Constructions of the Muse: Blues Tribute Poems in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century American Poetry

Emily Rutter

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillipsg@duq.edu.
CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MUSE: BLUES TRIBUTE POEMS IN TWENTIETH-
AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Emily Ruth Rutter

March 2014
Copyright by

Emily Ruth Rutter

2014
CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MUSE: BLUES TRIBUTE POEMS IN TWENTIETH-
AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

By

Emily Ruth Rutter

Approved March 12, 2014

Linda A. Kinnahan
Professor of English
(Committee Chair)

Kathy L. Glass
Associate Professor of English
(Committee Member)

Laura Engel
Associate Professor of English
(Committee Member)

Thomas P. Kinnahan
Assistant Professor of English
(Committee Member)

James Swindal
Dean, McAnulty College of Liberal Arts
Professor of Philosophy

Greg Barnhisel
Chair, English Department
Associate Professor of English
ABSTRACT

CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MUSE: BLUES TRIBUTE POEMS IN TWENTIETH- AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

By

Emily Ruth Rutter

March 2014

Dissertation supervised by Professor Linda A. Kinnahan

Moving chronologically from the New Negro Renaissance into the contemporary era, my dissertation examines poetic representations of five blues artists: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly), and Robert Johnson. Despite extensive scholarship on the blues and these icons, blues tribute poems have remained un(der)studied. Filling in this critical gap, I draw attention to the valuable sociocultural work that poets perform by continuously breathing new life into the blues in general and these artists in particular. At the same time, I contend that poets transform readers’ understandings of blues men and women by investing them with mythic and symbolic qualities that correspond with their own (and often the era’s) aesthetic and ideological concerns. Blues tribute poems, I argue, constitute a distinct and influential subgenre of American poetry—one that combines the mythic and the historical, the oral
blues tradition and the written poetic one and invites readers to imagine, listen, and
ultimately to internalize the images and narratives that poets advance.

Although there have been numerous blues figures invoked as muses, I maintain
that Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson possess what Joseph Roach terms
an “it” quality that makes them compelling to generations of poets, historians, and music
fans alike. Poetry offers a medium through which artists during any era can put forward
their own interpretations of what these icons symbolize. Since the poets in this study are
typically invoking these artists posthumously, they are also able to utilize poetic license
to a much greater extent than would have been possible if these men and women had still
been alive and performing. Indeed, the poet-muse relationship is not a one-sided affair,
for blues tribute poets both document and *produce* sociocultural histories. Ultimately
then, my project demonstrates that twentieth- and twenty-first century poets not only
engage popular culture and sociocultural history but play significant and often
unacknowledged roles in shaping readers’ understandings of them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my gratitude to Drs. Linda A. Kinnahan, Kathy Glass, Laura Engel, Thomas Kinnahan, and Magali Michael for their wisdom and guidance. This dissertation would never have been completed without the support of my family and friends, particularly Michael S. Begnal, Laura Rutter, Whitney Rutter, David Rutter, Diane Rodelli, Ginger Carter, Cynthia Finch, Mary Parish, Maureen Gallagher, Marianne Holohan, Lindsay Griffin, Lora Klein, Lauren Bennett, and Rachel Bachenheimer.

Because of you, I always knew which way to go.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Blues Tribute Poems, 1930-1959</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Black Arts-Era Tribute Poem</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Late Twentieth Century Blues Tributes by Male Poets</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Late Twentieth-Century Blues Tributes by Women Poets</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The Twenty-First-Century Blues Tribute Poem</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

When asked to describe the Mother of the Blues, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, in an interview, her one-time bandleader “Georgia Tom” Dorsey recalled a spectacular performance:

Ma was hidden in a big box-like affair built like a Victrola. . . . A girl came out and put a big record on it. The band picked up “Moonshine Blues”; Ma sang a few bars inside the big Victrola, then she opened the door and stepped out into the spotlight with her glittering gown that weighed twenty pounds, wearing a necklace of $5, $10, and $20 gold pieces. The house went wild. . . . Her diamonds flashed like sparks of fire falling from her fingers. The gold piece necklace lay like golden armor covering her chest. (qtd in Wald 24)

Later in the interview, he notes her remarkable ability to emotionally connect with her audiences: “She possessed her listeners; they swayed, they rocked, they moaned and groaned, as they felt the blues with her” (24). These divergent aspects of Rainey’s legacy elucidate her artistic complexity and help to explain why she has remained a larger-than-life figure decades after her death. Accordingly, in his eponymous poem “Ma Rainey” (1930), Sterling Brown stages a Rainey performance and pays tribute to the cathartic relief and inspiration that she provides her African-American fans and, by extension, Brown.

With this poem, Brown established a precedent not only for mobilizing historically African-American musical forms to the printed page—a practice that several
of his New Negro and modernist peers were already engaged in— but for invoking specific performers as muses. “O Ma Rainey, / Li’l an’ low,” Brown’s speaker cries out, “Sing us ’bout de hard luck / Roun’ our do” (III. 7-10). Calling for inspiration from a contemporary figure, not a mythic one, Brown blurs the line between literature and biography as his poem transforms Rainey, the dynamic and provocative blues star, into a symbol of African-American folk authenticity. Following Brown, poets from a variety of backgrounds have invoked blues icons as muses and, in the process, participated in the mythmaking surrounding the figures that they honor—whether it has meant constructing Rainey and Huddie Ledbetter (“Leadbelly”) as embodiments of folk authenticity, Bessie Smith as a helpless victim of Jim Crow racism, Billie Holiday as the epitome of tragedy, or Robert Johnson as a man who made a Faustian bargain in order to gain musical virtuosity.

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis maintains, muses “are projected inventions of the imagination inside poems and have historical status as cultural tropes; they can involve actual historical persons attempting to fill these support roles. There is a two-way exchange between the projection and the actuality” (86). Further, Gayle Levy observes, “poetic inspiration works solely on the author, whereas the muse, like the poem, is actually formulated by both the reader and the poet working together. The muse can be considered the product of a cooperative act between the poet and the reader in the same way that one’s close reading of a given poem is the result of the poet’s creative act and the reader’s analytical work” (21). Given this interdependent relationship among poet,

---

1 In *Cane* (1923), Jean Toomer references formal and thematic tropes of spirituals, blues, and jazz. Moreover, by the time Brown published “Ma Rainey” (first in the journal *Folk-Say* in 1930 and two years later in his collection *Southern Road*), Langston Hughes had already published blues- and jazz-inspired poems in two collections, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes for a Jew* (1927).
muse, and reader, tribute poems must be seen as texts that require the reader to (at least temporarily) invest in the imagined projections of the muse, thereby reshaping the historical figure’s legacy to accord with an individual poet’s perspective. At the same time, these poems perform valuable sociocultural work by keeping blues figures alive in the minds and ears of generations of readers and listeners. As T. Austin Graham argues, a musical text “asks its readers to ‘do’ something beyond merely reading it, and in the process it challenges and transcends many of the Western world’s most persistent cultural divisions, whether between author and audience, subject and object, material and ideal, black and white, or male and female” (3). Accordingly, as they link their poetry and poetics to various blues figures, poets urge readers to recall or seek out these figures’ music and to keep their poetic interpretations in mind as they listen. As such, blues tributes play significant and often unacknowledged roles in memorializing, vivifying, and transmuting cultural understandings of blues men and women.

Specifically, this study considers the ways in which a diverse array of poets have intervened in the legacies of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson as well as reflecting and influencing attitudes toward the blues itself. Although there have been numerous blues figures invoked as muses,2 I maintain that Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson possess what the cultural critic Joseph Roach terms an “it” quality that makes them endlessly compelling to generations of poets, historians, and music fans alike.3 Poetry offers a medium through which artists during any era can put forward their own interpretations of what these icons symbolize, particularly as famous African Americans who lived and died in the pre-Civil Rights/Black Power, pre-second-

---

3 Roach describes “it” as a “certain quality, easy to perceive but hard to define, possessed by abnormally interesting people” (1).
wave feminist era and were, therefore, subject to a level of racism and sexism that their successors had more agency to protest. Further, as Mark Aho argues, “death is the point after which reality will never again have meaning over image” (238), and, since the poets in this study are typically invoking Leadbelly, Johnson, Rainey, Smith, and Holiday posthumously, they are able to utilize poetic license to a much greater extent than would have been possible if these men and women had still been alive and performing. Rather than readings tribute poems as a form of biography then, I argue that we need to recognize the differences between poetic representations of these figures and their lived experiences; moreover, we need to consider the evolving discourses of race, gender, and celebrity that underwrite these representations.

Indeed, as the chapters that follow make clear, once historical figures are invoked on the printed page, they are always already distinct from the personae that they self-fashioned. Thus, while this study does not attempt an exhaustive or encyclopedic treatment of every blues tribute, the poems that I examine aptly demonstrate the transformations that all blues musicians and, by extension, all icons undergo as writers invest them with symbolic values that accord with their own (and often the era’s) ideological and aesthetic concerns. Some contextualization of the blues tribute subgenre is necessary, however, in order for the broader implications of this study to bear fruit. For instance, what is the specific function of a blues tribute poem, and what are the formal and thematic components that characterize it? How have the blues and blues-inspired poetry been theorized heretofore? Further, how do tribute poems register evolving discourses of race, gender, and fame over the last century, and how are these discourses related to the aspects of Rainey’s, Smith’s, Holiday’s, Johnson’s, and Leadbelly’s
Theorizing Blues-Inspired Literature

Following the 1963 publication of Amiri Baraka’s (LeRoi Jones) *Blues People*—the first book-length study of the blues by an African American—numerous blues histories, musicological studies, and biographies of famous blues performers have been published. In addition, blues and jazz poetry has been collected into anthologies, and several critics—Houston A. Baker, Jr., Fahamisha Patricia Brown, Cheryl Wall, and Tony Bolden, to name only a few—have published theoretical examinations of the aesthetic and ideological influence of the blues on African-American literature. To date, however, there has been no full-length study of the relationship between tribute poems and blues icons’ legacies. When scholars have examined blues tributes, they have grouped them with jazz poetry and/or have focused on African-American poets.
exclusively, leaving the multicultural impact of the blues on American poetry understudied. Recently, for example, Jennifer Ryan’s Post-Jazz Poetics: A Social History (2010) and Meta DuEwa Jones’s The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word (2011) enhanced the scholarship about tributes to Holiday and, in Ryan’s case, Smith by considering several of the poems dedicated to them from an African-American feminist perspective. Yet, both Jones and Ryan are primarily concerned with jazz poetics, specifically within the African-American literary tradition, rather than the implications of these poems in terms of Smith’s and Holiday’s legacies. In the case of Sascha Feinstein’s Jazz Poetry from the 1920s to the Present (1997) and David Yaffe’s Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing (2006), the focus is also on jazz.

By contrast, my study addresses the ways in which tribute poems are reflective and generative of blues discourses specifically. In my view, the underlying differences between blues and jazz—what might be described as oral and ritualistic versus avant-garde and instrumental—necessitate distinctions between poems that reference blues and jazz musicians. As Christopher Small asserts, “The blues is primarily a vocal art; the human voice is always paramount and the paradigm of blues sound is vocal, even when it is transferred to instruments” (204). Moreover, Edward Brunner observes,

Unlike the emphasis in the blues on the communal possibilities of a repeated set of phrases, jazz performance ultimately highlights the isolation and daring of the individual encouraged to self-present as a virtuoso. Jazz is always on the run, escaping from the restrictions of regularization. . . . The blues, by contrast, embraces repetition, in an
invitation extended to others to anticipate and thus join in a refrain. . . . If
the harmonies and rhythms of jazz tend to startle and surprise, the
harmonies and rhythms of the blues are old friends, familiar and stylized.

(218)

These distinct attributes influence the formal and thematic strategies that poets employ
when they invoke blues and jazz artists respectively.

Further, while jazz is a largely urban phenomenon, developed in cities and most
often performed in them as well, blues is historically associated with the African-
American culture of the rural South.⁶ There has, of course, long been an urban blues
tradition (in Chicago for example), but the blues resonates with a folk experience that
may be alluded to in jazz but is certainly not the jazz musician’s central subject or theme.
Unlike poetic constructions of John Coltrane and other avant-garde jazz musicians as
emblems of African-American strength and defiance,⁷ tributes to blues men and women
often place them within this Southern landscape and call attention to the discrimination
that they endured. In other poems, Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly are
transformed into folk heroes, who give voice to the experiences of the African-American
masses suffering under the oppressive weight of Jim Crow. Thus, poets invoke these
icons with particular formal and sociocultural frameworks in mind that are elided when
blues and jazz tributes are considered as one and the same.

⁶ In Robert Palmer’s Deep Blues, for example, he identifies Will Dockery’s Mississippi plantation as the
origin of the Delta blues (47). Other scholars have made competing claims, but the consensus is that the
blues originated in the rural Deep South as an outgrowth of spirituals, field hollers, and work songs.
observes, “The ‘Coltrane Poem’ has, in fact, become an unmistakable genre of contemporary black poetry
to which a host of accomplished black poets have contributed” (120). John T. Shawcross, Henry C. Lacey,
and Meta DuEwa Jones have also written about the “Coltrane Poem” as a vehicle for an expression of
African American empowerment.
Arguably, Holiday’s contributions to jazz are equally as significant as her contributions to blues, and she remains a seminal figure in both genres. As Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, “Billie Holiday’s sound was unique; while she modeled herself after Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith, she did not sound like them” (If You Can’t Be Free 17). Technically speaking, Holiday did sing only a handful of standard blues songs, but she was received by the culture at the time as a blues singer and in many cases subsequently, as her autobiography Lady Sings the Blues readily attests. Following Angela Y. Davis, whose Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (1999) identifies Holiday as heir to the blues woman’s tradition begun by Rainey and Smith, I contend that Holiday’s vocal style and social consciousness affirm her place in a long line of female blues singers extending from Rainey to stridently political blues and jazz musicians such as Nina Simone. Therefore, I explore poetic representations of Holiday within a blues, rather than a jazz context, in order to shed light on the similarities between invocations of Holiday, Rainey, and Smith and their blues men counterparts Leadbelly and Johnson.

In many ways, my attention to literary lineages is indebted to The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Tradition (1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s foundational study of the signifyin(g) strategies of African-American writers. Specifically in terms of blues literature, my research is informed by Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (1987) in which he asserts that “Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix” (3), and more recently by what Tony Bolden describes in Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and
Culture (2004) as the “blues network”: “As a trope for critical inquiry in black poetry, the blues network functions as a junction, a (super) conductor, intersecting classes, cultures, and continents” (43). Cheryl Wall’s Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition (2005) similarly engages the blues trope of “worrying the line”—the repetition of a line or phrase with a difference—to study “the line as a metaphor for lineage and the line as a metaphor for the literary traditions” (8) that African-American women novelists, in particular, utilize. All of these frameworks are useful for analyzing a long tradition of blues-inspired literature and for exploring strategies of allusion and revision.

Nevertheless, all of these studies are limited to African-American literature and culture, occluding the heterogeneity that has always underwritten the blues tradition. Building on the solid foundation laid by these critics, this study examines the blues tribute subgenre from a multicultural perspective, uncovering the ways in which writers with distinct cultural vantage points have troubled and (less frequently) reinforced dominant discourses through their constructions of blues figures on the printed page. For example, tracing the representations of Holiday in the works of such a diverse group of poets as Frank O’Hara, Elizabeth Bishop, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, C. D. Wright, Harryette Mullen, Tony Hoagland, and Fred Moten reveals that Holiday’s influence transcends not only race and gender but time itself. Adopting a multicultural stance does not mean ignoring the rich blues traditions within African-American literature and culture, however. Rather, I am interested in mapping out a history of the blues tribute subgenre; its engagement with musical and sociopolitical discourses; and its participation in the shaping of blues performers’ legacies that is representative of the wide-ranging
impact of the blues on American poetry. As Elijah Wald notes, the first blues recordings were of white vocalists (18), though this history is often effaced because the blues has come to be viewed as a distinctively “black cultural tradition” (21). By all accounts, the blues began among African Americans in the rural South and has influenced, either musically or epistemologically, every form of African-American music since, but from the beginning it attracted non-African-American performers and audiences, including Anglo-American poets. Indeed, examining blues tributes across eight decades, this study enriches understandings of this nation’s long and multifarious blues poetry tradition—a tradition that, as I will make clear, is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

**Defining the Blues Tribute Poem**

While there are other terms that one could use to label the poems that invoke blues icons as muses, I have chosen to call them blues tributes to indicate that they are primarily meant to pay homage to the artistic inspiration that blues musicians provide. Moreover, though our contemporary understanding of the poetic muse differs considerably from Homer’s or, for that matter, Milton’s, tribute poems are both informed by and consciously depart from the artistic and temporal relationships that underwrite the classical muse trope. As Gayle A. Levy writes,

> As the daughters of the goddess Memory, the Muses preserve the knowledge of the past and use this wisdom to gain a divine view into the future; as the moral beneficiaries of their inspiration, the poet has a parallel gift. Symbolically the figure of the poet is, like Homer, blind; although he cannot see the present he has the gift of divine sight and thus
can read the future. Like the Muses, it is the ancient poet’s memory of the past which allows him to see into the future. (11)

While their Anglo-European predecessors call upon Greco-Roman goddesses to sing and prophesize through them, tribute poems often endow blues men and women with transcendent qualities. Poets then use these figures to demarcate the triumphs and tragedies of the past and to envisage an empowered present and future. Yet, whereas the muses of antiquity and their Renaissance and neoclassical successors are repositories of dominant cultural values, African-American blues muses possess knowledge that chafes against an Anglo-Eurocentric narrative of the past. Thus, poets invoke blues musicians not only as creative forces but often as vehicles through which they oppose oppressive social schemas.

Of course, the formal dimensions of these tributes vary considerably, and there are numerous renderings of the same musician’s style and of the blues more generally within these poems, just as there are myriad definitions of the blues. For example, standard twelve-bar (three sets of four measures) blues songs often include a three-line lyrical stanza with the second line varying slightly from the first (“worrying the line”) and a third line, which “resolves or extends the repeated thought in some way” (Tracy 76). Blues scholars have also long sought to determine the African origins of blues tropes, such as dissonant sounds, call-and-response patterns, and the “blue notes” or the flatted third, fifth, and/or seventh degree of the scale, but most would agree that the blues is an amalgamation of African and American traditions—both derivative of Western
traditions and divergent from its musical precedents. Additionally, while blues lyrics are often written in African American vernacular English, they are inflected with colloquial expressions that vary depending on the region; therefore, even the prototypes are easily defied by performers’ individualized styles. Robert Palmer writes, for example, “The only way to define blues with any real precision would be to take the repertoire of every blues performer into account” (43). Steven Tracy adds that the blues “is complex because it refers to a number of separate entities—an emotion, a technique, a musical form, and a song lyric” (59).

Early blues tributes—Brown’s “Ma Rainey” (1930) and Myron O’Higgins’s “Blues for Bessie” (1945), for instance—adopt both the music’s dominant themes and its formal tropes, which include mimicking rhythmic and lyrical structures, “worrying the line,” creating call-and-response patterns, and writing in African-American vernacular English. Since the 1950s, however, blues tribute poems have evolved considerably with most poets now eschewing the music’s formal structures but continuing to gesture toward recognizable blues themes. The majority of this study’s poems are short lyrics written in free verse, but some are elegiac in tone, others are epic in scope, and still others, such as Elizabeth Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer” (1944) and C. D. Wright’s “The Secret Life of Musical Instruments” (1982), only identify their muse (in this case, Billie Holiday) indirectly. Also, several of the poets in this study—Bishop, Amiri Baraka, Sherley Anne Williams, Colleen McElroy, and Tyehimba Jess—combine the tribute and

---

8 See the Introductions to both Gioia’s Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized American Music and Palmer’s Deep Blues for a more comprehensive explanation of blues tropes and their origins.

persona poem traditions by positioning blues icons as their poetic inspirations and then assuming their voices. Despite this formal diversity, nearly all of these tributes convey a blues spirit of perseverance and resilience—what the philosopher George Yancy describes as “making a way out of no way” (213). With the exception of the Black Arts period, which ushered in a brief period of antagonism toward the blues that I discuss in chapter 2, from the 1930s through the twenty-first century, a range of poets have identified with this spirit of resilience and resistance to Anglo-American oppression. This blues ethos, I argue, is what compels poets to continuously turn to Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson for inspiration, even though jazz, rock and roll, R&B, and hip hop/rap have long usurped the music’s popularity in the commercial marketplace.

**The Politics of Representation**

Scholars of celebrity have written extensively about the commodification and objectification that famous individuals undergo as they are transformed into larger-than-life personae. As Cheryl Wanko notes,

> Most scholars agree that the celebrity object is someone known mainly via the media circulation of his/her textual and/or visual images, which are minimally controlled by their human referents, necessarily multivalent to embody multiple cultural desires and fears, and absorbed by a cultural machinery that uses, multiples, reinforces, and modifies those images.

(351)

---

For Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson, however, America’s race and
gender caste systems posed even greater challenges in terms of the ability to control their
own images and narratives, both during their lifetimes and posthumously. As Michele
Wallace argues, “In the context of mass culture, the image of the black is larger than life.
Historically, the body and the face of the black have posed no obstacle whatsoever to an
unrelenting and generally contemptuous objectification” (186). Daphne A. Brooks further
observes, “Having little access to the culture of propriety, to the culture of naming, or to
patriarchal wealth, the mythically rendered black body—and the black female body in
particular—was scripted by dominant paradigms to have ‘no movement’ in a field of
subjugation” (5). Given (or perhaps because of) this widespread objectification, until the
last several decades, poets avoided directly confronting the visual aspects of blues icons’
physicality and the oppressive discourses surrounding the black body, including the often
dehumanizing gaze to which blues figures were subjected. In fact, from the New Negro
Renaissance through the Civil Rights/Black Power era and even into the late twentieth
century, tribute poets generally omitted blues figures’ physical attributes, preferring
instead to represent them as mythic voices.

The desire to avoid perpetuating degrading stereotypes, specifically about
African-American women’s sexuality, helps to explain these elisions. While many
middle-class black women in the early twentieth century strove to prove their morality
and respectability in defiance of the stereotype of the hypersexualized Jezebel, Rainey,
Smith, and later Holiday were unafraid of flaunting their sexual independence and
subverting conservative social mores. Hazel Carby argues, “The blues singers had

---

11 In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins explains, “Treating African-American women as pornographic objects and portraying them as sexualized animals, as prostitutes, created the controlling image of a Jezebel” (177).
assertive and demanding voices; they had no respect for sexual taboos or for breaking through the boundaries of respectability” (241). Blues women certainly did not epitomize bourgeois notions of femininity, nor did they try to persuade white or black audiences of their middle-class values. Yet, Ann DuCille poses an important question, “If black blues singers claimed their sexual subjectivity through their songs, did they also on some level objectify, exoticize, and eroticize the female body in the process?” (428). Similarly, bell hooks maintains, “Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious” (65). Arguably, blues women both challenged dominant racial and gender stereotypes, as Carby argues, and, as duCille and hooks imply, utilized their exoticism in order to appeal to a mass market—a deft strategy of appropriation, subversion, and deployment of the Jezebel stereotype that early tribute poets chose to avoid grappling with. Read another way, poets’ omissions of these women’s physicality on the page may have functioned as an implicit protest of the American public’s hyperattention to the black body. In other words, in their decision to decorporealize their muses and highlight instead their symbolic or mythic qualities, poets may have been strategically revising denigrating discourses promulgated to justify second-class citizenship. Whether intentional or not, only as recently as the 1980s and 90s have poets—beginning with Sherley Anne Williams’s Some One Sweet Angel Chile (1982)—penned tributes that directly engage the visual complexities that African-American blues women posed to an American society stratified according to race, gender, and class.
In the case of Leadbelly and Johnson, it has similarly only been in the last three decades that poets have begun to confront the public treatment of these figures as paradoxically fetishized and feared objects. Leadbelly first gained national attention during the 1930s through his association with the ethnomusicologist John Lomax who, as Benjamin Filene explains, “depicted him [Leadbelly] as a savage, untamed animal” and, further, “a slow-witted, hulking man, motivated only by a drive for sex and violence” (610). A 1937 *Life* magazine caption “Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel” exemplifies the dehumanizing lens through which the American public understood Leadbelly and, by extension, all African-American men in the pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era. During the late 1960s, Black Arts poets such as Amiri Baraka and Jayne Cortez began paying homage to Leadbelly, and they were followed in the 1980s by Al Young and Cornelius Eady. Still, it was not until Tyehimba Jess’s 2005 collection *leadbelly* that the musician’s rise to fame among well-educated white liberals, many of whom saw him as a “primitive” other, was explored in any real depth. Since Johnson did not become a celebrity until long after his death, he did not endure the same struggles with fame and exploitation during his lifetime as Leadbelly and his blues women counterparts, and in fact he was not invoked as a muse until the Sterling Plumpp’s 1989 tribute “Robert Johnson.” Yet, as a black man living in Jim Crow Mississippi, Johnson was routinely dehumanized, as poets ranging from Forrest Gander to Kevin Young make clear. Moreover, as I discuss in the third chapter, Johnson has been invested with a range of symbolic values that efface his individuality: at times, he is an embodiment of primitive authenticity, or, evoking the legend of his Faustian bargain, he emerges as a mythical figure haunted by the hellhounds he famously sings of in “Hellhounds on My Trail.”
Influenced by post-structuralism and second-wave feminism, contemporary poets and scholars (many of this study’s poets are both) highlight the distinctions between these cultural mythologies and the lived experiences of blues men and women. For example, it is now widely recognized that race and gender are social constructions, demystifying the essentialist ideologies previously relied upon to represent African-American men and women. At the same time, as Elizabeth Ammons succinctly puts it, “we do not live in a postrace world—or a postgender, postnational, postcolonial, postheterosexual one either” (79). Accordingly, in recent years, poets have attended in greater detail to the politics of black fame and the tension between empowerment and objectification that this study’s icons were forced to negotiate, as I discuss at length in chapters 4 and 5. Whereas the first several decades of tribute poems elide the historical paradoxes of African-American celebrity, contemporary representations emphasize the importance of confronting them in order to honor the cultural work that Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly performed. As such, tribute poets are both participants in what Wanko described earlier as the “cultural machinery” of celebrity—deploying images and narratives circulating in popular culture—and outliers, for their poetic constructions often defamiliarize and reconfigure dominant representations. Exploring these constructions synchronically among contemporaries and diachronically across generations, this study thus enhances critical knowledge about the ways in which poetry, and tribute poems in particular, are imbricated in evolving discourses of fame, race, and gender.

**Constructions of the Blues Muse**
Given the numerous tributes that have been penned to some of these icons, especially Holiday, there are many more poems that this study could address, but I have selected ones that, to my mind, most aptly exemplify American poets’ interventions in the legacies of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson. All of these tributes, for example, are composed by well-regarded American poets whose work is often read and taught; in fact, many of these poets either were or are university professors who influence students’ understandings of the blues and these blues artists. Their tributes are also frequently included in jazz and blues poetry anthologies—Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa’s *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991) and *Volume 2 The Second Set* (1996), and Kevin Young’s *Blues Poems* (2003) and *Jazz Poems* (2006), among others—and are, therefore, accessible to a general readership that may have little prior knowledge of these blues men and women before encountering them on the printed page. Moreover, while none of chapters that follow include tributes to all five icons, I maintain that the poetic representations therein intervene not only in the legacy of the individual muse but in broader understandings of both the blues and, to a certain extent, all of the music’s iconic performers.

Chapter 1, “The Blues Tribute Poem, 1930-1959,” spans the longest period of any of the subsequent chapters and establishes the precedent for the tribute’s influence on the legacies of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, and, by extension, Leadbelly and Johnson across the next eight decades. Explicating tributes by Sterling Brown, Myron O’Higgins (a student of Brown’s), Frank O’Hara, Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, and Elizabeth Bishop, I argue, that, despite their radically different ideological commitments, these writers all identify with blues women as nonconformist outsiders—a sense of identification
anchored in these poets’ opposition to Anglo-American oppression. As they position blues women in roles typically performed by the muses of antiquity, these poets implicitly subvert denigrating discourses about African-American women in particular. Some of them also reflect the prejudices of their era, as they inadvertently reproduce race and gender stereotypes despite their intentions to subvert them, as is the case with Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer” (1944). At the same time, none of these poets felt comfortable portraying blues women’s physicality or the complexities of their stage personae. Rainey, Smith, and Holiday are thus rendered symbolically powerful but one-dimensional, as their lived experiences are occluded by the mythic qualities that they take on.

In chapter 2, “The Black Arts-Era Blues Tribute Poem,” I examine the sociocultural transformations that these figures underwent as a result of the Black Power and Black Arts movements that occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While the central focus of this chapter is on African-American poets, I also briefly discuss Hayden Carruth’s “Billie Holiday” (1964) and John Berryman’s invocation of Smith in “Dream Song 68” (1964) as examples of Anglo-American male writers who were eluding or, in Berryman’s case, deploying the racial stereotypes that their African-American contemporaries were actively resisting. Next, explicating poetic tributes by Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Al Young, and Alvin Aubert, I argue that, in diverse ways, these writers invoke blues men and women in order to chart a cultural nationalist history aimed at unifying and empowering the African-American masses. Unlike their predecessors, several of these poets invoke blues icons to mark the dawning of a revolutionary epoch rather than to honor the cultural work that blues artists
historically performed. Even Aubert and Young, who did not champion the Black Arts agenda, still imbue Rainey and Smith with sociopolitical values that convey the exigencies of the era—namely, black pride and self-determination—rather than calling attention to the dynamic personae that these blues women developed. Revealing the gender biases prevalent during this period and espoused by leading Black Arts figures, this chapter also demonstrates that Black Arts poets constructed blues women as symbols of victimization and racial oppression, whereas they characterized male icons, such as Leadbelly, as heroic symbols of working-class African-American authenticity.

Though the next two chapters both consider tributes published from the 1970s through the 1990s, I divide them according to the poets’ genders, treating male poets in chapter 3 and female poets in chapter 4. These divisions, I maintain, correlate with male poets’ elision of the politics of gender and representation, and women poets’ interest in addressing these issues head-on. In chapter 3, “Late Twentieth-Century Blues Tributes by Male Poets,” I discuss tributes by Al Young, Michael S. Harper, Amiri Baraka, Lawson Fusao Inada, Cornelius Eady, Sterling Plumpp, Forrest Gander, and John Sinclair. Unlike their Black Arts predecessors—including Baraka, who abandoned black nationalism in the intervening years—these poets elevate blues artists (male and female) to, in many cases, mythical stature. The tendency among these poets to apotheosize this study’s icons, rather than portraying them as victims, I maintain, is linked to late twentieth-century sociocultural developments, such as the increasing popularity of hip hop/rap, the second-wave blues revival (the first one occurred in the 1960s), and the increased academic interest in the blues as the sound of black opposition to white oppression. Accordingly, I argue that these poets use their tributes to educate younger generations of
hip hop/rap listeners about the historical significance of the blues, while demonstrating the continued relevance of blues icons as heroic symbols of African-American resistance, even as (or perhaps because) the music’s fan base was becoming increasingly white.

Chapter 4, “Late Twentieth-Century Blues Tributes by Women Poets,” then explores the tributes of Sherley Anne Williams, C. D. Wright, Amina Baraka, Rita Dove, Patricia Spears Jones, Betsy Sholl, Angela Jackson, and Harryette Mullen, whose constructions of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday reveal second-wave and black feminist concerns with revising the white male master narrative to address the sexism and racism that historically constrained and belittled the achievements of blues women. As they engage and respond to blues women’s legacies, these poets connect women and, in many cases black women specifically, across generations. To this end, some of these poets identify with their muses in autobiographical terms, while others illuminate the paradoxically dis/empowered positions that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday occupied as some of the first African-American female celebrities. Revising the poetic portraits of their mostly male predecessors and contemporaries who largely omit(ted) the physicality and sensuality of their muses, several of these poets—Williams, Jackson, Dove, and Mullen, for example—honor blues women as early feminists who were both objects and agents in unjust social schemas.

In chapter 5, “The Twenty-First-Century Blues Tribute Poem,” I then turn to contemporary tributes written by Colleen J. McElroy, Sascha Feinstein, Tony Hoagland as well as a number of African-American poets—Terrance Hayes, Kevin Young, Tyehimba Jess, Evie Shockley, and Fred Moten—who are a part of what has been termed
the post-soul generation. While these poets continue to bear witness to the race and gender discrimination that early blues men and women endured, they index a postmodern, poststructuralist theoretical shift away from identity politics and essentialist discourses and toward the recognition of blues icons as complex and multivalent artists and individuals—a thematic emphasis that cuts across the generational, racial, and gendered lines that distinguish these poets. Complementing the work of chapter 4’s poets, the tributes in chapter 5 illuminate the complexities of the professional personae that early blues figures developed in order to achieve fame in the racist and sexist era in which they lived. Drawing attention to the competing notions of what Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson have symbolized, these poets are also more self-conscious than their predecessors about the dynamic process of representation that icons undergo. Hoagland, Jess, and Moten, for example, not only revise mythological representations but foreground their own processes of mediation, acknowledging that they, like all tribute poets, are complicit in the mythmaking surrounding the figures they invoke.

In the brief Coda that ends the study, I reflect on my own participation in shaping the cultural memory of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly as an instructor who explicates blues tribute poems with undergraduate students and often provides them with their first introduction to these figures—a process that inevitably influences students’ interpretations of these poems as well as the legacies of the icons to whom they are dedicated. Rather than serving a didactic purpose, these discussions encourage students to critically examine literary representations of historical figures and, perhaps

---

12 The term “post-soul” has been used to describe the generation of black writers born during or after the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements. See chapter 5 for an explanation of my use of this term.
most importantly, to recognize American poetry not as removed from but as deeply enmeshed in sociocultural and political discourses.

Diverse, dynamic, and, by its very nature, interdisciplinary and dialogic, the blues tribute subgenre, I conclude, narrativizes and thematizes the legacies of blues icons in ways that diverge from the socio-historical work of biographers and documentarians. While historical accounts strive to record an objective narrative of the past, tribute poets are not beholden to factual accuracy. Instead, their poems reflect subjective interpretations that are often informed more by the discourses of the era than the innate qualities of the muse. Acknowledging their constructedness and fictionality, however, does not negate what I view as tribute poems’ vital social function. As Graham remarked earlier of musical texts, these poems continuously breathe new life into the music and personae of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson, keeping their memories alive for generations of readers and listeners. Now, let us hear what they have to say.
Chapter 1: The Blues Tribute Poem, 1930-1959

In Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol (1997), Nell Irvin Painter observes, “To appreciate the meaning of the symbol [of Truth]—Strong Black Woman—we need know nothing of the person” (4). While Painter does not deny the importance of symbolic figures, concluding her book with an acknowledgement of Truth’s sociopolitical function—“We need an heroic ‘Sojourner Truth’ in our public life to function as the authentic black woman” (285)—she makes an important point about the ways in which historical figures become one-dimensional as they are transformed into larger-than-life signifiers. Moreover, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis maintains, “Muses are vibrant, but mainly silent, or gnomic; unsophisticated yet unconsciously creative or ethical; desirable yet appropriated; givers but not owners” (75). Accordingly, as they invoke Rainey, Smith, and Holiday, the poets examined here—Sterling Brown, Elizabeth Bishop, Myron O’Higgins, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, and Frank O’Hara—cast them in rather conservative roles as inspirations for but not dynamic participants in the poems that honor them.

While these poets bring distinct perspectives to bear on their muses, none of them address, for example, blues women’s provocative stage personae. Perhaps surprisingly, in a pre-second-wave feminist era dominated by tributes written by men, these poems lack an erotic dimension. Rainey, Smith, and Holiday are referred to variably by their professional monikers or the often sensationalized mythologies surrounding their legacies, but none of the poets in this first wave of tributes explore these women’s sexuality or physicality. By contrast, Rainey, Smith, and Holiday are almost always
disembodied. As I discuss in the Introduction, there are numerous explanations for such an omission, specifically a desire to honor these women without reinscribing their bodies with the racial stereotypes propagated to reinforce African-American inferiority. As George Yancy argues, “the white body as normative is constituted through the negative designation of the black body as deviant” (“Afterward” 267), and further, “black women’s bodies have been traumatized, brutalized, objectified, and reduced to ‘oversexed’ objects in relation to white America’s obsession with its own sense of moral innocence and purity” (274). Arguably, these early blues poets’ very lack of attention to blues women’s physical attributes functions as an implicit protest against these discourses about African Americans that focus primarily on their bodies. Read another way, these poets were more interested in utilizing the symbolic value of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday for their own sociopolitical and aesthetic purposes and less concerned with the complex personae that these women self-fashioned.

Beyond this shared desire to obfuscate the physicality and sensuality of their muses, the blues tributes written between 1930-1959—dates marked by the publication of Brown’s “Ma Rainey” (1930) and O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” (1959)—vary widely in terms of poetic interventions in the musical and personal legacies of the figures they invoke. Admittedly, this chapter spans a considerable period of time (the most of any of the chapters), which includes several transitions in popular music, such as the decline of classic blues women such as Rainey and Smith in the late 1920s; the rise of Holiday in the 1930s; and, in the post-WWII era, the emergence of the radical new sounds of bebop jazz. Accordingly, these early tributes show a range of renderings of the blues. While Brown, O’Higgins, and Hughes exhibit the music’s formal tropes—the prototypical
rhyme and stanza patterns, “worrying the line,” and the use of African American vernacular English, for example—Hayden and Bishop only gesture toward them, and O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” neglects these tropes entirely. However, all of these poets mobilize common blues themes, such as heartbreak, racial oppression, and the “laughing to keep from crying” resilience that fortifies the resolve of both blues women and their audiences.

Interestingly, blues men such as Leadbelly and Robert Johnson were recorded and, in the case of Leadbelly, gained popularity during this period, but perhaps reflecting a more traditional conception of the muse as an inspiring goddess, only their blues women counterparts were invoked in this poetic role.13 Positioning these women in a role traditionally held by Greco-Roman goddesses openly defied the inferior social position that black women held, and had always held, in American society. Thus, while Anglo-American writers, such as Bishop and O’Hara, may reveal their own preoccupations with alterity via their poetic representations of Holiday, to a certain extent, all of these poets participate in a challenge to the racial caste system and, in reference to the blues, the hegemony of Anglo-American culture. As such, they bear witness to the injustices that blues women endured and honor them as symbols of resistance to institutionalized racism. In the process of advancing their own sociopolitical perspectives, however, Brown, O’Higgins, Hayden, Hughes, Bishop, and O’Hara elide many of their muses’ lived experiences.

It is not, of course, the responsibility of any tribute poet to comprehensively or even accurately represent the figures they invoke as muses, and, arguably, the implicit

---

13 An exception is Jack Kerouac’s “221st Chorus” (1959), which mentions Leadbelly’s name but only as a foil to Kerouac’s celebration of the new and inspiring sounds of bebop symbolized by the fictional “Deadbelly.” Thus, I have opted not to explicate this poem.
(and often explicit) protest against white oppression underwriting many of their tributes compels these poets to omit biographical details that would otherwise obscure this aim. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to critically examine the connections between these poets’ ideological and aesthetic outlooks and their emphases and elisions on the page, particularly because of the impact of these choices on readers’ interpretations of blues women’s legacies. Indeed, the tributes considered here originated what has become a distinct and influential subgenre of American poetry—one that that combines the mythic and the historical, the oral blues tradition and the written poetic one and invites readers to imagine, listen, and ultimately to internalize the images and narratives that poets advance. Accordingly, this chapter explores the poetic transformations that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday undergo as well as the precedent that this first wave of tributes sets for the representations of blues men and women that subsequent chapters will take up.

“She jes’ catch hold of us, somekindaway”

Before turning to the first blues tribute, Brown’s “Ma Rainey,” it is necessary to briefly outline the biographical and sociocultural context of this poem. Although it was Mamie Smith’s 1920 “Crazy Blues” that ushered in the era of the classic blues singers, Rainey and Bessie Smith certainly became the most famous, while many of their counterparts, including Mamie Smith herself, have largely been forgotten. Born in 1886, Gertrude Pridget married William “Pa” Rainey in 1904, and as they traveled with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels for the next several years, the pair was billed as the “Assassinators

---

14 As Elijah Wald has pointed out, “there were dozens of vocal blues on the market” by 1920, but they were all recorded by white musicians (18). Thus, Smith was not the first to record the blues, but “Crazy Blues” was the first blues song recorded with the intention of marketing it to an African-American consumer base (21). It sold 75,000 copies within the first month (Feinstein Jazz Poetry 19).
of the Blues.” Later, Rainey was marketed as the “Mother of the Blues,” for she was one of the first to perform the blues, incorporating the music into her minstrel act beginning in 1902 (Jackson 12-14). After she began recording with Paramount Records, the company also referred to her as the “Paramount Wildcat,” for she recorded nearly one-hundred songs and, during the 1920s, was their “most recorded female star” (Lieb 48). Moreover, she was indelibly endeared to her Southern black fans, who according to Buzzy Jackson, saw her as “a folk hero” (17). She was also one of the first African-American celebrities, and her dynamic personality both on and off stage set the precedent for Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and many of today’s female vocalists: “Flamboyant, self-dramatizing, hard-partying, and unimpressed by conservative mores, Ma Rainey was an icon of strength” (F. Davis 47). Unlike the tragic deaths that befell Smith and Holiday, Rainey retired from show business in 1935 and ran two movie theatres in her hometown of Rome, Georgia, where she died in 1939.

Not only was the 1920s notable for the popularity of Ma Rainey and other classic blues women, this was also the era of the New Negro, a time in which African-American artists and intellectuals, such as W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke, sought to mobilize the most effective sociocultural forces for uplifting African Americans and finally guaranteeing their rights to first-class citizenship. There was wide disagreement about what role African-American folk materials, such as the blues, should play as well as how to respond to the booming recording industry that inspired the national popularization of blues and jazz. For black leaders striving to gain acceptance by the Anglo-American mainstream, black music and performers like Rainey and Smith who openly flaunted their sexuality, complicated their efforts to break free of historical
stereotypes and prove that African-Americans possessed the same middle-class values as their Anglo-American counterparts. Faced with these complex sociopolitical challenges, many New Negro writers and artists either invested in Euro-American art forms—Countee Cullen is the most frequently cited example of this aesthetic outlook—or, in the interest of proving the cultural value of folk materials, sought to marshal the creativity of black folk forms to the production of high art.15

Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, on the other hand, were not interested in transforming the blues and, in Hughes’ case, jazz into a style that would be more palatable to white audiences. As Hughes writes in his oft-quoted “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand” (151). Like Hughes, Brown embraced the blues on its own terms, and they both sought to link their poetry and poetics to this indigenously African-American musical style. Despite this shared outlook about the value of African-American folk forms, their regional alliances led them to render these influences quite differently. As Steven Tracy observes, “Hughes was a big-city, Harlem poet, Brown more of a poet of the South” (42). Further, Tony Bolden maintains, “It is fitting that Sterling Brown identified himself as a New Negro and distanced himself from the concept of the Harlem Renaissance. The focus on Harlem denied the richness of the rural black culture in the South where Brown had discovered the sources for his art” (78).

15 As James Weldon Johnson wrote in the Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922), “These dances which I have referred to and Ragtime music may be lower forms of art, but they are evidence of a power that will some day be applied to the higher forms” (17). While Johnson celebrates the creative power conveyed in various forms of African-American expressive culture, his assumption that high art is superior to these “lower forms” indicates the subordinate role that he assigned to folk materials in the racial-uplift study in which he and other New Negroes were engaged.
Hughes was inspired by the jazz and blues playing nightly in Harlem, whereas Brown invested in what was, for him, the more culturally authentic blues performed in the rural South, as the title *Southern Road* (1932), the collection in which “Ma Rainey” was reprinted, readily attests. Both men mobilized African-American musical forms to the printed page and privileged the proletariat politically and artistically, but, as we shall see shortly, their tribute poems reflect distinct regional inspirations.

