity of these songs among all audiences, because, he says to the merriment of the other men in the room, "every man born ever had woman trouble."³⁶ Despite the relatability of these songs to the audience, the tone of the lyrics speaks to a deeper meaning as theorized by Adam Gussow. He states that the theme of romantic loss articulated in many blues songs is a method of "transcoding" that exchanges the pain of racial oppression, for that of romantic mistreatment.³⁷ This occurs in part because the violence of life in the South stood in stark opposition to both the emotional pain, and physical pleasure of love.

³³ Charley Patton, *The Complete Recordings 1929-1934 CD C*, "Some of These Days I'll Be Gone," JSP Records, 2008. Spotify.

³⁴ Son House, *The Original Delta Blues (Mojo Workin'; Blues for the Next Generation)*, "Downhearted Blues," Sony Music Entertainment Inc. 1965. Spotify

³⁵ Skip James, *The Complete 1931 Recordings*, "Devil Got My Woman," Compilation, Body and Soul, 2004. Spotify.

³⁶ Blues with Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee produced by Studs Terkel, 1912-2008 (Folkways Records, 1959), 11:30-12:00.

³⁷ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 58.

While many blues songs discuss the darker side of love, a large number also embrace and celebrate its physical manifestations. Many of these songs, such as Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues," Leadbelly's "Bring Me a Little Water Silvy," and Muddy Waters "I Can't be Satisfied," all demonstrate the bluesmen's desire for sexual fulfillment from their women. Yet, the seeking of physical pleasure fulfills another purpose, the healing of the pain and abuse inflicted by white oppression and violence. Sexual and romantic longing displaces fear, pain and grief, and replacing the threatening pain of racial violence with the pleasure of physical love gave bluesmen not only an outlet, but also a form of healing.³⁸

While the first two types of blues song express how black men dealt with white oppression, the third type, "ramblin'" blues, is more concerned with escaping it. Rambling was often the reality of the life of bluesmen, who often travelled extensively across the south in the search for work, women, and good times. Charley Patton's movements across Mississippi took him to approximately 17 different temporary residences, according to the index in his biography. It seems more often than not, rather than Patton leaving voluntarily, the enemies he made drove him from place to place.³⁹ Yet the theme of rambling went beyond mere escape from white supremacy, a hope of a better life. Bluesmen use images of railroads and greyhound buses extensively in their music, often in a wistful tone, with Robert Johnson expressing the desire to ramble even after death.

You may bury my body, ooh
down by the highway side

³⁸ Ibid, 59.

³⁹ Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* (Newton: Rock Chapel Press, 1988), 149, 357.

So my old evil spirit
can catch a Greyhound bus and ride⁴⁰

Some bluesmen even titled songs about certain train lines, like Son House's "Empire State Express," and Lead Belly's "Rock Island Line." Railroads occupied a special place in southern black culture as symbol of hope and escape in part due to the powerful history and legacy of the Underground Railroad.⁴¹ The railroad held a place in cultural legacy as a tool used to escape oppression, suffering and hardship, and the image of a train rolling past a plantation towards unknown destinations could evoke powerful feelings of hope and longing.

In addition to the more practical concerns of a bluesman's life, such as migration from town to town in search of work, rambling took on a much more hopeful role when between 1910 and the early 1940s, approximately 2 million blacks travelled north to escape the brutality of the south during the Great Migration. While in previous years the idea of travelling to the less oppressive north was a dream, it was increasingly becoming a reality for many Southern blacks, for whom the north represented a chance at a better life. Alan Lomax, records a conversation he witnessed between bluesman William Brown (not to be confused with contemporary bluesman and friend, Willie B.) and the owner of a local roadhouse, in which Brown, after describing the behaviour of southern white men states:

"I'm gonna miss it all when I'm gone. I was raised around here. And I know I'm gonna miss it."

⁴⁰ Robert Johnson, *The Centennial Collection*, "Me and the Devil Blues" Columbia Records, 2011. Spotify.

⁴¹ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 58.

“Where you going?” asked Hamp.

“Somewhere I’ll be treated like a man,” said Brown.⁴²

Richard Wright, too, discussed the idea of moving north, and finally despite not having enough money, he and his Aunt decided to gamble. Furthermore, he describes the lengths he goes to in order to leave his job safely, since whites were often resentful of losing black labour to the North. He described a tense conversation in which his boss tries to discourage him from going north with statements such as, “The North’s no good for your people, boy” and, “Boy, you won’t like it up there.”⁴³ A young preacher’s words to his father further reflect this strong desire of black men to leave the south, “When a young white man talks rough to me, I can’t talk rough to him. You can stand that; I can’t. I have some education, and the inside I has the feelin’s of a white man. I’m goin’.”⁴⁴

For these men, the North and the various railroads, highways, and buses that took one there, all represented a chance of better economic opportunities, but more importantly the chance to be treated as a human being, and the freedom to behave in a manner ungoverned by the strict rules of Jim Crow. Additionally, the romanticizing of rambling in blues music, expresses this hope, and furthermore, is a vocal rebellion against white supremacists, many of whom strongly resisted blacks leaving the south. In “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” Charley Patton sings “I’m goin’ away, to the world unknown/ I’m worried now, but I won’t be worried long” and, “Every day seem like murder here/ I’m gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don’t bid my care.” In these lyrics,

⁴² Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 12.

⁴³ Wright, *Black Boy*, 254 – 256.

⁴⁴ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 482.

he is stating his desire to move somewhere where the blues will no longer afflict him, despite the obvious ill reception of these words.⁴⁵ Many Southern whites would have reacted to Patton's words with extreme displeasure, and in fact, Southerners sometimes resorted to drastic measures to prevent the loss of their workforce. Police arrested blacks in train stations and hauled them off trains, and suppressed black, northern newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* to prevent the spread of dangerous ideas.⁴⁶

For bluesmen, their songs were more than sorrowful ballads of love, suffering and hardship, they were a form of social expression that both resisted, and attempted to cope with the economic, social, and physical violence of southern whites. While bluesmen write about white oppression in the form of lynching less frequently, bluesmen expressed their pain both through their desire for pleasure, and romanticization of rambling. The pain of an unfaithful lover was an echo of the pain of oppression, and the pleasure of physical intimacy was a powerful counter to the fear of physical violence. The theme of rambling regardless of whether bluesmen ever actually left the South was a coded expression of escaping oppression and was a message of hope, freedom and rebellion southern whites did not tolerate. The feeling of the "blues" was that of inequality, hopelessness, and crushing misery, yet blues music was an attempt by black men to find meaning in their pain, heal, and share collective suffering in one of the few ways open to them.

⁴⁵ Charley Patton, *The Complete Recordings 1929-1934 CD A*, "Down the Dirt Road Blues," JSP Records, 2008. Spotify.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 492.

Chapter 2

I Can't Be Satisfied

While bluesmen were performers, poets and fighters, they were primarily black men. The ways in which bluesmen expressed their maleness in both performance and lyrics was fundamentally linked to how black men constructed their own sense of manhood. Although in the early twentieth century, newspaper articles, law courts, and the public often considered black men as inherently violent, the ways in which black men constructed and expressed their own sense of manhood were infinitely more complex. Violence was not an instinctual reflex to confrontation, but rather a last resort in preserving one's sense of self-respect or agency and ability to self-determine.

This chapter will focus partially on the ways in which scholars have discussed black masculinity, and its performance, and secondly, how bluesmen presented masculine behaviours in blues shows and lyrics. The relationship between black masculinity and violence holds a unique position in much academic literature because while some of the earlier literature implies that black men are somehow predisposed to violence, some contemporary literature ties black violence to a complete internalization of white expressions and values of Southern honour. This perspective, while preferable to the previous attitude, denies black men their agency in defining their own sense of manhood. Anthropologist Edmund T. Gordon calls for analysis of black masculinity that respects black manhood as more than simply reactive and grants black men agency,

Unless the impact of oppression upon black males is made explicit, the Black male response to structural constraint, almost by definition, is understood as unconscious, illogical, and/or pathological, and passively

disintegrative, rather than internally coherent, resistant, and/or constitutive.⁴⁷

While black men both internalized and adopted some aspects of traditional, white masculinity, they simultaneously found new ways of defining manhood on their own terms, based on their own lived experience independently of the values of whites. For example, Richard Wright, during a discussion with his landlady's daughter, states that "a man oughta pay his own way," suggesting that he at least partially equated manhood with financial independence.⁴⁸ Yet he also tells a story of his disgust when he observes his co-worker, whom he describes as a man with a strong sense of racial pride and justice, encouraging a white man to kick him in the rear in exchange for a quarter. When he questions the man on this humiliation, he replies that "my ass is tough and quarters are scarce," causing Wright to abandon the topic. Furthermore, he states that while he and other black men accepted the boundaries white people drew in order to earn a living, and that they would be willing to suffer certain indignities to continue earning, that they were still entitled to those earnings.⁴⁹ Wright's personal sense of dignity and pride would not allow him to endure the same kind of mistreatment as his co-worker for payment, but he accepts the other man's agency in doing whatever he deemed necessary for money.

Wright's narrative suggests that although black men largely tolerated certain mistreatments, part of manhood was in constructing boundaries for oneself as to how much abuse one could take. Essentially, Wright defines manhood as self-determination and agency. While he expects that men can support themselves financially, he also

⁴⁷ Edmund T. Gordon, "Cultural Politics of Black Masculinity," *Transforming Anthropology* 6, No. 1 & 2 (Jan. 1997): 39.

⁴⁸ Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 211.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 227-229.

respects other men's ability to choose for themselves how they would do so, and what they would tolerate in the process.