In fact, as the first such tribute, Brown’s “Ma Rainey” sets the precedent for Hughes’s “Song for Billie Holiday” (1949) and the many invocations of blues women and men that will follow. In this regard, I argue that, as Brown links his poetry and poetics to Rainey’s blues style, he constructs a Rainey persona that both resembles and departs from the persona that she self-fashioned, conveying his own ideological perspective through the aspects of her legacy that he emphasizes and effaces. For example, in “The Blues as Folk Poetry”—an essay published alongside “Ma Rainey” in the 1930 edition of the journal *Folk-Say*—Brown announces his concern that the commercialization of the blues will dilute the music’s authenticity: “The Blues have deservedly come into their own, and, unfortunately for the lover of folk art, into something more than their own” (540). Brown continues,

> The poetry of the Blues deserves close attention. Crudities, incongruities, of course, there are in abundance—annoying changes of mood from tragedy to cheap farce. This seems to be entering more recently, a sophisticated smut, not the earlier breadth of Rabelais, but the snickering of the brothel. Blues are becoming cabaret appetizers. Perhaps the American public, both Negro and white, prefers this to the simpler, more
poetic phrasing of burdened folk. But at their most genuine they are accurate, imaginative transcripts of folk experience, with flashes of excellent poetry. (551)

Warning of the “cheap face” and the influence of “brothel” vulgarities, Brown privileges an unadulterated blues that has not been corrupted by the “crudities” of “cabaret” culture. “Brown’s literary ethos,” Phillip M. Richards observes, “had a deeply romantic aspect which attacked the estranging quality of modern life and promoted a transcendent ethos” (84). This romanticism is evident in Brown’s anxiety about the vulgarization of blues lyrics, which is somewhat incongruous with the history that he evokes. From its very beginnings, blues men and later women such as Rainey and Smith spoke of sex in frank terms and about heterosexual and homosexual liaisons that may not have been consummated in brothels but certainly did not all involve husband and wife.16 Still, in an interview with Charles Rowell years later, Brown reiterated the importance of maintaining the purity of the blues: “I think the blues should be kept authentic. And then again the qualities of the blues are so strong and distinctive that it’s easy to recognize the fake blues” (789). Brown’s decades-long interest in distinguishing between genuine and “fake” blues was predicated on his desire to preserve the collective spirit of resistance underwriting the music, while simultaneously demonstrating the beauty and sophistication of African-American folk art as a counternarrative to claims of Anglo-American superiority—dual aims that are necessary to bear in mind when examining the implications of poems like “Ma Rainey.”

16 Angela Y. Davis writes, “Sexuality was central in both men’s and women’s blues. . . . ‘Almost all other themes, leaving town, train rides, work trouble, general dissatisfaction, sooner or later revert to the central concern.’ In woman’s blues . . . there was an even more pronounced emphasis on love and sexuality” (11).
Although Rainey enjoyed remarkable commercial success, Brown showcases the mesmerizing sway she held over her African-American audiences in the rural South. He thus begins the poem with the speaker’s description of the long distances that her fans travel to see Rainey perform:

When Ma Rainey
Comes to town,
Folks from anyplace
Miles aroun’,
From Cape Girardeau
Poplar Bluff,
Flocks in to hear
Ma do her stuff. (I. 1-8)

Employing African American vernacular English, Brown situates his poem in Rainey’s blues oeuvre, though as Joanne V. Gabbin points out, “Ma Rainey” is not strictly a blues poem but a fusion of the blues and ballad form, which “combines the narrative framework of the ballad and the ethos of the blues.” Gabbin further observes that Brown’s allusion to the ballad works to reinforce his characterization of Rainey as a folk hero who sings the blues but is also larger than life, occupying mythic stature like the legendary figures of well-known ballads: “Casey Jones,” “John Henry,” “Stagolee” (259).

Divided into four parts, the poem’s movement reflects the ballad’s narrative structure, as it progresses from the speaker’s description of the audience’s arrival; to the speaker’s own homage to Rainey; to Rainey’s rendition of “Backwater Blues” (a song
Bessie Smith recorded but Rainey did not); and finally to the audience’s tearful response. Through this narrative framework, which calls upon multiple speakers, Brown elucidates the profound effect of Rainey’s performance on her audience as they are transformed from an initially heterogeneous group—“some jokers keep deir laughs a-goin’” whereas “some folks sits dere waitin’ wid deir aches an’ miseries” (II. 5-6)—to a unified collective by the poem’s end. Moreover, since everyone in the poem speaks the same language, there is no hierarchy of linguistic registers that could potentially degrade the vernacular of the audience members. Thus, while Rainey is ostensibly the subject of the poem, “Ma Rainey” is focused primarily on the audience, particularly Rainey’s male fans, and her identity is determined almost entirely by the qualities that they, via Brown, invest in her.

Accordingly, Brown highlights the audience members’ paradoxical feelings of grief and uplift as Rainey’s lyrics bear witness to their hardships while simultaneously affirming their humanity. Clyde Woods describes this communal function of the blues as a distinct epistemology: “The blues is a vision of a society that is dialectically polyrhythmic, a democracy where both cooperation and individual expression thrive. This philosophy is expressed in, through, and beyond the music” (288). In Part 3, the speaker’s aforementioned plea to Rainey affirms that she possesses this blues spirit that facilitates personal and collective catharsis:

O Ma Rainey,

Sing yo’ song;

Now you’s back

Whah you belong
Git way inside us,

Keep us strong. . . (III. 1-6)

Beginning with an apostrophe to Rainey, the speaker initially elevates her to mythic heights, but then he firmly grounds her presence in the material world of the rural South, telling Rainey this is “whah you belong” and asserting that she is “one of them.” He places the community members’ trust in her to penetrate their deepest feelings (“Git way inside us”), to commiserate with their hardships, and ultimately to fortify their resolve. In the process, Brown urges readers to listen not only to Rainey but to her audience, characterizing her performance as a group experience that distinguishes her from other singers and musicians whose fame and glamour may distance them from their fans.

Though “Ma Rainey” does not replicate a blues song structure as do many of the poems in *Southern Road*, Brown formally alludes to several techniques that Rainey and other blues men and women commonly employ. Specifically, the poem’s final part begins with a two-line aa stanza that reaffirms the community’s admiration of Rainey through vernacular phrasing that is frequently quoted by critics in their descriptions of Rainey’s legacy: “I talked to a fellow, an’ the fellow say, / ‘She jes’ catch hold of us, somekindaway” (IV. 1-2). Employing the caesura in the stanza’s first line, Brown gestures toward the singing of a standard blues song in which the beat would serve as the natural pause between two lyrical phrases, such as in the following line from Rainey’s “Don’t Fish in My Sea”: “Don’t like my ocean, don’t fish in my sea” (qtd. in A. Davis 214). Next, the speaker recounts hearing Rainey sing “Backwater Blues one day” (IV. 3):

‘It rained fo’ days an’ de skies was dark as night,

17 There are numerous examples of critics quoting “somekindaway” as a description of Rainey’s unique style. For example, Francis Davis and Sandra Lieb both employ the phrase in their biographical accounts of Rainey’s life and art.
Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.

Thundered an’ lightened an’ the storm begins to roll

Thousan’s of people ain’t got no place to go.

‘Den I went an’ stood upon some high ‘ol lonesome hill,

An’ looked down on the place where I used to live.’ (IV. 4-9)

Transcribing these lyrics, Brown demonstrates the similarity between the poem’s language and delivery and Rainey’s song. He also allows the song to stand on its own terms and voice the suffering and injustices of black life in the Jim Crow South. Though the song refers to a natural disaster, it exposes the racism that left thousands of African Americans stranded while their white counterparts were rescued from the flooded riverbanks.

Yet, as Bolden points out, Brown “does not so much incorporate Smith’s song [“Backwater Blues”] as riff on it,” altering slightly the verb tense, the stanza structure, and the opening word in the first two lines (89). Signifyin(g) on Rainey, and inadvertently Smith who made this song famous, Brown inserts himself into a community of blues musicians who, according to Angela Y. Davis, considered blues songs to be the “collective property of the black community.” Davis further contends that “A blues sung by one person and heard, remembered, revised, and resung by another belonged as much to the second performer as to the first” (136). Affirming this communal approach to the

---

18 Though many writers, including Hazel Carby, Angela Y. Davis, and Tony Bolden, have mistakenly assumed that Smith’s song was about the Mississippi River floods of 1927, it was in fact composed about the Cumberland River flooding Nashville on Christmas, 1926. See David Evans’s “Bessie Smith’s ‘Back-Water Blues’: The Story Behind the Song.”
music, Brown’s revised version of “Backwater Blues” testifies to his self-reflexive desire for “Ma Rainey” to be part of this socially-conscious blues tradition.

Moreover, while the audience’s response is not structurally built into blues songs, as Ted Gioia notes, the call-and-response trope, with its origins in communal African music, did not disappear with the blues. Rather, the singer performs both the call and the response through the repetition of the first line and, in effect, creates “a communal style of singing . . . in the expression of a single person” (14). Through the interaction between the speaker and the song, Brown’s structure creates this kind of implicit call-and-response that is further developed as the poem continues to highlight the audience’s emotional reaction to Rainey’s performance:

And den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an’ cried,
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an’ cried,
An’ Ma lef’ de stage, an’ followed some de folks outside”

Dere wasn’t much more de fellow say:
She jes’ gits hold of us dataway. (IV. 10-14)

Brown underscores the collective transformation from heartbreak to resolve that Rainey’s blues engenders, and though they are moved to tears, she has established a strong sense of camaraderie between performer and audience that is solidified as Rainey physically joins her fans by the end of the poem. These final lines also gesture toward the blues stanza structure, as Brown “worries” the line—“bowed dey heads” becomes “bowed dey heavy heads”—and employs the prototypical aab blues rhyme scheme. Thus, though not technically a blues song, Brown’s poem operates in a blues mode that is anchored in the
music’s ethos and common tropes, establishing a tribute form that is inspired by the
musical styles of Rainey and other blues women and men without being indebted to a
song structure per se.

In an interview with the blues scholar Paul Oliver, Brown described meeting
Rainey and the indelible impression she made on her Southern audiences, claiming that
she “wouldn’t have to sing any words; she would moan, and the audience would moan
with her.” Further, “Ma really knew these people; she was a person of the folk; she was
very simple and direct” (qtd. in Tracy 85-86). Unlike most performers, Brown implies,
Rainey’s “simple and direct” stage persona was a true extension of herself, and “Ma
Rainey” conveys this unvarnished quality that he admires. Yet, Brown also represents
Rainey so that she becomes not the spectacular performer with “glittering gown” and
“necklace of $5, $10, and $20 gold pieces” that “Georgia Tom” Dorsey described earlier
(qtd. in Wald 24), but rather a symbol of the “earthy and genuine” folk art that Brown
champions in “The Blues as Folk Poetry” (540). For instance, his selection of “Backwater
Blues,” which Rainey never recorded and was not one of her more popular songs, reflects
Brown’s interest both in emphasizing the Georgia-born Rainey’s personal connection to
her rural African-American fans and the sociopolitical function of the blues as an
essential vehicle for protesting white supremacy—interests that, as James Smethurst
notes, led Brown to “underplay Rainey’s considerable connection to jazz” (77). Thus, I
agree with Nicole Furlonge when she asserts that “Brown chooses to focus on a piece of
history and of Rainey’s career that is readily recognizable by the folk” (978). However, I
argue that it is also important to note the aspects of her persona which are conspicuously
absent or altered as a result of Brown’s choices, particularly because his symbolic portrait
of Rainey has shaped generations of readers’ understandings of her legacy, as well as 
influencing other poets’ representations of famous blues figures.

In *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, Sandra Lieb points out, “For the 
most part, Ma Rainey’s songs omit direct mention of race discrimination or white 
oppression, and they ignore lynchings and riots,” though her lyrics do convey “some 
essential truth about the black experience in this country: poverty, suffering, heartbreak, 
and pain, as well as humor, fortitude, strength, and endurance.” “Her great theme is the 
intense sexual love between men and women,” Lieb continues, and “most strikingly, she 
sings of mature, highly sexual women” (82). Despite the lack of overtly political content, 
Rainey’s songs communicated the resilient “laughing to keep from crying” ethos of the 
blues and, thus, provided cathartic relief from the pain of institutionalized racism—all of 
which Brown movingly renders on the page. At the same time, Rainey’s assertions of 
women’s agency and sexual desires, including the low-brow subjects that Brown 
disparaged in “The Blues as Folk Poetry,” were an essential part of her repertoire and the 
story of her fame that Brown’s portrait excludes.

Portraying Rainey’s performance as a natural expression of her rural African 
American worldview, Brown elides, for example, Rainey’s self-conscious efforts to 
achieve fame. Elijah Wald observes that “to understand the appeal of artists like Smith 
and Rainey it is important to remember that they were practiced professionals with many 
years of stage experience, and that they presented themselves not as pure, down-home 
blueswomen, but as successful stars” (24). Yet, Brown’s poem mostly excludes Rainey’s 
visual expressions of empowerment, mentioning her physical appearance in only two 
phrases. In Part 2, he writes of the gold teeth that have been captured in the most widely
circulated picture of Rainey (see the cover of Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, for example): “Ma comes out before dem, a-smilin’ gold-toofed smiles” (II. 7). Next, in Part 2’s previously quoted line, the speaker calls out to Rainey, “O Ma Rainey / Li’l an’ low.” Short and unintimidating, there is seemingly no distance between Rainey and her audience. She is “a-smilin’,” “li’l and low,” good-humored and approachable, and lacking the pretension that other performers might exude. Absent then are the aforementioned necklace of gold coins and her greasepaint, which apparently made her appear “almost gold-colored under the amber stage lights” (Lieb 8). On the one hand, Rainey’s striking appearance advertised her financial success and independence, as indicated most obviously by the flickering gold coins; on the other hand, Rainey’s grease-painted skin exemplified her capitulation to the widespread belief among the majority of whites and blacks during the early twentieth century that dark skin was less attractive. Subverting race and gender hierarchies by donning symbols of her socioeconomic achievements while also choosing to rather “inauthentically” adhere to dominant social conventions regarding skin tone, Rainey cultivated a provocative stage persona that, though he saw her perform live, Brown elected to omit from his poetic portrait.

Further, whereas biographers highlight Rainey’s sensuality as a defining feature of her persona on and off stage, Brown represents her as essentially asexual. Though she is gazed upon by men—the speaker either genders the audience as male in his references to “the fellow” or simply gender-neutral as “folks”—she is not physically gendered, and besides being described as “li’l and low,” there is no mention of her body

---

19 Angela Y. Davis notes, “Ma Rainey was notorious for being able to outshine any man with her amazing sexual voracity” (22), and Lieb asserts that Rainey “was fully alive to the varieties of sexual experience and expression” (170). Moreover, Jackson writes, “Despite her married status, she [Rainey] chose not to disguise her polyamorous tastes” (17).
at all. Nor is there anything particularly feminine about Rainey besides the maternal care she seems to offer her audience. In fact, Brown carefully avoids any description that could be associated with the historical stereotype of black women as sexually wanton. Arguably, his lack of attention to Rainey’s physicality serves as an implicit protest against the denigrating discourses circulating about African Americans in which the focus was again primarily on their bodies. Alternatively, Brown was more interested in invoking the aspects of Rainey’s persona that represented the aesthetic and sociopolitical value of African-American folk art and was less concerned with the complexities and even paradoxes of the star image that she created in order to become professionally successful in the racist and sexist era in which she lived. Thus, Brown celebrates her sociocultural importance in the same way that he champions the blues—not for its national popularity but as the “poetic phrasing of the burdened folk.”

However, because Rainey is a historical figure and not an imagined persona, the symbolic values that Brown invests in her and the lived experiences that he leaves out impact cultural understandings of Rainey’s legacy. “Ma Rainey” is widely anthologized, and, as a cursory look at the accounts of her life and art will attest, the poem has become an integral part of Rainey’s posthumous narrative. Acknowledging this trend, Angela Y. Davis justifies her own reference: “Every study of Gertrude Rainey cites Sterling Brown’s powerful poem, ‘Ma Rainey.’ I, too, want to quote it here because it successfully conveys the southern flavor of her appeal” (139). To cite another example,

---

20 As I discuss in the Introduction, classic blues women not only subverted but alternately utilized the stereotypical notions of their exoticism in order to appeal to a mass market.
Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance features a picture of Rainey on the cover, but Baker limits his discussion of her to a four-page analysis of Brown’s poem (92-95). Certainly, there is no denying the poetic power of “Ma Rainey,” especially in terms of Brown’s compelling renderings of the vernacular and the blues. Brown’s homage is a moving portrait that honors many of Rainey’s best qualities—her humility and strength—along with her ability to relate to and uplift blacks during a time of institutionalized racism. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize that, while “Ma Rainey”’s enduring importance is a testament to Brown’s abilities as a poet and Rainey’s symbolic importance as a folk matriarch, the poem is not a comprehensive portrait nor was it necessarily meant to be.

Tellingly, in his Introduction to the later 1974 edition of Southern Road, Sterling Stuckey writes that Brown “has demonstrated, as well as any artist known to this writer, how music and myth function in the lives of ordinary people” (xxvii). Brown understood the mythology that Rainey had already created among her fans through her decades of tent performances and her many recordings, and “Ma Rainey” evidences Brown’s interest in shaping his own version of this mythology and spreading it beyond the masses to a broad audience of readers and, ultimately, to future generations whose first introduction to Rainey is often through his poem. In the process, Brown privileges the parts of her stage persona that he finds most supportive of his literary and sociopolitical agenda and dispenses with the elements that he may have considered too closely associated with either minstrel shows or the vulgar aspects that he warns against in “The Blues as Folk Poetry.” Brown then sets a precedent for subsequent tributes to blues men and women, including the Smith and Holiday tributes that follow, in which these figures are
represented symbolically and mythically, rather than as multidimensional historical figures.

The Empress of the Blues

Eight years Rainey’s junior, Smith met Ma and Pa Rainey in 1912 and, as legend has it, Ma Rainey “discovered” Smith and taught her to sing the blues. Most critics agree, however, that that Rainey may have given Smith singing advice and taught her a few songs, but, by the time they met, Smith was already a skilled singer with a style all her own. Of course, more than any other event, the tale of her untimely death is what she is most remembered for by the American public and, until the last several decades, many writers as well. As Francis Davis writes, “even people who have never heard a record by Bessie Smith can tell you that she died needlessly, a victim of institutional racism” (78). Until the publication of Chris Albertson’s well-researched biography Bessie (originally in 1972 and reprinted in 2003), the story of Smith’s death was based, not on facts, but on the myth that a white hospital in Mississippi had refused to treat her after a car accident, leading her to bleed to death before she received medical treatment for her injuries. Smith died from internal bleeding and shock as the result of a car accident on September 26, 1937, near Clarksdale, Mississippi. She was never taken to a white hospital, however, and she passed away at the local African-American hospital several hours after the accident occurred. Albertson’s research has disproved the rumor that John Hammond, the legendary record producer who recorded and promoted both Smith and Holiday, spread in November 1937 with his story in Down Beat magazine titled “Did Bessie Smith Bleed to Death While Waiting for Medical Aid?” Apparently, reporters at the time also disputed
the allegations, but, according to Albertson, the truth proved less compelling than the
rumors. Though the story of her death has proved inaccurate—in all likelihood, she
would have died whether or not she was treated in a white or black hospital (Albertson
256-257)—the injustices of Jim Crow segregation and discrimination meant that many
other men and women did die needlessly. Thus, the tragic story of Smith’s death lived on
because it illuminated the consequences of America’s racial caste system, and, as will be
evident in my reading of O’Higgins’s “Blues for Bessie,” poets have been compelled to
cast Smith in the role of both victim and martyr in their own narratives of racial injustice.

First published in the 1945 edition of the Parisian journal *Portfolio*, 22 “Blues for
Bessie” was later re-printed in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps’s *The Poetry of the
Negro, 1746-1949*, and was critically lauded by Alain Locke as “a real folk poem” (12)
and by Paul Oliver for making “both a political and poetic point” (11). Born in 1918,
O’Higgins was a student of Brown’s at Howard University and was clearly influenced by
his mentor’s interest in the blues and, more specifically, by the formal and thematic tenets
of “Ma Rainey.” On the other hand, though O’Higgins’s literary and sociopolitical
agenda is not nearly as well-documented as Brown’s, “Blues for Bessie” evinces
O’Higgins’s desire to pen a blues tribute that advances his own perspectives and
concerns, specifically with the second-class citizenship that African Americans continued
to endure mid-century and the role of the blues in protesting this injustice. For instance,
O’Higgins follows Brown in subverting Anglo-American literary conventions and
demonstrating the lyrical poignancy of the blues and the African American vernacular
English in which they are typically sung; yet, “Blues for Bessie” is more structurally

---

22 In Graham Lock’s essay “Blues on the Brush: Rose Piper’s Blues and Negro Folk Songs Paintings of the
1940s,” he confirms in a footnote that “Blues for Bessie” was published in *Portfolio* in 1945, but it is still
unclear as to when the poem was actually written (68).
indebted to the blues than “Ma Rainey,” particularly because O’Higgins employs a lone (presumably male) speaker, rather than the multiple speakers and sections that comprise “Ma Rainey.” O’Higgins also utilizes a song-like refrain—“Let de peoples know / what dey did in dat Southern Town” (3-4)—that enjoins his audience not only to sympathize with his message but to join him in delivering it.

As with Brown’s symbolic portrait of Rainey, however, “Blues for Bessie” is not as much about Smith the historical figure as it is about what she signifies—in this case, as a tragic martyr for racial equality. The poem thus begins with an epigraph that attributes Smith’s death to a white hospital in Mississippi refusing her treatment after a car accident: “Bessie Smith, the greatest of the early blues singers, died violently after an auto accident while on a theatrical tour of the South in 1937. The newspapers reported that she bled to death when the only hospital in the vicinity refused her emergency medical attention because she was a Negro woman.” Given the widespread nature of the rumors of racism surrounding Smith’s death and the many racially-motivated fatalities that did occur, O’Higgins was most likely unaware that the story he recounted was a myth. Either way, this story exemplified in profound terms the consequences of institutionalized racism. Therefore, as with Brown’s allusion to the abject living conditions of Southern African Americans by way of “Backwater Blues,” Smith’s untimely death served as a useful rallying point for O’Higgins’s own blues protest against Jim Crow:

Let de peoples know (unnh)
what dey did in dat Southern Town
Let de peoples know
what dey did in dat Southern Town

Well, dey lef’ po’ Bessie dyin’

wid de blood (Lawd) a-streamin’ down

Bessie lef’ Chicago

in a bran’ new Cadillac;

didn’t take no suitcase

but she wore her mournin’ black (unnh)

Bessie, Bessie,

she wore her mournin’ black

She went ridin’ down to Dixie (Lawd)

an’ dey shipped her body back. (1-14)

Writing in vernacular and “worrying” and repeating particular lines and phrases, O’Higgins’s poem is clearly modeled on the blues form. O’Higgins also indicates his studied appreciation of Brown’s rendering of blues and work songs in *Southern Road*, particularly the collection’s title poem in which the speaker, a man on a chain gang, renders the tradition of collective call-and-response by spontaneously responding to his own lines. He first calls out, “Swing dat hammer—hunh— (1), then later “White man tells me—hunh—” (31), and, in the final stanza, “Chain gang nevah—hunh—” (37).

Similarly, “Blues for Bessie”’s parenthetical phrases both document the sociopolitical and communal function of the blues as a form of resistance to white hegemony and self-reflexively situate the poem in this mode; although Smith “won’t sing de blues no mo’” (38), O’Higgins will continue to bear witness to the fatal injustice that she endured.
Employing the word Dixie, O'Higgins specifically affirms that, despite the nearly three-quarters of a century that separated the Civil War and Smith’s southern tour, an Old South ideology still prevails below the Mason-Dixon line. The hortatory chant “let de peoples know” then underscores the imperative of spreading the word that Smith “went ridin’ down to Dixie (Lawk) / an’ dey shipped her body back.” In fact, where “Ma Rainey”’s polyvocality structurally instantiates the collective catharsis that Rainey’s performance inspires, O’Higgins’s lone speaker indicates the potential fragmentation of the black community and, thus, the pressing need for readers and listeners to respond to O’Higgins’s “call.” As such, Smith and the story of her death become powerful vehicles through which O’Higgins not only exposes but urges readers to protest the dehumanizing racism endemic to the Jim Crow South.

At the same time, other than to note that she rode in a Cadillac south from Chicago to perform, O’Higgins’s portrait excludes any detail about Smith, the glamorous blues star, which made her death notable in the first place. As Hazel Carby observes, classic blues women

were gorgeous and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as Goddesses, as the high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith, as the Empress of the blues. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, or gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire. (239)
Similar to Rainey’s stage persona, the characteristically extravagant and sensual image that Smith projected advertised both her financial independence and her liberated views toward sexuality and monogamy—striking qualities in an early twentieth-century woman. Yet, as Ann Ducille cautions, “Under what might be called the cult of true primitivism, sex—the quintessential subject matter of the blues—was precisely what hot-blooded African women were assumed to have always in mind and body” (427). Just as Brown elided much about Rainey’s appearance, perhaps strategically resisting these caricatures of the hyper-sexualized black woman, O’Higgins’s decision to efface Smith’s physicality may have been motivated by a desire to subvert negative stereotypes. As a result, the only visual image that readers are left with is that Smith “wore her mournin’ black.”

Of course, the funeral attire coupled with other haunting images foreshadow Smith’s death and further solidify the poem’s place within the blues tradition and especially in Smith’s own repertoire of songs about hoodoo practices and other folk superstitions23:

> Lawd, wasn’t it a turr’ble
> when dat rain come down
> Yes, wasn’t it a turr’ble
> when de rain come down
> An’ ol’ Death caught po’ Bessie
> Down in ’at Jim Crow town
> Well, de thunder rolled

---

23 In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Davis discusses at length the sociopolitical implications of Bessie Smith’s hoodoo references (156-157).
an’ de lightnin’ broke de sky
Lawd, de thunder rolled
an’ de lightnin’ broke de sky
An’ you could hear po’ Bessie moanin’,
“Great Gawd, please doan lemme die!” (15-26)

In “Backwater Blues,” Smith sings, “When it rains five days and the skies turn dark as night,” and a few verses later, “When it thunders and lightnin’, and the wind begins to blow” (qtd. in A. Davis 263). Alluding to these lyrics, O’Higgins limns a similar scene in which Smith and her “bran’ new Cadillac” are deluged as “dat rain came down,” and “de thunder rolled / an’ de lightnin’ broke de sky.” Not unlike Brown’s incorporation of the same song, O’Higgins strategically references “Backwater Blues” in order to expose the ways in which the consequences of a natural disaster (a thunderstorm) are compounded by America’s racial caste system. However, while Brown includes the song’s image of survival on “some high ol’ lonesome hill” (IV. 8) and, via Rainey, imparts the strength to collectively persevere, O’Higgins’s allusion further reinforces Smith’s weakness and vulnerability, for no one is there to rescue her from the storm or the accident that ensues.

When Smith is granted a voice, it is not to lift the community’s spirits, as Rainey does, but to cry out in vain for mercy:

She holler, “Lawd, please help me!”,

but He never heerd a word she say
Holler, “Please, somebody help me!”,

but dey never heerd a word she say
Frien’, when yo’ luck run out in Dixie,
well, it doan do no good to pray

Well, dey give po’ Bessie
to de undertaker man;
ol’ Death an’ Jim Crow (Lawd)
done de job, hand in han’

Well, Bessie, Bessie,
she won’t sing de blues no mo’

Cause dey let her go down bloody (Lawd)

trav’lin’ from door to do’ (27-40)

Emphasizing her lack of agency in this hostile environment, Smith’s pitiful cries go unanswered by both God and humanity, as she travels "from door to do’" desperately seeking treatment for her wounds. Transforming Smith into “po’ Bessie,” O’Higgins thus omits the notoriously bold and defiant persona that made Smith such a beloved figure during her lifetime. For instance, when Ku Klux Klan members attempted to disrupt one of her tent performances in Concord, N.C., Smith is reported to have successfully rebuffed them by shouting angrily, “What the fuck you think you’re doin’. I’ll get the whole damn tent out here if I have to. You just pick up them sheets and run!” (Albertson 157). As Buzzy Jackson further notes, Smith “was more than merely famous, she was a living symbol of personal freedom: she did what she liked; she spoke her mind, no matter how outrageous her opinion; she flouted bourgeois norms and indulged in alcohol, drugs, and recreational sex” (68). Akin to Brown’s portrait of Rainey, O’Higgins excludes these
subversive behaviors to more effectively render Smith, not a folk hero, but a helpless casualty of Jim Crow.

In fact, though Smith died almost a decade before O’Higgins published “Blues for Bessie,” he suggests that she remains a powerful martyr figure because the racial persecution that she and others experienced continues unabated. Whereas Brown’s poem concludes by reiterating the camaraderie and emotional uplift that Rainey’s performance provides her rural black fans (“She jes’ gits hold of us dataway”), O’Higgins’s mournful final couplet—“Well, dey lef’ po’ Bessie dyin’ / wid de blood (Lawd) a-streamin’ down” (51-52)—offers no such relief. As such, “Blues for Bessie” becomes both a warning to the African-American community about the dangers of being non-white in the Jim Crow South, where prayer will “do no good,” and a blues “call” for solidarity against racial segregation and discrimination. As a recent veteran, O’Higgins had personally experienced the painful contradiction of defending freedoms he was himself denied within the segregated U.S. Army—which Eric Lott describes as “its own theatre of combat” (707). Indeed, O’Higgins’s strategic departures from Brown are not only indicative of his subjective take on the blues tribute poem but also the passage of time from the New Negro to the WWII era, when American claims of moral superiority in its fight against the Nazis were systematically undermined by the treatment of African Americans at home. Striking a chord of urgency, “Blues for Bessie” thus affirms that the institutionalized oppression that “Ma Rainey” bears witness to has still not been addressed.

24 Although I have not been able to ascertain O’Higgins’s exact years of military service, the timeline in his biographical note in The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949 places him in the Army during WWII (Hughes and Bontemps).
Although “Blues for Bessie” has not intervened in Smith’s posthumous legacy as profoundly as “Ma Rainey” has in Rainey’s, as with all the poetic representations I examine, the image and narrative that O’Higgins advances has shaped sociocultural understandings of Smith. As the aforementioned accolades by Locke and Oliver suggest, since its appearance in Hughes and Bontemps’s *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*, the poem has been widely recognized for its formal and political acumen, but without attention brought to either the aspects of Smith’s persona that O’Higgins emphasizes and elides or the ideological and aesthetic perspectives underwriting these choices. In 1996, for example, the dramatic production “Who Am I” staged a reading of “Blues for Bessie,” and a review in *The Seattle Times* noted that the poem both “lament[ed] legendary blues singer Bessie Smith’s bleeding to death after being denied aid at a ‘white-only’ hospital,” and testified to “a collective strength and spirit borne of pain and discrimination” (Orr). As this review makes clear, more than fifty years after “Blues for Bessie”’s publication, the poem’s representation of Smith as a tragic victim was still being interpreted in historical, rather than symbolic, terms. Acknowledging the inherently fictional nature of “Blues for Bessie” (or any tribute poem) does not, of course, negate the sociocultural work it performs in maintaining the posthumous memory of Smith for generations of readers and potential listeners. Moreover, adeptly rendering blues tropes, O’Higgins follows Brown in drawing needed attention to the music’s ritualistic function as a repository of African-American cultural and communal knowledge. At the same time, it remains necessary to recognize the difference between O’Higgins’s poetic portrait and Smith’s lived experiences in order to ensure that the dynamic and provocative persona that she cultivated is not overshadowed by the apocryphal story of her death.
“put the lights to shame”

Published just a few years after O’Higgins’s poem, Robert Hayden’s “Homage to the Empress of the Blues” (1948) in many ways signifies on O’Higgins’s elegiac tribute. In fact, O’Higgins and Hayden published a collaborative collection of their poetry, *The Lion and the Archer*, in which “Homage to the Empress of the Blues” first appears. Departing from O’Higgins, Hayden’s poem does not focus on Smith’s death, nor does he explicitly critique racism. Rather, he characterizes Smith as an inspiring symbol of beauty, whose performances offer temporary respite from the violence, pain, and decay in the poverty-stricken world that surrounds the stage:

Because somewhere there was a man in a candystripe silk shirt

gracile and dangerous as a jaguar and because some woman moaned

for him in sixty-watt gloom and mourned him Faithless Love

Twotiming Love Oh Love Oh Careless Aggravating Love;

She came out on the stage in yards of pearls, emerging like

a favorite scenic view, flashed her golden teeth, and sang.

Because somewhere gray laths began to show from underneath

torn hurdygurdy lithographs of dollfaced heaven;

because there were those who feared alarming fists of snow

the door and those who feared the riot squad of statistics;

She came out on the stage in ostrich feathers, beaded satin,

and shone that smile on us and put the lights to shame and sang.

(1-12)
Formally, Hayden’s anaphoric couplets exemplify the repetition with a difference (“worrying the line”) common to many of the blues songs that Smith performed. Yet, unlike Brown and O’Higgins, Hayden derives his poetics primarily from the Anglo-American canon and only in the fourth line’s lament to the heart-wrenching disappointments of “Love” is there a linguistic deviation that could be recognized as lyrically blues-like. Instead, it is in the familiar themes of heartbreak, despair, and perseverance that Hayden evokes the blues spirit. With his series of justifications (“Because somewhere. . .”), he characterizes Smith’s performance as a cathartic response to the community’s troubles, such as the woman who “moaned” and “mourned him Faithless Love” as well as the violence that occurs just beyond the stage (“the alarming fists of snow upon / the door”).

Following O’Higgins, Hayden avoids the famously sensual aspects of Smith’s stage persona, but he also defamiliarizes her further by suggesting that she is too immaculate to touch—even her smile “put the lights to shame.” Signifyin(g) on Brown’s celebration of the blues woman as a folk hero and O’Higgins’s mournful portrait of Smith as a tragic victim (“po’ Bessie”), Hayden constructs Smith as a blues goddess, a true “Empress,” who appears “like / a favorite scenic view.” Indeed, Hayden’s attention to Smith’s glamour and beauty is heightened through the juxtapositions he creates between the extravagances of her “yards of pearls,” “ostrich feathers,” and “beaded satin” (not to mention her “golden teeth”) and the “sixty-watt gloom” under which her audience suffers. This socioeconomic despair recalls not only the Depression years but the exclusion and racial oppression blacks faced throughout the 1920s, as Smith’s “Poor Man’s Blues” documents: “Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind /
Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind / Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times” (qtd. in A. Davis 327). Hayden never mentions race, but his illumination of the violence and desperation caused by poverty (“the riot squad of statistics”) refers to the lack of social mobility for most members of the African-American community during the 1920s and 1930s.25 Whereas O’Higgins limns Smith in her “mournin’ black” and draws attention to the consequences of *de jure* segregation, Hayden casts Smith in a more traditional muse role, imagining her as an almost ethereal presence who smiles down from the stage at her adoring fans and provides a diversion from their pain.

Hayden saw Smith perform at Detroit’s Koppin Theatre, and, in an interview decades later with his editor, Paul McCluskey, he recalled the “clapping, shouting, whistling” response of the exuberant crowd to Smith’s performance (144). Reading the poem through this biographical lens, Frank Rashid contends that the poem “blurs the line between art and life, artist and audience” (187). Yet, Hayden also depersonalizes the poem so that his own experiences play only an oblique role in his representation of Smith on the page. In the interview with McCluskey, for example, Hayden describes Smith’s “elaborate pearl costume, with tiara and all” not in reference to the costume he saw her perform in, but as part of a story he tells of the present she received from her record company “in appreciation for the millions of dollars her records earned for them” (144). Instead of drawing from personal memory then, Hayden invokes an image of Smith as a dazzling blues star at the height of her fame.

---

25 In an interview with his editor Paul McCluskey in 1972, Hayden confirmed that he was referencing the lack of socioeconomic opportunities for African Americans and the violent despair that poverty engendered (146).
Following Brown and O’Higgins, Hayden thus selects the aspects of Smith’s legacy that appeal most to his own appreciation of, in this case, Smith’s beauty and glamour on the one hand and the emotional uplift that she provided on the other. Unlike the ephemerality of performance, “Homage to the Empress of the Blues” then reifies this image of Smith for posterity. Perhaps concerned that she would be remembered only as a martyr for racial justice, as the earlier “Blues for Bessie” indicates, Hayden immortalizes Smith as an idealized blues goddess, who will forever be offering hope to the marginalized and oppressed in her “ostrich feathers” and “yards of pearls.” Further, Hayden self-reflexively links his own work to Smith’s, as the poem, like Smith’s image, provides a respite from the grim reality of the statistical odds stacked against all marginalized people. Just as Smith inspires Hayden’s own escape into art, specifically the world of music, as a relief from despair, his homage offers a lyrical outlet through which he encourages readers to remember Smith’s transcendence and not her tragic death.\(^{26}\)

Reading “Homage to the Empress of the Blues” and “Blues for Bessie” alongside one another demonstrates Smith’s continued relevance long after her death and affirms Hayden’s and O’Higgins’s interest in harnessing their own aesthetic and sociopolitical outlooks to her blues tradition. In addition, both of these poems construct Smith as a community spokesperson, who voices the discrimination and socioeconomic hardships experienced by African Americans in the pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era. Yet, these poems also reveal the ways in which poets with similar sociocultural backgrounds and close personal ties produce distinctively different constructions of Smith’s personae and, in so doing, invest her with nearly opposite symbolic values: whereas Hayden

\(^{26}\) It is important to note that Hayden did not disagree with this characterization of Smith; he only seems to have found it limiting. In his interview with McCluskey, he retells the myth of a white hospital’s refusal to treat Smith and laments the racism that caused her death (144).
immortalizes Smith as the “Empress of the Blues,” O’Higgins memorializes her elegiacally as a victim and a martyr for racial injustice. As a result, Smith remains, to paraphrase DuPlessis, a giver but not an owner of her legacy, as she is reshaped to reflect the distinct perspectives of these male poets.

The Many Faces of Billie Holiday

Turning now to Billie Holiday, the blues woman most frequently invoked as muse, the connections between Holiday’s often heart-wrenching music and her biography have fascinated writers and artists since she first rose to fame. Born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia in 1915, Holiday grew up in Baltimore and later moved to Harlem, where she began her music career. By the time she was fourteen, “she had been physically and sexually abused, worked as a prostitute in two cities, and was already familiar with the criminal justice system” (Griffin *If You Can’t Be Free* 24). Desiring freedom from the life of a domestic servant or a prostitute, Eleanora transformed herself into Billie Holiday, claiming her estranged father’s name for the first time and reportedly renaming herself after the popular silent film star, Billie Dove (Jackson 93).27 Later, she would embrace the nickname Lady Day that the famed saxophonist Lester Young gave her, a name which has become as inextricable from Holiday’s legacy as “Ma” is from Rainey’s.

Like the sensational story of Smith’s death, the tales of Holiday’s substance abuse are one of the most well-known aspects of her legacy. She was a heroin addict and heavy drinker for much of her adult life and died from a kidney infection that developed after being treated for cirrhosis of the liver. In 1947, she spent nine and a half months in the Federal Reformatory for Women at Alderson, West Virginia, after being convicted of

27 Sadie Fagan told her daughter that her father was the jazz guitarist and banjoist Clarence Holiday.
heroin possession. She was arrested for narcotics possession three subsequent times, including on her death bed, and “eventually the stories of her arrests and drug addiction joined with her stage persona of the torch singer to create a new image, that of the tragic, ever-suffering black woman singer who simply stands center stage and naturally sings of her woes” (Griffin If You Can’t Be Free 31). Finally, an indispensable part of Holiday’s legacy, and certainly one that poets continue to reference, is her haunting renditions of the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit.” By most accounts, Holiday was not an overtly political person,\(^\text{28}\) but, as Angela Y. Davis notes, her recording of “Strange Fruit” “persists as one of the most influential and profound examples—and continuing sites—of the intersection of music and social consciousness” (196).

Moreover, unlike this study’s other blues figures, Holiday co-authored an autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), with New York Post writer William Dufty that became a best seller. Even at the time of publication, its many inaccuracies made it more of a sensationalized account than a true-to-life narrative of the singer’s life, and the 1972 biopic of the same name and starring Diana Ross as Holiday offered a similarly flawed account. Since the 1990s, several biographies have been published—Robert O’Meally’s *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (1991), Stuart Nicholson’s *Billie* (1995), and Griffin’s *If You Can’t Be Free: In Search of Billie Holiday* (2002), to name a few—that have provided the public with a more accurate and comprehensive portrait of Holiday’s life and art. Poets have also been part of this reevaluation of Holiday, and I will explore these tributes, along with similarly nuanced interpretations of Rainey’s and Smith’s legacies, in this study’s final chapters. My discussion here,

\(^{28}\) Holiday called herself a “race woman,” but as Griffin notes, she did not fit the narrative associated with this label (70-72). Buzzy Jackson similarly notes that “despite her [Holiday’s] self-proclaimed status as a ‘race woman, Holiday was never political in the standard sense” (If You Can’t Be Free 115).
however, will focus on three early poems—Elizabeth Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer” (1944), Hughes’s “Song for Billie Holiday” (1949), and Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” (1959)—that lay the groundwork for the many Holiday tributes that the proceeding chapters will take up.

Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer” is the first poem to invoke Holiday’s persona, though she is never directly referenced. Published first in Bishop’s Pulitzer Prize-winning collection North & South, “Songs for a Colored Singer” was later included in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps’s The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949 alongside several of the other tribute poets included in this chapter: O’Higgins, Brown, and Hayden. However, in the post-Civil Rights era, “Songs for a Colored Singer” has not been critically well-received, particularly because of Bishop’s problematic narrative voice. As a well-educated, upper-class white woman, Bishop’s assumption that she could express the concerns of a working-class African-American woman, including inconsistent attempts at rendering African American vernacular English, has made her vulnerable to a wide range of criticism. Adrienne Rich was the first to draw attention to these issues when she declared the poem a “white woman’s attempt—respectful, I believe—to speak through a Black woman’s voice. A risky undertaking, and it betrays the failure and clumsiness of such a position” (35). A problematic endeavor indeed, and thus the critical debate continues regarding the racial implications of this poem well as the extent to which Bishop’s personal connection to Holiday and her lesbianism informed her representation.29

29 For example, Steven G. Axelrod criticizes Bishop’s attempts to represent the hardships of African-American life: “This is a poem putatively for and about African Americans written by a person who has not known such individuals on a basis of equality and who holds herself apart from them” (“Was Elizabeth Bishop a Racist?” 347). Regarding Bishop’s sexual orientation, in Margaret Dickie’s “Race and Class in
While Bishop does not directly invoke Holiday, she later asserted that “she had Holiday in mind” when she wrote it (“Interview” 24), and the poem’s allusions to Holiday’s persona affirm the connection. Nevertheless, it is important to note her omission of Holiday’s name, particularly because Bishop depersonalizes Holiday further by evading any description of the singer’s appearance, thereby reinforcing the notion that all “colored” singers are essentially the same. As with her male contemporaries’ elisions of their muses’ bodies, Bishop’s refusal to describe her female speaker’s physicality may have been a strategic attempt to avoid relying on the Mammy or Jezebel stereotypes (or some combination of these) so commonly deployed in the pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era. Alternatively, as a closeted lesbian and a very private person, Bishop may have been wary of treating the subject of sexuality at all.  