While the oppressive circumstances of the South were detrimental to black men's emotional health, the imposition of "patriarchal masculinity" onto black men exacerbated this problem further. Bell hooks, author and feminist theorist states that the burden of patriarchal ideas of masculinity was, and continues to be harmful to black men's sense of self by forcing them to compete in a capitalist system that pushes ideas of monetary success, while preventing them from succeeding. Furthermore, she argues that this unattainable model of manhood "isolates" black men emotionally, and causes problems such as addiction and neglect.⁵⁰

According to hooks, the ideas of patriarchal masculinity had to be taught to black slaves upon their arrival in the Americas. During slavery, slave owners stripped black men of their masculinity and subsequently exposed them to the violent form of masculinity enacted by white men on other slaves. Deprived of their own sense of masculinity, enslaved males often internalized the masculine performance of their violent white owners, and re-enacted it within their own families.⁵¹

Yet black masculinity was not limited merely to imitating whites. For many black men, emancipation offered the opportunity to effectively care and provide for their families outside of the confines of white ownership.⁵² These gender roles were far from simple, however, and hooks suggests that partially due to the necessity of both parents to work and earn an income, black men were less concerned with being the

⁵⁰ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, (Routledge: New York, 2004), xiii – xv.

⁵¹ Ibid, 3-4, And ⁵¹ Pierre W. Orelus, *The Agony of Masculinity: Race, Gender, and Education in the Age of "New" Racism and Patriarchy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2010), 69-70.

⁵² Ibid, 5-6.

breadwinner and head earner of the household, than they were being the patriarch and leader of the family.⁵³ This strong need for agency and self-determination separates black southerners from white. White men may have put more emphasis on being the financial breadwinner, but for black men, both the legacies of slavery, and segregation made it much more vital for them to have the ability to make their own choices, and have those choices respected. As Pierre W. Orelus puts it, “slaves could not be their own men; they were somebody else’s men,” making it more necessary for black men following emancipation to be self-determining.⁵⁴

Black manhood, in addition to putting a premium on agency, also focused on the performance of maleness. Authors Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson theorize that the development of “cool pose”, allowed black men to cope with the anger and confusion resulting from the inability to fulfill traditional gender roles such as breadwinner, provider, and protector.⁵⁵ While fulfillment of these roles was somewhat important to African American men, again, it was having the agency and ability to fulfill these roles rather than actually doing so that was more important. However, when black men felt that another had taken their ability to choose away from them, “cool pose” became a coping strategy. While Majors and Billson proposed this theory in the 1990s to discuss the culture of inner city youth, their insight can also be applied in some contexts to the behaviours of southern blacks in the early twentieth century.

Majors and Billson define cool pose as a “ritualized form of masculinity” that uses various masks and facades to craft all physical and verbal presentations as a

⁵³ Ibid, 7-9.

⁵⁴ Pierre W. Orelus, *The Agony of Masculinity*, 65.

⁵⁵ Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood In America* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 1.

performance radiating pride, control and, strength. Cool pose empowers black men by allowing them to feel in control, capable, strong and, confident, and effectively disguises emotional fragility, and self-doubt.⁵⁶ Arguably, the bluesman's careful construction of his image is an early manifestation of cool pose. The previously mentioned portrait of Robert Johnson, of whom only two verified photos exist, with his jauntily angled fedora, pin-striped suit, and tie pins. In this photo, Johnson presents himself as a confident, professional, "cool," and financially successful musician, despite the worn condition of his guitar, and nomadic lifestyle. Yet Johnson's reputation went beyond his physical appearance. According to Ted Giola, the legend of Johnson having sold his soul to the devil was a tale Johnson himself created and perpetuated.

The association with the blues and the devil was already well-established by the time Johnson embraced the theme, and musician John Lee Hooker's preacher father even went so far as to forbid his son from bringing his guitar into the house.⁵⁷ Additionally, bluesman Tommy Johnson, a contemporary of Robert, had told the same story about selling his soul to the devil a few years before Johnson.⁵⁸ Giola adds that when Johnson's wife died in childbirth while he was travelling and playing music, her family was quick to blame his sinful ways for her death. The myth created by Johnson then, becomes not only an attempt to increase his own legend, but also by appearing to fully embrace the blues as the Devil's music he projected a devil-may-care attitude towards his own tragedy and the opinions of his ex-in-laws.⁵⁹ However, Robert Johnson

⁵⁶ Ibid, 4-5.

⁵⁷ Ted Giola, *Delta Blues*, 164-165.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 115.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 169.

in addition to his repertoire of songs about personal tragedy also wrote a fair number of songs about sexual fulfillment.

Carefully constructed stereotypes regarding the sexual appetites of black men and women were perhaps the main tool used by whites to justify the lynching and brutal treatment of blacks. Black men were branded as bestial rapists who would not hesitate to violate white women hence one of the most common reasons given for a lynching was that the victim (most often a black male) had assaulted a white woman.