Whatever the reason, the unfortunate effect is that, lacking a specific description of Holiday or even her name, Bishop relies on her mostly white readership to imagine a female “colored singer,” thereby depending on the often degrading images circulating in popular culture rather than envisaging Holiday herself. While Bishop’s racial essentialism certainly mars her tribute, “Songs” remains an important poem both in terms of Bishop’s intervention in Holiday’s legacy and the precedent she sets for future Holiday tributes. For instance, whereas the media represented Holiday as self-destructive and tragic, Bishop transforms her into a symbol of feminist independence and, by the final “song” (Part IV), a voice of social justice.

Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetry,” she claims that Bishop assumed the persona of the “colored singer” as a disguise for her own lesbian anxieties (49). Also, in Camille Roman’s Elizabeth Bishop’s World War II-Cold War View (2001), she observes a “lesbian subtext” in the poem (70). Additionally, Roman contends that, at the time that “Songs” was composed, Bishop was competing for her lover Louise Crane’s affection when Crane was enamored with Holiday and went to see her performances nightly (75-77).

30 Roman posits that, in order to survive the heteronormative social pressures during and after WWII, Bishop “withdrew into the culturally sanctioned role of the private woman hidden from public view” (7).
Considering Bishop’s own struggles with alcoholism and unsuccessful relationships, she may have been especially sensitive to the unflattering portraits of Holiday circulating in the press. Following her tribute predecessors, she thus represents the version of Holiday that appealed most to her own concerns and desires.

Yet, unlike her African-American counterparts, “Songs” demonstrates Bishop’s formally awkward attempt at crafting a blues-inspired poem. While John Lowney describes “Songs” as “a sequence of blues poems” (*History, Memory, and the Literary Left* 90), none of the four parts of this poem are structured like a blues song. Bishop gestures toward the blues at times, employing a regular rhyme scheme in all four parts, and, in Part II, the repeated line “The time has come to call a halt” functions as a refrain. She also attempts to replicate African American vernacular English, but it is inconsistently employed, such as in Part I’s final stanza:

I sit and look at our backyard
and find it very hard
What have we got for all his dollars and cents?
—A pile of bottles by the fence.
He’s faithful and he’s kind
but he sure has an inquiring mind.
He’s seen a lot; he’s bound to see the rest,
and if I protest

---

31 Axelrod notes that Bishop engaged in “regular alcoholic binges, followed sometimes by hospitalization and always by remorse, anger at herself, and firm decisions never to drink again.” He further observes her struggles as a “closeted lesbian in an increasingly homophobic time” (“Elizabeth Bishop and Containment Policy,” 844).
Le Roy answers with a frown,

“Darling, when I earns I spends.
The world is wide; it still extends…
I’m going to get a job in the next town.”

Le Roy, you’re earning too much money now. (14-26)

Le Roy, the speaker’s alcoholic husband uses one non-standard verb construction (“when I earns I spends”), but his other expressions and the female speaker’s language are consistently standard, making the vernacular expressions seem misplaced. Departing from a prototypical blues lyric form, Bishop structures this and the other three parts to the poem with stanzas of alternating length and rhyme schemes, and nearly all of the standard blues tropes—“worrying the line,” call-and-response, and the performativity evident in “Ma Rainey” and “Blues for Bessie”—are either absent or poorly rendered. Bishop later claimed that she “was hoping somebody would compose the tunes for them” (“Interview” 24), suggesting that, while she had Holiday’s vocal style in mind, she was not overtly concerned with arranging the poem’s structure to reflect her actual performances. Thus, though she called the poem “Songs” and invokes the Holiday persona, this sequence does not sound or read as blues.

Thematically, however, “Songs” is clearly blues-inspired and reveals the specific influence of Holiday’s repertoire. In Part I, Bishop evokes the blues themes of heartache and despair that Holiday renders so poignantly in many of her most famous songs—“Don’t Explain,” “Fine and Mellow,” and “My Man,” to name a few. While she neglects Holiday’s physicality and her stage presence, she dramatizes the “unlucky in love” persona (Nicholson 126) that Holiday developed in these songs, creating a blues

32 In its most well-known form, blues stanzas contain three stanzas with an aab rhyme scheme.
atmosphere in a sequence that otherwise bears little resemblance to the music. Still, as
Steven G. Axelrod points out, “whereas blues-based poems by African American
generally recognize white racism as a fact of life, Bishop’s erases that motif” (347). In
Parts III and IV, Bishop does address racial oppression, but the initial two “songs” reveal
a lack of interest in the social and economic stratification that contributes to it. For
example, she implies in Part I that Le Roy’s financial mismanagement (and not racial
discrimination) has led to the couple’s economic frustrations, thereby effacing the
injustices that have historically contributed to black poverty. Bishop’s intentions to
sympathize with the woes that Holiday sang about are compromised by these elisions of
the systematic race, class, and gender inequities that Holiday and other blues women
implicitly protested every time they took the stage.

On the other hand, though Holiday’s life and art was consistently discussed in
terms of personal tragedy, in Part II, Bishop recasts her in the role of the strong
independent woman that Holiday would occasionally perform in such songs as “Billie’s
Blues” and “God Bless the Child.” For instance, after her lover continues to abandon her
for “his other friends” at “Flossie’s place” (II. 3, 7), Part II’s speaker decides that she will
leave him and find someone who will be faithful:

Go drink your wine and go get tight.

Let the piccolo play.

I’m sick of all your fussing anyway.

Now I’m pursuing my own way.

I’m leaving on the bus tonight.

Far down the highway wet and black
I’ll ride and ride and not come back.

I’m going to go and take the bus

and find someone monogamous.

The time has come to call a halt.

I’ve borrowed fifteen dollars fare

and it will take me anywhere.

For this occasion’s all his fault.

The time has come to call a halt. (II. 15-28)

While the speaker’s desire to escape is reminiscent of many blues songs with lyrics about railway getaways that signify a desire to start anew, her independent attitude contrasts with Holiday’s most well-known persona as a victim of domestic abuse and infidelity, who nevertheless always forgives her man. In “My Man,” Holiday sings, for example, “He isn’t good / He isn’t true / He beats too,” but “I love him!” nonetheless (qtd. in Jones 19). Of course, Holiday did not write all of her songs (though she is credited with writing “Fine and Mellow” and “Don’t Explain”), but these lyrics are typical of her torch song repertoire and are indelibly linked to the mythology of her tragic victimhood.

Considering this, Bishop’s speaker makes the rather unexpected move of calling the affair “to a halt” and leaving her lover to “find someone monogamous.” Representing Holiday as a symbol of feminist independence, Part II again reveals the ways in which Bishop’s homage reshapes Holiday’s image into one that Bishop finds more sympathetic.

---

33 For example, among the blues subjects that Albert Murray identifies in Stomping the Blue is “the longing to go north with train whistles” (74).

34 It is necessary to note that this is the stereotypical portrait of Holiday, and, to my mind, this portrayal effaces Holiday’s conscious decision to perform this heartbroken persona. Even within the “tragic woman” role, she often critiqued the dominant power structures that constructed such a persona.
Initially, Bishop’s third “song” appears as a departure from the intended blues mode of Parts I and II, as Bishop announces in the first line and the beginning of each subsequent stanza that this “song” is a “Lullaby”:

Lullaby.
Adult and child
sink to their rest.
At sea the big ship sinks and dies,
lead in its breast.


Lullaby.
If they should say
You don’t have no sense,
don’t you mind them; it won’t make
much difference. (III. 1-5, 13-16)

Unlike the previous parts, the specter of WWII is omnipresent, as the international warfront collides with the domestic sphere and the difficulties women and families faced at home. At first glance then, this “song” has the least biographical connection to Holiday, who had no children and is typically not associated with domesticity, but Holiday certainly experienced the oppression that Bishop references and persevered in spite of the unrelenting racism and sexism she faced. Moreover, the non-standard English in this stanza (“don’t have no sense”) indicates Bishop’s effort to maintain the voice of the working-class African American woman that she invoked in the first two “songs,” even while she omits the race and gender of the “Adult and child.” Hardly the soothing
lullaby, the consolation that “it won’t make / much difference” suggests that the child’s marginalized social position is immovable. On the other hand, the speaker’s assurance that there is no valid justification for discrimination (“don’t you mind them”) accords with the defiant attitude expressed by the speaker in Part II. Additionally, Bishop’s evocation of the “lullaby” in the somber context of war abroad and disenfranchisement at home likely references Holiday’s vocal style, and her remarkable ability to describe with soothing quietude the horrors of domestic abuse and codependence (“My Man”) as well as the horrific violence of white supremacy (“Strange Fruit”). Thus, while Part III’s references to Holiday are not as overt as in the previous parts, Bishop continues to evoke Holiday’s persona through her implicit references to both the struggles of the oppressed (class, gender, and race are all suggested) and Holiday’s artistic trademarks.

In Part IV, Bishop then returns to a more familiar evocation of Holiday through her allusion to “Strange Fruit,” and, in the process, works to solidify Holiday’s image as a voice for social justice. Given Bishop’s claim that she wished someone had set these poems to music, one also has to wonder if she thought that this part of her sequence might be incorporated into Holiday’s repertoire as Abel Meeropol’s (Lewis Allen) poem “Strange Fruit” had been. Accordingly, this final “song” serves as both an elegy for the thousands of African-American victims of the lynch mob and an affirmation that justice will eventually prevail:

all the shining seeds take root,

conspiring root,

and what curious flower or fruit

will grow from that conspiring root?
Fruit or flower? It is a face.
Yes, a face.
In that dark and dreary place
Each seed grows into a face.

Like an army in a dream
the faces seem,
darker, darker, like a dream.

They’re too real to be a dream. (IV. 21-32)

Just as Meeropol’s lyrics works on the level of juxtaposition between the “pastoral scene of the gallant South” and the “bulging eyes and the twisted mouth” of the lynched black body, Bishop’s natural arbor scene becomes “dark and dreary” as the speaker recognizes the faces of the many victims of racial persecution. Moreover, referencing Meeropol’s images of “a strange and bitter crop” (1), Bishop imagines that the memory of the victims is preserved in the seeds that continue to bear witness to this history of racial terror and violence. As Betsy Erkkila argues, Bishop “not only describes the material conditions of black, specifically black female, oppression but also calls for—and indeed prophesies—the transformation of black sorrow and tears into ‘seeds’ of black revolution” (296). As the seeds “conspire” to avenge their white supremacist murderers, Bishop predicts a movement for racial justice, just as Meeropol’s poem shocks readers into recognizing the gruesome consequences of white supremacy. Though Margaret Dickie claims that Part IV’s singer “grieves without cause” (49), it is clear that Bishop’s final “song” picks up
where Meeropol’s left off, affirming the importance of recognizing the human consequences of pervasive racism. Furthermore, Bishop suggests that such horrors will soon lead African Americans to strike back, as the “army” of dark faces signifies. As such, Bishop urges readers to consider Holiday a prescient voice for racial justice, rather than, as Griffin put it earlier, “the tragic, ever-suffering black woman singer” (*If You Can’t Be Free* 31).

Part IV also indicates Bishop’s attention to Holiday’s enunciation and her vocal delivery. “I put in a couple of big words,” Bishop said in the aforementioned interview, “just because she [Holiday] sang big words well—‘conspiring root’ for instance” (24). Yet, as with the other “songs,” Part IV’s structure is not particularly rhythmic or melodic, despite having Holiday’s performances and/or recordings in mind. It is difficult, for example, to imagine Holiday singing rather clunky rhythms such as “Fruit or flower? It is a face. / Yes, a face.” In terms of Holiday’s legacy, however, Bishop’s allusion to “Strange Fruit” does represent the profound significance that the song had on American society. Angela Y. Davis argues that Holiday’s repeated performances and recordings of “Strange Fruit” “singlehandedly changed the politics of popular culture and put the element of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black culture” (184). Ending “Songs for a Colored Singer” with the grim image of an army of lynched ghosts, Bishop testifies to the social impact that Davis describes, while also keeping this aspect of Holiday’s legacy alive in the minds and ears of generations of readers through her own “Strange Fruit”-inspired “song.”

As is often noted, Bishop maintained that she “was always opposed to political thinking as such for writers” (“Interview” 22), but “Songs” is an important example of
the ways in which blues tribute poems are always reflecting and informing sociopolitical discourses, even inadvertently or unintentionally. While Bishop may have considered herself apolitical, her decision to dedicate a sequence of poems to Holiday, an African-American woman who frequently protested Jim Crow racism when she sang “Strange Fruit,” at the very least represents her awareness of the contentious issues of her day, such as the ongoing problems of race, class, and gender stratification during the 1930s and 1940s. She may not have openly protested racism (and missed this opportunity in the first two “songs” in the sequence) or publicly identified herself a feminist; yet, by recasting Holiday as a feminist who defiantly leaves her man and exposes America’s history of racial injustice, Bishop implicitly affirmed her sociopolitical outlook. These progressive gestures do not erase, of course, the problematic aspects of Bishop’s portrait, including her unsuccessful attempts at reproducing African American vernacular English, her title that essentializes the experience of all “colored” singers, and her elision of the root causes of inequity. Still, prefiguring many second-wave feminist representations of Holiday, “Songs for a Colored Singer” remains an important example of both the varied ways that poets have revised dominant representations of Holiday as a symbol of tragedy and the transformations that she undergoes as poets selectively render the aspects of her legacy that accord with their own perspectives.

“dusted with despair”

---

35 Davis observes that “Strange Fruit” was so well-received because of the “transracial economic and social tragedies of the Great Depression and by the multiracial mass movements seeking to redress the grievances of blacks and whites alike” (190). Additionally, traditional gender roles were increasingly challenged during the WWII period as women were expected to take part in the war effort both professionally, as the image of Rosie the Riveter affirms, but also remain, as Karen Anderson argues in *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II*, “‘feminine’ and attractive, weak and dependent on men during their free time” (64).
Langston Hughes’s tribute to Holiday, “Song for Billie Holiday” (1949) stands in sharp contrast to Bishop’s poetic portrait, and the distinctions between them are indicative of the differences in Hughes’s and Bishop’s poetics and worldviews. As already noted, while Bishop tried her hand only once at blues-inspired poetry, Hughes had been a pioneer of this subgenre during the 1920s and 1930s. Published in his One Way Ticket (1949), “Song for Billie Holiday” marks a shift back to the jazz and blues influences exhibited in his first two collections, The Weary Blues (1926) and Fine Clothes to a Jew (1927). Like Brown, Hughes also theorized the blues. In the essay “Songs Called the Blues” (1941), for example, Hughes contends, “For sad as Blues may be, there’s almost always something humorous about them—even if it’s the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying” (144). Moreover, in Poetry and Reflections (1962), he distinguishes between the themes in blues sung by men and women, and dismissively claims that, while men sing “economic blues,” women’s blues “are almost always about love. Very often a woman will be singing about some man who’s gone off and left her before she’s ready for him to go, or something like that” (qtd. in Tracy 117). As Steven Tracy similarly notes, this is a problematic generalization on a number of levels, including factual inaccuracy. Perhaps most importantly in terms of “Song for Billie Holiday,” Hughes evinces a clear gender bias that privileges men’s blues as more politically astute than women’s, which is of course somewhat at odds with his previous declaration of pride in “the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith” in his “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (151). Whether or not his thinking had changed during the intervening decades is unclear, but Hughes’s gendered assertion is consistent with his poetic portrait of Holiday as tragically weak.
“Song for Billie Holiday” is also remarkable because it both documents Holiday’s appearance on television—the first and only poem that I know of to comment on those performances—and conveys an elegiac tone, even though the poem was published a full ten years before Holiday’s death:

What can purge my heart
Of the song
And the sadness?

What can purge my heart
But the song
Of the sadness?

What can purge my heart
Of the sadness
Of the song?

Do not speak of sorrow
With dust in her hair,
Or bits of dust in eyes
A chance wind blows there.
The sorrow that I speak of
Is dusted with despair.

Voice of muted trumpet,

36 Stuart Nicholson notes that “with the rise of television in 1949,” the year “Song” was published, Holiday appeared several times on NBC’s Eddie Condon Floor Show. In fact, one of these appearances included a dramatization in which Holiday played the part of Bessie Smith (177).
Cold brass in warm air.
Bitter television blurred
By sound that shimmers—
Where? (1-20)

In the first stanza, Hughes employs the repetition with variation that is common to blues songs, as each variation of the question imbues it with new meaning. The song conveys the lamentation of the blues mode—“the song / Of the sadness” and “the sadness / Of the song”—while the speaker’s desire to “purge” the sadness through song also suggests the catharsis that blues songs provide. Yet, the speaker is ultimately unable to assure himself that this blues song will cure the singer’s pain, thereby defying what Hughes championed in “Songs Called the Blues” as the uplifting humor that undergirds the blues ethos. Portraying Holiday as the epitome of despair, the poem is an invitation to mourn the tragedy that she symbolizes.

In the second and third stanza, Hughes positions the speaker as a viewer who watches and listens to Holiday’s performance on the television screen. In part, the “dust in her hair” and “bits of dust in her eyes” represent the poor transmission of the images on the grainy screen that make Holiday appear ghostly; in part, these images function metaphorically to suggest the decay and desperation that the speaker ascribes to Holiday: “The sorrow that I speak of / Is dusted with despair.” The third stanza furthers this portrait of an enervated Holiday, whose potential is threatened by personal sorrow. She is “cold” and “dusted with despair,” and even the television performance reveals her “bitter” attitude. Referring back to his assertions about women’s blues, it is clear that Hughes identifies Holiday’s songs of heartbreak with desperation rather than the
resilience that he values, and he thus memorializes Holiday as a disembodied ghost whose “muted trumpet” of a voice still “shimmers” but otherwise lacks any sense of hope.

Beyond foreshadowing Holiday’s demise, “Song for Billie Holiday” also raises some crucial questions about the representation of black celebrities, particularly in light of the technological changes occurring in the post-WWII era. When “Song for Billie Holiday” was published, Holiday was at the height of her fame, and her private struggles were widely reported by the media. As Stuart Nicholson notes, a series of articles published after Holiday’s release from jail in 1947 “told of her fall from grace, her addiction, and her cure culminating in her Carnegie concerts [1947]” (170). Because she continued to struggle with drug addiction, the narrative of “her cure” faded quickly, and what remained was the image of “someone only in control of herself on stage” (170).

Although Hughes never mentions Holiday’s heroin addiction, her arrest and imprisonment in 1947 and her subsequent narcotics arrest in 1949 undoubtedly influenced his representation of her. His portrayal of Holiday as ghostly, for example, is most likely informed by the widespread accounts of Holiday’s drug abuse, but, incorporating television into the poem, Hughes likewise conveys a sense of skepticism about the ways in which the media obscures the “real.”

Thus, while I agree with Feinstein that the concluding “Where?” of the poem represents a search for a song that is able to “cut through this haze of depression” (49-50), the poem’s conclusion similarly documents the intervention of the medium of
television—an industry dominated almost exclusively by white men— in public perceptions of Holiday and other African-American performers. Responding to a televised Holiday, Hughes illuminates the mainstream media’s role in reframing, and perhaps adulterating, the transmission of the song and its singer and, by extension, the blues itself. Shedding light on the changing relationship between live and televised performances, he suggests that this distance actually heightens Holiday’s physical deterioration: the poor transmission and grainy screen make her appear ghostly. From this perspective, his final question “Where?” elucidates a broader and more ambiguous concern about the ways in which African-American performers like Holiday are obscured as television, and, in a technological age, all forms of media transmute their public personae. Therefore, at the same time that Hughes suggests that Holiday’s songs of heartbreak and sorrow do not accord with the definition of the blues that he personally champions, he expresses an implicit concern with the white media’s role in shaping and even distorting black celebrities’ images and legacies.

As will be evident in the next chapter, the themes in “Song for Billie Holiday” forecast many of the ideological and aesthetic issues raised by Black Arts Movement writers. For example, Hughes sets the stage for debates about which African-American icons and cultural forms most effectively represent black resistance to white oppression. Predictably, Holiday did not fare well under this cultural nationalist paradigm that privileged clear messages of strength and defiance, which again Hughes anticipates in the gender distinctions that he makes as he theorizes men’s and women’s blues. Moreover, Hughes’s implication that television distorts Holiday’s image and thereby contributes to

37 In Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948, J. Fred MacDonald notes that when George Norford joined NBC in the late 1950s, he was the first African-American television producer and executive (161).
the mythology of her tragic victimhood represents a pervasive anxiety among politically-conscious African Americans about the mainstream appropriation of black culture and historically black mediums like the blues—concerns that will become amplified over the next two decades.

**“whispered a song along the keyboard”**

Whereas Hughes anticipates Holiday’s impending demise, Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” was written shortly after her death in 1959. First published in *The New American Poetry* (1960, ed. Donald Hall), by the time the poem was re-published in O’Hara’s collection *Lunch Poems* (1964), Holiday had been dead for five years, but her sociocultural importance, particularly within the white hipster and gay community of which O’Hara was part, had not faded. “The talents of Billie Holiday were uniquely suited to the tastes of jazz hipsters,” Jackson notes, “she was a young, beautiful black woman from the ghetto with a voice as contradictorily tough and sweet as her personality, a singer who thought like a horn” (100). During the late 1940s and 1950s, Holiday gained cache among a culturally diverse but increasingly white group of writers and artists who considered themselves to be, like Holiday, outside of the mainstream.

Literarily, the decade following WWII also marks the institutionalization of the New Critical tenets of emotional detachment and universality, which the Beats as well as O’Hara and his New York School colleagues generally opposed. These “New American” poets sought artistic modes that would incorporate and respond to popular culture and

---

38 This term comes from Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* (1960) in which he brought together poets associated with these schools—the Beats, the New York School, the San Francisco Renaissance—in one anthology.
sociocultural phenomena in post-WWII America. In the process, they fetishized Holiday and other jazz figures, namely Charlie Parker, as esteemed cultural icons whose marginalization was not to be lamented, as it was for Bishop, but celebrated as an inspiring alternative to mainstream banality. Of course, as many critics have pointed out, African-American musicians such as Holiday and Parker did not feel the sense of liberation that was being projected onto them, quite the opposite in fact. Accordingly, as in Hughes’s poem, O’Hara renders Holiday a disembodied and tragic ghost, but his representation is framed in romantic terms, signifying yet another revision of Holiday’s legacy in which she becomes a beloved icon for a subculture of gay men and white hipsters.

Curiously, “The Day Lady Died” is the most widely anthologized poem about Holiday and, like “Ma Rainey,” is often mentioned in biographies of her life; however, Holiday’s identity as a historical figure here remains one of the most elusive out of all the “Billie Holiday poems” published to date. Similar to this chapter’s other tributes, O’Hara neglects Holiday’s physical appearance entirely. Beyond the title, which references her moniker, Lady Day, Holiday is not even invoked until the poem’s twenty-fifth line. The preceding lines describe the speaker’s quotidian errands—eating lunch, going to the bank, buying gifts for friends—until he finally enters a tobacco shop where a newspaper reminds him of Holiday’s death. While the speaker initially represses his emotional response to the tragedy by focusing on these rather mundane distractions, when he sees

---

39 See James Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* for a comprehensive overview of this period and the transition from the aesthetic and political influence of the Popular Front to the increasing dominance of New Critical thought for both Anglo- and African-American writers (31-37).

40 As an example of this poem’s influence on Holiday’s legacy, in their biographies, Stuart Nicholson (*Billie Holiday*) and Farah Jasmine Griffin (*In Search of Billie Holiday: If You Can’t Be Free, Be A Mystery*) both include brief summaries of “The Day Lady Died.”
“a NEW YORK POST with her face on it” (25), the image sends him into a physical panic:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of

leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT

while she whispered a song along the keyboard

to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing. (26-29)

Many critics have argued that the tension in this poem lies, not in the continuity between the speaker’s observations and the elegiac memory of Holiday, but rather in the disjuncture between the seemingly random details that precede his memory of Holiday and the memory itself.  

However, I agree with John Lowney that O’Hara builds to the climax of the memory through a number of cultural references to persecuted individuals—“the poets / in Ghana,” Paul Verlaine, Brendan Behan, Jean Genet (9-16)—thereby evoking a history of imperialism and oppression that is linked to the injustices that Holiday similarly experienced as an African-American female celebrity who struggled with drug addiction (“‘The Post-Anti-Aesthetic’” 257-260). Read this way, O’Hara’s allusions provide a historical and sociocultural context for understanding Holiday’s troubled life and premature death.

When the speaker remembers her performance, he is then able to assuage his anxiety about these historical and contemporary injustices through the cathartic relief that Holiday’s voice inspires. Though O’Hara dismissively described the style of poems like “The Day Lady Died” as “I did this I did that,” it is clear that he strives to elicit a similarly powerful response that will memorialize Holiday not only as a victim of

---

41 For example, in American Poetry and Culture: 1945-1980, Robert Van Hallberg argues, “The power of the poem lies in its inadvertent, banal approach to an earnest genre: the subject of the elegy does not even emerge until the poem is nearly complete” (178).
discrimination but also as an inspiring performer,\textsuperscript{42} even as the formal tropes of the blues are conspicuously absent. Accordingly, Griffin points out that O’Hara’s lack of punctuation before the final line leaves the reader feeling as breathless as the speaker—in a sense, staging the breathtaking profundity of Holiday’s performance (\textit{If You Can’t Be Free} 153). Unlike Hughes’s blues stanza or even Bishop’s various “songs,” O’Hara does not attempt to render Holiday’s vocal style on the page, but his description of the way she “whispered a song along the keyboard” does suggest the character of her late recordings, which Nicholson describes as the “‘less is more’ ethic” (209). Venerating her performance at this late point in her career, O’Hara pays tribute to Holiday not as a fading star but as a singer who remains powerfully emotive in her delivery. It is likely that the performance that O’Hara recounts was in 1957 when, as Nicholson describes, “she was in the audience with Mal Waldron [her pianist at the time], enjoying a few late-night drinks when she was invited to sit in and sing . . . She sang until 4 a.m.” (210). This was only two years before Holiday passed away, and the years of alcoholism and drug use were taking their toll on her voice and on her physical condition generally. According to O’Hara, she was still able to take the crowd’s breath away even though, or perhaps because, her voice was only a “whisper.”

Recalling this impromptu performance at the Five Spot, O’Hara’s poem also documents Holiday’s significance for a particular subculture and, in the process, buttresses her image as a gay icon.\textsuperscript{43} As Jackson observes, “Her hardened attitude toward

\textsuperscript{42} O’Hara’s description of “I did this, I did that” is quoted so frequently in descriptions of his work that the original source is never cited. I quote the \textit{Heath Anthology of American Literature’s} biographical note composed by David Bergman (2640).

\textsuperscript{43} Holiday is particularly popular among gay men, as Alexander Doty notes in \textit{Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture} (76).
life’s disappointments was familiar to gay men who, like Holiday, were increasingly forced to recalibrate their own aspirations and desires in the face of society’s restrictions on sexuality and emotional expression” (104). “The Day Lady Died” affirms this sense of empathetic identification, while O’Hara also suggests the kind of cross-cultural exchange that Holiday’s performances—perhaps more than those of Rainey and Smith whose audiences were less diverse—engendered. Correspondingly, David Román elucidates the role of performance in facilitating social change:

Performance’s liveness and impermanence allow for a process of exchange—between artists and audiences, between the past and the present—where new social formations emerge. These new social formations constitute a counterpublic that offers both respite and change from normative structures of being and belonging assumed both in the national culture and in the subcultural worlds that form a part of it. (1-2)

As an Anglo-American homosexual paying homage to a bisexual African-American woman, O’Hara’s poem not only evinces the “new social formations” that Holiday’s performances made possible, he encourages the subversion of heteronormative and racially-segregated social structures through the memory he recounts on the printed page, thereby emphasizing the aspect of Holiday’s sociocultural legacy that was of most importance to O’Hara.

Moreover, as Michael Magee rightly points out, “what we have in the milieu of the Five Spot is an instance where artists involved in different mediums were consciously tampering with each other—consciously transgressing the law of genre—in order to invent new forms of democratic symbolic action. Insofar as O'Hara’s ‘The Day Lady
Died’ represents activity in the Five Spot, it is one of these forms” (714). When O’Hara recounts Holiday’s performance at the Five Spot, rather than the many other venues in which she performed, he stages this artistic dialogue, and, as a result, “The Day Lady Died” memorializes a version of Holiday as a catalyst for breaking down barriers of race, gender, and sexuality. O’Hara does not allude to “Strange Fruit,” nor does he characterize Holiday as a proto-feminist or a voice for racial justice, as Bishop does. He hardly describes Holiday at all. Instead, O’Hara invokes Holiday as a romantically tragic “whispering” voice and affirms the camaraderie that he and other marginalized individuals felt with her.

O’Hara’s interpretation of Holiday’s iconic meaning—one that is rendered through the lens of his sociocultural perspective and experiences—is, in turn, passed on to generations of readers who encounter “The Day Lady Died” in numerous anthologies and university classrooms. Consequently, Holiday the complex historical figure, who was oppressed and empowered, glamorous and down-to-earth, personally unstable and artistically in control, recedes into the background. As Griffin notes, Holiday “becomes part of the poem, the new thing, which then becomes part of the lexicon that defines her. Because we have access to the poem and not to ‘Holiday,’ the poem transforms the very meaning of Billie Holiday” (If You Can’t Be Free 151). In this regard, “Ma Rainey,” “The Day Lady Died,” and all of these early tributes are similar in their treatment of blues woman as mutable symbols who speak more to the perspectives of particular poets than to the lived experiences of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday. Mostly silent and disembodied, these women are invested with a range of sociocultural values that both accord with and depart from the provocative personae that they cultivated for themselves.
As shall see in the chapters that follow, these symbolic representations lay the groundwork for subsequent generations of poets to reshape this study’s icons into figures that speak to their own aesthetic, sociocultural, and political concerns.
Chapter 2: The Black Arts-Era Blues Tribute Poem

At the 1964 Newport Folk Festival, a recently “rediscovered” Skip James played to a predominantly white crowd who sat in silent awe, some of them, according to the blues scholar Sam Charters, rose “half to their feet to watch Skip’s fingers” (qtd. in Adelt 40). To young white middle-class men and women seeking to cast off the yoke of their suburban upbringings, aging blues men like James loomed large as embodiments of “authenticity” in the face of the popular culture consumerism that they had been raised on. As Ulric Adelt observes of the 1960s blues revival, “Attempts by young white audiences to reject white middle-class culture, racism, colonialism, and fascism sometimes took form in a nostalgic re-creation of a safe blackness that predated the civil rights movement” (2). The blues revival, which was closely linked with the 1960s folk revival, reflected the same kind of romantic primitivism that Elizabeth Bishop previously revealed in her poetic construction of Billie Holiday. As the decade wore on, this nostalgic look backwards became anathema to many young black Americans disillusioned by the lack of systematic sociopolitical and economic change in the wake of the Civil Rights movement and increasingly sympathetic to the defiance and militancy of the Black Power/Black Arts movements. These two diametrically opposed perspectives on the blues past indicate the politicized roles into which blues icons were cast during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Accordingly, this chapter includes brief readings of tributes by the Anglo-American poets Hayden Carruth and John Berryman and then focuses on tributes penned by politically-conscious African-American poets: Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, Al Young, and Alvin Aubert. This latter group was affiliated with
or, in the case of Young and Aubert, responding to the ideologies and aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement (BAM or the Movement), and they brought these perspectives to bear on their representations of the blues and, more specifically, Rainey, Smith, Holiday, and Leadbelly. In this regard, the discussion that follows first surveys the ideologies circulating among BAM participants and then explores the ways in which poets invest blues artists with values that both reflect and collide with these ideologies. For example, I consider the central thematic distinctions between Carruth’s and Berryman’s poetic constructions of Holiday and Smith respectively and those of their African-American counterparts, as well as the implications of all of their portraits in terms of the legacies of blues men and women. Moreover, I examine the ways in which tributes composed during this period, particularly those by African Americans, offer an alternative narrative of this study’s icons that engages and revises the history of the blues—a history that, up until this time, had been written largely by white men.

Galvanized by domestic and international liberation movements, BAM adherents proclaimed the need for a separate black nation that would unify and empower the

---

44 Though Robert Johnson was becoming more well-known during this period, to my knowledge, no poetry dedicated to him appears until the 1980s.

45 Until quite recently, the music industry and music criticism was dominated by Anglo-Americans, and Black Arts poets were, in a sense, writing against a history of white musical interpretation of black music. Specifically in regard to the blues, ethnomusicologists John and his son Alan Lomax as well as the music historian Sam Charters were some of the first critics of the blues. Interpreting the blues through the lens of white outsiders, they characterized the music as essentially apolitical. As Paul Garon notes, “98% of these field workers [blues researchers] were white,” and thus he speculates that black performers were reticent to share their sociopolitical perspectives with these researchers: “Perhaps it was pride that made it impossible for them to admit to themselves that their black compatriots were holding something back and held deep secrets that were still beyond sharing with whites” (199). Although Brown and Hughes wrote essays about the blues that closely attended to the music’s sociocultural and political significance for African Americans, as previously noted, Amiri Baraka’s (then LeRoi Jones) Blues People: Negro Music in White America (1963) was the first full-length study of the blues written by an African American. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Blues People interprets the blues specifically through the lenses of race and class, arguably in response to Baraka’s white predecessors’ and contemporaries’ assessments of black musical traditions as expressions of universal rather than sociopolitical and material concerns.
African-American masses. In his oft-quoted essay “The Black Arts Movement,” Larry Neal announces these aims: “The Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics” (Visions 62). Gwendolyn Brooks delineates further the Black Arts dictum about the role of literature: “Black literature is literature BY blacks, ABOUT blacks, directed TO blacks. ESSENTIAL black literature is the distillation of black life. Black life is different from white life” (3). Neal’s and Brooks’ unequivocal assertions reveal the separatist and racially essentialist underpinnings of the new black aesthetic.

The rigidity of racial binaries that Brooks sets forth also coincide with the strict gender roles that BAM leaders espoused, which, modeled after traditional hierarchies, elevated black men to positions of power at the expense of women who also subscribed to the Movement’s aims. As Patricia Hill Collins contends, “Within this interpretative framework, strong African American women in Black families and Black civil society were labeled deviant” (106-107). To evidence these claims, Collins quotes the de facto Black Arts leader Amiri Baraka: “We do not believe in ‘equality’ of men and women. . . . We say that a Black woman must first be able to inspire her man’” (107). Positioned in an auxiliary role, African-American women were viewed as part of the Black Power revolution but only insofar as they privileged and emboldened African-American men.

---

46 It is necessary to point out, as James Smethurst and others have, that the Black Power/Black Arts movements were not monolithic in terms of ideology or aesthetics. Smethurst writes, “from the beginning of the movement to its decline in the mid-1970s, Black Arts poetics could be more accurately described as a series of debates linked to ideological and institutional conflict and conversation rather than a constituent practice” (The Black Arts Movement 57). My purpose then is not to define BAM ideologies but to survey the dominant discourses informing poetic constructions of blues women and men.
Although none of the tributes examined in this chapter explicitly critique blues women for failing to embody this articulation of the ideal black woman, these rigid gender roles informed, at the very least inadvertently, Black Arts poets’ constructions of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday. For example, it follows that since women were expected to adopt these subservient roles, and clearly these professional blues women had not, they were often constructed as tragic victims or martyrs, which highlighted the need for strong black men to protect women from racism and, in the case of hedonistic blues women, their supposed deviance. This gender dichotomy was not unique to Black Arts writers—as we shall see shortly, Hayden Carruth’s poem “Billie Holiday” (1964) similarly characterizes Holiday as tragically weak. Yet, where Carruth omits a connection between Holiday’s woes and systematic forces of discrimination, Sanchez portrays Holiday as a victim of oppression and a foil through which she heralds a new era of revolutionary social change. Correspondingly, in Amiri Baraka’s “LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH” (1969) and Jayne Cortez’s “Lead” (1969), it is the blues man Leadbelly who represents a historical example of black cultural defiance of white oppression.

Indeed, as the cultural wing of the Black Power movement, Black Arts leaders closely considered the propagandistic value of both black cultural forms and famous individuals, particularly musicians, distinguishing between those that they saw as passive or accommodationist and those that most aptly expressed an anti-assimilationist,

---

47 For socio-politically-conscious African-American men who had been systematically dehumanized and persecuted by the dominant white majority for centuries, black male empowerment was viewed as a crucial first step in uplifting the black community as a whole. Ironically then, Black Power/Black Arts leaders often ended up reproducing the gender hierarchies put into place and reinforced by the white male power structure that they challenged. For a comprehensive account of gender politics within BAM, see James Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (84-89), and Patricia Hill Collins’s *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (106-112). Also, see Cherise A. Pollard’s “Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women’s Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement” (*New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* [173-186]) for a look at women poets’ subversions of these gender hierarchies.
revolutionary ethos. Thus, as Kimberly Benston and others have noted, the Black Arts period was pivotal in further establishing the musician tribute poem, especially “the Coltrane poem,” as a subgenre in the African-American poet’s literary repertoire. While Amiri Baraka and several of his colleagues, such as Neal, Cortez, and Kalamu ya Salaam, continued to respect the blues as an important historical form of black aesthetic resistance to white oppression, most Black Arts adherents, including Baraka and Neal, invested in free jazz as the true sound of the revolution. As Richard Gray argues, “The need to scream, to shout and fight rather than lament, has led some of these [Black Arts] poets at least to jettison those aspects of black culture which, they believe, might impede the revolutionary momentum. Among those aspects, the most notable are the music and spirit of the blues” (669). Black Arts writers nationwide were drawn to the artistically radical developments in free jazz, and, as they linked their own aesthetic and sociopolitical objectives to John Coltrane and other avant-garde musicians, they often disparaged the blues and its performers as anachronistic and, therefore, incongruous with the revolutionary aims of Black Power/Black Arts.

In his essay “Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function” (1968), for example, Us organization founder Maulana (Ron) Karenga asserts that “the blues are invalid; for they teach resignation” and “keep us in the past” (2090). Refuting this characterization, Larry Neal’s essay “The Ethos of the Blues” (1972) maintains that “the

---

48 Benston coined the term the “Coltrane poem” in his 1977 essay “Late Coltrane: A Re-membering of Orpheus” and discusses the development of this subgenre in terms of the aims of the Movement at length in Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism (2000). Although poets pay tribute to other free jazz players, Coltrane is certainly the most frequently invoked jazz musician during the Black Arts era. As Henry Lacey observes of this period, “the poem in homage to John Coltrane became an expected piece in the repertoire of the Black poet” (12). See Stephen Henderson’s Understanding the New Black Poetry (1972) for several examples: A. B. Spellman’s “Did John’s Music Kill Him,” Sonia Sanchez’s “a/ Coltrane/ poem,” Haki Madhubuti’s “Don’t Cry, Scream,” and Michael S. Harper’s Dear John, Dear Coltrane, to name a few.
blues are inherently defiant in their attitude toward life” (*Visions* 108). Though many Black Arts writers subscribed to Karenga’s view, both Neal and Baraka championed the blues as an important historical form of black aesthetic resistance to white oppression, but ultimately they vaunted free jazz as the contemporary sound of Black Power/Black Arts. As Baraka asserts in his autobiography, “It is no coincidence that people always associate John Coltrane and Malcom X, they are harbingers and reflectors of the same development. And so I, we, followed Trane” (259). Likewise, in *Visions of a Liberated Future*, Neal champions free jazz musicians for striving to create “another world view” (53). Neal and Baraka continued to insist on the historical significance of the blues, but blues musicians did not occupy the same exalted positions as their free jazz counterparts. Moreover, their investment in famous musicians who embodied masculine strength and defiance led many poets to portray blues women as victims or martyrs, whose often subtle acts of protest were not deemed militant enough. Even for poets like Al Young, who did not subscribe to the racial separatism and militancy of Black Power, Rainey still plays a key role in proclaiming a new era of black cultural pride and in assuring readers that the indignities that she suffered will no longer be tolerated. Alvin Aubert’s tributes to Smith then look forward to a post-Black Arts era through his emphasis on healing the historical wounds that her tragic death symbolized.

Formally, all of this chapter’s poets depart from blues song structures, as was the trend by the end of chapter 1. Exemplifying their desire to break free from the Western literary tradition, the African-American poets examined here incorporate many of the characteristic tropes of Black Arts poetry, specifically free verse forms, non-standard syntax, phonetic spellings, typographical experimentation, and occasionally scatological
language. Many of these poets also employ African American vernacular English and mobilize paralinguistic elements to emphasize the performativity of their poems. As they eschew written poetic conventions, these poets convey their desire to narrate this history in the oral performative mode of the blues men and women to whom they pay tribute. Still, their blues tributes are written texts published in collections and anthologies and distributed to readers who have mostly never heard them read aloud. Thus, a tension emerges between the oral and the written that has in fact characterized the blues tribute poem since its first iterations during the New Negro era. Rather than a firm break with the past then, this chapter’s tributes are best understood as evolving the blues tribute subgenre—a poetic tradition that has always reflected the exigencies of the age more than the innate qualities of the muse.

**Romanticizing the Blues: Hayden Carruth and John Berryman**

Published five years after Holiday’s death, Hayden Carruth’s eponymous “Billie Holiday” (1964) in many ways resembles O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” (1959) in its portrayal of Holiday as a romantically tragic figure:

Here lies a lady. Day was her double pain.

Pride and compassion equally gone wrong.

At night she sang, “Do you conceive my song?”

And answered in her torn voice, “Don’t explain.” (1-4)

Structured as an epitaph, this four-line poem puns on Holiday’s moniker, Lady Day, as well as “Don’t Explain,” one of her most famous torch songs, and interprets this song as an autobiographical transcript of her personal misfortunes. Through the double entendre
of the first line and the abba rhyme scheme, Carruth also formally gestures toward the blues, but the poem lacks the catharsis that the music typically provides. What exactly was amiss about Holiday’s “pride and compassion” remain ambiguous, but Carruth characterizes Holiday’s music as inextricably linked to her self-destructive lifestyle, including the masochistic relationship she sings of in “Don’t Explain”: “Two or three girls / Has he / That he likes as well as me,” and “He isn’t true / He beats me too.” While the third line leaves open the possibility that songs such as “Don’t Explain” were misunderstood by a public who could not “conceive” of the music’s underlying meaning, Carruth ultimately implicates Holiday’s behavior (not broader social injustices) as the cause of her demise. Memorializing Holiday as an embodiment of despair, Carruth’s portrait advances a stereotypical narrative of Holiday’s life and art and, in many ways, foreshadows the Holiday homages that Black Arts poets will pen just a few years later. Yet, where Carruth omits Holiday’s race and gender as root causes of her premature demise, Sonia Sanchez and Larry Neal implicate institutional racism, in particular, as the central reason for Holiday’s “double pain.” Indeed, the differences between who and what engendered Holiday’s suffering evince larger sociocultural divides between Anglo-Americans’ and African-Americans’ interpretations of Holiday’s legacy and, more broadly, the history of blues and jazz that were brought to light during this period.