Conversely, whites stereotyped black women as lustful and immoral to continue the allowance of the sexual advances and predations of white men. These stereotypes were instrumental to upholding the racial hierarchy of the South because they allowed white men to pursue relationships with women of colour, while demonizing black men who entered consensual relationships with white women.⁶⁰

While whites possessed an overwhelmingly negative view on black men's sexuality, there is little doubt that it played an important role in the ways that black men constructed their own manhood. As many bluesmen demonstrate in their suggestive lyrics and claims to multiple partners, sexual ability and physical intimacy were vital to men's image and reputation. Charley Patton is a prime example of this. Not only did he have countless girlfriends, and approximately fourteen common-law wives throughout his life, many of his songs prioritize sexual fulfillment over romantic commitment.⁶¹ Men who knew him reported that Patton was "woman crazy," and Son House reported that

⁶⁰ Ida B. Wells and Alfreda M. Duster, eds., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida. B. Wells* (University of Chicago: Chicago Press, 1970), 64.

⁶¹ Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* (New Jersey: Rock Chapel Press, 1988), 82 – 84.

this was in part because Patton seemed to have little respect for his female companions. In *Pony Blues*, Patton begins with the lines:

Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare
 Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare
 I'm gonna find a rider, baby, in the world somewhere

Riding is common slang in blues lyrics for intercourse, and blues artists often referred to their female partners as “riders.” In these lines, Patton is clearly expressing his desire for a female companion. However, the song also makes clear the temporary nature of the relationship he seeks through the concluding lines,

I got somethin' to tell you when I get the chance
 Somethin' to tell you when I get a chance
 I don't wanna marry, just wanna be your man⁶²

Additionally, the testimonies of Patton’s contemporaries indicate that not only was Patton promiscuous, but also that he actively presented his wives to his peers. His nephew reported that “heap of time you’d mostly meet him he’d have a different wife,” suggesting that Patton took a certain measure of pride in his ability to collect companions.⁶³

As we demonstrated in the first chapter, black men often used physical pleasure as a method of healing emotional pain, and the example of Charley Patton demonstrates that promiscuity was both a metaphorical painkiller, and a manifestation of “cool pose.” Majors and Billson argue that in addition to providing distraction, entertainment and, the pleasures of female companionship, promiscuity also was both consciously and unconsciously bolstered by black men as cool because it reinforced one’s masculinity.⁶⁴

⁶² Charley Patton, *The Complete Recordings 1929-1934*, “Pony Blues,” JSP Records, 2008. Spotify.

⁶³ Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues*, 83.

⁶⁴ Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, 16-17.

Where many knew Charley Patton for his promiscuity and abundance of partners, Muddy Waters was legendary for the promotion of his libido in his music. While the greater part of Waters career falls outside of the scope of this research, he recorded with Alan Lomax, Son House influenced him, and he is one of the most celebrated legends of the Delta blues tradition. Therefore, no study on this topic could be complete without him. Waters was also the musician who took the previously suggestive lyrics of those such as Patton and Johnson and made the sexual metaphor explicit. Song titles such as “(I’m Your) Hoochie Coochie Man,” “Got My Mojo Workin’” and, “I Just Want to Make Love To You,” all indicate Waters’ pride in his sexuality as well as the changing attitudes of the time that allowed such song titles to be recorded. Additionally, Waters preference for writing songs about his own sexual prowess indicates that he was aware of how his claims boosted his own reputation and “coolness.”⁶⁵

Yet, the sexually suggestive nature of blues lyrics exceeded the singer’ desire for the respect of his peers and the inflation of his ego. It was also a significant rebellion against white oppression. As Giola notes, “no aspect of racial equality was more worrisome to the white ruling class than the assertion of black sexuality and the resulting potential for miscegenation.”⁶⁶ By singing about sexual ability and multitude of partners, bluesmen reclaimed and celebrated their own sexuality, and in doing so, gained the respect of their peers. Furthermore, black mens’ sexual activities represented a significant portion of their lives in which they could exercise control. While white social rules and expectations regulated his public behaviours to a certain degree,

⁶⁵ Giola, *Delta Blues*, 220.

⁶⁶ Giola, *Delta Blues*, 220.

his relationships with black women were largely outside of the realm of white concern and control.⁶⁷ By exercising control in their relationships, and publicly attesting to this fact through blues, bluesmen not only boosted their own reputations, but also enhanced their own confidence through self-determination.

Although bluesmen used sexuality and cool pose in establishing their image, black men sometimes grew tired of resisting white supremacy through more subtle methods, and embraced the “badman mythos,” for its violent rejection of white oppression. The badman archetype was that of a man who was something of an outlaw, and defined himself by his lack of fear of white supremacy and its various forms of violent punishment.⁶⁸ When faced with the humiliations or threats of white supremacy, the badman would respond with his gun and fearlessly fight back, rather than make use of the masking and deflecting strategies often used by southern blacks in their dealings with whites. As trope, he was a rebel folk-hero who epitomized all the traits that black men sought to portray in themselves: control, strength, fearlessness, and perhaps a certain amount of crazy reckless abandon. Some blues artists sang songs featuring a badman, such as Leadbelly’s “Duncan and Brady” which tells the story of a black bartender who shoots a white police officer in the chest.⁶⁹

When the trope of the badman crossed from lyric and folklore into real life, such men who defended themselves, their families or property with force against white violence, were sometimes referred to as “crazy niggers” by whites, but also by other blacks who, somewhat awestruck, considered them to be a mix of brave and suicidal.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues*, 82.

⁶⁸ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 169.

⁶⁹ Lead Belly, *The Smithsonian Folkways Collection*, “Duncan and Brady,” 2015

⁷⁰ Gussow, *Seems like Murder Here*, 169.

Broonzy, tells a story about his “crazy” uncle, who refused to allow his pregnant wife to work in the fields; when the white man pushed the issue, the uncle retaliated by beating the other man. Later, when a lynch gang came for him, he allegedly shot four or five of them before he was finally taken. Although Broonzy states that others called his uncle “crazy,” both him and Slim regard the man with respect, stating that he was only called crazy because he stood up for his rights.⁷¹

While the badman trope mainly concerned black men who fought white violence with violence, Broonzy and Slim seem to consider a “bad negro” any man who resisted white oppression in a way that brought severe risk onto himself. Memphis Slim describes a scene he encountered in Marigold, Mississippi, where, in a carefully guarded room in the back of a restaurant black men were reading the banned, and inflammatory, black operated newspaper the *Chicago Defender*. “That’s what they really call a bad Negro,” he says, “a Negro that had nerve enough to smuggle the *Chicago Defender* down in the state of Mississippi.”⁷²

While the badman could be a rebel who merely read dangerous material, however, he was primarily a “heroic ideal,” who defied the white construction of genial, black subservience, with a quick trigger finger and fearless attitude. While the use of “cool pose” and the exercise of sexuality allowed black men to practice agency in a society where they were often painfully denied it, the badman took his own destiny from behind a pistol.

Although black masculinity and violence were often intertwined in this period, they were not defined by it but by the ways in which they gained agency over aspects of

⁷¹ Bill Broonzy and Memphis Slim, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. CD.

⁷² Ibid.

their lives that were tightly controlled by whites. Asserting one's right to self-determine and make their own decisions was paramount, and it was frequently when others violated this right that black men reacted in violent, defensive ways. As demonstrated by Broonzy's anecdote about his uncle, a man would be accorded a measure of respect for violently defending his right to govern himself, his family, his finances, and his own sexuality, even if the cost was his own life. In the lives of black men, violence was not random; it was a carefully employed tool used when other strategies were exhausted, and when words failed; senseless violence was reserved for white men, and lynch mobs.

Chapter 3

House of the Rising Sun

Blues lyrics just as often describe violence committed by blacks, or bluesmen themselves, against other African Americans as they do the pain of white supremacy. This intraracial violence, or as Gussow terms it, “intimate violence,” was perpetrated in the home within families, but publicly as well in juke joints, bars and barrelhouses. Historical context and social theory offer us some insight as to why this violence occurred. In the Jim Crow South, African-Americans lived in a state which W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as “behind the veil,” which can be described as the experience of living with the realization that in this society, being black meant being separate, and inherently inferior.⁷³ Whites reinforced this experience daily through segregation laws, violence and, the by maintaining the socio-economic inequality that African-Americans endured. Between 1910 and 1960, the percentage of working blacks who held white-collar jobs was between 3 – 7%, while for whites it was between 17 – 24%.⁷⁴ This systematic oppression was responsible for creating anger and severe tension among blacks, tension which often could not be released in the form of resistance against whites due to fear of severe retribution

In the climate of racial violence in which lynchings occurred, violent resistance against whites could have dire consequences. However, as the law rarely persecuted

⁷³ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1897): 1.

⁷⁴ Benjamin P. Bowser, *The Black Middle Class: Social Mobility and Vulnerability* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc. 2007), 72. Pdf.

the murder or assault of an African American, committing violence against blacks had few consequences. In the strongly honour-based society of the South, men had to defend against any insult to one's honour and self-worth, but for African Americans, reacting against white oppression was often impossible. Instead, they had to claim respectability in whatever situation they could. Responding violently to extreme insult or disrespect could preserve one's own self-worth by projecting an image of strength, confidence and roughness.⁷⁵ Additionally, black men sometimes reacted in a violent manner to having their agency, and personal boundaries infringed by other black men, from whom this treatment did not have to be tolerated the way it did from whites. Blues lyrics express this phenomenon, but this struggle for respect and status played out most strikingly within juke joints, barrelhouses, and other drinking establishments catering to blacks. In these establishments, according to Katrina Hazzard-Gordon "Blues was a mode of resistance: a way of bearing coded and overt witness to terror, easing troubled minds, making a living outside the sharecroppers exploited condition, clearing a space for pleasure, fantasizing revenge – a way of bringing oneself and one's community back to life by getting loud, fierce, and down."⁷⁶ In this way, blues and the venues that played it were intricately entwined, and together provide both an atmosphere and a space in which blacks could unwind, socialize, and release tension.