Published in 1964 as part of 77 Dream Songs, John Berryman’s homage to Bessie Smith, “Dream Song 68,” more specifically represents the history from which his politically-conscious African-American counterparts sought to break free. Invoking “Miss Bessie” (2), Berryman casts Smith in a traditional muse role as a poetic inspiration, but, rather than linking his poetry and poetics to her directly, she becomes a creative
force that enlivens the blackface minstrel performance of Henry’s, the *Dream Songs*’s protagonist, unnamed friend:

so, as I say, the house is givin hell to

*Yellow Dog*, I blowin like it too

and Bessie always do

when she make a very big sound—after well,

no sound—I see she totterin—I cross which stage

even at Henry’s age

in 2-3 seconds: then we wait and see

I hear strange horns, Pinetop he hits some chords,

Charlie start *Empty Bed*,

they all start hangin Christmas on some tree

after trees thrown out—sick house’s white birds’,

black to the birds instead. (7-18)

Via this minstrel persona, Berryman celebrates Smith’s and the band’s musical virtuosity as they play “*Yellow Dog*” and “*Empty Bed*” and “all start hangin Christmas on some tree.” Performing what he imagines to be the behavior and speech of a black man, including the use of dialect, Berryman conveys the titillating thrill of watching Smith and her band play the “strange” sounds of the blues. Instead of emphasizing the viability of Smith’s music and persona to speak to the sociopolitical exigencies of the Civil Rights/Black Power era, however, Berryman (perhaps inadvertently) suggests nostalgia for a bygone time when racial hierarchies were more firmly intact. Moreover, rather than
casting Smith in the role of a community spokesperson, as his African-American counterparts frequently do, Berryman portrays Smith as a “happy go lucky” black entertainer, thereby assuaging his racial anxiety and affirming his own privileged position as a white man by, to borrow a phrase from Toni Morrison, “playing in the dark.”

There has been much critical debate about Berryman’s supposedly noble intentions and what he produced on the pages of Dream Songs, particularly because, at the same time that he incorporates racial caricatures, Berryman addresses racial inequities and supports aspects of the Civil Rights movement underway as he was writing. I have to concur then with Aldon Lynn Nielsen’s assessment that Berryman “lampoons the very people whose cause he advocates” (143)—contradictory impulses that similarly manifest among the white audiences of the aforementioned blues revival. Regardless of his intentions, Berryman’s deployment of minstrel stereotypes and poorly rendered African American vernacular English demonstrates the entrenched racism that African-American writers were up against in their efforts to counter claims of white superiority and bolster black pride, and thus “Dream Song 68” serves as a useful counterpoint to African-American poets’ representations of the blues and blues icons that the next section takes up. None of the Black Arts poets allude to Berryman specifically, but these poets’ insistence on claiming black musical icons as part of their heritage while simultaneously

49 Since The Dream Songs was published, numerous critics have grappled with the racial implications of this work. The debate continues today, particularly in light of the African-American poet Kevin Young’s stated admiration of this text in his Introduction to John Berryman: Selected Poems (2004), a collection he edited: “Berryman explores the ‘blackness’ of whiteness in a way I have come to admire—even if, from another angle he might be said to replicate in all too familiar a fashion the constant use of blackness by whites to say the unsayable” (xxiv-xxv). It should also be noted, however, that Young specifically identifies “Dream Song 68” as an example of Berryman’s clumsy rendering of the blues aesthetic: “He [Berryman] is at his best not when he attempts to write directly about the blues (as in Dream Song 68 about Bessie Smith) but when he captures something of their tone, humor, and iconic survival” (xxiv). See Peter Maber’s article “So-called black’: Reassessing John Berryman’s Blackface Minstrelsy” (Arizona Quarterly 64.4 [2008]) for an overview of the critical debate surrounding Dream Songs.
marking a clear break with the racist past that “Dream Song 68” evokes suggests that they had his and other Anglo-American poets’ tributes in mind as they represented the blues and its icons to a new generation of politically-conscious African-American artists and readers.

“Pay me off, savages”

Before turning to Amiri Baraka’s “LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH” (1969) and Jayne Cortez’s “Lead” (1969), it is necessary to provide a brief biographical account of Huddie Ledbetter’s (Leadbelly) life and art in order to later consider which aspects Baraka and Cortez emphasize and omit. Leadbelly was born in West Texas in 1888, and between there and Shreveport, Louisiana, he learned to play the blues, eventually favoring the twelve-string Stella guitar that can be seen in the most widely circulated pictures of him. His rise to fame was atypical in many respects, and, like Smith and Holiday (not to mention Robert Johnson), the legends about, in this case, his crimes and the subsequent prison pardons that set him free have historically dominated his legacy. Leadbelly, who was using the alias Walter Boyd at the time, was first imprisoned in Sugarland Prison, Texas, in 1918 after being convicted of killing Will Stafford in a fight over a woman, and one legend goes that Leadbelly pled for a prison pardon from Governor Pat Neff in a song that he wrote and performed for Neff, who was so moved by the song that he granted it. In The Life and Legend of Leadbelly, Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell demonstrate that only parts of this story are true—Neff did eventually pardon Leadbelly but only after his minimum sentence had almost been met (87). Leadbelly was again imprisoned in Angola Prison, Louisiana, in 1930 for assaulting a white man, Dick
Ellet, with a knife, and a similar scenario occurred. This time Leadbelly was in Angola prison, and this is where his fateful performance for the famous ethnomusicologist John Lomax and his son, Alan, took place. Again, Leadbelly pled his case to Governor O. K. Allen in a song that he wrote, and again he was eventually released. As the legend goes, John Lomax actually delivered the song to the Governor and pled Leadbelly’s case for him; however, according to prison records, Leadbelly was released in 1934 because of what was called a “double good time” provision that did not involve Lomax’s intervention on his behalf (120).

Upon his release from Angola, Leadbelly began working for Lomax, first helping him to record other blues artists and eventually going on tour with him. Lomax’s promotional support allowed Leadbelly to gain public recognition, but Leadbelly later felt that Lomax had exploited him and sued Lomax to recuperate lost profits. Though it is clear that the Lomax-Leadbelly partnership financially benefitted the producer more than the performer, Leadbelly was able to build on the recognition he received and eventually became a nationally-known blues figure. Yet, his relationship to black audiences remained strained throughout his life. While Leadbelly recorded some songs that championed the rights of the poor and disenfranchised—“Equality of the Negro,” “We’re in the Same Boat Brother,” “Bourgeois Blues,” and “Scottsboro Boys,” for instance—his refusal to take a more active role in protesting Jim Crow segregation and discrimination led many African Americans to consider him an “Uncle Tom” (Wolfe and Lornell 246). The 1935 March of Time reel that stars him and Lomax does little to refute these charges. At one point in the film, Leadbelly says to Lomax, “I’ll drive you all over the United States and I’ll sing all songs for you. You be my big boss and I’ll be your man” (qtd. in F.
Davis 167). Of course, Leadbelly’s subservience in this film is undoubtedly performative, rather than representative of his fawning devotion to Lomax. As an African-American ex-convict in a pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era, Leadbelly had little choice but to perform this role if he wanted to achieve even a modicum of success in a music industry controlled by white men.

Nonetheless, Leadbelly was unable to convince most African Americans that he and his music were progressive, particularly because his blues style was based on an “older music that predated both blues and jazz” (Wolfe and Lornell 2). In fact, it was this same antiquated style that propelled Leadbelly to fame during the 1940s in New York’s predominantly white folk music scene. In the immediate years after his death in 1949 from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease), Leadbelly’s popularity grew with white audiences, particularly as a number of white folk musicians began to cover his songs; for example, the Weavers’ version of “‘Irene’ became the biggest popular song of 1950” (Wolfe and Lornell 257). Until the late 1960s, however, it seems that many African Americans were still reticent to celebrate his achievements,50 which makes both Amiri Baraka’s and Jayne Cortez’s tributes to him so important in understanding the evolution of his posthumous legacy.

As with Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes before him, Baraka theorized the blues, most famously in his book-length sociological history *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963). Though he has publicly evolved his sociopolitical outlook

50 An exception to this was the friendship that Leadbelly struck up during the 1930s with the novelist Richard Wright, whose article “Huddie Leadbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People” for the *Daily Worker* (August 12, 1937) praised the singer and sharply criticized Lomax as engaging in “one of the most amazing swindles in American history.” Wolfe and Lornell note that this article “furthered the singer’s reputation in left-wing circles,” though again these circles were dominated by whites (200). They also point out that Wright was “one of the few black friends the singer had” (200-201).
perhaps more than any other major American poet, the poem “LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH” bears the influence of the historical account of the blues that Baraka provides in Blues People; thus, as with Brown and Hughes, it is profitable to briefly consider his statements as a lens through which to view the poem. Like many blues theorists, Baraka holds that the epistemology of the blues exists in the contemporary era through its manifestations in jazz:

Blues is the parent of all legitimate jazz, and it is impossible to say exactly how old blues is—certainly no older than the presence of Negroes in the United States. It is a native American music, the product of the black man in this country; or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives. (Amiri Baraka Reader 21).

Unlike his Anglo-American predecessors, such as Sam Charters, who characterized the blues as essentially apolitical, Baraka makes an explicit link between the development of the blues and the history of African-American bondage. Furthermore, reflecting the racial essentialism that undergirds his Black Arts-era work, he claims the blues as an exclusively black form of musical expression: “The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle-class blues singer. The materials of blues were not available to the white American, even though some strange circumstances might prompt him to look for them. It was as if these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood” (Amiri Baraka Reader 37). Baraka insists that only African Americans can authentically render the blues

---

51 In his The Poetry of the Blues (1963), Sam Charters argues that the blues “is not social protest, or even complaint,” though he does acknowledge that “in its implications there is reflected some of the difficulty of the continual adjustment to the insult and the injustice of the color line” (156).
because they carry with them the oppressive history of enslavement and Jim Crow that inspired the music in the first place. Finally, as is already clear, *Blues People* privileges the working-class ethos of the blues, disparaging middle-class African Americans for abandoning what Baraka views as an essential black cultural form that eschews assimilation: “The blues impulse was a psychological correlative that obscured the most extreme ideas of *assimilation* for most Negroes, and made any notion of the complete abandonment of the traditional black culture an unrealizable possibility” (33).

Historically, Baraka argues, blues preserved a distinctively African-American worldview, and, as will be evident in his portrait of Leadbelly, it is the defiantly black and proudly proletarian emphases of the blues that he champions most wholeheartedly.

“LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH” first appeared in *Black Magic Poetry* (1969), the first of Baraka’s Black Arts-era collections. In perhaps the most famous poem in this volume “Black Art,” Baraka poignantly proclaims the militaristic, black nationalist outlook that would characterize not only his poetry for the next several years but a whole generation of like-minded artists and writers who viewed the poem as a rallying cry: “We want ‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems” and “We want a black poem / And a Black world” (19-20, 50-51). As the most-well known and vocal BAM initiator and leader, Baraka is a central figure in any examination of this period. Most importantly in terms of the blues tribute poem, as a former Beat poet and a friend of Frank O’Hara’s, Baraka also serves as a bridge between the dominant forms and themes in the work of “New American” poets, including their interest in jazz and blues, and Black Arts poets’ defiance of Anglo-European poetic conventions. Baraka derived his poetics, for example, from the post-WWII period and adapted the formal influence of avant-garde Anglo-
American poets\textsuperscript{52}—Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams, in particular—to the new black aesthetic. Accordingly, “LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH” bears little formal resemblance either to the prototypical language and structure of a blues song or, for that matter, to the work of his African-American tribute predecessors: Brown, O’Higgins, Hayden, and Hughes. Thematically, however, Baraka links contemporary black liberation struggles to Leadbelly and his turn-of-the-century blues style, characterizing the man and his music as symbols of historical resistance to white oppression.

Although the poem’s capitalized title (the only one in \textit{Black Magic Poetry}) reads like a billboard announcement, thus implying Leadbelly’s commercial appeal, Baraka pays tribute to Leadbelly as a spokesman for the concerns of the black proletariat. Arguably in response to the blues and folk revivals occurring among middle-class white Americans during the 1960s, Baraka reshapes Leadbelly’s cultural legacy so that he is remembered not as a popular figure among white audiences but as an emblem of racial pride. The poem’s Leadbelly persona thus inscribes, or autographs, his vision of a world in which African Americans subvert the white male master narrative and devise their own history and future:

\begin{quote}
Pat your foot

and turn

the corner. Nat Turner, dying wood
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52}In the Introduction to the \textit{The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader}, William J. Harris argues, “Baraka’s years in Greenwich Village had made him a master of avant-garde technique that he utilized in his own work and passed on to younger black artists such as Nikki Giovanni and Haki Madhubuti. Ironically, avant-garde ideas of form cohered perfectly with the new black artist’s need to express his or her own oral traditions; the free verse and the eccentric typography of the white avant-garde were ideal vehicles for black oral expression and experience” (xxvii).
of the church. Our lot
is vacant. Bring the twisted myth
of speech. The boards brown and falling
away. The metal bannisters cheap and
rattly. Clean new Sundays. We thought
it possible to enter
the way of the strongest.

But it is rite that the world’s ills
erupt as our own. Right that we take
our own specific look into the shapely
blood of the heart. (1-14)

Referencing Nat Turner, who claimed that his 1831 slave rebellion was ordained by God,53 Baraka describes a Christian church now bereft of hope and spiritual solace. Once its doctrine may have served to inspire African-American opposition to white oppression, but, as the religion imposed upon the slaves by their white masters, Baraka implies that the function of Christianity within the black community must now be reevaluated. In the second stanza, the Leadbelly persona calls upon his audience to look into the “shapely / blood of the heart” and determine its own collective future—this is both a necessary ritual (a “rite”) and a moral imperative (“right”) in order to realize an empowered future.

Moreover, as the speaker/Leadbelly continuously invokes the collective “we,” he affirms

53 Nat Turner attributed his slave rebellion to a series of visions from God. In his third vision, he was told to attack his enemies: “I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent. . . I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons” (“Nat Turner’s Rebellion”).
both the racially essentialist, communal worldview that undergirds the Black Arts aesthetic and what Tony Bolden describes as the blues musician’s “exalted position in working-class African-American communities” (48).

Juxtaposing the dilapidated sanctuary of the church with the spiritual solace offered instead by the blues, as the poem progresses, Baraka then limns Leadbelly’s music as a historical example of the “traditional black culture” that he delineates in *Blues People*:

The possibilities of music. First
that it does exist. And that we do,
in that scripture of rhythms. The earth,
I mean the soil, as melody. The fit you need,
the throes. To pick it up and cut
away what does not singularly express.

Need.
Motive.
The delay of language.

A strength to be handled by giants. (22-31)
Baraka imagines Leadbelly’s blues as a primal outgrowth of the relationship between the singer and the natural world that surrounds him. Because of his innate talent, he is able to gather these natural materials and “cut / away what does not singularly express” into a poignantly resonant music that offers the spiritual solace (“that scripture of rhythms”)
that the church cannot adequately provide. The following stanza’s terse statements are more obtuse and suggestive of epistemological concerns about language’s ability to articulate human experience. At the same time, these statements formally model the kind of stripped-down approach that Baraka celebrates in Leadbelly’s blues. He has “cut / away” extraneous language so that only the essential words—“Need. / Motive.”—are laid bare. Elevating Leadbelly to the stature of a “giant,” Baraka praises Leadbelly and his music as symbols of a specifically African-American art and worldview, rather than as a folk star among white intellectuals.

By the poem’s conclusion, Baraka has then transformed Leadbelly the historical figure into a powerful rhetorician who proclaims,

The possibilities of statement. I am saying, now,
what my father could not remember
to say. What my grandfather
was killed
for believing.

Pay me off, savages.

Build me an equitable human assertion.

One that looks like a jungle, or one that looks like the cities of the West. But I provide the stock. The beasts and myths.

The City’s Rise!

(And what is history, then? An old deaf lady)
burned to death
Advancing the same proletarian and racially exclusive perspective that he delineated in *Blues People*, Baraka suggests that, though the father “could not remember” the blues worldview, it is now up to the son (the Leadbelly persona) to revive it among contemporary African Americans. Subverting the historical connotations of the term “savages” so that, instead of referencing people of non-European descent, it describes white imperialists and slave owners, the speaker/Leadbelly demands retribution or “an equitable human assertion” to account for the centuries of oppression. He then envisions a future in which a new mythology (“I provide the stock”) derived from a blues epistemology supplants the white Western narrative of the past. While the final lines underscore the importance of acknowledging America’s violent history of lynching and racial terror, which is aptly represented by the torture of one of the most marginalized members of society—a disabled, elderly African-American woman (“old deaf lady / burned to death / in South Carolina”)—Baraka also insists on moving beyond this oppressive past and toward an empowered future (“The City’s Rise!”). Through the Leadbelly persona that he constructs, Baraka thus realizes both his own theories about the blues’ historical importance and the aims of Black Power: self-determination, separatism, and pride.

There are, of course, many historical blues artists that Baraka could have chosen as the muse for this poem, Robert Johnson among them, for the poem itself reveals little about Leadbelly the historical figure. Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues that Baraka’s experiences in Louisiana while he was in the Air Force inspired the poem, which expresses in “lyrical terms” Baraka’s “quest for a wholeness of the black self” (*The
Journey Back 101). While this is likely part of the reason Baraka invoked Leadbelly, who grew up on the Texas-Louisiana border, there are other key biographical details that may explain Baraka’s choice of muse. For example, since Leadbelly’s music has been historically conceived of as a blues style uncontaminated by developments in mainstream (white) music, it serves as a suitable symbol of the African-American “authenticity” that Baraka imagines. Moreover, Leadbelly’s reputation as a fearless and often violent man accorded with the Black Power/Black Arts investment in masculine strength and defiance. As previously noted, Leadbelly was arrested and imprisoned several times, and one of these imprisonments was due to an attack on a white man during a racially-charged incident. After narrowly escaping a lynch mob, Leadbelly was sentenced to hard labor in Angola Prison, again the site of his first encounter with the Lomaxes (98-99). Given Baraka’s own militancy and belief in Malcom X’s dictum “by whatever means necessary,” it is likely that this part of Leadbelly’s biography appealed to Baraka and motivated him to reshape the singer into a proto-black nationalist figure.

Yet, while Leadbelly certainly had a violent temper and was opposed to racial oppression, he was not associated with confrontational statements of retribution, such as “Pay me off, savages,” that the poem’s persona announces. Leadbelly was also atypical in that he was “synonymous with the blues for most Americans, but had no black following to speak of” (F. Davis 165). Recognizing Leadbelly’s stature as a famous African American, who would be asked to give an autograph for example, Baraka intervenes in Leadbelly’s legacy as an “Uncle Tom” and reconstructs him as a historical voice of African-American resistance to Anglo-American hegemony—again, the central blues tenet that he champions in Blues People. Ironically, the “primitive” style that made
Leadbelly famous among white audiences is also what Baraka celebrates, suggesting for instance that Leadbelly derived his music from the natural landscape ("The earth / I mean the soil, as melody"). Certainly, Leadbelly learned the blues in the rural South, but he recognized playing the blues as a means of escape from a life of sharecropping and, later, prison. Moreover, as Wolfe and Lornell point out, Leadbelly “wanted to be a star. . . . He wanted to make a hit record; he wanted to have his own radio show; he wanted to make it to Hollywood; he wanted to be lionized in Paris” (264). Similar to white audiences’ romanticization of Leadbelly’s music as an uncontaminated relic from a bygone era, Baraka memorializes Leadbelly as an authentic voice of the working-class black masses, neglecting the story of his fame that was made possible by his capitulations to Anglo-American record producers, such as John and Alan Lomax, and was largely sustained by well-educated white liberals. Given both his stated rejection of Western literary models, of which the female muse tradition is apart, and his investment in strict gender roles, it is also fitting that Baraka receives his inspiration from Leadbelly, rather than the blues women that his tribute predecessors favored. Indeed, though Leadbelly was not considered a political activist during his lifetime and the circumstances surrounding his celebrity are not easily situated into a black nationalist narrative, “LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH” reshapes Leadbelly’s posthumous legacy to suit Baraka’s own Black Arts vision of the past, present, and future.

“spit the blues out”

Published in her 1969 collection Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey’s Man’s Wares, Jayne Cortez’s “Lead” also represents Leadbelly’s rural roots and, more
specifically than Baraka, his supposed popularity among working-class African Americans. Incidentally, the poem that opens *Pissstained Stairs*, “The Road,” alludes to the apocryphal story of Bessie Smith’s death: “Bessie’s arm was torn / when the Blues come down mean” (12-13). While “Lead” more directly intervenes in Leadbelly’s legacy, “The Road” demonstrates Cortez’s broader interest in engaging blues history, which is unsurprising given Cortez’s long career as a blues and jazz performer with her own band the Firespitters. Many of the poems in *Pissstained Stairs* were written for the Watts Repertory Theatre to perform (Melhem 209), and the performative blues spirit of “Lead” is clear even on the printed page. Similar to Baraka’s “LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH,” however, her representation of Leadbelly is primarily informed by black nationalist concerns, rather than his lived experiences. Specifically, “Lead” evinces Cortez’s efforts to construct a proudly African-American artistic lineage distinct from the Anglo-American literary tradition—a poetic strategy that Stephen Henderson describes as honoring “the musician as subject/poem/history/myth” (47).

Referencing the mass migrations that millions of African Americans participated in, the poem begins with an image of Leadbelly’s home in the rural South and moves north to describe the significance of Leadbelly’s blues for poverty-stricken black laborers during the Depression:

They were like fish meal
poppin in a greasy skillet

Cracklin hot at sunrise

Watching for the lead
that turned Lead
A belly eye bucking
outhouses to chase
the hurt from mud
and put the knife to the other woman’s
cool papa please can I rub your thigh man
and ran like beans
through swamps & screams
up north
where the El broke off
and the urban nigguhs Blues
was stomped
right through the piss stained stairs
of the monkey man’s wares

When festered coons wrapped
a soulful purple meat grin
round a heartful
of black pride
comin out porkchops
on the depression line
that’d make any nigguh
bite back dust
eating black earth Delta
to hear Leadbelly
spit the Blues out. (1-30)

Utilizing African American vernacular English (“comin out”) along with the sound devices common to song, such as alliteration (“bite back”) and assonance (“stained stairs”), Cortez gestures toward several of the typical tropes of Leadbelly’s and other blues musicians’ performances. She also mobilizes one of the most common blues themes—the desire to flee one’s current circumstances—which often involves traveling north to escape the oppressive living conditions in the Jim Crow South. “Midnight Special,” a song Leadbelly made famous, refers to this desire for, in this case, the Midnight Special train line to deliver the singer from prison: “Let the Midnight Special shine her light on me / Let the Midnight Special shine her ever-loving light on me.”

Defying Karenga’s assertion that the blues “teach resignation,” Cortez characterizes Leadbelly’s performance as an act of protest. He does not accept the hardships of black life in the South or the North; his response is to “spit the Blues out.”

In many respects, “Lead” is true to the biographical facts of Leadbelly’s life. Yet, as with Baraka, Cortez also engages in a revisionist study, whereby Leadbelly becomes a defiant spokesman for the black community who provides an inspiring historical model for aesthetic resistance to Anglo-American oppression. For instance, the Leadbelly performance that Cortez stages facilitates and helps to maintain collective resistance to the hegemonic structures that have caused the factory workers to “bite back dust.” As they listen to him “spit the Blues out,” the African-American masses affirm their “heartful / of black pride” and self-worth in response to socioeconomic deprivation.
Positioning Leadbelly as an inspiration and forefather for her own socially-conscious poetry, Cortez represents him as a symbol of working-class African-American resistance who all Black Arts writers can embrace as part of their artistic and sociopolitical lineage. In a recent interview with Feinstein, Cortez lamented that “the blues have been abused. The black people who produce the blues have been abused” (54), and arguably “Lead” represents her efforts to heal these wounds by paying proper tribute to the cultural work that Leadbelly and other African-American blues men and women performed. Nonetheless, the history that Cortez narrates simultaneously misrepresents both the racial make-up of Leadbelly’s actual audiences of white liberals who valued his “primitive” music for its supposed authenticity and Leadbelly’s own inability to cultivate an African-American fan base during his lifetime. 54

Extolling Leadbelly as a figure who symbolizes black cultural pride is certainly accurate, but he was not popular among the northern migrants who suffered in “depression lines.” As Wolfe and Lornell observe, “Huddie probably sounded somewhat old-fashioned in 1935; his rough, raw ‘country blues’ sound would have been at home in rural Texas in 1925, but not with the black factory workers in Chicago a decade later” (159). Setting the latter half of “Lead” in a northern city, as the references to “urban Blues” and “the El” suggest, these appear to be exactly the factory workers to which Cortez refers. As previously noted, Leadbelly had “no black following to speak of” (F. Davis 165), and evoking the masses that Cortez describes as turning out with “black pride” to hear him play works on a rhetorical level but is misleading in terms of

Leadbely’s historical legacy. Elevating a historical blues figure to the pantheon of heroic

54 As already noted, the majority of Leadbelly’s fans were white liberals, and he was often dismissed, particularly by younger African-Americans, because he was not vocal enough about civil rights (Wolfe and Lornell 245-246).
black musicians, Cortez’s and Baraka’s Leadbelly tributes achieve a similar effect: Leadbelly becomes a distinctively African-American cultural icon whose music laid the groundwork for these poets’ own overtly political art, while his popularity among white audiences is reduced to a historical footnote. Moreover, their poems reveal a new phase in Leadbelly’s posthumous fame in which he finally receives endorsements from politically-conscious African Americans who had long dismissed him. As such, Baraka and Cortez revitalize Leadbelly and his music for contemporary readers, while simultaneously reshaping their interpretations of what they hear.

“blues ain’t culture”

While Leadbelly was embraced by African-American poets as a heroic artistic ancestor, blues women underwent a similar transformation in which they became anachronistic foils to the revolutionary present and future. As we already observed, Carruth constructs Holiday as the epitome of pain and suffering (“Day was her double pain”), but he neglects to link the hardships of her life to her marginalized social position—a connection that becomes the focus of Sonia Sanchez’s and Larry Neal’s representations. Baraka anticipated this interpretation of Holiday’s legacy in his poetic essay “Dark Lady of the Sonnets” (1962) in which he characterizes her music as expressive of both her personal struggles—“What, in her life, proposed such tragedy, such final hopeless agony?”—and the oppression she endured as an African-American woman: “A voice that grew from a singer’s instrument to a woman’s. And from that (those last records critics say are weak) to a black landscape of need, and perhaps,
suffocated desire. Sometimes you are afraid to listen to this lady” (Black Music 25). Frightened by what he perceives as her enervated state, Baraka not only conflates Holiday’s music and biography but overtly distances himself from the despair that he associates with her “black landscape of need.”

Similarly, Haki Madhubuti’s well-known tribute to Coltrane, “DON’T CRY, SCREAM,” disparages Holiday and the blues as ineffective modes of strengthening black pride and, importantly for him, black masculinity: “i cried for billy holiday. / the blues. we ain’t blue” (39-40). A few lines later, Madhubuti declares,

we ain’t blue, we are black.

we ain’t blue, we are black.

(all the blues did was
make me cry). (47-50)

Dismissing the blues as an emasculating and hopeless expression, Madhubuti invokes Holiday, not as an inspiring muse, but as a foil through which vaunts the emboldened sense of manhood that Coltrane and his “SCREAM-EEE eeeeeee-ee-ee loud” horn engenders (44). By Madhubuti’s own estimation, Don’t Cry, Scream has sold “close to half a million copies” since its publication (“Interview” 240), and, as perhaps the best selling poetry collection produced during the Black Arts era (and a rival for that accolade in any era), the title poem has clearly had an enormous impact on readers’ conception of both Coltrane and Holiday—one that impresses on its readers a one-dimensional portrait of Holiday as an emasculating embodiment of suffering whose blues music must be

55 This brief lyrical essay was originally written as liner notes to accompany Holiday’s album Billie Holiday in Germany and then was later reprinted in his collection of essays Black Music (1968).
pushed aside in order to make room for the new revolutionary era of free jazz and Black Power.

In his discussion of cultural production during the Black Arts era, Howard Rambsy II contends, “Tribute poems celebrating the lives and legacies of Malcom X, Frederick Douglass, John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, and Harriet Tubman were especially prevalent.” These tributes, “extol the virtues of black historical figures and provided current readers with examples of how they might lead their lives” (76). In fact, as Baraka, Madhubuti, Sanchez, and Neal make clear, Black Arts-era tributes to Holiday in particular often perform opposite work, as they instruct readers how not to lead their lives. For example, exemplifying the sway that Karenga’s disparagement of the blues held during this period, Sanchez’s “liberation / poem” (1970), begins with a strident rejection of the blues, as she dismisses its historical and cultural value altogether: “blues ain’t culture / they sounds of / oppression” (1-3). Published as part of her 1970 collection We Are a BaddDDD People, Sanchez’s poem stands in stark contrast to Hughes’s, Brown’s, and even Baraka’s, investment in the blues as a vital historical medium for defiance of Anglo-American hegemony. Characterizing the blues as the aural experience of racial persecution and blacks’ “strangulation” (8), Sanchez marks a radical shift between the blues past symbolized by Holiday and the contemporary era of Black Power/Black Arts:

but. now.

when I hear billie’s soft

soul / ful / sighs

of “am I blue”
i say

no. sweet / billie.

no mo.

no mo

blue/ trains running on this track

they all been de/ railed.

am i blue?

sweet/ baby/ blue/

billie.

no. I’m blk/

& ready. (13-28)

Formally, Sanchez’s slash marks indicate the often abrupt chord changes in jazz—shifts that rarely, if ever, occur in the blues—and exemplify her rejection of the soothing quietude of Holiday’s voice (“soft // soul / ful / sighs”) in favor of the more strident sounds of free jazz, as her most famous tribute “a/ coltrane/ poem” indicates. The poem’s title implies that, for Sanchez, “liberation” means breaking free of the yoke of both Holiday and her blues legacy. Jennifer D. Ryan contends that “the speaker addresses Holiday with tenderness” (56), and it is clear that the speaker has felt a past kinship with Holiday and her music. Yet, her description of Holiday as “sweet/ baby/ blue” also suggests condescension and a view of Holiday as weak and self-pitying—a sharp contrast to the speaker who is “blk/ & ready” for the revolution. Whereas previous generations of African Americans protested racism through coded lyrics about fleeing, exile, and alienation, Sanchez affirms that these “blue/ trains” have all been “de/ railed.” Enjoining
readers to adopt a similarly militant stance, the speaker announces that, rather than singing “soul /ful / sighs,” she is “ready” to take action against white hegemony.

Also part of We Are a BaddDDD People, in “for our lady,” Sanchez continues to characterize Holiday as an embodiment of suffering:

yeh.

if someone

billie

had loved u like u

shud have been loved

ain’t no tellen what

kinds of songs

u wud have swung

gainst this country’s wite mind.

or what kinds of lyrics

wud have pushed us from

our blue / nites.

yeh. billie.

if some blk / man

had realle

made u feel

permanentlee warm.

ain’t no tellen

where the jazz of yo/ songs
As the title’s collective pronoun indicates, Sanchez honors Holiday as a figure of cultural importance for the African-American community; however, Holiday does not so much inspire Sanchez’s poem as provide an example of what black female artists should strive to avoid. Unlike Coltrane, who, in Sanchez’s “a/coltrane/poem,” guides the speaker toward a liberated future—“my favorite things is u. / showen us life/ liven” (118-120)—Sanchez imagines Holiday as a symbol of the misfortunes of the past and a warning to the black community about what happens when it neglects to care for one of its own.

Specifically, Sanchez implies, black women must be protected by strong black men, and this will prevent the self-destructive behavior for which Holiday became famous. Evincing the Black Arts emphasis on African-American masculine strength as key to African-American self-determination and empowerment, Sanchez suggests that Holiday’s blues singing style was the unfortunate byproduct of her lack of “permanentlee warm” affection from black men. If Holiday had “been loved” by “some blk / man,” Sanchez contends, surely she would have sung more stridently political songs. Sanchez does not allude to Holiday’s drug addiction or her predilection for masochistic relationships, but, like Baraka and Carruth, she implies that Holiday’s songs of heartbeat and despair were autobiographical expressions, rather than artistic performances. As such, she represents Holiday not as a creative inspiration but as a tragic reminder of what happens when African-American men fail to protect black women.

As Cheryl Clarke observes, “None of these rationales attributes very much agency to Holiday or her own prodigious genius and intellectual processes” (65). By all biographical accounts, Holiday was in fact a very complex artist and individual—a
historical reality that Sanchez’s portraits mostly neglect. Though she was not as overtly political as Black Arts writers wished her to be, Holiday did frequently protest what Sanchez calls “this country’s wite mind” in her performances of “Strange Fruit.” Furthermore, as Farah Jasmine Griffin reminds us, Holiday “was a very sensual bisexual,” who “had many lovers, black and white, male and female, and she did not hide it” (If You Can’t Be Free 30). Given her polyamorous tastes, Holiday may not have desired the kind of monogamous male-female relationship that Sanchez describes, and therefore it seems misguided to identify Holiday’s lack of a stable heterosexual relationship with someone of the same race as the motivation behind her blues-style singing. Advancing the Black Arts agenda, however, meant that Sanchez’s narrative of victimization could not allow for the actual complexities of Holiday’s life; in other words, Holiday had to remain one-dimensional in order to affirm the heteronormative, androcentric tenets of the Movement.

Admittedly, as Elisabeth A. Frost points out, Sanchez’s goal throughout this period is difficult indeed: “to forge a feminist avant-gardism that would voice the concerns of African-American women without betraying the ‘revolution’” (68). Frost and Ryan have both written compellingly about Sanchez’s investment in both feminism and the blues after she disengaged with the Movement and the Nation of Islam. Still, Sanchez has not recanted these earlier poems and, in a recent interview with Feinstein, she continues to privilege jazz as a more empowering musical form, in contrast to the

---

56 Frost discusses Sanchez’s transition from an ambivalent, and often conflicted, feminist sensibility during the Black Arts era to an overtly feminist stance in The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry (2003). In Post-Jazz Poetics: A Social History (2010), Ryan similarly examines the marked shift in the feminist politics in Sanchez’s poetry in the post-Black Arts era, arguing for example that “she created a new poetic form, the blues haiku, in part as a vehicle for political statement alternative to the narrow ideological focus of other Black Arts practitioners” (50).
blues-inspired poems written by her former husband, the late Etheridge Knight: “There is so much pain in Etheridge’s work that his poems are always infused with the blues life, the blues style, the blues way of looking at the world. If you do jazz, my brother, you see a win. That’s why I love jazz. Jazz musicians, when they play, are saying, ‘I got it. I see a win’” (“Interview” 357). Sanchez made these comments in 2002, decades after We Are a BaddDDD People was published (1970), but the difference that she emphasizes between the celebratory nature of jazz and the supposedly mournful tone of the blues seems consistent with her early work. It is clear that, while she no longer subscribes to BAM ideologies, Sanchez continues to ascribe different kinds of sociocultural values to blues and jazz that reflect the musical dichotomy that undergirds “liberation/poem” and “for our lady.”

Sanchez has always claimed Holiday as a seminal African-American icon, as her title “for our lady” makes clear, but she also maintains her distance in order to affirm the distinctions between her own empowered persona and overtly political art and what she interprets as Holiday’s regrettable submissiveness. In fact, Sanchez’s complex relationship with Holiday—claiming that she is “our lady” (emphasis mine) while also characterizing her as an embodiment of a demoralizing past—represents a tension that pervades this chapter’s BAM tributes. As Sanchez and her counterparts invoke blues men and women as part of a cultural nationalist counternarrative to a history that had been largely written by white men, they simultaneously emphasize the contrast between the marginalization with which they associate these figures and their own nationalist ethos of separatism and militancy. In the process, the blues men and women they invoke are
further separated from their lived experiences and the multifaceted personae that they self-fashioned in order to achieve fame in a pre-Civil Right/Black Power era.

“Dear Billie baby”

In “Lady Day,” Neal presents another version of Holiday as a victim, though his representation is more generous in terms of Holiday’s artistry. “Lady Day” was first published in Neal’s Black Boogaloo (Notes on Black Liberation) (1969); then, it was revised as “Lady’s Days” for his contribution to Abraham Chapman’s Black Arts-era anthology New Black Voices (1972); then, another version appeared in Neal’s collection Hoodoo Hollerin’ Bebop Ghosts (1974)—a revisionary process that includes significant changes to his portrait of Holiday. Accordingly, in the poem’s first iteration as “Lady Day,” Neal constructs Holiday as a tragically talented blues woman who was the victim of both her own self-destruction and of the systematic forces of oppression. In the “Lady’s Days” of New Black Voices, Holiday is similarly unable to defend herself against a racist and sexist society, and, not unlike O’Higgins’s “Blues for Bessie,” she is memorialized as a martyr for racial equality. Yet, in the final version of “Lady’s Days,” the lines that emphasize her victimhood have been redacted, and Neal recasts Holiday in the role of a wise, resilient, and ultimately transcendent blues goddess. As a result, her personal tragedies recede into the background, and the central focus of “Lady’s Days” becomes Holiday’s distinctive and powerful rendering of the blues. Neal passed away in 1981, and his reasons for these multiple revisions of “Lady Day”/“Lady’s Days” remain unclear. It does seem certain, however, that he ultimately wished to transition away from the rather unsympathetic characterizations that marred Holiday’s image during the Black
Arts era and present a much more endearing portrait for posterity. Neal’s multiple revisions likewise demonstrate the importance of this poem in terms of his oeuvre and his long-term concern with honoring Holiday and her blues legacy. Thus, in what follows I discuss “Lady Day/Lady’s Days” as a poem that reflects, informs, and ultimately seems to move beyond the sociopolitical discourses that Neal and his Black Arts colleagues espoused during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As previously noted, in Neal’s “The Ethos of the Blues,” he emphasizes the historical importance of the blues for African Americans, and it is useful to briefly highlight the central points of this essay in order to consider the ways that Neal’s theoretical views manifest in “Lady Day/Lady’s Days.” As with Baraka’s Blues People, “The Ethos of the Blues” underscores the blues’ grounding in the material reality of the working-class black masses:

The blues are informed by a social history of mental and physical hardships; they lyrically address themselves to concrete life situations. . . .

The blues singer, acting as ritual poet, merely reflects the horrible and beautiful realities of life. He didn’t make it that way, that is just the way things are. Hardships can conquer you, or you can conquer them.

Therefore, toughness of spirit is an essential aspect of the ethos of the blues. (Visions 110)

Neal highlights the perseverance and resilience that undergirds the blues tradition and the ways in which the singer expresses the concerns and values of the community at large:

“The blues singer is not an alienated artist attempting to impose his view of the world on

---

57 The latter version of “Lady’s Days,” which presents a noticeably more flattering portrait of Holiday than the previous two, also appears in Neal’s posthumous collection, Visions of a Liberated Future (1989), and Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa’s The Second Set: the Jazz Poetry Anthology Volume 2 (1996).
others. His ideas are the reflection of an unstated general point of view” (113). Further, “The essential motive behind the best blues song is the acquisition of insight, wisdom” (108). The blues is not entertainment, Neal posits, but an essential means of understanding the human condition, particularly for a socially, politically, and economically disenfranchised population.

Correspondingly, in all three versions of “Lady Day”/“Lady’s Days,” Neal initially champions Holiday’s resilient spirit and her position as a community spokesperson who voices “an unstated general point of view.” In Black Boogaloo, the poem’s speaker is the famous saxophonist Lester Young, Holiday’s long-time friend and collaborator,\(^58\) and in a prose-poem form, Young recalls touring with Holiday and the adoration of the beleaguered crowds that attended their performances:

When we arrived, I remember the faces, the soft and the hard
A lot of them negroes had scars on their faces. She left them moaning,
waiting for more of the song, digging the Gardenia bit she had going,
digging the song as it turn soft in her mouth, as the mouth turned softly in
the song, they dug. (26)\(^59\)

In the 1972 version titled “Lady’s Days,” Neal limns a similar scene:

Faces/ the soft and the hard/ faces raining hard/ faces
scarred/ they wailed for the song and moaned
digging the gardenia bit she had going, scars
digging the gardenia thing that she was

\(^{58}\) Many historians have noted the close platonic relationship between these two musicians, and in fact Young gave Holiday the title Lady Day and she in turn gave him the nickname Prez for president (O’Meally 94).
\(^{59}\) I quote the page rather than lines numbers with this version because Neal constructs it as an epistolary prose-poem.
Finally, in the “Lady’s Days” of *Hoodoo Hollerin’*, Neal again alters the poem’s form but employs much of the same imagery to highlight the catharsis that Holiday’s performances provide:

I remember them faces
the soft and the hard
faces scarred, wailing
for the song and the moan
digging the gardenia thing
she was into. . . (10-15)

All of these stanzas characterize Holiday as a figure who facilitates emotional relief and inspiration to a “scarred” black audience. Though Neal clearly evolved his poetics over the course of these publications—incorporating and then dispensing with the characteristic Black Arts-era slash marks, for example—these stanzas are thematically similar in terms of Neal’s portrait of Holiday.

In the poems’ conclusions, however, Neal’s different versions offer almost oppositional representations of Holiday. Although “The Ethos of the Blues” describes singing the blues as a means of seeking “insight, wisdom,” in the “Lady Day/ Lady’s Days” of *Black Boogaloo* and *New Black Voices*, Holiday does not offer an empowering vision of the future as much as she symbolizes the injustices of the past—a representation furthered by Neal’s elegiac tone and ominous imagery. In the final lines of the *Black Boogaloo* version, the Lester Young persona exalts Holiday as a “spring goddess” but one who is “better off dead” given society’s failure to properly care for her:
Billie beautiful, the raped child, the spring rape of the goddess. early pain. and when they worshipped, the rape lingering even after a hot bath at the end of the night.

They walked home drunk smelling of her smell, the flesh of the spring goddess being chewed slowly by winter beasts. Yeah, and some black ones too, the ones you would least expect.

Dear Billie baby, we could not take it... we could not take you... perhaps perhaps some gods are better off dead.

“Prez” (26)

As “Prez” relieves his own guilt for not better protecting Holiday, Neal implies that the “we”—the black community of fellow musicians and fans—failed Holiday by allowing her to be abused and mistreated. When Holiday was eleven years old, she was raped by a neighbor (Nicholson 25), and Neal implies that she continued to be defined by this childhood trauma for the rest of her life. Even her performances, he suggests, are reenactments of the physical and sexual abuse that she suffered as a child, as the audience “walked home drunk smelling of her smell.” Not unlike Sanchez’s “for our lady,” Holiday thus becomes a symbolic warning of the danger in neglecting, or worse, participating (“and some black ones too”) in the demise of a member of the black community.

The “Lady’s Days” of *New Black Voices* that appeared a few years later is quite similar in its emphasis on Holiday’s victimhood and resignation to suffering, except that, in this version, the speaker is no longer the adoring Young. Rather than concluding with an apology, Neal’s final image emphasizes Holiday’s martyrdom:
One night between sets I asked you what it meant/ the pain
raining/ and the moans of scars and gardenias/
is that the way it is Billie/ I asked you/
remember baby when I asked you that
Slow power of the blues you said/ rem [sic] please
you said/ you said/ that it had to
be that way/ there was no reason you said
no reason for towns faces moans
Against the rain/ uptight/ the steady pull of death
can’t help you sweetheart/ you said
remembering the time in Philly/ the cops
crashing the hotel room looking for the
scag/ looking for a piece of your ass
O baby

Road house stop the john for the niggers/ a special john
for the Lady/ for Billie beautiful/ the raped
child/ rain
Rape lingering after the bath at the end of the night
the rape child/ and they would worship
at your body/ the Lady/ rape lingering/
They walked home/ drunk/ smelling of your flesh/ as you/
lay bleeding/ under red spots. (25-38, 48-55)
Referencing Holiday’s drug use but also the police harassment that she endured, Neal highlights her lack of agency and control—an image that is again heightened by his description of her as “the rape child.” As such, Holiday is memorialized as a psychologically and emotionally damaged woman who is regrettably self-destructive (as the reference to “scag” implies) and unable to defend herself against the numerous perpetrators that seek to physically and mentally dominate her.

Instead of being outraged by the pain of her experiences, in these first two versions of “Lady Day”/“Lady’s Days,” Holiday places her faith in the “slow power of the blues” to relieve her suffering. On the one hand, Neal endorses this aspect of her resolve as an example of her resilience; on the other hand, his violent imagery (“drunk/smelling of your flesh”) undermines the honor in passively accepting the “towns faces moans” in the segregated South. Moreover, repeating the phrase “you said,” Neal formally gestures toward the blues’ prototypical repetition, but he implies that the blues spirit that Holiday invested in (what she “said” would carry her through) failed to protect her and may indeed have made her more vulnerable to abuse. As Stephen Henderson remarks, the Black Boogaloo version “concludes more ambivalently with Lady realizing and accepting her fate as [an] enduring vessel of sorrow and pain” (232). Juxtaposing Holiday’s submissive attitude with the horrors of white supremacy and rape, Neal highlights Holiday’s victimization but also suggests that her resignation to injustice—“That’s how some towns were you said” (39)—prevents sociopolitical change. Therefore, though he does not blame Holiday for the hypocritical brutality of men who “worship / at your body” and then leave her “bleeding,” he underscores her weakness and inability to defend herself against the myriad forces of oppression that threaten her well-being.
While Neal’s images evoke sympathy and even pity for Holiday, they elide the resilient and formative persona that Holiday self-fashioned. As Griffin points out, “She [Holiday] fist-fought men and was beaten by them. She is alleged to have beaten her female lovers as well. She did not tolerate racist remarks, often responding with her sailor’s tongue accompanied by a knockout punch” (*If You Can’t Be Free* 31). Additionally, Robert O’Meally recounts Holiday’s caustic response (“Get that motherfucker out here!”) to a white southerner’s racial slur when she toured with the all-white Artie Shaw band (127)—hardly the meek and fragile persona that Neal portrays. Despite her personal tragedies, Holiday did not simply allow herself to be victimized by race and gender oppression, and these first iterations of “Lady Day”/“Lady’s Days” reshape her posthumous legacy in ways that neither accord with Holiday’s lived experiences nor fully realize the heroic qualities of the blues singer that Neal describes in “The Ethos of the Blues.” Instead, Neal’s representations of Holiday reveal the Black Arts-era androcentrism that relegated women to supporting roles and called on black men to protect them, particularly in his implication that Holiday experienced discrimination and tragedy in part because a strong African-American man was not there to rescue and defend her.

Alternatively, the version of “Lady’s Days” that appears in *Hoodoo Hollerin’* (1974) celebrates Holiday as the “child of the God of Song” (46), exalting her as an example of the blues singer that Neal reveres in “The Ethos of the Blues.” Rather than seeking to protect Holiday, in the poem’s final stanza, the speaker turns to Holiday for guidance:

I had just finished running some scales
In quiet sixteenths when I asked you:
Is that the way it is Billie baby?
I recall you humming a line from
One of my solos
And then you laughed, that real pretty laugh
Slow power of the blues, you said.
You said, you said that it had to go
Down that way; honey, ain’t gotta be no
Reason for towns, faces, moans. . . (60-69)

Revising his former emphasis on her victimhood, Neal retains many of the poem’s original lines but transforms Holiday into a leader among her peers who anchors her fellow musicians and, via her performances, the community at large in the blues ethos. Without the concluding images of drug use and police harassment, Jim Crow segregation, and rape, Holiday’s “toughness of spirit” is brought to the fore, and her resolve that “ain’t gotta be no / Reason for towns, faces, moans” is no longer emblematic of her resignation to tragedy; it is now a sign of Holiday’s role as what Neal called a “ritual poet” who wisely puts her faith in the “slow power of the blues.”

In all three iterations, “Lady’s Days” remains an evocative tribute to Holiday, and, though Neal initially characterizes Holiday as submissive to abuse, he clearly maintained a long-term admiration for her blues style and the catharsis that she provided her audiences. While none of these versions is modeled on a prototypical blues song, Neal effectively evokes a blues mood, particularly through the recurring image of Holiday’s continuous travel—what Baker refers to
as the “durative and kinetic” impulses that underlie the blues tradition (*Blues* 8). His multiple revisions of the poem also situate “Lady Day”/“Lady’s Days” in the improvisational tradition of blues performances in which singers riff on standard lyrics—in this case, Neal’s own images and phrases—in order to apply them to personal or topical circumstances. Nevertheless, these formal and thematic blues gestures do not fully account for Neal’s shifting portraits of Holiday. Whereas the first versions of “Lady Day”/“Lady’s Days” represent Holiday as a victim and a martyr—a “goddess” but one who is “better off dead”—the final version apotheosizes Holiday as the “child of the God of Song” who represents the “toughness of spirit” and “insight, wisdom” that Neal celebrates in “The Ethos of the Blues.” Neal’s multiple constructions of Holiday on the page over the course of only a few years illuminate on a micro-scale the revision process that cultural icons undergo and, more specifically, the tribute poem’s role in reshaping the posthumous memory of Holiday and this study’s other blues figures in ways that reflect the poet’s own, in this case evolving, ideological perspective.

“our beautiful people”

Although Al Young was not directly associated with the Black Arts Movement, he was certainly influenced by many of its central tenets—namely, the need for African-American self-determination, pride, and unity—and his 1969 poem “A Dance for Ma Rainey” reflects many of these concerns but lacks the didactic tone of Sanchez’s and Baraka’s poems, for example. Invoking Rainey, the first blues icon to be poetically honored, Young positions “A Dance for Ma Rainey” as an inheritor of a tradition originated with Brown’s “Ma Rainey,” but he also distinguishes his portrait from his
predecessor’s by constructing her as a foil through which Young proclaims the
dawning of a new age in African-American sociopolitical consciousness. Whereas
Brown characterized Rainey as a symbol of folk authenticity, Young’s Rainey
functions to remind contemporary black readers of how much social progress has
been made since her heyday, while simultaneously encouraging a new generation
of readers and music fans to value her historical importance:

I’m going to cry so sweet
& low
& so dangerous,
Ma,
that the message is going to reach you
back in 1922
where you shimmer
snaggle-toothed
perfumed &
powdered
in your bauble beads

hair pressed & tied back
throbbing with sick pain
I know
& hide so well
that pain that blues
jives the world with
aching to be heard
that downness
that bottomlessness
first felt by some stolen delta nigger
swamped under redblooded american agony;
reduced to the sheer shit
of existence
that bred
& battered us all,

Ma,
the beautiful people
our beautiful people
our beautiful brave black people
who no longer need to jazz
or sing to themselves in murderous vibrations
or play the veins of their strong tender arms
with needles
to prove how proud we are. (14-48)

Departing from Brown, Young describes Rainey’s eccentric appearance in vivid detail—
“snaggle-toothed / perfumed & / powdered”—and emphasizes the ways in which she
constructed her blues woman persona through “shimmer” and “bauble beads.” Yet,
Young also draws attention to the physical “sick pain” that “hair pressed and tied back” caused Rainey, suggesting that maintaining the image of a star meant conforming to expectations for black women that involved sacrificing, for one, the natural tendencies of her hair. This is in fact one of several ways that Young marks the passage of time and sociopolitical change from the 1920s and early 1930s to the late 1960s when such phrases as “black is beautiful” were commonly used. By the poem’s end, Young thus affirms that “our beautiful brave black people” no longer need to conform to white standards of beauty such as straight hair.

As with his Black Arts counterparts, Young eschews the traditional blues form but gestures toward blues tropes, particularly in the final stanza when he “worries the line” of “the beautiful people.” He also champions Rainey’s “laughing to keep from crying” ethos that nearly all blues theorists identify by both sympathizing with “that downness / that bottomlessness” that Rainey experienced and admiring her ability to voice and, in the process, mitigate hers and her community’s struggles by singing the blues. Nevertheless, Young continues to affirm that African Americans have progressed beyond these “murderous vibrations” and are now able to proudly assert a distinctively black worldview without fear of reprisals. Thus, the self-destructive acts that previous generations engaged in, such as injecting drugs into “their strong tender arms,” to offset the pain of disenfranchisement and marginalization are no longer necessary.

By the time “A Dance for Ma Rainey” was published in 1969, Rainey had been dead for decades, and her music was rarely heard beyond the blues cognoscenti, and perhaps infrequently among them as well. Therefore, as he signifies on Brown’s version of Rainey as a folk hero, Young maintains Rainey’s posthumous fame and engages a new
generation of readers and fans in preserving her legacy. In accordance with Brown’s precedent, Young simultaneously constructs a version of Rainey that conveys his own sociopolitical outlook. There is no evidence to suggest, for instance, that Rainey used heroin or that her lifestyle was especially self-destructive. She retired from show business in 1935 and became a successful business owner and devout churchgoer before dying from heart disease in 1939 at the age of fifty-three. Young’s tribute celebrates many of Rainey’s admirable qualities—her alluring stage persona, personal resilience, and powerful role as a community spokeswoman—but, similar to his Black Arts contemporaries’ representations of Holiday, he also characterizes her as an embodiment of the historical suffering that blacks endured. Whereas contemporary African Americans have cast off the social mores of the dominant culture, Young regrets that Rainey and her generation could only express the pain of racial discrimination through the blues.

However, given the sociopolitical and economic constraints placed on working-class African-American women during the early twentieth-century, it is difficult to conceive of Rainey as a powerless victim. In many respects, she was in fact a groundbreaking figure who defied these constraints both by achieving socioeconomic success as a professional performer and by, as Daphne Duval Harrison argues, helping to create “an emerging model for the working woman—one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, assertive, and trend-setting” (10). Yet, for Young, Rainey symbolizes an oppressed and feminized African-American past, and she is invoked to galvanize contemporary readers toward realizing a more liberated present and future.

Maintaining an elegiac tone, “A Dance for Ma Rainey” thus mourns the racially-charged

---

60 Lieb reports that Rainey operated two theatres in her hometown of Rome, Georgia, and “turned to religion,” “joining the congregation of the Friendship Baptist Church, where her brother Thomas Pridgett, Jr., was a deacon” (47).
indignities that Rainey and, by extension, all African Americans suffered and concludes by affirming that no longer do they need to “play the veins . . . with needles/ to prove how proud we are” (46-48).

“burly chantress with a song”

Alternatively, Alvin Aubert’s elegiac tributes to Smith—“Bessie” and “Bessie Smith’s Funeral” (1972)—invoke her memory in order to celebrate the blues mode as cathartic and inspirational, particularly to contemporary African Americans seeking closure for the injustices of the past. Whereas Baraka references Smith in his 1964 play Dutchman in order to announce a new era of black militancy—“If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music” (Amiri Baraka Reader 97)—Aubert’s “Bessie” emphasizes the need to resolve the anger and resentment that the black community harbors as a result of the injustices that Smith endured (including her premature death), even while he maintains the story of the white hospital’s refusal to treat her:

Bessie Smith,
Enable me.
But first forgive.

.................

Forgive, Mississippi, Bessie,
Forgive Mound Bayou, U.S.A.
Forgive,
And serve me,
Bessie, in this time

Of our most common need. (3-5, 13-18)

Positioning Smith as a muse who is not only essential to his poetic vision but to a unified and empowered black community at large—as the reference to the historically African-American city, Mound Bayou, suggests—Aubert restores Smith to the role of a community spokesperson that she held during her lifetime and calls on her spirit to unify and uplift African Americans “in this time / Of our most common need.” As with the other poets in this chapter, he envisages the struggles of the contemporary era in collective terms and mourns historical injustices (“Forgive Mississippi”) via his allusion to the legend of Smith’s racially-charged death. However, Aubert also underscores the importance of reconciliation, as the repeated imperative to “forgive” indicates, portraying Smith as an instantiation of the blues ethos of resilience and perseverance, which he insists is still sociopolitically viable.

In “Bessie Smith’s Funeral,” Aubert then laments what he perceives as the lack of proper respect paid in the aftermath of Smith’s death, represented by the dearth of mourners and the dilapidated setting where he imagines Smith was laid to rest: “The brief procession. / The crude gray church” (1-2) and the “Naked bulbs retreat / From slaking so much darkness” (11-12). In fact, an “estimated ten thousand mourners” paid their respects to Smith and she was sent off in a “five-hundred-dollar silvery metallic coffin, trimmed with gold and lined with pink two-tone velvet” (Albertson 2). Yet, it is true that

---

For example, the city of Mount Bayou’s web site reports, that “Throughout the years, Mound Bayou has continued its long tradition of community self-empowerment that has produced numerous African American leaders, innovators, and proud family lineages. Mound Bayou has always been a model city for the capabilities of African-Americans to rise above inequality in the South. The town has never practiced or experienced segregation within its borders. Mound Bayou is a town without second class citizens” (City of Mound Bayou).
“Performers, promoters, and others in the entertainment field who later claimed Bessie as friend, idol, or inspiration were conspicuously absent” (5). While Aubert misconstrues the circumstances of the funeral itself in order to more effectively render the tragedy of Smith’s death, the poem’s funeral scene reveals the sad reality that many of the people who capitalized on Smith’s talent and generosity as well as the many who were influenced by her distinctive style failed to posthumously honor her achievements.

Recalling the cathartic trajectory of a blues song, Aubert’s conclusion then pivots away from these initially somber images to an affirmation that Smith’s blues legacy and the cultural work that she performed continues as another

... burly chantress with a song,

Balks the yokeless choir that grates

The lily-scented air;

Her song is news, begins the dispensation

Of the blues. (20-24)

The “burly chantress” transcends the chintzy surroundings and the mournful atmosphere by singing the blues and, through this Smith-like successor, Aubert assures readers that the blues ethos is alive and well, despite Smith’s physical absence. Unlike Berryman who invokes Smith in order to relive a fading epoch of blackface minstrelsy, Aubert pays homage to Smith’s sociocultural importance as a figure who symbolizes artistic resistance to Anglo-American hegemony. Also departing from his Black Arts counterparts’ characterizations of blues women as embodiments of historical injustices, Aubert characterizes Smith as a muse who represents the tragedies and triumphs of the past, while he invests in her the ineluctable power of the blues to bear witness and
provide hope—a combination that he suggests can never be anachronistic. Further, whereas many of the poets in this chapter chafe against the linguistic and syntactic conventions of the Anglo-American canon, Aubert’s tributes convey a blues worldview through rather conventional stanzaic structures and standard English, looking forward to formal trends in the next era of blues tributes in the process.

“For the posthumous celebrity, the ‘real’ person can no longer shape his or her story,” Joli Jensen rightly asserts, “but this doesn’t stop the process of story evolution and transformation” (xxii). During the 1960s and early 1970s, the legacies of Leadbelly, Holiday, Rainey, and Smith continued to evolve because of the intervention of writers and, by extension, readers into their posthumous narratives. Additionally, since this chapter’s poets follow the precedent set decades prior in eliding the physicality of the blues men and women that they invoke, these figures are represented as amorphous voices, rather than multifaceted historical individuals. At the same time, these poems maintain the cultural currency of these figures, albeit at times by using them as foils to herald a new age in African-American political consciousness. In the next two chapters, poets continue to vivify and reshape the legacies of these blues men and women, investing them with symbolic values that reflect the sociocultural developments of the late twentieth century: second-wave feminism, the increasing popularity of hip hop/rap, and the second-wave blues revival that once again spurred enthusiasm for this study’s blues icons among middle-class white audiences.
Chapter 3: Late Twentieth-Century Blues Tribute Poems by Male Poets

Robert Johnson’s “Best Historical Record” Grammy in 1990 for The Complete Recordings—an award he received sixty-three years after his last recording and sixty-two years after his death—marked a pivotal moment in American music history, for it signaled the mainstream recording industry’s renewed appreciation (and perhaps nostalgia) for the blues and virtuosos like Johnson. Indeed, though this study’s icons—Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson—experienced widespread discrimination during their lifetimes and have often been undervalued as producers of “low” culture, the second-wave blues revival, underway as Johnson received his posthumous accolade, indicated that the blues and these iconic figures were finally being recognized as seminal American musicians. The 1980s and 1990s also ushered in the era of hip hop/rap, which became enormously popular among younger generations of all cultural backgrounds but was particularly reflective of an urban African-American (and predominantly male) experience. Within the same decades, the American literary canon was being interrogated for its white male bias and the New Critical hermetical approach to literature overhauled (not without fierce debate, of course); in the process, the blues gained increased exposure and credibility as an aesthetic framework for examining other forms of African-American cultural production, including literature.

In what follows, I explore poetic representations of blues men and women produced by male poets who are writing against the backdrop of these varied sociocultural developments. For example, this chapter further examines the work of

---

62 As evidence of the posthumous attention these icons were receiving during the 1980s and 1990s, Johnson (1986), Leadbelly (1989), Smith (1989), Rainey (1990), and Holiday (2000) were all inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ("Rock and Roll Hall of Fame"). Furthermore, in 1989, Smith won a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and Holiday’s recordings won three “Best Historical Album” Grammy awards (in 1991, 1993, and 2001, respectively) (“Past Winners Search”).
African-American poets—Al Young, Michael S. Harper, Cornelius Eady, and Sterling D. Plumpp—who were influenced by the Black Arts Movement but did not subscribe to its nationalist tenets. During the mid-1970s, many Black Arts writers were changing their sociopolitical allegiances, such as in 1974 when Amiri Baraka surprisingly “rejected black nationalism as racist and became a Third World Socialist” (Harris xxviii)—a political pivot that Sonia Sanchez similarly made. Accordingly, this chapter considers Baraka’s post-Black Arts tribute to Billie Holiday, “The Lady” (1987), in order to shed light on the ways in which his poetic representation of blues artists has evolved to, in many ways, accord with the stances of these other African-American writers.

Additionally, I examine the Japanese-American poet Lawson Fusao Inada’s “Billie Holiday” (1993) and homages to Robert Johnson by the Anglo-American poets Forrest Gander (“Life of Johnson Upside Your Head, a *Libretto*” [1993]) and John Sinclair (“Hellhound on My Trail” [dated 1987 and 1995]), demonstrating the thematic commonalities that these poets share with their African-American peers. Gander and Sinclair also register the growing importance of Johnson as an iconic figure for a wide range of audiences, as well as poetry’s participation in the mythmaking surrounding his posthumous legacy.

By the time this chapter’s tributes were composed, jazz, rock and roll, and R&B had long ago eclipsed the blues’ mainstream popularity, though the music always continued to attract a niche audience. As already noted, two important developments in the music industry during the 1980s and 1990s repositioned the blues further, thereby impacting these poets’ outlooks on the music and its performers. First, though rap/hip hop originated on the streets of New York during the 1970s, arguably as an outgrowth of
the Black Arts emphasis on spoken word and performance poetry.63 it was not until the mid-1980s that it usurped the popularity of every other black musical form and became an international phenomenon.64 Literally then, hip hop is pertinent to almost any discussion of the relationship between music and American poetry in the late twentieth century, particularly African-American poetry.65 “Every poet writing in the United States since the late 1970s has been doing so during the age of hip hop/rap,” James Smethurst rightly contends, “It does not matter whether he or she has been or is hostile, indifferent, or enthusiastic toward the many varieties of hip hop, hip hop is an inescapable cultural fact with which poets of every stripe and community must grapple” (“Internationally Unknown” 648). Although the poets in this chapter do not reference the popularity of hip hop/rap in their tributes, I interpret their emphases on keeping the history of the blues and its ethos alive in the late twentieth century as, at least in part, a response to this cultural phenomenon.

Concurrent with the dawning of this new age of hip hop/rap was the second-wave blues revival and the reissuing of blues recordings on compact disc that inspired cultural critics, music fans (the majority of which were white),66 and this chapter’s poets to renew

63 Many critics have made the argument that hip hop is the successor of Black Arts-style performance poetry. For example, see Lorrie Smith’s essay “Black Arts to Def Jam: Performing Black ‘Spirit Work’ across Generations” (New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement 349-368) for a discussion of the intergenerational collaborations between hip hop artists and Black Arts writers.
64 As Jeff Chang writes in Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation, “By 1986 rap had eclipsed all the other movements” (229).
65 Of course, many American poets are only indirectly aware of hip hop, and considering their work with this music in mind may not be as productive as it is with many of the poets examined in this chapter. Also, a note on terminology: although rap and hip hop have distinct etymological origins and slightly different musical connotations, I will follow the cultural trend of using these terms interchangeably.
66 As Barry Lee Pearson observes, “The blues revival, like the folk revival as a whole, implies resurrecting moribund traditions or artists but more generally means presenting one community’s traditions or artists to a non-traditional audience—in this case presenting older Black blues to a new white audience” (218). Moreover, as Adam Gussow explained in 2006, “Although the so-called ‘chitlin’ circuit’ of juke joints, clubs, and concert venues lingers on in the modern South, supplying a small but loyal black audience with so-called ‘soul blues,’ the mainstream blues universe of festivals, nightclubs, bands, record labels, DJ’s,
or, in the case of younger generations, appreciate for the first time the music of the blues icons considered here. Exemplifying the national attention that the blues was receiving, in 1994 the United States Postal Service issued a collection of stamps featuring eight blues singers: Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, Billie Holiday, Jimmy Rushing, Ma Rainey, Mildred Bailey, and Howlin’ Wolf (Schroeder 4). While this chapter’s poets continue to honor blues women, they also indicate this increased cultural interest in male blues artists, such as Johnson and Leadbelly. In fact, the success of the Columbia/Sony CD box set of Johnson’s The Complete Recordings, which sold over 500,000 copies and includes liner notes written by Keith Richards and Eric Clapton, arguably spurred small and large record labels alike to cash in on the revival by both reissuing other deceased blues legends and recording current ones before they passed away (Weissman 134). Moreover, including endorsements by these British rock giants, who first gained fame during the 1960s playing blues-inspired rock and roll, indicates precisely the middle-aged, middle-class white fan base that Columbia/Sony was hoping to reach.

In addition to the popular acclaim the blues was receiving, the late twentieth-century also marked a period of increased academic interest in the blues, as demonstrated by the incorporation of blues songs into widely-distributed and well-regarded literary anthologies: beginning with the first editions of The Heath Anthology of American Literature (1990) and The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1996), and continuing with several anthologies of jazz and blues-inspired poetry.67 Also during this

---

67 The following anthologies include jazz- and blues-inspired poems (no distinction is made between the two): The Jazz Poetry Anthology (Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, eds., 1991), The Second Set:
period, Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1987) and Clyde Woods’s *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (1998), among others theorized the blues not only as a musical form but as a distinctively African-American worldview. Although the extent to which these specific critics influence this chapter’s poets varies, it is clear that there has been a significant paradigm shift away from conceiving of the blues as either, in the words of Maulana Karenga, the sound of “resignation” (2090), or strictly as a set of musical conventions and toward a broader understanding of the blues as a meta-music, which embodies and expresses epistemological and ontological developments in African-American culture past and present. Correspondingly, many of the poets considered here do not employ a prototypical blues song structure, but, echoing their theorist peers, they affirm the blues ethos of resistance and perseverance as a dominant influence on their poetic outlooks. For instance, the sheer number of tributes that Young, Sinclair, and Plumpp have written makes it clear that the blues is a primary aesthetic, thematic, and ideological influence on these poets’ oeuvres. Indeed, the tributes that follow often function best as lyrical liner notes meant to be read alongside their muses’ recordings that were just being remastered and re-released on compact disc, for these poets urge their late twentieth-century readers to become active blues listeners and to use their tributes as a means of interpreting what they hear.

---

68 In addition to the tributes examined in this chapter, all of these poets have written similar homages to blues figures that this study does not examine, but the tributes considered here are representative of the influence of the blues on these poets’ artistic outlooks.
Further, with the exception of John Sinclair, who is not an academic *per se* but a well-known countercultural figure who gained fame during the late 1960s,⁶⁹ all of this chapter’s poets were (and many still are) creative writing professors whose poetic constructions of Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly influenced a generation of up-and-coming writers, many of whom have gone on to write blues tribute poems of their own.⁷⁰ In this regard, as a long-time professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago, Plumpp’s insistence on the viability of the blues during the age of hip hop/rap has had a significant impact on his students, as Tyehimba Jess, the author of a book-length poetic homage titled simply *leadbelly* (2005), attests: “I didn’t know how history can shape the poem, and I didn’t know enough about how the poem can shape history. Sterling was my introduction to all that. But the first lesson he taught me was the Blues” (41). The tutelage that Jess received in Plumpp’s classroom is representative of the ways in which all of this chapter’s poet-professors (as well as those in other chapters) teach their students to value the blues and blues artists as inspirations for their own poetic expressions of sociopolitical consciousness.

---

⁶⁹ Sinclair first gained attention as manager of the proto-punk rock band the MC5 from 1966-1969 and as the leader of the White Panther Party (a group Sinclair formed to support the tenets of the Black Panthers). As Jeff Chang notes, Sinclair “was inspired to form the White Panthers and draft their ten-point program. The first point was a full endorsement of the Black Panthers’ program. The second read, ‘Total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock ‘n’ roll, dope and fucking in the streets’ (243). Yet, his arrest and imprisonment for marijuana possession in 1969 is perhaps what he is best known for. On his 1972 *Some Time in New York City* album, John Lennon famously protested Sinclair’s harsh jail sentence in a song simply titled “John Sinclair”: “They gave him ten for two. . . gotta, gotta, gotta set him free.”

⁷⁰ Al Young has taught at a number of universities, including San José State University, Stanford, U.C. Berkeley, and U.C. Santa Cruz, where he taught Harryette Mullen, a tribute poet that I examine in the next chapter. Michael S. Harper has spent decades teaching at Brown University, along with Forrest Gander. Brown is where Kevin Young, a poet who this study explores at length in chapter 5 received his M.F.A. In addition to being the co-founder of the Cave Canem Workshop with Toi Derricote, Eady has taught at several universities, including the State University of New York at Stonybrook and, most recently, the University of Missouri. Terrance Hayes, again a poet of a younger generation whose tribute to Billie Holiday will be examined in chapter 5, worked with Eady while he was an assistant at Cave Canem, and he now serves on the Board of Directors. As these examples make clear, the poets considered here influenced the next generation of tribute poets, either directly through mentor-protégée relationships or as a result of networks and affiliations that grew out of the universities where they taught.
Since the late 1970s, women poets from a variety of cultural backgrounds have also been inspired by the blues and, more specifically, the legacies of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday, but I explicate their poems separately in the next chapter in order to fully explore the influence of second-wave and black feminisms on their understandings of the blues past. Many of the same theoretical developments are, of course, relevant to a discussion of the male poets that follow; yet, while many late twentieth-century women poets were concerned with reimagining Rainey, Smith, and Holiday as early feminists, their male counterparts largely elide this aspect. Instead, this chapter’s tributes call attention to the oppression that early blues men and women endured, while also venerating them as heroic symbols of African-American resistance to Anglo-American hegemony, arguably in response to (or perhaps because) the music’s fan base was becoming increasingly white. Even Gander and Sinclair convey this perspective, demonstrating that this interpretation cuts across racial lines. Further, unlike the communal emphases of many Black Arts tributes (indicated by the repeated use of collective pronouns, for example), this chapter’s poets frame their homages as personal responses that reflect a more individualized appreciation for the creative inspiration that their muses provide. Following Brown’s precedent in “Ma Rainey” of constructing a blues woman muse tradition that is more symbolic than historical, apotheosizing blues men and women often means omitting the complexities of their stage personae and the strategies that they used to gain and maintain fame in the pre-Civil Rights/Black Power, pre-second-wave feminist era.

In Harper’s homages to Smith and Holiday, for example, he highlights these women’s influence on his poetry and poetics, while also striking a balance between
history and mythology that recurs in diverse ways in the tributes of Young, Inada, Eady, Baraka, and Plumpp that follow. Similarly, in the chapter’s final section, Plumpp, Gander, and Sinclair celebrate Johnson’s historical and artistic importance, but perhaps because of the dearth of biographical information available, their poetic constructions are (at least to some extent) predicated on the sensational legends surrounding him; as a result, Johnson emerges as a heroic, almost mythical figure, much as he did in the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, as with the blues tribute subgenre as a whole, the poems considered here blur the lines between fact and fiction, poetry and music, and reshape the legacies of blues men and women to reflect the outlooks of individual poets—outlooks that are informed by sociopolitical, aesthetic, and cultural developments that are, in this case, specific to the late twentieth century.

“where is my woman now”

Harper is perhaps best known for his homages to John Coltrane, particularly the title poem of his 1970 collection Dear John, Dear Coltrane, but he has also invoked many other jazz and blues legends as muses. Although he began publishing during the 1960s, Harper did not subscribe to the black nationalist agenda. Departing from Karenga and many of his Black Arts peers who characterized the blues as the sound of a bygone era, Harper’s tributes to Holiday and Smith—“Lady’s Blues,” “Where Is My Woman Now: For Billie Holiday,” and “Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song”—champion these artists’ continued musical, sociocultural, and literary relevance. These tributes were first

71 In the introductory paragraphs of the final section of this chapter, I discuss at length the lack of historical evidence about Johnson’s life.
published during the early 1970s,\textsuperscript{72} but I examine them in this chapter because they are more usefully considered alongside the Holiday and Smith tributes by Young and Plumpp, with whom Harper shares a similar artistic and sociocultural perspective. In addition, by the time these poems were reprinted during the 1980s and 1990s, Harper had gained the stature of a major American poet,\textsuperscript{73} and presumably these tributes gained an even wider audience of readers who were simultaneously listening to Smith’s and Holiday’s music on compact disc for the first time.\textsuperscript{74} Extolling Holiday and Smith, Harper’s poems demonstrate the influence of their blues styles on his poetry and poetics, while simultaneously educating readers and listeners about the sociopolitical and aesthetic contexts of their music.

Accordingly, Harper’s brief elegiac “Lady’s Blues” describes a pilgrimage to Holiday’s gravesite, which the speaker and his companion find regrettably unmarked and unkempt:

\begin{quote}
We visit bark
an unmarked grave,
the money
the grass, the ground
\end{quote}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} “Lady’s Blues” and “Where is My Woman Now: For Billie Holiday” were first published in Dear John, Dear Coltrane (1970) and “Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song” was first published in Song: I Want a Witness (1972).
\item \textsuperscript{73} By 1988, Harper had become the first poet laureate of the state of Rhode Island, had been nominated for two National Books Awards, and had received a number of other esteemed grants and awards. Moreover, his homages to Holiday were reprinted in the second edition of Dear John, Dear Coltrane (U of Illinois P, 1985)—in many ways, the volume that still remains his most acclaimed. “Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song” also appeared in his 1977 volume Image of Kin: New and Selected Poems. Since then, the poem has been reprinted in his Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems (2000), Kevin Young’s Blues Poems (2003), and the anthology that followed the Furious Flower Conference (1994), Furious Flower: African American Poetry from the Black Arts Movement to the Present (2004).
\item \textsuperscript{74} For example, Sony released a five-disc box set of Smith’s recordings from 1991-1996, and five box sets of Holiday’s music were released from 1991-1997 (Griffin If You Can’t Be Free 216-217); in 1991, Holiday’s recordings ranked among CBS/ Sony’s “top-selling artists” (Nicholson 229).
\end{itemize}
your face,
no stone your voice
we kiss the air. (1-7)

Harper suggests the ways in which Holiday has suffered posthumously from both a lack of money and care to properly celebrate her artistic contributions, and indeed his description of Holiday’s pauper’s grave is accurate, at least in terms of the immediate period following her death. Stuart Nicholson laments, for example, that “within a year [of Holiday’s death], *Downbeat* discovered that Louis McKay [her estranged husband] had not even bothered to erect a headstone on his wife’s grave and invited contributions for a suitable monument” (228). Eventually, Holiday received a proper headstone, but, as was fitting with his character, McKay charged it against Holiday’s pitifully small estate, instead of paying for it himself. 75 Rather than regretting the drug abuse and alcoholism that led to Holiday’s premature death, Harper implicates those surrounding her, including her husband, for failing to give her an honorable gravesite and, thus, to pay respect for what she achieved artistically during her lifetime. Ultimately, however, he does not dwell in tragedy, as his final lines convey the blues ethos evoked in his title by affirming that mourners may “kiss the air” for Holiday’s transcendent spirit still perseveres.

Harper’s homage also self-reflexively maintains Holiday’s musical importance through his formal gestures to her blues style—an influence that he described in a 1994 interview with Aldon Lynn Nielsen:

If you listen to the solos of the great musicians or the phrasings of the great singers, the Sarah Vaughans and the Billie Holidays, these are

---

75 Nicholson notes that when she died in 1959 Holiday had only $848.54 in cash to her name and was thousands of dollars in debt (228).
always people who are looking for the epiphanies in things, and they turn the whole melody, the whole chordal structure, on just a phrase or two, and the exposition as well as the highlights turn on these moments. That’s what I’m trying to do in a certain kind of analogical way; I’m trying to build on that. (“Conversation” 85)

“Lady’s Blues” employs a climactic “turn” that is not unlike Holiday’s own emotive manner of resolving the heartbreaking narratives that she often performed. For instance, in “Lady Sings the Blues,” a song title that is not only similar to Harper’s poem but is also the title of her autobiography, Holiday laments heartbreak—“Lady sings the blues / I’m telling you she’s got ‘em bad”—and briefly pauses to allow the audience to feel the pain of loneliness and grief. Then, in a quietly soothing tone, she offers assurance that she will find the strength and resilience to overcome these feelings: “But now the world will know / she’s never going to sing them no more.” Likewise, Harper’s penultimate line notably pivots away from the grief and outrage of “no stone” to mourn Holiday’s death to the cathartic affirmation that the memory of “your voice” still persists. In the poem’s concluding line, Harper then offers the reassuring realization that Holiday’s legacy has not been permanently marred by the unfaithfulness of her lovers and friends.

In “Where is My Woman Now: For Billie Holiday,” Harper more explicitly evinces the inspiration he receives from Holiday as he combines the repetition of the blues song mode through the refrain “where is my woman now” with the sonnet’s fourteen lines to create an homage that is typically blues in its themes of heartbreak and loneliness while also reminiscent of Holiday’s performances of “Strange Fruit”:

Poplars lean backward
Greener and sparer
On windward side
where is my woman now
captured in northern spit
losing the weak leaves
and winter bark
the rains till the hillside
while the poppies mope
where is my woman now
on the slopes are sparrows
bathing like sheep
in this spring muck
where is my woman now.

Whereas Elizabeth Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer” (1944), which also alludes to Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” is rather unconvincing in its rendering of the blues, Harper’s refrain (“where is my woman now”) and despairing tone firmly situate the poem in Holiday’s blues mode, thereby offering a lyrical corrective to what Harper once criticized as “the resurrection of Billie Holiday by poor imitators” (“The Map and the Territory” 507).

Moreover, Harper’s pastoral imagery references “Strange Fruit” and the lynched black body that disturbs the tranquility of the blooming poplar trees that appear in both the poem (“poplars lean forward”) and the song: “Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees” (4). Accordingly, Harper writes that “this spring muck” brings the speaker no
solace, just as the song’s “pastoral scene of the gallant South” is traumatized by the “strange and bitter crop” (5, 12). Through these allusions, Harper frames his tribute to Holiday within the context of the sociopolitical impact that she made as the vocalist who bravely incorporated “Strange Fruit” into her repertoire and, in the process, provides an inspiring counternarrative to Sanchez’s Black Arts-era description of Holiday’s music and the blues more generally as “sounds of / oppression” (“liberation / poem” 2-3).

Similarly departing from his predecessors, Harper’s “Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song” exposes the racism that all African Americans experienced during the pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era without reproducing the apocryphal mythology surrounding Smith’s death:

Disarticulated
arm torn out,
large veins cross
her shoulders intact,
her tourniquet
her blood in all-white bands:

 Can’t you see
what love and heartache’s done to me
I’m not the same as I used to be
this is my last affair.

Mail truck or parked car
in the fast lane,

afloat at forty-three

on a Mississippi road,

Two-hundred-pound muscle on her ham bone,

‘nother nigger dead ’fore noon.

Can’t you see

what love and heartache’s done to me

I’m not the same as I used to be

this is my last affair.

Fifty-dollar record

Cut the vein in her neck,

Fool about her money

Toll her black train wreck,

White press missed her fun’ral

In the same stacked deck:

Loved a little blackbird

heard she could sing,

Martha in her vineyard

pestle in her spring,

Bessie had a bad mouth
made my chimes ring:

Can’t you see
what love and heartache’s done to me
I’m not the same as I used to be
this is my last affair. (1-36)

Harper’s juxtaposing images of white (“her blood in all-white big bands”) and black (“black train wreck”) allude to the often pernicious consequences of Jim Crow segregation; regardless of Smith’s actual cause of death, “the same stacked deck” led to the systematic disregard for myriad other African Americans (“’nother nigger dead ’fore noon”).

Chris Albertson biography’s Bessie (1972) was published the same year as “Last Affair,” and, as previously noted, Albertson once and for all debunks the story of the white hospital refusing Smith treatment. He reports that Smith would never have been taken to a white hospital to begin with, and, in any case, neither the black nor the white hospital was properly equipped to treat her injuries. Even in 1971, “Bessie would have stood only a fifty-fifty chance of surviving the accident—she certainly would never have been able to sing again” (262-263). Given the timing of Harper’s and Albertson’s publications, it is likely that Harper had this new information in mind as he composed his poem and that he wished to draw attention to the injustices that Smith and other African Americans did experience, even while he accepts that her death was not a direct result of racism. For instance, highlighting the music’s industry’s historical exploitation of black musicians, Harper implies that she received no royalties from her “Fifty-dollar record,”
and that “the white press missed her fun’ral” because, as a black woman, she was not considered worthy of media attention. Thus, unlike many of his predecessors—Myron O’Higgins, Alvin Aubert, and Waring Cuney,\textsuperscript{76} to name a few—Harper resists characterizing Smith as a martyr for racial justice but further illuminates the widespread racial persecution that explains why the mythology surrounding Smith’s death remains compelling.

Further, incorporating the refrain from the song “(This is) My Last Affair”—a tune that Holiday, not Smith made famous—into his Smith-inspired blues poem, Harper demonstrates the influence of these iconic women on his own poetry and poetics. Harper replicates, for example, the prototypical blues aab rhyming pattern as well as the heartbreak that Smith often sang about, such as in “Empty Bed Blues, Part II”: “When my bed get empty, make me feel awful mean and blue (2x) / My springs are gettin’ rusty, sleepin’ single like I do” (qtd. in A. Davis 277-278). Moreover, Harper develops a call-and-response pattern between his stanzas that allude to the implied rapport between blues performers and their audiences, and his colloquialisms (“bad” meaning dangerously good) and sexual innuendos (“pestle in her spring”) position his “song” in the tradition of Smith and other classic blues women like Rainey who flaunted their sexuality in thinly-veiled erotic metaphors such as “springs are gettin’ rusty.” Harper’s elegiac poem marks Smith’s “last affair,” but his formal and thematic gestures toward her blues style keep Smith’s musical memory alive. While Smith and Holiday remain physically amorphous in “Lady’s Blues,” “Where Is My Woman Now: For Billie Holiday,” and “Last Affair:

\textsuperscript{76} See chapter 1 for an examination of O’Higgins’s “Blues for Bessie” and chapter 2 for an analysis of Aubert’s two tributes to Smith, “Bessie” and “Bessie Smith’s Funeral.” Though I have not explicated Cuney’s brief elegiac poem “Bessie Smith” (1973) in which he asks, “Where do you die / if your face ain’t white?” (3-4), he follows O’Higgins’s example of portraying Smith as a tragic symbol of the injustices of American racism.
Bessie’s Blues Song.” Harper thus draws attention to these artists’ sociocultural importance and suggests that their music transcends their historical moments—a point punctuated by his blues-inspired poetics. As we shall see momentarily, these dual impulses to historicize and mythologize this study’s icons recur in late-twentieth century tributes, particularly as poets contend with the second-wave blues revival among white audiences and the emergence of rap as the new lyrical expression of resistance to Anglo-American hegemony.

“Warm me again now”

As with many of the poets considered here, Al Young has long been invested in blues and jazz as the primary influences on his poetry and poetics and has penned many blues tributes, such as his “A Dance for Ma Rainey” (1969) that was examined in the previous chapter. Following Harper, Young’s homages to Holiday and Leadbelly both elevate these figures to mythic heights and educate his readers about the sociopolitical context of their music, including Holiday’s and Leadbelly’s struggles with institutionalized racism in a pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era. In an interview with Feinstein, Young emphasizes the connection he strives to make with readers: “When you write a poem or make a painting or perform music, what really informs that is your spirit. It is inexplicably the main ingredient, and it connects with the spirit of the listener (or the person who’s reading or seeing it). So it has a life that is prolonged by a spectator or co-participant” (“Makes Me Feel” 409). Accordingly, one cannot fully appreciate Young’s tributes without knowing the songbook that he references, as his poetic portraits invite
readers to become listeners and to appreciate the mythic and sociohistorical aspects of Holiday’s and Leadbelly’s legacies in the process.

In “Billie,” a fourteen-line poem that references the sonnet tradition of extolling the virtues of a beautiful woman, Young portrays Holiday as a seductive muse within an otherworldly voice who, though she is not physically present, is permanently “etched into time” by the recordings that preserve her sound. As such, he disassociates her from the legacy of tragedy and self-destruction that his predecessors so frequently invoked and, renovating the classical muse trope, transforms Holiday into a blues goddess who inspires Young’s effusive artistic response:

Music: a pattern etched into time

I suck on my lemon, I squeeze my lime
into a bright but heady drink, soft
to the tongue, cold to touch, and wait

She who is singing enters my mouth,
a portion at a time: an arm, a leg,
a nipple, an eye, strands of hair—
There! Her song goes down and spins
around the way a toy pinwheel does, as
rosy blue blur, as rainbow, whirling
me through her throaty world and higher
Chug-a-lug enchantress, show me your
etchings. Warm me again now with
the red of your Cleopatric breath. (1-14)

Suffused with images of seduction and intoxication, Young situates “Billie” in an extensive catalogue of blues songs about hedonistic indulgence. Rendering Holiday a “Chug-a-lug enchantress,” the speaker even experiences an orgasmic moment (“There!”) in which the song satisfies his deep yearning to become immersed in “her throaty world.” Unlike the portrait of a victim who, in Larry Neal’s “Lady’s Days,” “lay bleeding / under red spots” (55), Young imagines Holiday as empowered and erotic; and, signifyin(g) on Langston Hughes’s description of Holiday’s voice as “Cold brass in warm air” (17), Young embraces her recordings as perpetually (almost addictively) “warm” and inviting.

As the muse, Holiday inspires Young’s poetic response—“She who is singing enters my mouth”—and he honors her artistry without associating her lyrics with the tragedies of her life. The Cleopatra metaphor includes the only allusion to self-destruction, affirming that, similar to Cleopatra’s suicide, Holiday died prematurely; yet, the comparison still maintains Holiday’s stature as an alluring blues queen who, as Feinstein rightly observes, “becomes not merely lifelike but life affirming” (177).

In “On the Road with Billie,” Young further emphasizes the creative inspiration that he receives from Holiday, whose persona he engages in an ongoing dialogue as he travels “on the road.” Referencing her diverse repertoire of songs ranging from popular standards to tunes that she personally wrote, this poem again invites readers to reevaluate Holiday’s personal legacy so that she is viewed heroically and not as an embodiment of despair:

Black and Catholic out of Baltimore. What else?
Who did you think you were? I thought I knew.
The sounds of dreams remembered—that’s who.
You covered the waterfront. We dogged the road.

........................................

“I get no kick from cocaine”? “Mere alcohol
doesn’t thrill me at all”? It made you smile awhile
The war? They changed the chords, the beat,
you know, it never stopped. They changed the bill.
The War on Poverty, it bombed, but War on Drugs,
it’s on a roll, like we were on a roll—April in Paris,

Autumn in New York, Nice Work if You Can Get It;
as if you’d be waiting for me always in the doorways of
Trailways and Greyhounds and train depots, small
hotels with wishing wells, and all the grand hotels;
the same old fine brown frame, sweating like an orchid,
and your heart beat so that you could hardly speak. (3-6, 43-54)

Incorporating lyrics from many of the songs that Holiday recorded —“I Cover the Waterfront,” “God Bless the Child,” “Detour Ahead,” “You Go to My Head,” “April in Paris,” “Autumn in New York,” “Nice Work if You Can Get It,” and “Cheek to Cheek”—and biographical details of her life (“Catholic out of Baltimore” and “sweating like an orchid” refers to the trademark orchids and gardenias she wore in her hair), Young constructs Holiday as a historical individual, rather than casting her in the goddess role
that she plays in “Billie.” Moreover, Young calls attention to the various stage personae that Holiday performed and wryly questions the implications of her lyrics such as “You Go to My Head” (“‘Mere alcohol / doesn’t thrill me at all?’ It made you smile awhile”), suggesting a necessary separation between her music and the realities of her life that contrasts with his predecessors—Hughes, Sanchez, and Carruth, for instance—who characterized the lyrics that Holiday sang as testimony of her personal struggles.