Blacks used the term "juke joint" to describe rural establishments where musicians played the blues and liquor freely available, in which African Americans, usually of a lower socio-economic status, could gather and socialize. Barrelhouses,

⁷⁵ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 210

⁷⁶ Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 15.

roadhouses, and rural black bars fulfilled the same function. These joints also had a reputation for being a hotbed for seedier activities such as prostitution, gambling, and as is the focus of this paper, violence.⁷⁷ Gussow theorizes that in addition to the juke's main function as a place for drinking, gambling and dancing, the pursuit of violence also held a strong attraction. For Gussow, these bars are a place where blacks “reclaimed their own and each other's bodies” and, “rediscovered their pride and agency.”⁷⁸ Therefore, the juke joints were the stage upon which blacks could act out their frustrations, and compete for the limited amount of status and respect that Jim Crow allowed them. *Seems like Murder Here* cites a number of memoirs by musicians who discuss the dangers of playing jukes. Charles Love, a Jazz musician has this to say about juke joints and playing the blues: “Wherever the blues is played there's a fight right after. You know the blues is apt to get them all bewildered some kind of way, make 'em wild, they want to fight.”⁷⁹ For the musicians, their job was sometimes merely to play the music that provided the backdrop for the pursuit of agency and empowerment that came from doing violence to others and receiving it in return.

Yet, another duty of the musician was to play his heart out all night long in order to exhaust the joint's patrons. In encouraging blues patrons to dance all night, the musician urges the release of tension and aggression in such a way that reduces violence.⁸⁰ Therefore, the role of the blues musician was to provide a form of therapy by

77 Kristopher I. Debnam, “A Sense of Community and Community Change: An Ethnographic Study of a Contemporary Louisiana Juke Joint As It Compares to Historical Literature on the Subject” (MA Thesis, Louisiana State University, 2009), 8.

78 Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 202.

79 *Ibid*, 213.

80 *Ibid*, 215 – 216.

providing an atmosphere in which blacks, repressed by Jim Crow and white oppression, could find an outlet for the frustrations that result from everyday oppression.

The function of the juke joints themselves were also a major contributing factor to the outbursts of violence that occurred. First, these jukes were one of the few places where African Americans could find alcohol. Many white businesses and saloons forbade the selling of alcohol to blacks, or demanded segregation in their establishments. This was in addition to any Prohibition laws against the sale of alcohol in general.⁸¹ However, not only was alcohol prevalent in these spaces, the use of drugs such as cocaine only provided further fuel to the already tense environment. Charley Patton's "A Spoonful Blues" describes the desperation with which users sought cocaine, and the lengths they would go to in obtaining it.⁸² Furthermore, although segregation was demeaning, it also allowed for the establishment of black only spaces where one could relax their regular attention to the strict social rules of Jim Crow, and release pent-up anger in an environment far from white surveillance.

Second, dancing was one of the primary activities that patrons of jukes indulged in, and it provided lots of opportunity for the exacerbation of romantic rivalry. The style of dancing in the juke focused on hip and pelvis movements and became increasingly associated with sexuality and a display of sexual intent toward a partner.⁸³ Therefore, the sexually charged atmosphere of the juke contributed to both real and imagined movements on one's partner, and could lead to conflict. Last, gambling was also a

⁸¹ Debnam, "A Sense of Community and Community Change, 37.

⁸² Charley Patton, *The Complete Recordings 1929-1934, CD A*, "A Spoonful Blues," JSP Records, 2008. Spotify.

⁸³ Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 93.

popular past time in these places, and gamblers commonly quarreled over debts and loses.⁸⁴ The known fact that nearly everyone occupying the joint was armed only served to further aggravate tensions in the juke. After the Civil War, guns became much more affordable, and possession of firearms skyrocketed among the working class.⁸⁵ In fact, blues music itself reflects this rise in the possession of firearms through its fixation on the metaphor of weaponry.

Guns, razors and knives all appear frequently in blues lyrics, often as a conduit through which a musician can express his own pain by inflicting it onto the body of another or as a tool through which hurts and insults could be avenged. *Seems Like Murder Here* paraphrases Harvard professor Elaine Scarry in saying “it feels good, if you're a blues singer in pain, to project and objectify your rage, heartache, and lust sickness as images of guns and knives.”⁸⁶ Uncle Skipper's “Cutting My ABC's” is an example of this in which he describes using a razor to carve letters into his lover's skin in return for the pain she causes him.⁸⁷ This theme of using weapons to deal with conflict is a reflection of how blacks often had to defend themselves from white aggression through the display or use of firearms. The Delta musicians rarely mention knives or razors, but guns appear in the lyrics frequently. Robert Johnson's “32-20 Blues” is a clear and provocative example of this, as he threatens his lover with a gun if she leaves him.

If I send for my baby
and she don't come
If I send for my baby

⁸⁴ Ibid, 40.

⁸⁵ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 212.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 224.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 198.

man, and she don't come
 All the doctors in Hot Springs
 sure can't help her none
 And if she gets unruly
 thinks she don't wan do
 If she gets unruly
 thinks she don't wan do
 Take my 32-20 now and
 cut her half in two
 She got a 38 special but I believe its much too light
 She got a 38 special but I believe its much too light
 I got a 32-20, got to make the camps alright⁸⁸

Lead Belly, whose very name implies the act of being shot in the stomach, sings about a woman who is murdered by a bartender.