“On the Road with Billie” also provides a sociopolitical context for understanding the spectacular stories that surround Holiday’s legacy, highlighting specifically the institutional forms of discrimination that hindered Holiday’s and scores of other black musicians’ professional success. Just as they were racially profiled as drug users, Young implies that, rather than addressing the socioeconomic links between poverty and narcotics usage, government officials continue to persecute drug addicts. Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” “bombed,” Young explains, but the current administration’s “War on Drugs” is “on a roll,” not unlike the police harassment that Holiday experienced decades prior. As Griffin maintains, “the media and law enforcement seemed to revel in a voyeuristic fashion with her [Holiday] and an abusive harassment of her” (If You Can’t Be Free 44). Young’s poem offers a critique of the misplaced priorities of the American government and society at large, shifting the conversation away from Holiday’s drug abuse to the exposure of broader injustices.

Young then concludes the poem by returning to the personal intimacy that he established early on, constructing an image of Holiday as the speaker’s closest confidant and traveling companion (“the same old fine brown frame”). Though he references Holiday’s drug use, Young does not dwell on these unflattering details; instead, “On the
Road with Billie” affirms that first and foremost Holiday should be remembered for her musical achievements and not the narrative of heartbreak and despair that was once again being propagated during the late twentieth century as record companies marketed Holiday’s music on compact disc. As Stuart Nicholson writes in his 1995 biography Billie Holiday, “Today she [Holiday] is part romantic martyr, claimed by feminists and civil rights campaigners, and part heroine of excess whose details of self-extinction threaten to obscure her genuine achievements in jazz” (234). Young’s poems provide a counternarrative to these accounts by emphasizing the artistic and personal inspiration she continues to provide not symbolically as a martyr but, as in “Billie,” through the “rosy blue blur” of her emotive music.

In “The Leadbelly Song” and “The Midnight Special Revisited,” Young similarly imbues his portraits with the admiration of an ardent fan, championing in particular Leadbelly’s ability to mitigate the hardships of his life by singing the blues:

```
got guitars thrown at me
& I was spared

the chain gang

ah, but you could sing
cities & ashes
& brown/black/meat
wobbling thru your songs
```

---

77 For example, in the liner notes of the reissue of her album Solitude on compact disc (Verve, 1993), Vincent Pelote writes, “Knowing the details of her tragic love life makes listening to this recitative akin to hearing a confessional.”
pictures & energy
pouring from you
like rainwater
trickling down a branch
I caught the fever
called off the war
put everything away
stopped walking
stopped talking
moved in with Jean Harlow
bought that horse
Stewball
on a Monday
& kissed Irene
goodnight

flopped over
grew my hair out
picked up on your jive
fingers tingling
wrapped around
a new hammer. (25-31, 40-60)
Young constructs Leadbelly as an embodiment of the blues ethos who persevered artistically in spite of his misfortunes, such as “the chain gang” in the Jim Crow South, thereby affirming his importance as an African-American symbol of resistance to racial oppression.

As with “On the Road with Billie,” this poem is also interspersed with several Leadbelly songs—“Pigmeat,” (“brown/black/meat”), “Stewball,” “Irene” (often called “Goodnight, Irene”), and “Take this Hammer”—and this intertextuality requires readers to listen to these songs in order to fully appreciate Young’s lyrical reference points. As T. Austin Graham observed previously, “Musical literature of the sort studied here asks its readers to ‘do’ something beyond merely reading it” (3). Establishing links between his own contemporary poetry and Leadbelly’s oeuvre, Young invites his audience to participate in maintaining Leadbelly’s legacy not in the commodified form proffered by record companies but as members of a socially-conscious community of artists, readers, and listeners. Indeed, transmitting his enthusiasm for the music, Young’s speaker testifies to the creativity and artistic confidence (“picked up on your jive”) that listening to Leadbelly instills; and, as this narrative of artistic epiphany attests, Leadbelly is responsible for Young’s own decision to try his hand at the “new hammer” of blues-inspired poetry.

Much like the final stanzas of “On the Road with Billie,” in “The Midnight Special Revisited,” Young’s speaker is on the road, but this time he travels to Shreveport, Louisiana, the city where Leadbelly spent his early years busking and was subsequently arrested and, as discussed in the previous chapter, imprisoned for assaulting a white man (Wolfe and Lornell 97-99). Young’s poem explores the sociocultural transformations (or

---

78 See chapter 2, pgs. 11-20 for a detailed account of Leadbelly’s convictions and his years in prison.
lack thereof) that have occurred between Leadbelly’s imprisonment at Sugarland (1920-1925), where he first began singing the song “The Midnight Special,” to the present (83). Similar to his critique of the so-called “War on Drugs,” Young emphasizes how much has remained the same in terms of racism and socioeconomic disenfranchisement.

Beginning the poem with a wryly humorous reproach of Leadbelly—“Mean old murderous Leadbelly, / Sugarland bound as sure as you’re born” (1-2)—Young first acknowledges the notorious reputation that Leadbelly gained during his lifetime. For example, a 1935 *Time* headline once described Leadbelly as a “murderous minstrel” (Wolfe and Lornell 3), and, as previously noted, a 1937 *Life* magazine caption read “Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel” (Rosenberg 220). Though decades have transpired since these headlines first appeared, “The Midnight Special Revisited” observes the same inequities in the white authorities’ treatment of blacks in Shreveport, implying that Leadbelly’s reputation must be considered within the context of the racially hostile environment in which he rose to fame:

. . . Seriously, you’d

have to hot tail it all the way back to when

gasoline was 15 cents a gallon to find

so much as a watermelon man or a hot tamale man

or a strolling spasm band on Fannin Street.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

But the KKK is still alive & thriving.

Christian born-againers still burn

& the fervor of their flaming return
Religious, political or not, the cops’ll
still gitcha if you don’t watch out!
They catch you acting too colored or
not colored enough—it’s blam!
You better not stagger & you better not fight. (24-28, 32-34, 39-43)

Though the Shreveport scenery has dramatically changed since the 1920s, the socioeconomic and racial injustices have remained regrettably similar. Alluding to lyrics from “The Midnight Special,” Young asserts that the same motto—“You better not stagger & you better not fight”—still applies because, as Leadbelly’s song famously warned, the authorities will “arrest you” and “take you down” (qtd. in Wolfe and Lornell 84). Through these song lyrics, Young again encourages his audience to seek out Leadbelly’s “The Midnight Special” and listen to its sociopolitical implications, asserting that lyrics about hardship, imprisonment, and a desire for freedom still resonate with African Americans in the late twentieth century.

Obliquely responding to the popularity of hip hop/rap and the second-wave blues revival, Young educates his readers in the musical history of black resistance to Anglo-American hegemony and, in the process, enjoins them to appreciate the viability of Leadbelly’s and Holiday’s blues to speak to the same disenfranchisement and marginalization that his rap successors often voice. Exalting these figures as his personal and artistic inspirations, Young does not ignore their flaws. Rather, he implicates systematic discrimination as aggravating factors in Leadbelly’s imprisonments and Holiday’s drug arrests, poetically reshaping their posthumous personae so that
contemporary and future generations of readers will appreciate Holiday’s and Leadbelly’s musical and sociocultural significance without relying on the sensational stories that have long overshadowed their legacies.

“here’s the tune”

Although he is of a slightly younger generation, Cornelius Eady joins this chapter’s other poets in embracing blues and jazz as primary poetic influences. In his 1991 poem “Leadbelly,” for example, Eady praises Leadbelly as a heroic symbol of artistic resistance to the racial caste system in the Jim Crow South. As in Young’s poems, Eady sheds light on the oppressive sociopolitical circumstances that Leadbelly makes reference to in his songs, while also celebrating his ability to lyrically render them in music that remains culturally and literarily relevant decades later. Leadbelly was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988 (just a few years before this poem was published), and like all of this study’s blues icons, he experienced a posthumous surge in popularity due to the reissues of his recordings on compact disc. The same year also marked the release of A Vision Shared: A Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly with recordings by such rock giants as Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and U2, making 1988 the clear zenith of Leadbelly’s career. Eady’s poem intervenes in this renewed interest in Leadbelly by offering his own account of the musician’s legacy:

You can actually hear it in his voice:

Sometimes the only way to discuss it

Is to grip a guitar as if it were

---

79 During the 1990s, a series of compact discs of Leadbelly’s recordings were issued on the independent labels, Rounder and Document. In addition, in 1994, Smithsonian Folkways released a four-disc box set of Leadbelly’s recordings.
Somebody’s throat
And pluck. If there were

A ship off of this planet,
An ark where the blues could show
Its other face,

A street where you could walk,
Just walk without dogged air at
Your heels, at your back, don’t
You think he’d choose it?
Meanwhile, here’s the tune:
Bad luck, empty pockets,
Trouble walking your way
With his tin ear. (1-14)

Eady’s fourteen-line poem draws on the sonnet tradition, employs standard English, and, unlike many of his predecessors’ tributes, is not overtly performative. However, in the dialogue that Eady facilitates with the reader, he models the call-and-response pattern of the blues, whereby the singer assumes (though it is not vocally inscribed into the song), that the audience commiserates with the sentiments expressed in the lyrics. Employing the second person (“You can actually hear it in his voice”), Eady implicates readers in this discussion of Leadbelly’s style, encouraging them to seek out Leadbelly’s music and simultaneously informing their interpretations of what they hear. For instance, comparing
Leadbelly’s forceful delivery to the violence of strangulation (“to grip a guitar as if it were / Somebody’s throat”), Eady limns Leadbelly’s songs as imbued with anger and frustration, not to mention Leadbelly’s volatile temper, at the oppressive forces that impinged on his daily life.

In a recent interview, Eady described his blues- and jazz-inspired poems as “documenting” the protest of second-class citizenship—what Eady poignantly terms the “shouting at silence”—that black musicians historically engaged in (186). As Steven Tracy asserts,

This creative expression is itself a revolt against authority and the conventional and makes the black blues singer automatically a representative of protest and revolt by virtue of his existing and performing. And, theoretically, the audience understands this idea, either consciously or unconsciously. Thus, the blues and the blues singer embody protest and revolution as they embody the separateness of blacks in the U.S. (104)

Because Leadbelly could not openly revolt against institutionalized racism without fear of reprisals—could not “Just walk without dogged air”—he sang about his “Bad luck, empty pockets / Trouble walking your way,” implicitly resisting the discrimination that he faced. By rendering his homage in the blues mode of expressing black pride and artistic defiance to the dominant Anglo-American power structure, Eady also attests to what Bolden describes as “blues music’s central position in African American culture” (43), even in the last decade of the twentieth century. Providing an alternative narrative to
the reissues of Leadbelly’s recordings that were primarily marketed to white audiences, Eady’s dialogic tribute draws attention to the relationship between Leadbelly’s music and the racial persecution that he endured and champions his creative response to second-class citizenship without altering the biographical details of his life, as his Black Arts predecessors were wont to do. As such, Eady joins Young in anchoring his Leadbelly portrait in the context of a racially unjust past while maintaining the artistic continuity between Leadbelly’s music and the blues more generally and his own late twentieth-century poetry and worldview.

“I want to remember”

In this post-Black Arts era, Amiri Baraka continues to claim the blues as a distinctively African-American music and worldview, but he does not imbue “The Lady” (1987) with the black nationalist agenda that underwrites poems such as “LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH” (1969). “The Lady” was published in The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues (1987), a collection of poetry and essays that includes the previously unpublished poetic essay “Billie”81 as well as poems written by his wife Amina, who has her own Holiday tribute, “For the Lady in Color,” that I will explore in the next chapter. In fact, these are not Baraka’s first reflections on Holiday. As mentioned in chapter 2, he also wrote the poetic essay “Dark Lady of the Sonnets” (1962) as the

80 For example, the cover of Sony’s 1991 release Leadbelly: King of the 12 String Guitar features an image of Leadbelly clad in prison stripes performing for a group of fellow convicts. The image is clearly based on the 1935 March of Time film staged by John Lomax and essentially reenacts the image of Leadbelly as a savage savant that Lomax successfully deployed a half-century earlier to well-educated white liberals. In fact, a 2006 JSP box set of Leadbelly’s music, Important Recordings, 1934-1949, similarly reproduces a “Wanted” poster of Leadbelly on the cover, affirming that Lomax’s marketing strategy is still alive and well, despite the degradation implicit in such images.

81 “Billie” was meant to be included in a BBC documentary about Holiday, The Long Night of Lady Day (1986), but it never made its way into the film because, as Baraka notes, the “BBC nutted” when he had to miss the contract meeting to attend his murdered sister’s funeral (The Music 285).
liner notes for the album *Billie Holiday in Germany*; thus, as Griffin argues, it is possible to chart the changes in Baraka’s sociopolitical perspective via his writings about Holiday (“Baraka’s Billie Holiday” 314). To this end, “The Lady” demonstrates Baraka’s move away from conceiving of Holiday in “Dark Lady of the Sonnet” as a threat to one’s emotional well-being—“Sometimes you are afraid to listen to this lady” (*Black Music* 25)—or as the “tragic poet of longing” whose “songs were genuinely frightening” that appears in “Billie” (*The Music* 285).

Yet, while Griffin suggests that “The Lady” represents Baraka’s evolution “from the poet who represents the Black Woman (as cultural bearer) to the poet who is influenced by her [Holiday’s] artistry” (320), I argue that Baraka continues to invoke Holiday as a symbol but one that more appropriately matches his current identity as a Third World Marxist. Griffin is right to point out that “The Lady” demonstrates Holiday’s influence on Baraka’s poetic outlook; yet, rather than exploring Holiday’s artistic complexity, Baraka invokes her as a transcendent voice of blues resistance to white oppression:

> The Lady said of her life here that she 1st
> heard part of her own voice, (Bessie & Louie)
> in a whore house; but she wasn’t the only one
>
> The Lady said
> But also that the whore
> house
> was the only place where
> there was even a semblance
Alluding to passages from Holiday’s autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* that highlight both her working-class upbringing and her distinctive vocal style, Baraka recuperates parts of this narrative, which has often been dismissed for its many factual errors. On the other hand, he transmutes Holiday’s observations in order to advance his own political critique as well as his autobiographical interpretations of her music. For example, in *Lady Sings the Blues*’s first chapter, Holiday recalls running errands for Alice Dean who Holiday told that she would work for free “if she’d [Dean] let me come up in her front parlor and listen to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith on her victrola” (9). She continues, “I guess I’m not the only one who heard their first good jazz in a whorehouse. . . . a lot of white people first heard jazz in places like Alice Dean’s. . . . A whorehouse was about the only place where black and white folks could meet in any natural way” (10). In the poem, “natural way” becomes the more overtly political “a semblance / of democracy.” Later in the narrative, Holiday offers her perspective on the emotive delivery that made her famous: “I’ve been told that nobody sings the word ‘hunger’ like I do. Or the word love. Maybe I remember what those words are all about” (195).

Mobilizing these particular sections from her autobiography, Baraka constructs Holiday as a socially astute and resilient woman whose music is moving because she draws on her
own background and insights as a working-class black woman. He thus reiterates his previous interpretation of Holiday’s music as autobiographical—a point he underscores in “Dark Lady of the Sonnets”—but, rather than describing her sound as “genuinely frightening,” here Baraka highlights her political acumen as a women who understands the links between her own troubled life and systemic injustices. In the process, however, Baraka elides the ways in which Holiday consciously performed and even capitalized on autobiographical interpretations of her songs, including in Lady Sings the Blues. Of course, this is nothing new. “The Lady,” as with the tribute subgenre as a whole, is ultimately more about the poet’s ideological perspective than the complexities of the muse.

Nonetheless, “The Lady” does perform valuable cultural work on Holiday’s behalf. In light of the renewed commodification of Holiday’s legacy by record executives and the cultural dominance of hip hop as the new sound of black “authenticity” and resistance, Baraka insists on Holiday’s and, by extension, the blues’ continued sociopolitical relevance. “The Lady” suggests that Holiday’s songs, which speak of African-American struggles for first-class citizenship (“Strange Fruit” being the most striking example) and universal needs and desires, such as “hunger” and “love,” are still culturally valuable and viable, even though hip hop/rap has become the most popular musical form. As a renowned poet and political activist, Baraka’s representation undoubtedly influenced readers’ (and listeners’) understandings of Holiday’s posthumous legacy, acting as a bulwark against the one-dimensional portraits proffered by record companies as they repackaged Holiday for middle-class white audiences.
“The Lady’s home”

Whereas Baraka invokes Holiday as a vehicle through which he addresses race and class struggles, Lawson Fusao Inada’s eponymous tribute effaces these sociopolitical concerns. Instead, Inada places Holiday within a middle-class domestic fantasy and, invoking her birth name, Eleanora Fagan, rewrites the script of her life so as to edit out the pain, instability, and loneliness, as well as Holiday’s own choices to live an unconventional lifestyle. Beginning the poem in first person, Inada describes the speaker arriving at Holiday’s address, “Except what it says is ‘Eleanora Fagan’ (4), and she lives in “what is known as a nondescript setting: / a preplanned subdivision, tract home at that” (10-11). Locating Holiday in a suburban setting in which the kitchen, not the stage, is her principal domain, Inada portrays Holiday without “all that class and fame, gardenias…” (7). As the poem then shifts into second person, Inada engages readers in re-envisioning Holiday through a heteronormative, patriarchal lens, whereby she is fulfilled not by her professional career but through her role as a homemaker:

Listen to her sing—so you can understand.

Listening to The Lady, you want to turn back.

The act of listening is an invasion of privacy.

You can stand it, though—just don’t get close.

You’re in the street; she’s at the kitchen window.

She’s doing what she pretty well please—

143
cooking, singing, in any getup, so beautiful…
And, oh, does she have some mouths to feed!
Papa’s home, hungry, and her come Pres and Ben!
You know if you knocked, she’d invite you in.
Make a fuss over you as you fussed with the kids.
Come on in and help me get this stew together!
Get vegetables from the garden! Go follow Mama!
All this chopping to do—don’t eat too fast!
Put some mellow music on—let’s make it last!
And the music you choose is her with Pres.
All the love you have comes pouring out again.
Whoever you are, you will never be the same.
This is The Lady’s home, the home
she never had. (12-31)
Characterizing Holiday’s music as intensely evocative, Inada predicts that the listener
will initially “want to turn back.” He then assuages this perceived anxiety by creating an
image of Holiday in the domestic sphere where the despair and heartbreak she often sang of are nowhere to be found.

Consequently, Inada recalls (no doubt, inadvertently) the Mammy stereotype of the asexual, selfless nurturer. Holiday is happily focused, for example, on her family and her duties within the home (“And, oh, does she have some mouths to feed”) and no longer has to fulfill the obligations of the professional performer—in fact, “She’s doing what she pretty well please.” Tellingly, “cooking” supersedes “singing” in her preferred list of tasks, and she is content to wear “any getup,” rather than the elegant gowns she donned onstage. Moreover, “Pres” (Lester Young) and “Ben” (Ben Webster) are present, but, including them in the list of “mouths to feed” right after “Papa,” Inada again reinforces Holiday’s role as caretaker, demoting her from her historical position as Young’s and Webster’s musician colleague. By the final line, Inada’s tone becomes somber as he acknowledges that Holiday “never had” “The Lady’s home” that he describes, lamenting that Holiday was regrettably unable to enjoy the supposed bliss of domestic tranquility.

In an interview, Inada lauds Holiday “as the greatest word-person I’ve ever studied, heard, known, or met—the absolute greatness—and boy, did she put some magical, musical, emotional momentum in me!” (16). Describing Holiday’s profound impact on his artistic outlook, in “Billie Holiday,” Inada joins his African-American counterparts in poetically exalting Holiday as an icon whose impact transcends her historical moment. Instructing readers to cue up particular records (“All the music you choose is with her and Pres”), Inada acts as a kind of deejay, selecting the songs from her oeuvre that he finds most poignant and emphasizing the transformative effect of her
music on listeners of any generation: “Whoever you are, you will never be the same.” Yet, through his revisionary tale, he simultaneously effaces Holiday’s agency as a woman who sought fame and artistic success as well as an iconoclastic lifestyle that involved heavy drinking, illegal drugs, and casual affairs with men and women. In so doing, Inada transmutes Holiday into a familiar stereotype, neglecting the multifaceted personae that she developed to achieve fame in an era in which she was expected but consciously chose not to play the caretaker role that Inada imagines for her.

“The Lord, Queen / of the blues”

As with the other poets considered here, Sterling Plumpp honors blues artists as inspirations for his own poetry and poetics, and, in accordance with contemporary theorists, his tributes to Smith, Holiday, and Johnson also affirm that the blues is more than a musical genre—it is a distinct epistemology that undergirds African-American culture past and present. Accordingly, though these artists gained fame in the secular realm, Plumpp casts them in spiritual roles, transforming them into mythical muses who provide not only artistic but existential guidance. Anointing Smith “Queen / of the dispossessed” (73-74), for example, Plumpp’s “Bessie Smith” celebrates her as both a larger-than-life icon and a community spokesperson whose music fortifies her audience’s resolve against endemic racism. As with Harper’s “Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song,” Plumpp does not reference the sensational story of racism surrounding Smith’s fatal car accident or construct her as a victim or martyr, as previous generations of tribute poets often did; in fact, Plumpp does not mention her death at all. Rather, he represents Smith as both the inspiration for his work and as an embodiment of the blues worldview, whose
songs bear witness to the frustrations of the silenced and disenfranchised black masses in the rural South:

Furrowed meanings.
Middlebusted origins of speech. Took her in sides, called epics of the down and out multitudes.
Before a nation, a scattered fragmented tribe of sufferers.
Their epic laden woes crouched in her in sides moaning like a drunk boll weevil. She rises from back doors carved on memories to loom history round skeletons of lynched dreams. (1-15)

Employing the blues tropes of metaphor and coded language, Plumpp’s enjambment allows for multiple meanings to emerge, such as the fragmented “in / sides”: on the one hand, Smith absorbs, or takes “in,” the concerns of her community and her blues voices what is “in / side” of her; on the other hand, the “sides” of her records preserve and maintain these expressions, providing her audience with continuous opportunities to experience the catharsis of hearing her “bellowing / over peaks of time” (47-48). In the
same way, Smith’s lyrics to “Poor Man’s Blues” perform double duty. She ostensibly protests the disparity of wealth in post-WWI American society—“Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you” (qtd. in A. Davis 327)—but, within the context of black Americans’ struggle for equal rights and opportunities, “the war” refers not only to the recent war abroad but the Civil War and Reconstruction and the many unfulfilled promises for African Americans here at home. Positioning his poetry as an inheritor of Smith’s “epics of the / down and out multitudes,” Plumppp honors her as a spokeswoman for her community’s suffering that began first under slavery and then continued with sharecropping, as the references to the “middlebuster” (a farm implement used to break up soil) and the “boll weevil” (a pest that famously infected millions of Southern cotton crops during the 1920s and 1930s) attest.

During a time in which the blues was being marketed to middle-class white audiences and younger generations of all racial hues were gravitating to the urban (and predominantly black and male) sounds of hip hop, Plumppp suggests that Smith’s music continues to provide a cathartic counternarrative to the despair that “lynched dreams” threaten. As the brutal beating of Rodney King by white Los Angeles police officers in 1991 (the same year Plumppp’s “Bessie Smith” was published), the murder of James Byrd, Jr. in 1998 by white supremacists, and the numerous other racially-charged incidents during the last several decades remind us, the specter of America’s racist past is ever-present. Although decades have passed since the white supremacist terror that Plumppp alludes to was commonplace, he evokes this history and, via Smith and her blues oeuvre, encourages readers to remember the thousands of victims of lynchings and other such atrocities in order to ensure that history does not repeat itself.
He thus concludes the poem by celebrating Smith’s timeless importance as a voice for the marginalized and disenfranchised:

Queen of the
dispossessed.
Mother of
night longings.
Keeper of
hard time dues.
Lord, Queen
of the blues. (73-80)

While Smith sings of “night longings” and “hard times,” her songs offer solace by validating her audience’s frustrations and desires and renewing theirs and her own resolve to overcome them. Akin to Hayden’s “Homage to the Empress of the Blues” (1948), Plumpp praises Smith’s ability to provide cathartic relief to the working-class masses. Yet, Plumpp does not highlight her material beauty or her glamour as Hayden does. Eliding her physicality completely, Plumpp apotheosizes Smith as a spiritual figure who rises above the material hardships of which she sings and, recalibrating the Christian trinity, he exalts her as “Mother,” “Keeper,” “Lord, Queen.”

Likewise, in the poem that bears her name, Plumpp limns Holiday as a blues goddess, whose deeply emotive deliveries inspire paradoxical feelings of grief and relief:

I can
not let
go and I
can not keep the music.

She feels and I
hear deep with
in flesh of tones.
I
believe/ I’ll
go back
to college and
major in kneeling

with my ears. (35-48)

While Smith nurtures the black community at large, the relationship that Plumpp’s speaker establishes with Holiday is far more personal and heart-wrenching, which indeed matches with Holiday’s most well-known persona as a perennially heartbroken woman—“Don’t Explain,” “Lady Sings the Blues,” “My Man,” are just a few of her most famous torch songs. Rather than constructing Holiday as a tragic muse, however, Plumpp joins Young, Baraka, and Inada in characterizing her music as poignant and evocative (“She feels and I / hear deep”), as well as transcendentally inspirational: he “can / not let / go,” but he also “can / not keep the music.” Similar to his construction of Smith then, Holiday performs an artistic and spiritual role, as Plumpp’s speaker proclaims his devotion and resolves to reeducate himself “and major” in the worldview that her music conveys.

The poet and critic Jerry W. Ward has called Plumpp “the most gifted blues poet of his generation,” and, as Jess’s praise made clear earlier, Plumpp has inspired younger
generations to appreciate the role of poetry in keeping the blues and its most famous musicians viable—an apt summary of what “Billie Holiday,” “Bessie Smith,” and all of the tributes in his collection *Blues: The Story Always Untold* (1989) aim to do. As with many of the poets considered here, Plumpp praises Smith and Holiday in personal terms as his poetic inspirations, while he also testifies to the historical and contemporary importance of the blues not only as a musical form but as what Baker describes as “the multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (*Blues* 4). As Plumpp and his contemporaries position blues men and women in the pantheon of black heroes, however, they simultaneously omit many of the complexities of these musicians’ lived experiences, particularly the tension between empowerment and objectification that these figures contended with as black celebrities in a music industry controlled by white men—aspects of their legacies that many of the feminist poets examined in the next chapter address head-on. Indeed, the impulse to engage in poetic mythmaking is perhaps most poignantly realized in the homages to Robert Johnson that the next section takes up.

**“hell hound on my trail”: The Robert Johnson Poem**

Before turning to Plumpp’s “Robert Johnson” and then the Johnson tributes written by his Anglo-American contemporaries Forrest Gander and John Sinclair, it is useful to briefly summarize Johnson’s life and art as well as his unusual celebritization. Despite being a contemporary of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, and Leadbelly and becoming
relatively popular during the 1960s blues revival, poets did not pay tribute to Johnson until the second-wave blues revival, which, as already noted, spurred new interest in this enigmatic blues legend. In fact, during Johnson’s lifetime (probably 1911-1938), he was virtually unknown outside of the Delta, and, within the region, as an “itinerant hobo who wandered and womanized widely” (Rothenbuhler 209). Yet, today he is internationally celebrated as one of the most esteemed blues performers of all time. As Francis Davis writes, “Johnson’s Complete Recordings sold in excess of 400,000 copies within six months of its release in August 1990—enough for it to be certified gold. In contrast, Johnson’s raunchy ‘Terraplane Blues,’ recorded in 1936 and his most popular record during his lifetime, sold just 4,000 copies upon its initial release and was distributed only in the South” (126). Like his “discovery” and promotion of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, John Hammond, the famed CBS talent scout, actually sought to make Johnson a blues star, booking him at Carnegie Hall as part of his “From Spirituals to Swing” concert on December 23, 1938 (Gioia 151). Unfortunately, Johnson died the previous August, having supposedly been poisoned after initiating an affair with a married woman; however, as with all of the details of his life, scholars are still sifting through the various, and often contradictory, accounts of Johnson’s death. Despite the numerous scholars who have researched Johnson’s life since his death in 1938, Ted Gioia notes that still “we can assign only a few specific dates and places” to his biography (156). He was born illegitimately to Julia Major Dodd in Hazelhurst Mississippi, but was it in 1911, as is often cited, or 1912 (or even 1907, a year Gioia identifies as a possibility)? One of the reasons that Johnson’s biography has proven so elusive is that, as Robert Palmer

---

82 Columbia released Robert Johnson’s recordings on LP—King of the Delta Blues (1961) and King of the Delta Blues: Volume II (1966)—and, according to Barry Lee Pearson, these records “made a terrific impact on the folk-and-blues revival audience and countless coming-of-age musicians” (221).
describes, Johnson resisted a fixed identity even during his lifetime: “He boomeranged from woman to woman, town to town, trusting no one and taking few musical associates, acting for all the world like there really was a hellhound on his trail” (117). Certainly, the lack of a full biographical account of Johnson’s life is one of the reasons why the myths persist, and poets remain so fascinated in offering their own interpretations of his life and art.

Also, Johnson’s otherworldly persona is indelibly linked to his claim that he sold his soul to the devil in exchange for musical virtuosity. There are numerous theories about the origins of this legend, and Johnson’s songs, which are full of references to spiritual reckoning and damnation (“Cross Road Blues,” “Preaching Blues [Up Jumped the Devil],” “Hellhound on My Trail,” and “Me and the Devil Blues”) have only worked to perpetuate these myths. Regardless of how he acquired his skills—whether in a crossroads deal with the devil, by learning from Son House and other Delta blues men, or simply through practice and ingenuity—he was undoubtedly an accomplished blues musician and lyricist, who, as Davis writes, “doesn’t really sound like anyone else, past or present” (133). Moreover, Johnson’s evocative metaphors, such as the “crossroad” (“I went to the crossroad / fell down on my knees”), have continuously fascinated writers and listeners because of the existential crises and despair that they convey (“I’m standin at the crossroad, babe / I believe I’m sinkin down”). A fictional dramatization of Johnson’s Faustian bargain titled Crossroads (1986) exemplifies Hollywood’s interest in

83 Several biographies—by Elijah Wald, Barry Lee Pearson, and Bill McCullough, among others—adamantly dispute the veracity of the bargain with the devil. Ted Gioia contends that the most likely scenario is that Johnson spread the story himself in order to distinguish himself and gain attention, as many of his blues colleagues did in their own songs about the devil. He cites Skip James’ “Devil Got My Woman,” Peetie Wheatstraw’s “The High Sheriff from Hell,” and “The Devil’s Son-in-Law” as examples (162-164).
cashing in on this aspect of the Johnson mythology. Further, Johnson’s famous lyrics about a “hellhound on my trail” not only speaks to fears of damnation but also the racial terror that black men and women were frequently victims of in Johnson’s home state of Mississippi, making the image poignant in both universal and historically-specific terms.

As Plump, Sinclair, and Gander pay tribute to Johnson’s creative influence on their poetry, they all (at least to some degree) represent him as larger-than-life and interpret his lyrics about spiritual crises and deals with the devil autobiographically. Even Gander and Sinclair who strive to anchor Johnson in his own sociohistorical moment—specifically in the racially oppressive Jim Crow South—rely on the legends to thematize Johnson’s experiences, suggesting that the dearth of biographical evidence makes it nearly impossible to represent Johnson as a man and not a myth. Thus, comparing their tributes sheds light on poets’ efforts to shape Johnson’s cultural narrative during a time in which his music and persona were being marketed to a largely white middle-class fan base and elucidates the underlying tension between mythology and history that characterizes Johnson’s, and all of this study’s blues icons’, posthumous fame.

In “Robert Johnson,” for example, Plump invokes Johnson as a haunting muse who, in contrast to the spiritual comfort that Smith and Holiday provide, causes the speaker to undergo an existential crisis:

His walking shoes
tore down/ all
most level with my mind.

Blues
all a
Formally, Plumpp gestures toward Johnson’s style through both his surreal imagery of
spiritual reckoning and his enjambment that recalls the prototypical caesura that occurs
mid-line in songs such as Johnson’s “Me and the Devil Blues”: “Me and the devil, was
walkin’ side by side.” As in “Bessie Smith,” Plumpp’s enjambed lines require readers to
consider the individual parts of his fractured phrases and to simultaneously glean dual
meanings from them, such as in the lines “mumbling at the cross / roads.” On the one
hand, this line refers to the choice that Johnson supposedly made between the security of Christian salvation (“mumbling at the cross”) and the renunciation of his faith that allowed him to gain artistic prowess playing the so-called devil’s music. On the other hand, Plumpp portrays Johnson as the otherworldly guardian of the “cross / roads”—a sort of embodiment of the devil himself—whom the speaker must now reckon with in order to gain the ability to sing the blues. In the process, Plumpp implies the symbolic universality of the “crossroads” as a representation of the existential choices as well as the incumbent sacrifices that all artists (including Plumpp himself) must make in order to realize artistic aspirations. Thus, by the poem’s end, the speaker makes his own Faustian bargain and resolves to “Crawl a thousand / steps / for his voice” (46-47), eventually conjuring Johnson’s spirit in the twice-repeated final lines “Hell / hounds on my trail” (48-49).

Creating these links between his blues poetry and Johnson’s songs, Plumpp underscores Johnson’s literary and musical relevance in the contemporary era; yet, while he interprets the “crossroads” metaphorically, he also resurrects Johnson as the embodiment of his haunting lyrics. As Barry Lee Pearson lamented in 1992, during the height of the second-wave blues revival, “Apparently, it is impossible to convince anyone that blues songs do not mirror the singer’s own experience; nor is it possible to deter people from nurturing their own image of Johnson as satanist, genius, outsider, and inventor of rock and roll” (223). Of course, teasing out the man from the myths is more difficult with Johnson than perhaps any other blues musician because the facts of his life have eluded historians and musicologists for decades. Still, as he embraces Johnson as an inspiring artistic influence, Plumpp’s poetic portrait largely corroborates, rather than
complicates, the tales of his Faustian bargain, leaving readers with an image of Johnson as an otherworldly figure—a representation that is not significantly different from the one that record companies were marketing.  

**“on his way to the spirit world”**

In “Hell Hound on My Trail,” Sinclair also references Johnson’s song lyrics as a means of narrating the musician’s life and death—in fact, the poem’s epigraph is the first full verse of Johnson’s “Hellhound on My Trail.” At the same time, Sinclair locates his homage to Johnson in a more historically-specific context and educates readers about the sociocultural and communal function of the blues, thereby resisting the commodified narratives of Johnson as a haunted savage-savant. As mentioned earlier, unlike the other poet-professors examined in this chapter, Sinclair is indelibly associated with the late 1960s counterculture, and “Hell Hound on My Trail” demonstrates the importance of Johnson’s music for his generation, who first became fans during the 1960s after Columbia released Robert Johnson’s recordings on LP: *King of the Delta Blues* (1961) and *King of the Delta Blues: Volume II* (1966). Notably, Sinclair’s collection *Fattening Frogs for Snakes: Delta Sound Suite* (2002), which includes “Hell Hound on My Trail,” contains a number of other poems that take their titles directly from Johnson’s songs: “Preaching the Blues,” “Walking Blues,” “Stones in My Passway,” and Come On in My Kitchen.” Unlike “Hell Hound on My Trail,” these poems are almost exclusively

84 For example, in the liner notes to *Robert Johnson: The Complete Collection* (Prism Leisure, 1998), Tony Watts writes that Johnson “attempted to exorcise his demons through the medium of songs in a unique way.”

85 Sinclair was undoubtedly aware of these recordings and was almost certainly an ardent Johnson fan, given his “passion for blues and jazz music” and his extensive record collection of those genres (Callwood 30, 35).
composed of passages from Peter Guralnick’s well-researched biography *Searching for Robert Johnson: The Life and Legend of the “King of the Delta Blues”* (1989), demonstrating Sinclair’s interest in anchoring his portraits of Johnson in biographical research and resisting the tendency in popular culture (and often among his peers) to characterize Johnson and other blues men and women in purely mythological terms.

Moreover, *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* became a gold record in 1990 and, as previously noted, won the musician a posthumous Grammy to boot. Sinclair’s “Hell Hound on My Trail” concludes with three dates—July 15, 1987; July 22-August 5, 1987; and December 11, 1995—that coincide with this revitalization of Johnson’s career. Thus, as a long-time Johnson fan, Sinclair puts forward his own interpretation of the man, the music, and the myths at a time in which Johnson was gaining the widest audience that he had ever had.

Beginning the poem with the lyrics from Johnson’s song of the same title, Sinclair immediately situates “Hell Hound on My Trail” as an inheritor of Johnson’s blues tradition, though admittedly Sinclair’s poem is no match for Johnson’s intonations, including his high-pitched strained wails. As the poem progresses, Sinclair continues in the blues mode by invoking a blues-man speaker to narrate Johnson’s career and the mysterious circumstances surrounding his death:

& Robert Johnson was a name

         to be reckoned with

         in the blues world of the Delta

         where he had spent all his life
& the ladies would crowd around him

to press favors upon him,

the mens would enjoy the music

& the womens dancing

& the excitement rising up in the womens

pressing up into them on the floor

in the juke joint on the fork road,

peoples crowded around (68-79)

As Guralnick reports, before Johnson died he was gaining in popularity and reputation in the Delta region, particularly as his 1936 recordings began to be heard on local jukeboxes (39). Also, Sinclair’s allusions to Johnson’s time in Greenwood and Honey Boy Edwards, who traveled and played alongside Johnson toward the end of his life, accords with Edwards’ 1968 interview with Pete Welding that Guralnick includes in Searching for Robert Johnson: “He was poisoned three miles from Greenwood, Mississippi. He was playing for a country dance, but he was living in Greenwood at the time. About 2:00 he got so sick they had to bring him back to town . . . and he died in Greenwood [and] was buried out from Greenwood out at a place called Three Forks, not far from where he was playing” (49). While Plump constructs Johnson as a mythical figure, Sinclair both exalts and historicizes Johnson by referencing these oral accounts that blues scholars were actively collecting from the 1960s onward, and, in so doing, inserts his own account into the epic search for the “real” facts of Johnson’s life and death.
As the poem continues, Sinclair recasts the “hellhound” metaphor in his narrative about Johnson’s untimely death:

he would fix Robert Johnson’s ass
& he would call himself doing a favor
for the legion of endangered husbands
whose ladies were lined up by the stand

& while Robert played his first set
the poison was eating away at him
& death was inside of him

he could see that hell hound
that he had that song about,

*hell hound on my trail*,

*got to keep moving*,

but he couldn’t move his hand
or get up off the ground,

Robert Johnson,
he couldn’t get up to move,
he laid there on the ground,
poison eating away his life, looking up
into the drooling jaws
of the dreadful hell hound

standing dead up over him,
blood dripping from its eyes,
its foul breath in his face—

*Robert Johnson*

on his way to the spirit world
catch that Greyhound bus & gone. (133-136, 148-150, 160-175)

These fantastical images of “drooling jaws” and “blood dripping” represent a literal interpretation of Johnson’s lyrics about “hellhounds on my trail”; however, Sinclair’s emphasis on the poison that was “eating away his life” likewise implies that the poison was making Johnson hallucinate—a narrative corroborated by interviews with Johnson’s friends Honey Boy Edwards and Johnny Shines. In addition, Sinclair asserts that the pack of hellhounds, almost humorously, symbolizes the “legion of endangered husbands” out to make Johnson pay for making them cuckolds.

Again referencing Johnson’s lyrics from “Hellhound on My Trail” (“I got to keep movin’... hellhound on my trail”) and “Me and the Devil Blues” (“So my old evil spirit / Can catch a Greyhound bus and ride”), Sinclair evinces his comprehensive knowledge of Johnson’s oeuvre and, not unlike this chapter’s other poets, encourages readers to listen to these songs as a means of appreciating the poem’s allusions and the blues worldview that the lyrics convey. As James Cone asserts, “The blues express a belief that one day things will not be like what they are today. This is why buses, railways, and trains are

---

86 For example, in Gayle Dean Wardlow’s *Chasin’ that Devil Music: Searching for the Blues*, he recounts the story that Edwards and Shine told that before Johnson died he “was crawling along the ground on all fours, barking and snapping like a mad beast” (91).
important images in the blues. Each symbolizes motion and the possibility of leaving the harsh realities of an oppressive environment” (139). Sinclair imbues the poem and the Johnson persona in particular with this blues attitude of resilience—even as Johnson dies, he is still moving “on his way to the spirit world / Catch that Greyhound bus & gone.” Thus, Sinclair celebrates the enduring poignancy of Johnson’s blues, and, at the same, he uses his biographical research to portray Johnson not as a mythical figure per se but a daring man who paid the ultimate price for refusing to abide by social laws and customs.

Arguably, Sinclair’s decision to assume a black blues man’s voice and sporadically try his hand at writing in vernacular—“mens,” “womens,” and “peoples,” for example—is problematic. Perhaps as the founder of the White Panthers Party and a longtime critic of Anglo-American hegemony, he assumed that he was immune to criticism about his inconsistent employment of black vernacular. Nevertheless, his usage harkens back to a tradition of white deployment of dialectical features to demarcate racial difference (and often inferiority), rather than to authentically render actual speech patterns—Elizabeth Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer” and John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* are two examples from this study alone. Also, “Hell Hound on My Trail” does not measure up imagistically to the metaphorical poignancy of Johnson’s lyrics, nor is Sinclair as adept at rendering the formal aspects of the blues on the printed page as Harper and Plumpp.

What remains valuable, however, is Sinclair’s interest in intervening poetically in Johnson’s legacy as his music was once again being commodified as the sound of “authenticity” for white audiences, just as it was during the 1960s. By contrast, Sinclair seeks to honor Johnson as a seminal artist and an embodiment of the blues ethos. In his
Introduction to *Fattening Frogs*, Baraka writes, “John has taken the Blues, many Blues, many Blues singers, their words, their feeling, their lives, their conditions, the places and traces of where they was and is, the Delta, Chicago under the El, in the streets of any anonymous Black and Blue America, and transformed them into a poetry, a narrative epoch of PLACE and REPOSSESSION” (10). Baraka applauds Sinclair’s documentation of the often forgotten social function of the blues, such as the sense of community that “the juke joint on the fork road” fostered, as well as the artistic resistance to Anglo-American oppression that the music represents. Indeed, as a poet and blues fan who spans the first and second blues revivals, Sinclair’s “Hell Hound on My Trail” shows his continued interest in shaping understandings of Johnson and the blues more generally in order to, like his African-American counterparts, call attention to the music’s sociocultural importance both historically and contemporarily.

“*a sort of omen*”

Offering a very different style of tribute, Forrest Gander’s “Life of Johnson Upside Your Head, a *Libretto*” (1993) constructs Johnson as an allegorical hero while simultaneously addressing head-on the conflict that exists between the historical and mythological aspects of Johnson’s posthumous persona. Transitioning between experimental poetry and prose and mobilizing several voices, including Johnson’s and other anonymous blues men’s, “Upside Your Head” is an epic-length tribute that formally distinguishes itself from the other tributes considered in this chapter. Gander juxtaposes Old Testament-like cadences—“Approacheth and fishtailon toward Protho Junction” (35)—that augment Johnson’s mythic aspects with Southern place names that
root the poem in a specific historical and geographic moment: “out of Memphis”; “Tunica County, Mississippi, near the cemetery at Three Forks” (43). Moreover, collapsing traditional distinctions between high and low culture, Gander’s title locates his homage in both an oral, colloquial tradition (as the expression “Upside Your Head” implies) and with the libretto (the text of an opera or other musical theatre) an elite, written one. As such, Gander demonstrates the multiple registers in which Johnson’s music functions and, thus, the reason that his recordings remain both culturally and literally influential. Also fittingly, Gander’s libretto casts Johnson and his music in a historical drama that alludes to many of the sociohistorical circumstances, including racial discrimination, that led not only to Johnson’s premature death but to the tensions between the man and the myths that have beset his legacy ever since.

Along with Plumpp, Gander imagines Johnson as an embodiment of his Faustian bargain—“The Devil hummed around the tonic, the blue third and the fifth / he snatched this out of air / to cock it on the wall, controlling timbre” (40)—again exemplifying the proliferation of this Johnson legend in particular. Yet, in another stanza, Gander refers to more historical aspects of Johnson’s legacy, namely his notorious womanizing, as his blues-man speaker riffs on one of Johnson’s own sexual metaphors (“rubbing up against how many / women says she’ll squeeze my lemon” [43]) from “Traveling Riverside Blues”: “You can squeeze my lemon till / juice run down my leg.” As with his contemporaries, Gander similarly urges readers to listen to Johnson’s music in order to hear what his poem describes:

The voice the dead man’s voice is young and tight and high
the naturalness of it as language a man’s voice
tuned a little sharp the image of the voice

a pressured high and letting out

the dead man’s falsetto counterpointing a drum beat

in lower register his guitar breathing the blinds

of syllables his chair squeaks voice undulating

outside the wire-thin loops of swallows in his voice

the diphtheria epidemic in his voice the barn fires

his father a drunk in the dark

mistaking carbolic acid for cough medicine

bottleneck slide groups of triplets

in the treble strings tuned sharp thumb

for hard rhythm intensity inside his mouth

a little slack the concentration inside

the voice an orphan who ate match heads

his wife on the cooling board his baby buried

pain’s medium voice contours of landscape eroded

moral erotic upwelling to warp as the degree

of emotion the power to be funny

jammed through oblivion like crowbar cotton

fields frog gig pissing in wild sweet peas

sweat lubricating voice sex speeding up the dead

man’s voice orphaned from its mouth. (45)
Highlighting the artistry and complexity of Johnson’s sound—his high-pitched “falsetto counterpointing a drum beat” along with his “bottleneck slides” on the guitar—Gander attempts to describe why, as Davis remarked, Johnson “doesn’t really sound like anyone else, past or present.” Gander also references biographical details, such as the story of his first wife’s death in childbirth, his father’s alcoholism, and the alienation associated with being his mother’s only bastard child. The traumas that Johnson reportedly endured ascribe a period and class-specific identity that link the blues man’s emotive delivery to the personal and communal sufferings of blacks in the Jim Crow South—a connection that Gander develops further in the poem’s conclusion. While Gander offers this narrative to accompany Johnson’s music, as is the custom in the libretto tradition, he also indicates that Johnson’s voice is not bound by his physical body. As the hero in this musical drama and as a musician whose recordings have far outlasted “the dead man [’s]” brief twenty-seven-year lifespan, Gander affirms that Johnson’s music exceeds its origins (“orphaned from its mouth”), remaining timeless and universally appealing.

In the poem’s final lines, which function as a sort of epilogue, Gander continues to evoke this tension between the mythic and the historical that not only undergird this poem but Johnson’s entire legacy:

He ends here, a sort of omen. History accelerates. The excluded remains to disrupt the structures that would domesticate it. Unimproved, his voice turns away at the most intense moments of emotion. Into grooves. You bloodless and attenuated: here is the rufous prophet wailing a blue fuck.

---

87 It is necessary to note that only some of Gander’s references have been substantiated by Johnson’s biographers. His first wife, Virginia Travis, died in childbirth (Gioia 169), explaining the allusion to “his wife on the cooling board.” Also, as the illegitimate son of Julia Major Dodd, Johnson lived with two different father figures, perhaps explaining Gander’s description of Johnson as “an orphan.” Otherwise, the allusions to Johnson’s early life seem to be imagined.
The prompt sound. Where the Mississippi embouchures. Sixty years ago, a voice that no longer exists in a room that no longer exists. Fugitive tendency. Erotic disorder. He woke up this morning and reached under the bed for his shoes. Material added by way of analogy. I lacks a nickel. The barber who clipped his nose hairs. When you get down to the lick log. Ruminations of sex without love, love without children. Undergrowth with two figures. Part of his earlobe torn off in a married woman’s teeth. Pubic hairs shed in the beds of strangers. Ass curve moonlight. Stared into landscapes in ceilings, knots and their tributaries and lead-based paint unfolding moth wings. Reeling stars. Bulge in his pants at her funeral. Instead of a country a set of traps. There is not much time in the day between death and life. Tuning. His dogs, throat eaters, untamed and invisible. A weed under tongue. Wanted to be a living man. (51)

Illuminating many of the reasons why he and his contemporaries are poetically inspired by Johnson’s music and his life story, Gander conveys the awe that Johnson evokes in his listeners (“You bloodless and attenuated”). He also draws attention to the music’s timeless appeal—Johnson may “no longer exist” physically, remaining an enigma for scholars and listeners, but his songs endure.

For Gander, Johnson epitomizes an unconventional lifestyle (“Fugitive tendency. Erotic disorder”), thereby signifying resistance to the dominant white society’s circumscribed roles and codes of behavior (“sex without love, love without children”). As the Johnson speaker proclaims in an earlier stanza, “I pick cotton for no man / and I ain’t skeared of Satan” (38). Gander champions Johnson’s iconoclastic behavior and his
refusal to abide by the social conventions that pressured him and scores of other black men and women to repress creative urges and accept a life of back-breaking agricultural labor—a slavery in everything but name. Though systematic oppression prevented blues men and women from achieving fame and notoriety in the same ways as their white counterparts ("Instead of a country a set of traps"), Gander’s libretto strives to atone for these injustices. The poem then transforms Johnson into “a sort of omen” that portends the consequences of marginalization, and, as its allegorical hero, he “remains to disrupt the structures” of sociocultural, political, and economic exclusion.

At the same time, Gander suggests that Johnson remains compelling and otherworldly because he is more authentic than his commercial counterparts. Describing Johnson as a “rufous prophet,” similar to the reddish-brown color of the earth and soil, Gander implies that he is an outgrowth of a bucolic setting, and his voice, which is like “a weed under tongue,” is unique because it is raw and unrefined. Gander makes it clear, however, that he is aware of his own potentially problematic endeavor to situate Johnson into this narrative of authenticity and assures readers that Johnson remains “untamed and invisible” in spite of the many efforts (including his own) to “domesticate” him. Therefore, in these final passages, Gander self-reflexively comments on the cultural work that his poem (and tribute poems more generally) performs by highlighting both the impossibility of ever truly narrating the life of “a voice that no longer exists in a room that no longer exists” and the role of the poem in transforming Johnson the historical figure into a transcendent persona. In fact, Gander affirms that Johnson will remain elusive because, as an African American living in the Jim Crow South, he was “excluded” from the historical record, thus making it nearly impossible to project a fixed
identity onto him. Ultimately, Gander indicates that the tension between the mythic and historical aspects of Johnson’s legacy must in a sense remain unresolved and that lack of clarity is part of what remains so fascinating about Johnson’s haunting lyrics and enigmatic legacy.

“Robert Johnson at the turn of the century is an empty center,” Patricia Schroeder writes, “around which multiple interpretations, assorted viewpoints, and a variety of discourses swirl” (3). Explaining the reasons for the sensationalized accounts of Johnson’s legacy is not a simple task, for, as Gander’s Libretto makes clear, doing so involves confronting larger and often conflicting issues of race, class, and gender with which American society continuously wrestles. As Eric Rothebuhler posits:

Being an American Black man who signed the kind of recording contract typically offered to Black men in the era—and now universally deemed exploitative—he [Johnson] can be seen as victim of the industry system, more than its product. Accompanying himself on guitar, playing songs credited as his own compositions, representing for his white audience an African-American sound, he can be seen as a primitive original. (232)

Not unlike Leadbelly, Johnson has been invoked by poets such as Plumpp and Gander as a symbol of the authentic and even otherworldly blues man that has not been corrupted and commodified by the music industry and audience demands, while in all this chapter’s Johnson tributes he simultaneously represents the racial injustices that have plagued American society since its infancy.

Although these narratives are compelling, they are underwritten by a discourse of primitivism that overdetermines Johnson’s supposedly authentic, autobiographical blues
music. From a musicological perspective, Johnson was, rather than preserving rural folk traditions, attempting to parlay the Delta blues style into commercial success. As the alternate takes on his recordings demonstrate, he was not improvising—these were carefully constructed songs that he believed could become hits (Gioia 170). However, as we have seen in the tributes of Plumpp, Sinclair, and Gander, autobiographical interpretations of his lyrics continue in part because Johnson’s existential metaphors of spiritual reckoning encourage listeners to view Johnson as a deeply conflicted man. As with Rainey, Smith, Holiday, and Leadbelly, Johnson thus emerges from these late twentieth-century tributes as a mutable symbol that represents the concerns of particular poets during this distinct sociocultural moment in which Johnson was rapidly becoming the most acclaimed blues man who ever lived. Sometimes these poetic portraits overlap with the historical record, and sometimes they perpetuate mythologies that more aptly fit with the aesthetic and ideological agendas that motivated these Johnson homages in the first place.

As we have seen, poets bring their own cultural backgrounds to bear both on their interpretations of the blues and on their constructions of blues men and women, but this chapter’s poets reflect similar trends in the evolution of the blues tribute subgenre during the late twentieth century. Whereas their Black Arts predecessors focus exclusively on the historical significance of blues figures, this chapter’s poets insist on the viability of the blues as a literary and ideological influence, revealing the intersection between the second-wave blues revival, the theoretical work of blues scholars, and the broadening of the American literary canon to include blues lyrics and other extra-literary cultural materials. By insisting on the sociocultural significance of blues artists from the past—
specifically, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson—these poets educate and inspire a younger generation of readers, writers (including their own creative writing students), and hip hop fans to appreciate the viability of these figures’ songs as powerful and poignant artistic expressions during any era. Several of this chapter’s poets also apotheosize these figures as larger-than-life blues heroes, and thus remains the dual impulses toward rendering the historical and the legendary that has characterized the blues tribute since Brown’s “Ma Rainey.” I have to concur then with Feinstein when he observes “an emergent pattern” among jazz and blues poets in the late twentieth century toward “hagiography” (*Jazz Poetry* 165). While Young and Eady mention the violence Leadbelly was famous for and Young draws attention to Holiday’s drug use, they also frame this destructive behavior within the context of America’s racist past, thereby providing justification for the parts of their biographies that threaten to diminish their exalted stature. The feminist poets examined next are, in many cases, similarly hagiographic in their tributes, and, as is the recurring theme in this study as a whole, they too reshape the legacies of blues artists to reflect their own concerns and desires.
Chapter 4: Late Twentieth-Century Blues Tributes by Women Poets

In her 1972 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich explains, “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.” As the essay concludes, she declares, “women can no longer be primarily mothers and muses for men: we have our own work cut out for us” (18). Rich’s two-part call to action in this essay—for readers to approach canonical texts from “a new critical direction” and for women writers to refuse to play the subordinate roles that have underwritten the history of Western literature—was powerfully taken up by women in various ways in the years that followed, and, not surprisingly, the blues tribute subgenre underwent a similar transformation.

Indeed, this chapter’s feminist poets—Sherley Ann Williams, C. D. Wright, Amina Baraka, Rita Dove, Betsy Sholl, Angela Jackson, Patricia Spears Jones, and Harryette Mullen—are engaged in complicating and enriching the posthumous narratives of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday, which, as we have already observed, had mostly been written by male poets and critics. Moreover, as they invoke blues women as demiurgic forces on the page, they re-envision the muse trope that, as Rich suggests, had long been employed to further an androcentric outlook that cast women as inspirations for but not producers of the “high” art of poetry. In fact, Williams’s tributes in Some One Sweet Angel Chile (1982) mark a pivotal moment in the history of the blues tribute poem. Just as Brown’s “Ma Rainey” originated this form, Williams reinvigorates its literary and sociopolitical potential by anchoring her poems in both her feminist perspective on the blues and in historical research, thereby transitioning away from the largely symbolic
representations of blues muses that precede hers. Arguably taking their cue from Williams, the other poets considered here construct Rainey, Smith, and Holiday as multifaceted historical women who set the precedent for their own late twentieth-century poetry and poetics.

Even as this chapter’s tributes are more firmly grounded in their muses’ biographies than many in this study, it remains necessary (as it does with all tribute poems) to examine the differences between these poetic representations and blues women’s lived experiences, shedding light on the aspects of their legacies that are emphasized and omitted; the aesthetic, cultural, and sociopolitical perspectives that motivate these choices; and the influence of these representations on cultural understandings of these artists. For example, as with the majority of this study’s poets, many of these women are creative writing professors whose representations of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday have influenced their students and, because their tributes have been included in well-regarded collections and anthologies, scholars and general readers as well.88 These poets, like their male counterparts, were also writing against the backdrop of the second-wave blues revival, the popularity of hip hop/rap, and an increased academic interest in theorizing the blues. Correspondingly, they emphasize the musical and sociocultural viability of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday while also affirming the blues worldview, which is undergirded by a “laughing to keep from crying” ethos and a tradition of black cultural resistance to white oppression. Additionally, postmodern and poststructuralist theories were increasingly influential in literary and cultural studies

88 For example, Sherley Anne Williams, Rita Dove, Harryette Mullen, C. D. Wright, and Betsy Sholl all are or were creative writing professors. Moreover, with the exception of Amina Baraka, the poets in this chapter are often anthologized, appearing in anthologies such as Blues Poems, Jazz Poems, and The Jazz Poetry Anthology.
during the 1980s and 1990s, and some of the tributes examined here evince their impact, particularly in terms of an intrinsic suspicion of master narratives of the past and essentialized notions of race and gender. Yet, rather than highlighting these signifiers as socially constructed, these poets reshape blues women’s legacies to reflect the transgenerational experiences that connect women and, in many cases, black women specifically.

Moreover, the poets that follow are often formally innovative, devising unique poetic structures to interpret and vivify blues women’s music and personae. Williams’s tributes most closely resemble the blues of Smith and Rainey, but she also employs a contemporary narrative voice that marks the distinctions between the classic blues era and her own. Mullen’s untitled, highly experimental tributes from *Muse & Drudge* (1995) are perhaps best described as *sui generis*, though her numerous allusions to blues women’s lyrics and themes (not to mention her invocation of a blues woman muse) position her work within a blues tribute poem continuum that reaches back to “Ma Rainey.” However, the majority of these poems—Jackson’s, Dove’s, Jones’s, Baraka’s, Sholl’s, and Wright’s—are short lyrics that engage and respond to the blues women they invoke, often in autobiographical terms that allow them to link their sociopolitical and aesthetic perspectives to their muses’ legacies. Ultimately, this chapter’s African-American and Anglo-American poets bring distinct perspectives to bear on their homages, but I argue that their investment in poetry as a medium for reimagining Rainey, Smith, and Holiday as women artists who paved the way for their own innovative lyrical

---

89 I am referring here to a postmodern theoretical perspective guided by what Stuart Sim describes as “skepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms” (3).
expressions of feminist consciousness unifies their individual efforts toward a collective purpose.

These poets marshal discourses of authenticity, celebrity, and/or performance in order to, on the one hand, personally identify with and embrace their muses as poetic forebears, while, on the other hand, calling attention to the paradoxically dis/empowered positions that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday occupied as African-American female celebrities in the pre-Civil Rights/Black Power, pre-second-wave feminist era. Some of the poems examined here exemplify both of these aims, while others focus more conspicuously on one of them. For instance, Sholl, and, at times, Baraka, Jackson, and Jones reproduce autobiographical interpretations of Holiday’s songs of pain and heartbreak and value the authenticity of this connection as an inspiring antecedent to their own artistic outlooks. Conversely, Williams, Dove, Wright, and Mullen elucidate blues women’s performative strategies as well as their expressions of agency amidst systematic objectification and discrimination. Whereas many of their predecessors and male contemporaries elide the physicality and sexuality of their muses, several of this chapter’s poets engage the spectacle of the black woman’s body on stage. Images of clothing and jewelry thus become visual markers of the struggle for empowerment, as these fashion choices indicate the control that blues women exerted at the same time that they signify the pressure put on them to conform to socially-prescribed scripts of behavior and appearance.

Accordingly, Williams, Dove, and Mullen limn the stage as a contested sociocultural site and dramatize what Daphne A. Brooks describes as “Afro-alienation acts” in which “the condition of alterity” is converted “into cultural expressiveness and a
specific strategy of cultural performance” (4). Characterizing Rainey, Smith, and Holiday as astute negotiators of the terrains of gender and race, these poets suggest that these performers consciously constructed celebrity personae that both met and undercut dominant stereotypes and social conventions—even at times inventing their own set of communal blues women traditions, as we shall see momentarily in my discussion of Williams’s work. In this regard, their tributes participate in an intertextual dialogue with scholars, such as Hazel Carby, Daphne Duval Harrison, and Angela Y. Davis, all of whom have published critical works in the last several decades that champion Rainey, Smith, and, in Davis’s case, Holiday as seminal figures in a lineage of working-class black feminists.90

In Carby’s essay “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues” (1988), she lays out the sociohistorical study in which she and many other black feminists have been engaged in recent decades: “By analyzing the sexual and cultural politics of black women who constructed themselves as sexual subjects through song, in particular the blues, I want to assert an empowered presence” (228). Carby later references Williams’s poetic homage to Smith and Rainey titled “fifteen” as well as Brown’s “Ma Rainey” to describe the pivotal sociocultural roles that Rainey and Smith played within the early twentieth-century black community. She elaborates further in “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context” (1992): “Blues women did not passively reflect the vast social changes of their time; they provided new ways of thinking about these changes, alternative conceptions of the physical and social world for

---

90 It is necessary to point out that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday did not refer to themselves as feminists, though in many ways their lifestyles as independent, professional women who refused to become caretakers for white families and/or be encumbered by the demands of being a full-time wife and mother now represent a proto-black feminist outlook.
their audience of migrating and urban women and men, and social models for women who aspired to escape from and improve their conditions of existence” (755). As noted previously, in Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s (1990), Harrison credits Rainey, Smith, and their colleagues for creating “an emerging model for the working woman—one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, assertive, and trend-setting” (10). In accordance with my own multicultural approach, in Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (1998), Davis asserts that “feminist interpretations of blues and jazz women’s legacies can contribute to an understanding of feminist consciousness that crosses racial and class borders” (xvii). Importantly, Williams’s Some One Sweet Angel Chile anticipates these scholars’ central claims by portraying Rainey and Smith as empowered African-American community leaders who openly defied social mores that prescribed heterosexuality, domesticity, and subservience. Thus, as we have seen throughout this study, blues tributes have not only kept the memory of blues women and men alive long after their deaths but, to a significant but often unacknowledged extent, have shaped critical discourses surrounding the figures to whom they pay tribute.

Some One Sweet Angel Chile

In her essay “Some Implications of Womanist Theory” (1986), Williams explains the sociopolitical objectives that undergird her poetic vision by way of an interpretation of what Alice Walker termed a “womanist” perspective: “Feminist theory, like black aesthetics, offers us not only the possibility of changing one’s reading of the world, but of changing the world itself” (303). Likewise, in “The Blues Roots of Contemporary
Afro-American Poetry” (1977), Williams champions the blues ethos as one of “action, rather than contemplation” (544) and praises blues musicians for solidifying “the thematic relationship between individual and group experience” (546), thereby fostering community solidarity and defiance of systematic forces of oppression. Williams brings these views about the relationship between feminism, blues performances, and social change to bear on her representations of Smith and Rainey. In the process, Williams troubles the Manichean binary between white male privilege and black female oppression by which African-American women’s history is often constructed and posits a more nuanced approach that accounts for acts of creative resistance. As Jennifer D. Ryan rightly asserts, “Williams represents blues culture as a source for emerging black feminism in the 1970s and 1980s by allowing Smith’s voice and body to permeate her poetic narratives through demonstrations of agency rather than spectacular objectification” (37). Specifically, Williams champions Smith’s and Rainey’s use of the blues medium to resist gender inequities in the culture at large and, by claiming these women as artistic forebears, she positions her work as heir to the tradition of socially-progressive artistic expression to which these blues women made a profound contribution.

Although Rainey is a prominent figure in Williams’s series of tributes, Smith is clearly her primary muse and the central subject of these tributes. Certainly, all twenty poems in the Smith sequence are worthy of in-depth analysis, and several critics, including Ryan, have offered compelling readings of the sequence as a whole. In what follows, however, I focus on a few select poems that, to my mind, best represent Williams’s intervention in the mentor-protégée relationship between Rainey and Smith.
the alternative blues women community that these women formed, and what she interprets as their deft negotiation of the politics of black female celebrity in the early twentieth century. Formally, the sequence employs multiple speakers, including Smith, her niece Ruby Walker, and a contemporary speaker (arguably, a Williams persona), thus creating a dialogue among these women across space and time that vivifies Smith and, in turn, Rainey for contemporary readers and listeners. Code switching between African American vernacular and standard English, Williams makes the distinctions between speakers clear, while these linguistic transitions also function as a call-and-response in which the contemporary standard speaker thematically echoes the messages conveyed by her blues women predecessors. According to Carmen Kynard, “In the blues, both audience and musician experience and create a new meshing of meaning, language, and experience according to a social and historical condition of being oppressed as African Americans” (360). Williams enacts this process both by drawing attention to Smith’s and Rainey’s roles as community spokespersons and by staging this “meshing” so that Williams and her late-twentieth century readers generate new and empowering insights into the legacies these blues women left behind.

Some One Sweet Angel Chile also demonstrates Williams’s thorough knowledge of these women’s music and biographies and, departing from many of her male predecessors—Brown, Young, O’Higgins, Hayden, and Aubert, for instance—she represents Smith and Rainey as multifaceted artists. She portrays Rainey as a woman who developed a successful template for financial success as a black female performer during an era in which that seemed nearly impossible, and was subsequently a dominant influence on Smith’s conception of her own professional identity. Demonstrating her
studied knowledge of Smith’s songbook and Albertson’s *Bessie*, Williams mobilizes these sources in her narrative of Smith as a woman who, on the one hand, struggled against the oppressive social forces in the society at large and within the domestic sphere and, on the other hand, cultivated her persona as “The Greatest and Highest Salaried Race Star in the World” (Albertson 87) by asserting her agency both onstage and off of it.

Accordingly, in one of the early poems in the sequence, “39. Bessie on My Wall,” Williams celebrates the poetic and personal inspiration that she receives from Smith:

39. Bessie on my wall: the thick triangular
    nose wedged
    in the deep brown
    face nostrils
    flared on a last hummmmmmmm.

Bessie singing
    just behind the beat
    that sweet sweet
    voice throwing
    its light on me. (39)\(^9\)

Though this poem is not structured as a standard blues song, Williams establishes a blues mood through her paralinguistic “hum,” which alludes to Smith (and scores of other blues men and women) who often improvise sounds as a segue into the next line or a sort of call-and-response to one’s self, such as in Smith’s famous “Backwater Blues”:

\(^9\) Since this is a sequence of poems, I will refer to page rather than line numbers when discussing *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*. 
“Mmmmmmmmm, I can’t move no mo’” (qtd. in A. Davis 264). Furthermore, unlike her male contemporaries or their predecessors in the previous chapters, Williams spotlights Smith’s facial features and claims her “deep brown / face” as beautiful—a point that she highlights further in a later poem in the sequence, “them ol young woman’s blues,” in which she quotes verbatim from Smith’s “Young Woman’s Blues”: “I ain’t no high yella, I’m a deep killer brown” (44). Thus, Williams not only embraces Smith’s music but her physical appearance as a model for taking pride in one’s dark skin and the aspects of her appearance that do not reflect white standards of beauty. One of the remarkable aspects of Smith’s and Rainey’s careers, not to mention their often forgotten counterparts, was their bodacious attitudes and the ways in which they flaunted the aspects of their personae that flouted the dominant’s society’s conceptions either of femininity or the subservient roles that black women were expected to fulfill. As Buzzy Jackson notes, “The spectacle of a black woman onstage bragging about her accomplishments was an act of real courage” (47), and Williams conveys a similarly bold and assertive tone by looking to Smith to throw her “light on me.”

In the poem that follows, titled “fifteen,” Williams assumes Smith’s voice and stages her first encounter with Rainey, which began a relationship that Williams represents as central to Smith’s development as a blues artist:

I looked in her face
and seed the woman
I’d become. A big
boned face already
lined and the first line
in her fo’head was
black and the next line
was sex cept I didn’t
know to call it that
then and the brackets
round her mouth stood fo
the chi’ren she teared
from out her womb. And
yo name Bessie; huh.
she say. (Every one
call her Ma o’ Ol
Lady) Bessie. well.
Le’me hear you sang.
She was looking in my mouth and I knowed
no matter what words
come to my mind the
song’d be her’n jes as
well as it be mine. (40)

Williams represents Rainey as a career blues woman whose lifestyle cut against the grain of social conventions for African-American women, and, as her protégée, Smith was groomed for a similarly iconoclastic lifestyle. Highlighting the camaraderie that Rainey and Smith shared—“song’d be her’n jes / as well as it be mine”—Williams elucidates Rainey’s maternal role, as her stage name suggests, but also the sense of community and
artistic support that these women provided one another. Jackson writes, for example, “Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith cemented a relationship—possibly romantic, but certainly warm—that lasted throughout Smith’s career” (42), and Albertson quotes Smith’s niece Ruby Walker affirming that, though many people considered them rivals, “they were good friends, very good friends” (116).

Additionally, while Brown’s “Ma Rainey” portrays Rainey as “a-smilin’ gold-toofed” (II. 7) and seemingly unaffected by the demands of being a professional performer, Williams limns the “face already / lined” and indicates a premature aging no doubt caused by a career that involved constant touring and performing in order to make a living—a future that Smith accepts as her own. Whereas Brown describes Rainey’s presence through his presumably male speaker and her male fan (a “fellow” at the show), and Young similarly describes Rainey’s “snaggle-toothed” (22) eccentricity from a male perspective, Williams provides a much more intimate portrait that allows Smith and Rainey to speak for themselves. Of course, the first-person perspectives that Williams employs are equally fictitious, but she relies on well-researched biographies, such as Albertson’s Bessie, that lend historical credibility to Smith’s and Rainey’s imagined voices.

In accordance with her feminist critic colleagues, Williams also illuminates the multiple ways that Rainey and, in turn, Smith defied social expectations by engaging in casual sexual liaisons (“the next line / was sex”) and refusing to be encumbered by children (“the chi’ren she teared / from out her womb”). In many ways Rainey’s and, in turn, Smith’s overt sensuality confirmed the stereotypes of African-American women as sexually wanton that pervaded popular culture during the early twentieth century. As Ann
Ducille noted earlier, “Under what might be called the cult of true primitivism, sex—the quintessential subject matter of the blues—was precisely what hot-blooded African women were assumed to have always in mind and body” (427). According to Williams, however, these women mapped out an alternative blues community in which sexual inhibition was but one part of broader expression of personal freedom and independence in a society that otherwise denied their rights to such behavior. As Carby observes, “the women’s blues of the twenties and early thirties is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women’s bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women’s song” (231). Prefiguring Carby, Williams’s “fifteen” and many of the poems that follow it underscore the importance of the alternative lifestyle and discourse that Rainey helped to create and Smith subsequently embraced, which was undergirded by a devotion to the blues as a vehicle for working-class black female artistic expression that by its very privileging of that experience (not to mention their many feminist song lyrics) resisted the prevailing middle-class white “patriarchal order.”

In fact, as the sequence progresses, Williams exposes the tension that arose for these women when their assertive and sensual public personae, which made them beloved and admired stars, conflicted with their husband’s expectations. In the aptly-titled “... a rowboat out on the stormy seas,” an allusion to Smith’s “Lonesome Desert Blues” (“My mind is like a rowboat out on the stormy sea / He’s with me right now, in the morning where will he be?”), Williams dramatizes the marital trouble that Smith had with her husband, Jack Gee, after she was caught having an affair. Rather than expressing
contrition, Smith defends her behavior by suggesting that her sexual liaisons will continue because, to her mind, they are unrelated to her commitment to her marriage: “I was walkin mens when I met you, / honey; it ain’t no harm in that” (48). Moreover, Williams links this part of Smith’s legacy to cultivating and maintaining a blues celebrity image—a strategy that she learned from Rainey: “It wouldn’t be blues if I didn’t trance / mens to my side. Ma showed me that” (48). While her male predecessors elide the ways in which Rainey and Smith respectively used their sensuality strategically to develop a fan base, as the phrase “trance / mens” suggests, Williams highlights these women’s keen awareness of how to utilize and exploit their sexuality in order to captivate an audience.

As the poem continues, Williams again celebrates the pride Smith took in her black body, particularly at a time when most whites and African Americans subscribed to the belief that lighter skin was more attractive: “This nigra bragged he didn’t deal in coal. / I taught him degrees, baby; that’s the truth” (48). Smith embraces her dark skin, as the aforementioned lyrics to “Young Woman Blues” attest, and is equally proud of her sexual aggression: “Ah, baby—Jack—that walk is a mark / in the family,” the Smith speaker concludes, “it’s got to be carried on” (48). Of course, for Smith and Rainey, these extramarital affairs were not limited to men, as Williams evinces in another poem, “The Empress Brand Trim,” which is told from the perspective of Ruby Walker: “She [Smith] loved womens and / mens” (51). Their ambisexual tastes were no secret, but Williams continuously shows that in both their personal and professional lives Rainey and Smith exerted their agency and resistance to conservative codes of behavior. As with all tribute poets, Williams showcases the aspects of their biographies that appeal to her own sociopolitical and aesthetic perspective as an African-American feminist poet, but,
departing from her male contemporaries and predecessors, she portrays Rainey and Smith as complex historical women, rather than disembodied, silent muses.

To illustrate further, in “from a picture taken at the start of her career,” Williams elucidates the public image that Smith created for herself as a glamorous blues queen—a significant symbolic statement at a time in which domestic service was practically the only available job for working-class black women⁹²:

the pearls caught
just so in
long fingered
hands and the
hands held close
to the breast

the strength to
break the strand
a smile to break the heart

and the lines
that bracket
the long lip’s
end.

this is

⁹² As Carby attests, “being a member of a vaudeville show or performing in a nightclub was not attractive primarily because it offered a mythic life of glamor but because it was a rare opportunity to do ‘clean’ work and to reject the life of a domestic servant” (“Policing the Black Woman’s Body” 752).
no yearbook

pose.

her pearls
were the last
jewels she sold.

Posing for a publicity photograph to accompany her music that often celebrated sexually uninhibited behavior, Smith, Williams implies, was aware of the sensuality that she was expected to exude—an awareness that, as we have already observed, recurs in Williams’s sequence. At the same time, Williams suggests that Smith was, as Brooks describes it, “using performance tactics to signify on the social, cultural, and ideological machinery that circumscribes African Americans” (5). Rather than exemplifying the “putative ‘stillness’” ascribed to the black female body by the dominant society (5), in Williams’s rendering, Smith is both cognizant of and consciously undermining the role of the sex object who passively accepts her lack of control and social mobility. On the one hand, the strand of white pearls, reminiscent of the noose being used to lynch record numbers of African Americans during the 1920s,\(^93\) indicates the pernicious social forces that constantly threatened Smith’s elevated stature. On the other hand, “the pearls caught / just so” represent elegance and refinement—a contrast with both the prevailing stereotypes of black women and Rainey’s eccentric attire—further signifying the ways in which Smith distinguished herself from denigrating caricatures while also developing a public persona that was unique from her mentor and peers. The poem’s concluding lines (“her pearls / were the last / jewels she sold”) then affirm Smith’s pride in the image that

\(^93\) According to the Tuskegee Institute’s archive of lynchings, 281 African Americans were lynched between 1920-1930 (“Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882-1968”).

187
she created for herself as a sophisticated and financially successful African-American woman.

In the poem that ends the sequence, “down torrey pines road,” Williams finally turns to Smith’s death and, though she does not perpetuate the mythology that Smith was denied treatment in a white hospital, she evokes the haunting memories of segregation and racial violence that serve as reminders of the ongoing threat that endemic racism poses:

This could be that road

in Mississippi

though this one winds up

the hill from the sea

that stretch of highway

outside Coahoma close by

Clarksdale and the Jim Crow ward in the hospital

that used to be there.

I dare each curve to

surprise me as I

round it show me the

rear-end of some truck

before I can stop. (64)
The tentative language that Williams employs (“This could be that road”) to describe the parallels between Smith’s Southern tour and her own keeps the differences between Williams and Smith front and center—“This is not / the road to Clarksdale” (65), the route on which Smith had her fatal car accident—even while the speaker suggests that America’s history of racial injustices continues to impinge on the contemporary era. For instance, Williams expresses fear that because she too is a black woman artist working and traveling in the South she will also meet an untimely demise (“I dare each curve to / surprise me”). Yet, she also distinguishes her life from Smith’s and, as a result, implies that there are real differences between her own late-twentieth-century career as a poet and academic and Smith’s as an early-twentieth-century blues performer. Although the “Jim Crow ward in the hospital . . . used to be there,” it is no longer. As Ryan contends, Williams “signifies a conscious resistance to the narratives that exploit the violent nature of Smith’s death” and, thus, emphasizes “the feminist progress toward self-determination that Williams envisions for black women” (32). Still, this empowered state remains tenuous, as the poem concludes with the parallels between Williams and Smith not entirely erased. The speaker is still convincing herself—“I say / over and over / what my name is not” (65)—that she will not meet a similarly tragic fate. As such, Williams associates Smith’s death with the perils of black celebrity, even while she resists characterizing Smith as a martyr. Ultimately, Williams is not interested in simply bemoaning Smith’s and Rainey’s experiences with gender and race oppression. Instead, she celebrates their subversive acts of creative resistance as a precursor to her own socially-conscious blues poetry and, in the process, demonstrates the relevance of their music and sociocultural experiences to contemporary women’s lives.
“My mouth is on fire”

The heterogeneous group of poets that follow—Angela Jackson, C. D. Wright, Amina Baraka, Rita Dove, Patricia Spears Jones, and Betsy Sholl—all claim Holiday as a creative inspiration and strive to instantiate her, not as the subordinate muse figure that Rich described earlier, but as an African-American woman artist whose experiences offer important lessons for feminist poets of all backgrounds. They similarly follow Williams in maintaining the viability of the blues ethos of resilience and resistance, even while their lyric poems do not replicate Holiday’s vocal style or standard song structures. Beyond these points of commonality, however, these poets intervene in Holiday’s legacy in diverse ways, identifying with the autobiographical authenticity of her music at times and calling attention to her performative strategies at others—as we shall see shortly, this oscillation even occurs within the same poem. Read alongside one another then, they aptly demonstrate the varied roles into which Holiday has been cast, as poets highlight the aspects of her persona that appeal most to their own concerns and desires.

For instance, Angela Jackson’s “Billie in Silk” (1993) offers a personal account of her speaker’s and arguably her own identification with Holiday’s struggles with alienation and marginalization but also with her ability to ameliorate these painful experiences through artistic self-expression. The poem’s title is most likely an allusion to the last album that Holiday recorded, Lady in Satin (1958), which is both the most revealing of Holiday’s declining health and a testament to her resilience and commitment to her art. Through the analogy of a spider spinning her web, Jackson illuminates the way Holiday skillfully developed her timbre and phrasing in order to captivate her listeners’ attention while also challenging them through the penetrating intensity that she brought to
her music. However, this understanding of Holiday occurs only after the speaker grapples with the initial uneasiness that Holiday’s complexity evokes:

I have nothing to say to you, Billie Holiday.

You do not look at me when I try to speak to you.

You cannot look me in the eye. Your eyes look elsewhere.

Your steamy mouth sewn up with red tears is poised to speak

The orchid in your hair grows, grows like

A spider turning herself inside out.

The shadow hangs

into your eye. (1-11)

Jackson imagines Holiday not with her characteristic gardenia but an orchid (an even more prized and delicate flower) pinned behind her ear—an indication of Holiday’s vulnerability and her uniquely beautiful sound. These first stanzas also reflect a mournful tone as the speaker laments Holiday’s emotional distance (“Your eyes / look elsewhere”) and the somber “shadow” that shrouds her image. Further, though she is “poised to speak,” Holiday’s mouth is “sewn up with red tears,” and the recipient of the message is unclear. Invoking a rather stereotypical portrait of a weak and battered Holiday, the speaker initially identifies with these aspects of Holiday’s persona because she too has felt alienated and silenced—“I was just out of love, / and cold. / I was naked, beyond caring” (14-16)—and could only see herself and Holiday as fallen women, as the
subsequent declining words on the page “I only saw the fall / from / grace” signify (20-22).

As the poem progresses, the speaker evolves these youthful responses and becomes increasingly attuned to Holiday’s strategic use of song to negotiate and potentially relieve the hardships she faced:

(You lay down with music in the leaves.
You wrapped him in leaves, in sheets.
Your legs lindyed around him. Young
then old. Do not be deceived. The
thunder of the spider is no small
thing. You had your way with music,
and ate him. The memory hot
in your belly. Ours)

You never want to let her leave.
She. The voice deceives.
You could hurt it.
It would kill you
too.
The dragline seeking
curving above Surprise.
Below.
Just so.
Size is not the issue.

Volume not

the question. A hairline

fracture in the Silence

in which nothing rests.

The voice deceives.

Every thing

swings. (23-47)

Through the images of the orchid and the spider and its silk (the poem’s dominant motif), Jackson evinces the deceptively simple quality to Holiday’s voice, underscoring its potency (“It would kill you”) and her ability to captivate her listeners with the slightest turn of phrase. The metaphor of the “dragline”—the strand of silk that spiders use first to build the web’s framework and then to lower and return themselves to it—encourages readers to seek out and listen to Holiday’s vocal technique and the subtleties by which she controls her delivery.

Holiday only appears to be the passive victim, Jackson implies, but in fact she took the music that male songwriters and composers arranged for her and transformed it to suit her own agenda. As O’Meally describes,

Through the necessity imposed by her limited vocal range . . . Holiday would strip songs down to their bare essentials, using at times only a half dozen tones to put together an entire piece. Working with such starkly limited artistic materials, and doing so with the expertise of a master painter who decides to sketch with one or two colors, Holiday lured
listener into her tight emotional orbit. Once she set a pattern for a song, any change at all—even an unexpected half tone up or down or a twist on a word or part of a word—could take your breath away. (33)

Jackson recognizes Holiday’s vocal limitations—“Size is not the issue / Volume not / the question”—but, echoing O’Meally, suggests that Holiday utilized her poetic sensibilities to induce her audience to enter “her tight emotional orbit,” and, praising her in the jazz vernacular, Jackson insists that with Holiday “Every thing / swings.”

By the poem’s end, Jackson has complicated the narrative of tragedy and woe that she initially introduced and reimagined Holiday as a source of creative inspiration:

I have something to say to you, Billie Holiday.

Sew up your breathing, then send it back to me.

Fluent and ruminating the source of such anguish.

Look into my eyes.

If only it were not so lonely to be black and bruised by an early-morning dream that lifts the mouth to sing.

Here is an orchid, spidery-petaled, glorious, full of grace.

My mouth is on fire. Let it burn. (48-57)
Rather than the first stanza’s “mouth sewn up with red tears,” in these final lines, Jackson praises Holiday for setting the precedent for her own poetic outlook (“My mouth is on fire / Let it burn”). Jackson also situates the poem in a broader blues tradition of protesting racial discrimination through her allusion to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?”—a song Ellison references in the opening and concluding chapters of *Invisible Man* as a metaphor for the pain of racial invisibility. Additionally, Holiday claimed on many occasions that she fashioned her vocal style after Armstrong and Smith and, alluding to Armstrong here, Jackson honors, and self-reflexively inserts herself into, this esteemed lineage of African-American blues and jazz musicians who resisted wallowing in the despair of being “black and bruised” and instead “lift[ed] the mouth to sing.”

“If you can’t be free, be a mystery”

The critic Anne Anlin Cheng recently asserted, “The conjunction among celebrity, glamour, and race is thus the place where we can address the intimacy, rather than the opposition, between agency and objectification, persona and impersonality” (“Shine” 1023). Accordingly, Rita Dove’s “Canary” (1989) illuminates the paradoxes of Holiday’s experiences in the limelight as an African-American woman in a pre-Civil Rights/Black Power, pre-second-wave feminist era. Dedicating the poem to Michael S. Harper, Dove also suggests that readers should consider her poem as both an homage to and a revision of Harper’s own tributes to Holiday—“Lady’s Blues” and “Where Is My Woman Now: For Billie Holiday”—in which he honors Holiday’s sociocultural importance but elides the gendered discourses that have long underwritten interpretations
of her legacy. The poem’s title similarly functions as what Stephen Henderson describes as a “mascon image”—“a massive concentration of black experimental energy” (“Forms of Things Unknown 414)—through Dove’s reference to the plight of the caged bird of which Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote so eloquently almost a century prior. Indeed, the songbird metaphor evokes both the literary and cultural traditions into which Dove situates her black feminist interpretation of Holiday and the systematic forces of race and gender oppression with which Holiday contended.

Specifically, Dove calls attention to the images and narratives that have been used to advance ideologically dangerous myths that have denied Holiday’s agency and individuality:

Billie Holiday’s burned voice

had as many shadows as lights,

a mournful candelabra against a sleek piano,

the gardenia her signature under that ruined face.

(Now you’re cooking, drummer to bass,

magic spoon, magic needle.

Take all day if you have to

---

94 Farah Jasmine Griffin, who takes the final line from “Canary” as the subtitle of her Holiday biography In Search of Billie Holiday: If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery (2001), enumerates the myriad meanings that Dove’s title suggests: “The word ‘canary’ can have two meanings in the context of Dove’s poem: 1) the name given to the ‘girl singer’ who sings in front of a band of ‘real’ (male) musicians, and 2) the little songbird, indigenous to the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa, caged and kept as a pet. . . . Finally, for some of us, canary, the caged songbird, also brings to mind Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy” with the oft-quoted line, ‘I know why the caged bird sings’” (156). I would only add to this that I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is also the title of another major African-American poet, Maya Angelou’s, 1969 autobiography, and with all of these allusions Dove positions her homage to Holiday firmly within an African-American literary tradition and, as Griffin points out, a social history of race and gender oppression.
with your mirror and your bracelet of song.)