Ella Speed was down town just a havin' her lovin' fun
 Let me tell you what Bill Morton done

 The deed that Bill Morton done
 First degree murder with a Colt forty-one⁸⁹

The rise in the ownership of firearms was not only a result of their price decrease, but also a rise in white hostility after Reconstruction. For many African Americans, a show of force in the form of guns could be an effective way to protect oneself and family from violence or lynchings. This lead to blacks placing a high value on guns and their ability to solve problems. If guns could be a defense against whites, they could also provide protection and a sense of agency in other areas of life as well, especially in personal relationships. Therefore, for blues musicians, guns and other

⁸⁸ Robert Johnson, *The Centennial Collection*, "32-20 Blues," Columbia Records, 2011. Spotify.

⁸⁹ Lead Belly, *The Smithsonian Folkways Collection*, "Ella Speed," Smithsonian Folkways, 2015. Spotify.

weaponry were symbolic as a tool for which one could not only express pain, but also as a universal problem solver in a region where violence was often the norm.

A number of musicians recall violent encounters in the juke. Charley Patton had a terrible scar due to a failed attempt by another man to slit his throat, and walked with a limp resulting from a gunshot wound (both injuries sustained in juke joints).⁹⁰ Bluesman Ishman Bracey tells of an encounter in a juke where after a man attacked him with a switchblade after Bracey has a friendly exchange with the other man's lover who is paying him to play her favourite song. The joint's owner, armed with a gun, then ran off the assailant.⁹¹ A sawmill worker describes a scene in which Joe Holmes, also known as King Solomon Hill, a bluesman from Southern Mississippi, flees a small town in Texas, "Funniest sight I ever see'd: that guy didn't stay in town 30 minutes before he got in an argument with this other guy in the joint. That other guy just pulled out his pistol and shot at him three times. He didn't stop running until he was clear out of town."⁹²

Perhaps the longest-lived tale of violence in the juke joint is the tale of Robert Johnson's alleged murder by a vengeful rival. David "Honeyboy" Edwards, a fellow bluesman and the main source of this tale, believed that a man, whose wife was having an affair with Johnson, had committed the murder by means of poisoned whiskey.⁹³ While the truth of this account has been long debated by blues historians, the violence of the juke joints, and the often extreme actions of jilted lovers lend a degree of plausibility to this account.

⁹⁰ Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman, 1998), 101.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 59-60.

⁹² *Ibid*, 5-6.

⁹³ Giola, *Delta Blues*, 185-187.

While much of the violence that occurred in juke joints were quarrels over romantic and sexual disputes, many outbursts of violence were between the lovers themselves, rather than rivals. The relationships of bluesmen and their lovers were often volatile, passionate, and violent, and while much of the violence was one-sided abuse, there were many instances of the violence being mutual, with women being the perpetrators almost as frequently as their men. John Lee Hooker's relationship was one of these hostile relationships, and the couple's frequent fights sometimes occurred within the venues Hooker played. His wife, Maude Hooker, attacked him in a club in Toledo once, and broke a guitar over his head, and during an especially bitter fight, cut his hand so deeply that she sliced a tendon, with the result that Hooker could no longer flex that finger. In addition to these acts of physical violence, Maude Hooker frequently verbally abused her husband, criticizing him for his devotion to music that brought him little income.⁹⁴

Tommy Johnson, another Delta bluesman who was particularly known for his addiction to alcohol and willingness to drink substances such as Canned Heat and shoeshine, had many women, but his relationship with Maggie Campbell was the most incendiary. According to his brother Ledell, they fought often, and one night he observed Maggie chasing Tommy out of the house barefoot into the snow, striking him with pots and pans, and even biting him on the ear, yet later both returned to the house, hand in hand, apparently made up.⁹⁵

Bluesmen often express the turbulent and often violent nature of their relationships in their music as well. Robert Johnson's "When You Got a Good Friend," is

⁹⁴ Ibid, 250.

⁹⁵ Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music*, 109.

a particularly interesting example, as it describes his regret and confusion at mistreating his lover.

When you got a good friend
 that will stay right by your side
 Give her all of your spare time
 love and treat her right
 I mistreated my baby
 and I can't see no reason why
 I mistreated my baby
 and I can't see no reason why
 Everytime I think about it
 I just wring my hands and cry
 Wonder could I bear apologize
 or would she sympathize with me⁹⁶

Johnson cares for his lover, and yet, he treats her badly, perhaps even violently, suggesting that his own pain sometimes leads him to lash out towards his lover. He acknowledges that he should treat his lover well, since she stands by him, and yet, it seems he cannot help himself, despite his actions causing him to suffer guilt, regret and obvious distress.

While Johnson disturbed himself with his own actions, it appears as though Charley Patton suffered little guilt for his abuse of women. While he had had a parade of lovers throughout his life, he took only one formal wife, Mandy France, whom he allegedly treated abhorrently. He would claim her income and spend it on drink and socializing, and would beat her if she protested. Another woman's fear of his abuse was such that when she finally left him, she begged the plantation owner, Will Dockery, to

⁹⁶ Robert Johnson, *The Centennial Collection*, "When You Got A Good Friend," Columbia Records, 2011. Spotify.

remove her belongings from his residence rather than encounter him herself. Another woman who knew Patton even claimed that he kept a bullwhip that he used to punish women.⁹⁷

Patton matched his violence towards women only with the violence he incited in juke joints and barrelhouses. As previously stated, he was seriously wounded twice in these establishments, and those who knew him report that he was frequently involved in fights. Will Dockery's friend Howard Stovall stated that he personally witnessed three fights involving Patton, all of which were started because the musician felt the other man had insulted him in some way.⁹⁸ This recollection further supports the theory that black men met disrespect with violent opposition and demanded respect from other black men as one of the few opportunities they had to demand such.

Violence occurred in the juke joint and in black relationships partially as a reaction to economic, racial, and social pressures, but it also fulfilled a performative role that allowed black men to assert their right to respect. Guns were frequently displayed and fired not necessarily to kill, but as a warning and pulling a gun could be an effective deterrent to physical violence. Physical conflicts in these establishments may occasionally have left a patron physically maimed, yet they played a strong psychological role in allowing black men to reassert their masculinity, react to the pressures of white supremacy, and socialize with other blacks free from white surveillance.

⁹⁷ Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues*, 147-149.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 146 – 147.

Conclusion

The early twentieth century was a period in which the threat of brutality was a daily reality in the Mississippi Delta, and the blues was one of the many ways in which African American men interacted with this reality while simultaneously expressing pain, agency and identity. In the context of violence, humiliation, and injustice, the birth of the blues allowed black men to communicate their lived experience and provided an outlet for their emotions. While direct and obvious rebellion against white supremacy could invite danger, the covert acknowledgement of the pain, anger and injustice incited by white supremacy in blues lyrics allowed for not only expression, but also the chance for an exchange of understood grief between blues musicians, and their audience. The “lynching blues” were an example of how black men directly addressed white violence in their music, and focused mainly on the constant, overarching anxiety about avoiding white hostility, and the unfairness of daily life. These songs rarely discussed the issue of race explicitly, yet the meaning is clear: Difficulty, pain, and often fear defined life in the Delta, and indeed, the American South.

In addition to the more explicit lynching blues, the “women trouble blues” are more than just love songs they are coded expressions of pain that convey the hopelessness of having the blues, in a way that was relatable, and disguised from white scrutiny. By using the unfaithfulness or absence of a lover, blues musicians expressed the pain of unjust treatment by white society, and exchanged the hardship and fear caused by white supremacy for the heartbreak and loneliness of troubled relationships. Furthermore, the pleasure associated with romantic and sexual companionship served as a strong opposition to the pain of white oppression and violence, and the assertion of black male sexuality in these songs was perhaps the highest form of rebellion against white fears of racial mixing. The strong sexual innuendo of many blues songs also served to elevate the status and reputation of the blues musician, for whom the assertion of his sexual prowess was both a testament to his own manhood, and a seizure of his own right to exercise it. The songs about love and sex both boasted of the black

musician's sexual ability and promiscuity, yet also displayed fragility in the emotional comfort found in a lover's company, and the sincere and devastating pain of their abandonment or unfaithfulness.

Yet, the anguish of a lover finding comfort in another man could easily transition into violence, especially in the context of the juke joint where intoxication and suggestive dance styles exacerbated tensions between men. Moreover, juke joints served an inherent function as a black social space in which men could reclaim the respect, identity and agency often denied to them by white overseers, employers and, social etiquettes. Although, it is significant that these interactions were not inherently violent, and were often resolved through conversation and courtesy. It was only in the case of aggressive and persistent disrespect that violence was resorted to resolve the insult. Largely, these scenes resulted from the understood right of all men to set their own boundaries regarding insult and mistreatment. While many would tolerate abuse and disrespect from whites to survive and continue earning a paycheck, insult from another black demanded an answer. Yet, an excess of violence, especially towards women was often met with disapproval, and it was only in the context of defending one's own reputation from extreme insult that it was acceptable for a man, or even woman, to resort to a performance of violence when they deemed it necessary. Therefore, violence did not define black manhood rather, it was defined by a man's right to determine when violence was an acceptable answer to disrespect, and when his own boundaries had been crossed. In the same way, the juke joint was not a lawless space of overly violent male dominance plays, but a delicate social stage on which black men and women negotiated their relationships, shared trauma, identity and, agency.

Overall, hopelessness, anxiety and pain of white subjugation and violence saturated the experiences of black men and blues musicians, and yet in their work they conveyed these experiences in an unexpectedly and frankly inspiring tone of humor and hope. These talented and often troubled men transformed their pain and anger into an outpouring of creative

expression that maintained a careful balance between defeat and optimism, tenderness and violence, defiance and acceptance, and, pleasure and pain. In this way, bluesmen both epitomized what it meant to be a black man in the Jim Crow South, and defied all expectations of what black men should be, while simultaneously and irrevocably influencing the direction of American popular music for the foreseeable future.

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