Fact is, the invention of women under siege
has been to sharpen love in the service of myth.
If you can’t be free, be a mystery. (1-11)

These lines limn Holiday late in her career when her heroin addiction had become an integral part of her public narrative and her vocal range was even more limited; yet, through the first two stanzas’ juxtapositions between beauty and destruction, artistic fame and exploitation, Dove interrogates and revises a clichéd narrative of Holiday’s tragic downfall. As Meta DuEwa Jones argues, “A bracelet is usually a delicate piece of adornment, so by connecting jewelry to Holiday’s singing, Dove is alluding to a fragility that is instrumental. In other words, it is a song calculated to sound fragile, and thus paradoxically, it connotes Holiday’s strength as a vocalist” (165). Calling the “gardenia” her “signature,” Dove suggests Holiday’s conscious effort to perform delicate femininity, as the “bracelet of song” implies, and the props (“mournful candelabra against a sleek piano”) likewise assist in setting the stage for Holiday’s dramatization of the perennially heartbroken woman. Thus, Dove evinces Holiday’s complexity as a woman who struggled with addiction but was also acutely aware that her personal misfortunes fascinated a voyeuristic American public that wanted to believe her iconic songs of heartbreak derived from her own experiences. As noted in previous chapters, her autobiography, Lady Sings the Blues, is a testament to Holiday’s interest in capitalizing on the sensational stories that circulated about her, and Dove represents Holiday as both a victim of discrimination and an astute performer who utilized this perception of her
powerlessness to her advantage. She had the stage presence and vocal virtuosity to keep
the audience’s attention (“Take all day if you have to”) and, at the same time, she was
controlled by her drug addiction, the police who harassed her and many other black
musicians, the dealers who exploited her, and the public who seemed to enjoy watching
the spectacle of all of these personal troubles unfold.

Additionally, “Canary” provides a sort of meta-commentary on the social
construction of Holiday’s legacy by grounding the narrative of her victimhood in a
feminist reading of Western history in which Holiday is only one example of the passive
female victim—the face and voice of “women under siege”—that justifies the myth of
male superiority. Beginning the penultimate stanza with the phrase “fact is” and ending it
with “in the service of myth,” Dove implies the necessary distinction between the
realities of Holiday’s life and the cultural mythologies that have largely overshadowed
them. Signifyin(g) on her predecessors—Langston Hughes and Sonia Sanchez, for
example—Dove defamiliarizes the portrait of Holiday as an embodiment of despair and
ends the poem by highlighting the agency Holiday derived from remaining an enigma. In
an interview, Dove affirmed this interpretation of the poem’s final line: “If you can’t be
free, don’t show it; don’t let them get to you” (30). Like Rainey and Smith before her,
Holiday could not change the terms by which she was judged, but, in Dove’s rendering,
Holiday subverts the hegemonic forces of discrimination by refusing the public the
transparency they so desired and, therefore, gains control through the only means
available to her. As such, Dove urges contemporary readers and listeners not only to
appreciate the multiple facets of Holiday’s persona but to interrogate the gender and
racial discourses typically deployed to understand her and, by extension, all black women performers.

“Billie’s flame”

In “For the Lady in Color” (1987), Amina Baraka establishes a more personal sense of solidarity with Holiday based on their shared identities as African-American woman artists and underscores Holiday’s authenticity as a vocalist whose blues style was made more powerful by her painful experiences with institutionalized oppression. At the same time, Baraka represents Holiday’s performances as creative acts of resistance and, in the process, joins Dove in calling attention to the paradoxes of black female stardom. In fact, it is useful to read “For the Lady in Color” as a work not only in dialogue with other feminist poets and critics but also with Amiri Baraka’s “Dark Lady of the Sonnets” (1962), “Billie” (1987), and “The Lady” (1987)—a dialogue in which Amina distinguishes her poetic invocation from Amiri’s by identifying with Holiday’s efforts to have her voice heard in a racist, classist, and patriarchal American society. In The Autobiography of Leroi Jones by Amiri Baraka, he discusses Amina’s desire to publically disassociate herself from her husband’s past misogynist statements as well as his middle-class upbringing:

So her [Amina’s] sharpened opposition to male chauvinism, with a yeast of guilt at having been publicly “taken in,” I feel—at having been in a cultural nationalist organization [Black Arts] that preached the subjugation of women—has seen her move to a kind of social feminist position (I feel), where feminism has replaced Black nationalism, except that
manifests itself now as an intense mistrust of petty bourgeois women, most of whom are White. . . . She also feels that she must take positions as publicly as possible in contradiction to mine. . . . (xxiv)

Although “For the Lady in Color” does not directly engage Baraka’s tributes, given these ongoing tensions within their marriage and that Amina’s poem and Amiri’s “The Lady” were published within their collaborative collection *The Music: Reflections of Jazz and Blues*, it is likely that Amina (perhaps even inadvertently) wished to advance her interpretation of Holiday’s legacy. For example, whereas “The Lady” is made up of revised passages from Holiday’s autobiography, Amina utilizes the lyric “I” to establish the commonalities between the speaker (arguably, a thinly veiled Amina) and Holiday, as well as attending in greater detail than her husband to the complexities of Holiday’s professional and personal life.

As with many of the phrases in this poem, Amina Baraka’s title has multiple connotations. Specifically, she subverts the term “colored” or “colored lady” that was often used to describe Holiday—Elizabeth Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer” is a striking example—so that “in color” references not to racial hues *per se* but Holiday’s multidimensionality as a “colorful” performer who captivated her audiences both with her elegant gowns and gardenia flowers and her emotionally penetrating delivery:

> It is the blue part of billies flame
> that enchants me
> something in common
> w/ the Lady
the man I love
you’ve changed
on me
was a high Lady
the needle brought down
did they bury the flower
in her hair too
is that where flowers have gone

. . . . . . . . . . .
the story was
important to the Lady
she staged it in
High Drama
on the road
in a one woman show
the woman sang
and even when
her lyrics smiled
water laid in her eyes
waiting to overflow
in a phrase and a crying note
it was not magic
that we heard
it is the oppression
this country can lay on you
black & oppressed
poor & aint got nowhere
to go. (1-12, 22-42)

Referencing Holiday’s songs, such as “You’ve Changed” and “The Man I Love” (“you’ve changed / the man i love”) and her trademark gardenia (“did they bury the flower”), Baraka vivifies Holiday’s stage persona, while also suggesting the distinction between the roles she performed onstage and her experiences off of it. As with the title, “billies flame” then performs double duty, for Baraka refers to both the description of Holiday as a “torch singer” and, since the color blue signifies the hottest part of the flame, the intensity that she brought to her music. Stacy Holman Jones observes, “In bringing cabaret’s theatricality and blues phrasing and melodies to torch songs, Holiday revises and reshapes the standard narrative to fit her performance style and political agenda” (24). Correspondingly, Amina embraces “the blue part” of Holiday’s music—in other words, the blues ethos that undergirds her renditions of popular standards as well as the songs of heartbreak and injustice—and similarly implies Holiday’s subversion of the melodrama and sentimentality that accompany the label “torch singer.” With the lines “something in common / w/ the Lady,” Baraka then affirms her identification with the “blue” mood of Holiday’s music and the social paradoxes that she voices.95

As with Dove’s “Canary,” Baraka elucidates Holiday’s awareness of and participation in creating her public narrative and the ways in which she utilized “the

95 Ryan makes a similar point about the sociopolitical implications of this poem: “Rather than merely admiring Holiday’s artistic talent, the poem’s speaker compares performance to protest in order to argue that Holiday’s onstage appearances were political acts” (39).
story” in her “High Drama” in order to capitalize on what audiences wanted to hear: that her songs were autobiographical and, thus, authentically real. Calling Holiday a “one woman show,” Baraka suggests these performative aspects and, at the same time, bemoans Holiday’s precarious social position, indicating that her vocal delivery is alluring precisely because of the tragic emotion that lies behind it (“water laid in her eyes / waiting to overflow”). Thus, while she praises Holiday’s resolve as an African-American woman who rose to fame in a society and music industry controlled by white men, she laments the personal injuries that Holiday suffered, such as the self-inflicted wounds (“the needle that brought her down”) and, more broadly, “the oppression / this country can lay on you.” As with many of this poem’s rich allusions, “the needle” symbolizes both the needle used to inject heroin and the record needle—a reference to the exploitative music industry that in many ways benefitted from the sensational media attention devoted to Holiday’s drug arrests and imprisonment.

The poem then builds to a climax through the multiple references to Holiday being “high” (an allusion to her drug use and her fame) and then concludes, like Williams’s sequence, by reflecting on the perils of black celebrity:

the darker you are
the harder you fall
did the Lady
sing the blues
or not
yeah
i tell you
its the blue part
of billies flame
that enchants me
cause its the
hottest. (46-57)

Of course, Holiday was a very light-skinned African-American, but Baraka’s claim that “the darker you are / the harder you fall” is not only a reference to Holiday’s skin color but to the racial taxonomy that deems blackness a handicap to professional success and well-being in American society. Baraka’s unexpected description of Holiday’s “darkness” makes readers pause to consider Holiday’s life and art within the context of the irrationality and hypocrisy that has historically characterized America’s racial caste system in which the color of one’s skin is often irrelevant to one’s racial category and the categories themselves based on social, not biological, constructions. Furthermore, Holiday may not have been “dark” physically, but her music often voiced the pain of heartbreak and alienation and, in “Strange Fruit,” the horrific practice of lynching—a dark and highly political song indeed. Therefore, as with the poem itself, these concluding lines illuminate Baraka’s engagement with multiple dimensions of Holiday’s legacy: the solidarity Baraka feels with Holiday and her experiences with social oppression and artistic resistance, the emotional authenticity that she celebrates in Holiday’s music (“the blue part / of billies flame”), and the sad reality that American society could not appreciate the intensity (the “darkness”) of an artist like Holiday during her lifetime.

96 I refer here to the so-called “one-drop” rule developed during the early nineteenth century that meant that racial categories were based on ancestry rather than visual appearances. See Nell Irvin Painter’s The History of White People for a more in-depth explanation of this practice.
As with the other poets in this chapter, Baraka does not derive her form from a standard blues song structure, and her lack of punctuation, lower case lettering, and colloquial expressions recall many of the tropes of Black Arts poetics. Yet, it is clear that she conceives of the blues not only as a musical genre but, following contemporary blues theorists, as a worldview that conveys African-American cultural resistance to Anglo-American hegemony. Accordingly, Baraka’s concluding question, “did the Lady / sing the blues / or not,” invokes a voice of skepticism, of someone who defines the blues in a strictly formal sense and, therefore, questions the description of Holiday as a blues singer. Answering with a definitive “yeah,” she affirms that Holiday’s music exemplifies what Ralph Ellison famously described as the blues’ “impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it” (78), even while the songs Holiday performed were mostly not twelve-bar blues. Decades earlier, Amiri Baraka posed a similar question in “Dark Lady of the Sonnets”: “A man told me Billie Holiday wasn’t singing the blues, and he knew. O.K., but what I ask myself is what had she seen to shape her singing so? What in her life, proposed such tragedy, such final hopeless agony?” (Black Music 25).97 Whereas Amiri implies that Holiday should be considered a blues singer because she renders the pain that blues songs often express, Amina revises her husband’s rhetorical response in order to showcase Holiday’s courage to vocally confront “episodes of brutal experience” in order to overcome them, thereby signifyin(g) on her husband’s suggestion that Holiday’s music conveys “hopeless agony.” Distinguishing her poetic interpretation of Holiday from her husband’s, Amina establishes a shared personal, artistic, and sociopolitical perspective with Holiday and affirms that her music continues to resonate

97 See chapter 2 and 3 for further discussion of this poetic essay.
as an expression of the complex, and often destructive, struggle for empowerment historically and contemporarily.

“FROM THE BILLIE HOLIDAY CHRONICLES”

In Patricia Spears Jones’s collection The Weather that Kills (1995), Holiday similarly becomes a central figure in Jones’s exploration of both her personal and America’s national history, as several poems with the subtitle “FROM THE BILLIE HOLIDAY CHRONICLES” attest. In the poem that opens the collection, “The Birth of Rhythm and Blues,” Jones juxtaposes Holiday’s struggles with abusive, exploitative men and narcotics with the narrative of a mother’s pregnancy and the subsequent birth of her child (seemingly Jones herself), yoking together the hardships that all African-American woman face(d) with the declaration that “A Black woman’s life is like double jeopardy” (14). However, whereas Baraka identifies with Holiday’s struggles and her acts of resistance, “The Birth of Rhythm and Blues” portrays an utterly dejected and objectified Holiday:

Was it Billie standing in that pool of ugly light?

Fair skin wrinkling. Desperate for the ease of a needle.

Was it ever as sad as this? Not even the grave yet.

Eight more years before the coffin’s fit to surround her.

And the men like hellcats cursing the click of her expensive heels.

Billie shivers in her skin going slack. Joking the dope down.

Her face maps a bitter terrain.
From pain and back again.

While each door that opens for her, closes.

But now, this moment, the door opens, a crack

Where the light bleeds in, stays on her, merciless. (85-99)

Jones characterizes Holiday’s career as a series of frustrations and disappointments caused by her “double jeopardy” status, and when she appears under the stage lights, the experience is “merciless” in its illumination of her personal pain and suffering (“Her face maps a bitter terrain” [95]). Focusing on Holiday’s physical deterioration, Jones bears witness not only to the emotional and psychological consequences of race and gender oppression but the self-inflicted bodily scars, which she links to Holiday’s disempowered status. Whereas in Dove’s and Jackson’s tributes, Holiday’s stage attire indicates a degree of control over her image, Jones suggests that Holiday’s displays of success, such as her “expensive heels,” only exacerbated the exploitation that she experienced. As such, Jones resists the notion that there is anything redeemable about watching an enervated and objectified Holiday perform.

In contrast to this dark and troubling portrait, another poem in the same collection, “The Usual Suspect: FROM THE BILLIE HOLIDAY CHRONICLES,” invokes Holiday as a larger-than-life figure at the peak of her fame during World War II:

Satin gown the color of black
sand under full moonlight.
Voice colored jewel rich. Ruby rouge. Cat’s eye
green. Blue at autumn twilight blue.
She’s got this big sad heart.
When she sings, she sings the world’s real dream:
love, faith, money.
The world’s real problem: love, fear, death.

She’s gorgeous. Full story. NO WARNING.
Her voice sweeps couples together.
It is that real weather
That kills and kills
And makes the day so new. (1-13)

These opening stanzas emphasize the catharsis that Holiday’s performances provided and, thus, her ability to instill the perseverance and inspiration that undergirds the blues ethos—the poignancy of her music “kills and kills” but it also “makes the day so new.” Departing from her previous representation of Holiday “Joking the dope down,” here Jones echoes Jackson and Baraka in encouraging readers to listen to and appreciate the resilient blues spirit that Holiday’s music conveys.

Indeed, Jones represents Holiday as fully in control, as she transforms her wartime audience’s mood and inspires them (“sweeps couples together”) to seek human connection and camaraderie. In an interview, Jones asserted, “I wanted to think about her [Holiday] as this incredible goddess figure, in the way that people talk about Marilyn Monroe” (17), and not unlike Young’s, Harper’s, and Plumpp’s apotheoses of Holiday as a transcendent figure, Jones concludes this poem with an image of Holiday as a mythic muse for the nation at large:

... There are times when only the
spring

in her throat offers the essential prayers.

And even then, the world trips, stumbles and falls away
from her voice as if deaf, dumb and blind. (30-34)

On the one hand, Holiday’s uniquely soothing and rhythmic voice provides succor to an unstable world at war; on the other hand, “the world” is not able to fully comprehend the profundity of what she offers: Holiday is a blues goddess who confounds her listeners.

At first glance then, it is difficult to believe that this construction of Holiday’s otherworldly beauty and artistry are part of the same collection as the somber “The Birth of Rhythm and Blues” that opens it. Yet, what helps to explain these nearly oppositional portraits is their connection to the evolution or, for Jones and many others, the devolution of Holiday’s career. Whereas during the early 1940s, Jones notes the “spring” in Holiday’s voice, it is in the post-WWII period that her voice lost what Angela Y. Davis describes as its “youthful buoyancy” (172), as Holiday publicly battled her narcotics addiction. Therefore, until recently, many critics considered this final stage of Holiday’s career to be a period of artistic decline.98 Beginning with the end, so to speak, Jones charts this prototypical retrospective of Holiday’s rise and fall as a blues and jazz star through these two poems that present very different versions of Holiday.

In the last two decades, however, poets and critics alike have begun reevaluating this autobiographical interpretation of Holiday’s late performances and recordings as

98 Although O’Meally disagrees with this assessment of Holiday’s “career chart,” he usefully sums it up: “The typical outline for a discussion of Holiday’s career is as follows: (1) the great stuff of the thirties, ‘out of nowhere’; (2) ‘Strange Fruit’ and the beginning of the decline; (3) the final years, when she miserably imitated herself” (98). This narrative was accepted by critics and jazz fans alike until recently. For example, the jazz critic Whitney Balliett once described her late recordings as proceeding “steadily and sadly downward” (102) and Glenn Coulter echoed him in panning her final album Lady in Satin as “very nearly total disaster” (105).
tragic testaments of her personal difficulties with narcotics, the criminal justice system, and the men who took advantage of her. As Davis argues,

The consensus among critics is that the youthful Billie Holiday, who sang primarily up-tempo tunes with a youthful buoyancy that seemed to transcend the troubles of society and the individual, was a more impressive artist than the mature Billie Holiday. This opinion fails to acknowledge the degree to which her art became increasingly communicative, even as her technical skills may have waned with the increasing depth and destructive intensity of her own life experiences. (172).

I would add that to exalt the wartime Holiday as, in Jones’s words, “this incredible goddess figure” and the later one as a powerless drug addict over simplifies the ways in which, as a black working-class woman in a music industry controlled by white men, Holiday was always negotiating the tension between objectification and agency. Jones’s tributes certainly venerate Holiday, and, importantly, “The Birth of Rhythm and Blues” contextualizes Holiday’s premature death within America’s oppressive social schemas. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to question the zenith to nadir trajectory that Jones posits—an interpretation of Holiday’s career that critics as well as many of this chapter’s other poets were simultaneously working to revise.

“Come all ye faithless”
By contrast, in “The Secret Life of Musical Instruments” (1982), the Anglo-American poet C. D. Wright omits any reference to Holiday’s personal misfortunes and instead pays tribute to her social consciousness as well as her glamor:

Between midnight and Reno
the world borders on a dune.
The bus does not stop.

The boys in the band have their heads on the rest.
They dream like so-and-sos.

The woman smokes
one after another.
She is humming “Strange Fruit.”
There is smoke in her clothes, her voice,
But her hair never smells.
She blows white petals off her lapel,
tastes salt.
It is a copacetic moon.

The instruments do not sleep in their dark cribs.
They keep cool, meditate.
They keep speech with strangers:
Come all ye faithless
young and crazy victims of love.
Come the lowlife and the highborn
All ye upside-down shitasses.
Bring your own light.
Come in. Be lost. Be still.
If you miss us at home
we’ll be on our way to the reckoning. (1-24)

Referred to as “the woman,” Holiday is never mentioned by name, but Wright makes her identity clear through her allusions to the characteristic gardenia flowers that Holiday often pinned in her hair and, of course, the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit.” Wright imagines Holiday, as she often was, the only woman on a tour bus full of male musicians99 and implies that Holiday was comfortable among the “boys in the band.” At the same time, she describes Holiday as “the woman” who transcends these circumstances through her beauty and grace. Despite her chain smoking, her “hair never smells,” and Holiday’s presence orders and pacifies the surrounding environment, as the symbol of the “copacetic moon” suggests.

While these initial images cast Holiday in the role of the sublime but silent muse, Wright’s identification of “Strange Fruit” as the song that Holiday hums underscores her sociopolitical engagement, particularly the significance of this song in Holiday’s repertoire. Symbolically, the tour bus also represents the possibility of sociocultural protest, as the band of musicians and instruments travel the nation delivering “Strange

---

99 During the late 1930s, Holiday traveled first with Count Basie and then later with Artie Shaw as the only woman in an all-white band.
Fruit”’s powerful cry against racial injustice. Portraying Holiday and the instruments as part of a progressive musical movement, Wright invites listeners—“Come all ye faithless” and “Come the lowlife and the highborn”—to recall or seek out “Strange Fruit” and engage in this “reckoning” with America’s long history of racial terror. She insists that the instruments, including Holiday’s voice, have the potential to reach all people (“all ye upside-down shitasses”), regardless of race, gender, or class. Akin to Frank O’Hara’s invocation of Holiday at the Five Spot (a club known for its diverse crowds) in “The Day Lady Died,” Wright suggests that Holiday’s performances, specifically of the song “Strange Fruit,” as cross-cultural exchanges that encourage listeners to grapple with the injustices that she voices.

Formally, “The Secret Life of Musical Instruments” does not reference the blues, but Wright’s allusion to the Christmas carol “O Come All Ye Faithful” situates her poem in the jazz tradition of riffing on popular standards and transforming these songs into provocative pieces of music. Holiday was a master of such revisions and reinventions, as is clear in listening to her emotive renderings of standards such as George Gershwin’s “Our Love is Here to Stay” or Irving Berlin’s “Cheek to Cheek.” Though Wright does not fashion her poetics specifically according to Holiday’s vocal style, she demonstrates her studied knowledge of jazz’s formal innovations and, as a result, elucidates the influence of Holiday’s oeuvre on her poetry. Arguably, as an Anglo-American woman paying homage to Holiday and referencing “Strange Fruit,” Wright follows the example set decades prior not only by O’Hara but also Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer.”

Cognizant of this problematic history of “othering,” Wright elides Holiday’s race and avoids essentializing Holiday’s personal experiences as those typical of a “colored
woman.” In fact, the final stanza’s series of imperatives (“Come in. Be lost. Be still.”) put the onus on Wright’s readers to listen and appreciate the underlying sociopolitical implications behind Holiday’s songs. In so doing, Wright self-reflexively positions this poem as a continuation of the cultural work that Holiday began and affirms Wright’s own investment in building multicultural/multiracial alliances (even across space and time) through the mutual bond of being socially-progressive women artists.

**Don’t Explain**

“Don’t Explain,” the title poem from Betsy Sholl’s 1997 collection, on the other hand, calls attention to Holiday’s authenticity as a singer whose music testifies to the painful experiences that she personally endured. Although the poem’s title signals that Sholl pays tribute to Holiday’s rendering of the song “Don’t Explain,” her narrative focus is more on the speaker’s psychological trauma, which is caused by the anger that the speaker feels toward her mother and, more emphatically, her deceased father after she discovers his private letters that are “full of slurs, doors he wanted shut against / just about everyone” (69). Strategically alluding to the parts of Holiday’s biography that symbolize oppression and tragedy, Sholl resurrects Holiday as a symbol of hardship and emotional despair that the speaker identifies with because of her own suffering. For instance, the speaker’s frustration and anger with her mother’s emotional detachment leads her to imagine asking her,

- Did you know the same years you were
- in school, Billie Holiday was scrubbing floors
- in a whorehouse, playing Louis Armstrong
Recalling the poverty that Holiday suffered as a child and young woman but also the music that allowed her to rise above her circumstances, Sholl champions Holiday as an inspiring example of someone who relieved her grief through lyrical self-expression. Similarly, Sholl casts Holiday in a cathartic role through the recurring motif of the cassette tape on which Holiday’s music plays alongside the dissonant sounds of the industrial rock group Nine Inch Nails, acting as a soundtrack to the turmoil that the speaker experiences as she attempts to reconcile the prejudices of her father. As such, Sholl represents Holiday not only as an influence on her personal and artistic outlook but also implies her music’s timeless nature, which allows it to speak to the same frustrations and desires that late twentieth-century musicians voice.

In the final lines, Sholl further solidifies her representation of Holiday as a singer whose traumatic life cannot be separated from the art that she produced:

\[
\ldots \text{even on a bad tape made from old records}
\]

\[
\text{ sends her losses straight to the marrow—Don’t Explain}
\]

\[
\text{Strange Fruit—voice totally shot by the end,}
\]

\[
\text{as if the life couldn’t be kept out,}
\]

\[
\text{the music couldn’t keep itself from breaking. (70)}
\]

Sholl embraces the emotive power of Holiday’s recordings, but she likewise contends that Holiday’s “losses” impinged on her music until she could no longer withstand either. While many of her peers showcase Holiday’s assertions of agency onstage, thereby disassociating the private and public Holiday, Sholl reinstates an interpretation of Holiday’s songs as testimonials of her personal pain. Concluding the poem with a
A description of Holiday’s deterioration (“voice totally shot by the end”), Sholl then echoes Jones’s “The Birth of Rhythm and Blues” in lamenting the ineluctable connection between the quality of Holiday’s late recordings and performances and her impending death.

Thus, while I generally agree with Griffin’s interpretations of Holiday, I question her assertion that Sholl “reads the loss of Holiday’s song and of her voice not as death but as the triumph of life—its insistence on breaking through artifice, much like flowers that grow between the cracks of a cement pavement” (If You Can’t Be Free 155). “Don’t Explain” certainly portrays Holiday as sincere and resilient but, to continue the botanical metaphor, rooting Holiday’s poignancy and authenticity in her life experiences elides her conscientious efforts to craft and evolve her art. However, as with Wright’s “The Secret Life,” it is noteworthy that Sholl, a late twentieth-century white woman, commiserates with Holiday’s pain and embraces her music as an inspiring example of the kind of cathartic self-expression that she enacts on the page. Citing Holiday’s most political song, “Strange Fruit,” and “Don’t Explain,” one of her most disquieting in its exposure of heartbreak and co-dependence, as the music that resonates with the speaker’s agony, Sholl demonstrates the ways in which Holiday’s music continues to appeal to late twentieth-century audiences in highly personal ways. Unlike Hughes and Sanchez, who similarly interpreted Holiday’s music autobiographically but resisted the despair they identified in it, Sholl views this authentic connection between Holiday’s life and art as a point of identification as well as an important precedent for her own artistic vision, though clearly she laments the final outcome in which Holiday’s “music couldn’t keep itself from breaking.”
Introducing a more formally innovate tribute mode, Harryette Mullen’s collection *Muse & Drudge* (1995) invokes a composite blues woman muse in the figure of Sapphire, whom Mullen describes as “an iconic black woman who refuses to be silenced” (“Preface” xi). Joining her feminist contemporaries, Mullen also vivifies Rainey, Smith, and Holiday as complex artists and individuals. As Mullen animates this multifaceted central muse figure, “Sappho as Sapphire singing the blues” (“Interview” 412), she defamiliarizes and reconfigures both the one-dimensional narratives that were previously deployed to sum up these blues women’s legacies and the derogatory image of the “loud-mouth, aggressive” and “supposedly emasculating black woman” (Hogue “Interview”) Sapphire stereotype.

Moreover, informed by poststructuralism as well as critical race and gender theories, Mullen troubles the binaries between the subjectivity and visibility historically associated with whiteness and the invisibility and objectivity associated with blackness, which have underwritten dominant racial discourses and long justified America’s hegemonic power structures. As Mullen writes in “Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness” (1994),

The black woman remains in the last place within the color/economic hierarchy, her disadvantaged status reinforcing the already existing prejudice against her . . . It is this woman furthest from whiteness who is therefore imagined as being also furthest from the advantages that whiteness has to offer in a racist-sexist hierarchy of privilege and oppression, in which the privilege of whites and males is based upon and
unattainable without the exploitation and oppression of blacks and females. (73)

In her homages, Mullen realizes this black feminist interest in exposing and working to dismantle these hierarchical structures. Taking her cue from many of this chapter’s other poets and feminist blues scholars (Davis, Carby, and Harrison, for example), she imagines Rainey, Smith, and Holiday as embodying the paradoxical position of being publicly disregarded “within the color/economic hierarchy” while simultaneously occupying empowered positions as black women celebrities who posed a visible challenge to notions of inferiority and immobility—a contradictory social status that the title’s juxtaposing roles between that of the exalted muse and the degraded drudge signify. Likewise, Mullen demonstrates the poetic inspiration that she receives from these artists, as she formally alludes to the ways in which blues women utilized the subversive potential of language, especially puns and sexual innuendos, as a means of asserting their sensuality and independence and, in the process, protesting the dominant society’s expectations that black women embody subservience. As Robert Switzer points out, “In the blues, the music and the words, both of them ‘masked’ and signifying, play off one another in apparent simplicity, while in fact exploding with awesome, subversive, and liberating power” (30). Adopting this blues idiom, Mullen references lyrics from songs that Rainey and Smith recorded and transforms them through her own linguistic innovations that, as she explains it, allow her to “sing it in my voice / put words in like I want them” (Recyclopedia 125).

At the same time that Mullen situates her work within this African-American blues context, she anchors Muse & Drudge in the Anglo-European tradition of the epic
poet and his muse as well as the lyric poetry of Sappho—again, breaking down oppressive binaries of gender, race, and culture as well as aesthetic hierarchies between the oral vernacular of the blues and these classical written traditions. As Mullen explains it, “Muse & Drudge, in a sense, is a crossroads where the blues intersects with the tradition of lyric poetry, as well as a text for collaborative reading and an occasion to unite audiences often divided by racial and cultural differences” (Preface xi). Indeed, the many self-reflexive gestures in this collection indicate Mullen’s interest not in dutifully replicating the formal structures of blues women’s songs but in using their music and personal narratives as a springboard to develop her own dynamic and participatory late twentieth-century poetics. In the process, she celebrates, revises, and, in the call-and-response tradition, echoes her blues predecessors.

In the poem that opens Muse & Drudge, for example, Mullen constructs an image of Sappho/Sapphire as a blues woman onstage and alludes to several songs that Smith recorded:

Sapphire’s lyre styles
plucked eyebrows
bow lips and legs
whose lives are lonely too

my last nerve’s lucid music
sure chewed up the juicy fruit
you must don’t like my peaches
there’s some left on the tree
you’ve had my thrills
a reefer a tub of gin
don’t mess with me I’m evil
I’m in your sin

clipped bird eclipsed moon
soon no memory of you
no drive or desire survives
you flutter invisible still. (*Recyclopedia* 99)

Referring to Smith’s “Mama’s Got the Blues” (“You don’t like my peaches, please let my orchard be”) and “Gimme a Pigfoot” (“Gimme a reefer and a gang o’ gin / Slay me, ’cause I’m in my sin”) (qtd. in A. Davis 310, 282), Mullen characterizes Smith as a Sapphire figure who, as in Williams’s homages, is proudly sexually uninhibited and hedonistic, thereby celebrating an aspect of Smith’s identity that her male predecessors—Aubert, O’Higgins, and Hayden, to name a few—neglected. Davis contends that “Mama’s Got the Blues” and other such defiant Smith recordings, demonstrated a “determination to redefine black womanhood as active, assertive, independent, and sexual” (75), and Mullen clearly champions this attitude as an inspiration for her own socially-progressive poetry.

Simultaneously, Mullen exposes the tension between Smith’s attitude of assertiveness and the alienation that she and, by extension, other black women performers experienced as they negotiated the denigrating social discourses circulating in the early
twentieth century. In this regard, the opening stanza draws attention to the ways that Smith fashioned her image through “plucked eyebrows” and “bow lips,” which were designed to appeal to socially conventional notions of beauty. On the other hand, as several critics have noted, the “bow” refers to the instrument designed to play the strings of the lyre, and the “bow lips and legs” allude to Smith’s and other blues women’s strategic use of their bodies to seduce their audiences and cultivate a fan base—in other words, to develop their individual “lyre styles,” as Williams’s homages similarly revealed. Evoking the prototypical blues theme of alienation, Mullen reveals Sappho/Sapphire/Smith to be “lonely” in her paradoxically dis/empowered role, even while she boasts defiantly that she is sexually available for other men (“you don’t like my peaches / there’s more left on the tree”) and is more interested in indulging hedonistic pleasures such as “a reefer and a tub of gin” than in male companionship. Employing the metaphor of the caged bird in the final stanza and echoing Dove’s “Canary,” Mullen then furthers the image of the marginalized black female performer who chafes against social norms but is “invisible still,” reinforcing the tension between Sappho’s/Sapphire’s/Smith’s acts of resistance onstage and the pain of still being rendered powerless by the dominant white society. However, through the continued fluttering of the “clipped bird,” Mullen affirms the blues’ underlying ethos of perseverance and resilience as well as Sappho’s/Sapphire’s/Smith’s importance as a figure who requires our attention, urging readers to dwell on the juxtapositions between

---

100 Jones writes, “Depictions of sexuality and sexual prowess abound in blues songs, and it is this view of blueswomen as controlling their bodies and their sexuality that Mullen espouses” (160). Elisabeth A. Frost contends that “Mullen has her [Sapphire] take recourse to a more available tool than those of high art: her ‘lyre’ is her body” (“Ruses of the Lunatic Muse” 469). Ryan concurs that “through sexual references, Mullen portrays African-American women as agents making productive decisions without recourse to stereotypes about appropriate behavior for black women” (158).
freedom and captivity that she illuminates and to (re)imagine Smith as a woman who embodied them.

Subsequently, Mullen focuses her attention on the liminal space that Holiday occupied as both a glamorous blues and jazz singer (a muse figure) and a black woman who was considered inferior (a drudge) by pre-Civil Rights/Black Power American society:

honey jars of hair
skin and nail conjuration
a racy make-up artist collects herself
in time for major retrospection

her lady’s severe beauty
and downright manner
enhance the harsh landscape
positioned with urban product

mule for hire or worse
beast of burden down when I lay
clean and repair the universe
lawdy lawdy hallelujah when I lay

tragic yellow mattress
belatedly beladied blues
shines staggerly avid diva
ruses of the lunatic muse. (119)

Akin to Smith’s invisibility, Mullen illuminates Holiday’s struggles to establish a public persona free from historical stereotypes. In fact, prior to becoming a successful vocalist, Holiday worked as a maid and a prostitute—two of the only professions available to her\footnote{In her autobiography \textit{Lady Sings the Blues}, Holiday recalls beginning work at sixteen: “minding babies, running errands, and scrubbing those damn white steps all over Baltimore” (9). She further recalls working “as a strictly twenty-dollar call girl” when she moved to Harlem at the age of thirteen (23). As Griffin notes, after Holiday was released from Blackwell’s Island, where she spent 100 days in a workhouse after being arrested for prostitution, “Holiday decided to ‘stop turning tricks’; she also decided she ‘didn’t want to be nobody’s damn maid.’ In the thirties, that didn’t leave many options for an uneducated young black woman” (\textit{If You Can’t Be Free} 24).}—and Mullen implies that, despite her success, like all black women in early twentieth-century America, Holiday was still viewed as a “mule for hire / beast of burden” by a society stratified according to race, gender, and class. As Mullen puts it in the poem’s final quatrain, Holiday was “belatedly beladied”—a self-reflexive comment on the cultural work that Mullen and several of her peers perform here on Holiday’s behalf.

Lamenting the unrelenting race and gender discrimination that Holiday had to contend with, Mullen furthers Dove’s contention that Holiday chose an elusive persona—both performing and defying social expectations, as the punning phrase “racy make-up artist” suggests—in order to maintain some degree of control over her public image.

Formally, Mullen’s linguistic innovations enact this complex role, and the final lines (“shines staggerly avid diva / ruses of the lunatic muse”) in particular dramatize Holiday’s contradictory experiences in the limelight. Through the dual meaning of the term “shine”—a racial epithet used to describe black Americans but also a verb that means to emit or reflect light and to stand out or excel—Mullen implies that Holiday was
both objectified by the audience’s gaze and transcended this degradation through her radiance onstage. Negotiating these oppressive social conditions took a personal toll, as the description of Holiday’s inebriated (“staggerly”) state suggests. “Staggerly” also evokes the mythic African-American outlaw Stagger Lee (or Stagolee), indicating the parallels between the mythologizing of Holiday’s legacy and this legendary figure and, more broadly, the ways in which the lived experiences of historical individuals are subsumed by cultural myths, as we have observed throughout this study.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of the palindromic words “avid diva”—the latter of which carries its own pejorative connotations of a demanding and narcissistic woman—highlights the use of language to construct denigrating gendered and racialized stereotypes, such as the Sapphire. Through Mullen’s attention to and subversion of the typical function of racial slurs like “shine,” she empowers the reader to similarly interrogate and, thus, reconceive of the typical narratives propagated about Holiday and other blues women’s and men’s legacies. Accordingly, the final line “ruses of the lunatic muse” functions both as commentary on Mullen’s own iconoclastic style and as a reiteration of the contradictions that Holiday embodied as a celebrated performer who had the agency to devise and enact a “ruse” but whose defiance of traditional roles and social mores for black working-class women was interpreted as lunacy. Mullen’s juxtapositions thus allow for a reimagining of Holiday’s celebrity persona that accounts not only for the oppression that she faced but the creative ways—what Brooks referred to earlier as acts of “Afro-alienation”—in which she transcended the “harsh environment” and still managed to “shine.”
Likewise, in a poem that invokes Rainey, Mullen elucidates the empowerment that blues women exercised in their performances and the tradition of sexual boasting and masking that their lyrical punning exemplifies. Correspondingly, Mullen’s punning calls attention to the sociopolitical function of language to naturalize and, conversely, challenge dominant discourses of race and gender. In the opening quatrain, for instance, Mullen describes a “sugar shack full” of “women of size with men / who love too much” (121), thereby introducing an alternative conception of beauty and sensuality that defies mainstream society’s privileging of the petite white female body as more sexually appealing. As Sandra Lieb points out,

While white culture frequently views heavy women as ugly, and mothers as asexual, Ma Rainey could be both big and sexy, both maternal and erotic. She was fully alive to the varieties of sexual experience and expression; bisexual herself, she sang publicly of lesbians and homosexuals, joked about her motherly/incestuous attractions to younger men, and reaffirmed in her songs the centrality of passion in human affairs. (170)

Mullen gestures toward the thinly veiled sexual language typical of many Rainey songs, and certainly of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” in her own blues-inspired metaphors, such as

what is inward
wanting to get out
prey to the lard
trying to pass for butter. (121)
Affirming the catharsis that singing the blues facilitates, Mullen suggests the need for self-expression (to let the “inward” “get out”) while simultaneously referencing the ardor of the “men / who love too much.”

In the lines that follow, Mullen utilizes puns as a means of situating her poem in the tradition of classic blues women like Rainey and Smith whose lyrics, as Ryan points out, often identify “sexuality and food as sources of personal empowerment for black women” (157). However, Mullen adds another layer of political commentary when she evokes the cultural practice of passing—“trying to pass for butter” or, in other words, trying to pretend one is white in order to take advantage of the first-class citizenship that accompanies this racial signifier. Although Rainey never attempted to pass, and her dark skin would have made that impossible, as previously noted, she “lightened her face with heavy greasepaint, powder, and rouge” in order to conform to the widespread belief among most white and black Americans of her era that light skin was more attractive (Lieb 8). As the humor of “prey to the lard” indicates, Mullen does not so much criticize Rainey as use this typically effaced aspect of Rainey’s legacy to highlight the contradictions that these early blues women embodied as performers who, in many respects, subverted social conventions with their bold and bawdy stage personae but were also subject (and often capitulated) to public expectations that denied the beauty of their natural appearances.

As the subsequent lines make clear, Rainey and other blues stars used their liminal social positions to mock middle-class white values:

\[
\text{cakewalk matrix} \\
\text{tapping the frets}
\]
dubbed and mastered
tucked into the folds. (121)

The reference to the “cakewalk,” a dance that black slaves invented as a parody of their masters that, in an ironic turn of events, then became a dance craze among whites, suggests this process of exploitation and appropriation that the phrase “dubbed and mastered” bears out more fully. In the music industry, dubbing refers to the process of revising previously recorded music to produce a new recording, thus creating a new “master” copy. Within the context of the cakewalk, the term “mastered” also takes on multiple meanings: on the one hand, it references the slaves who signified on their masters’ dances and then witnessed these dances being copied by whites; on the other hand, “mastered” references the white record executives and musicians who profited from “master” copies of “the frets” that Rainey and other African-American musicians recorded, exemplifying a long-standing pattern in American culture of black creativity and white appropriation (the story of rock and roll is one of the best modern examples):

Mullen’s defiant tone in the final quatrain reflects an effort to reclaim blues women’s music for the women who developed them and, at the same time, to revitalize the proud and authoritative stance that they proclaimed in their songs:

kiss my black bottom

good and plenty

where the doorknob split

the sun don’t shine. (121)

---

102 As Kevin Young notes, “Like so much American culture, it [the cakewalk] began as black and ended up “white”; and like so many white folks before and after, the white folks did not know that they were doing and imitation of an imitation, a dull copy of a parody” (The Grey Album 79).
As with the song “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” in which Rainey boasts that “Wait until you see me do my big black bottom, / It’ll put you in a trance,” and “All the boys in the neighborhood, / They say your black bottom is really good” (qtd. in A. Davis 231-232), Mullen’s language is clearly sexual. Similarly, she employs the braggadocio common to the classic blues woman tradition, thereby celebrating the blues persona that Rainey and others developed as an inspiration for the development of Mullen’s own poetic voice. Positioning herself as heir to this tradition, Mullen’s representations then encourage readers to listen to and appreciate Rainey, Smith, and Holiday as multifaceted artists and, more broadly, to value the blues as a viable mode for self-expression during any era. As with all the poets in this study, Mullen and her feminist counterparts emphasize and elide the aspects of blues women’s legacies that speak to their own aesthetic and sociopolitical outlooks. Nonetheless, the representations examined here do mark a turning point in the blues tribute subgenre, as these women poets attend more to historicizing than mythologizing.

In Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work (2006), DuPlessis posed the following question about the muse trope: “Will social change in gender relations alter these characters, or will social change make ‘them’ (or the agents who continuously write them) more stubbornly attached to these stories as a refuge from the social demands of historical women? Is poetry, then, a gender-conservative institution?” (86). As we have seen, Williams, Wright, Dove, Jones, Baraka, Sholl, Jackson, and Mullen anticipate this question and, through their homages, reimagine the dimensions of the muse trope so that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday are exalted not only for the creativity they inspire but also as seminal cultural producers in their own right. Echoing and, in Williams’s case,
anticipating feminist historians and cultural critics, in diverse ways these poets represent blues women as boldly announcing both their humanity and their artistry to a society that systematically denigrated them. Williams, Dove, and Mullen then grapple with the paradoxically emboldened and objectified black female body onstage and blues women’s resistance to the endemic stereotypes that denied their agency. Several of the other poets considered here identify with Holiday in personal terms and highlight her authenticity as a woman artist whose experiences with race and gender discrimination, not to mention her more individualized hardships, were directly channeled into her music. The tributes of Jackson, Jones, and Baraka honor Holiday in ways that exemplify both of these impulses. In the next chapter, poets of a younger generation, many of whom have been mentored and influenced by the poet-professors included in this and the previous chapter, continue to explore the complexities of early twentieth-century fame (and black fame in particular). At the same time, these poets suggest the limitations of race and gender as lenses through which to interpret the legacies of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly, further evolving these figures’ posthumous personae to reflect the discourses of a new century of blues tributes.
Chapter 5: The Twenty-First-Century Blues Tribute Poem

In 2003, the United States Congress declared that it was the Year of the Blues—a year chosen to mark W. C. Handy’s first encounter with the music a century prior. A wide array of events commemorating the blues ensued, including “all star concerts at New York’s Radio City Music Hall, academic symposia on the blues, international competitions for emerging talents, and the debut of a documentary film series on the blues directed by Hollywood notables such as Martin Scorsese and Clint Eastwood” (Lawson 40). In the words of Scorsese, his series and the Year of the Blues were intended to “introduce new audiences worldwide to this music and also inspire kids, whether they like rock or hip hop, to better understand the struggles and genius that gave birth to what they listen to today” (“The Blues: About the Film Series”). Though this chapter’s poets were not directly called upon to take part in this national and international veneration of the blues, they buttressed these efforts by affirming that, one hundred years after Ma Rainey began incorporating the blues into her repertoire (Jackson 12-14), the blues remained a seminal influence on American poetry. Accordingly, Sascha Feinstein, Tony Hoagland, Colleen McElroy, Terrance Hayes, Kevin Young, Evie Shockley, Tyehimba Jess, and Fred Moten continue the work of their forebears in vivifying the blues and this study’s icons for, in this case, twenty-first century audiences.

As Jonathan Sterne maintains, “Today we are surrounded by the voices of the dead: they come to us through computer and Muzak speakers, televisions, headphones, and radios. Famous dead people on recordings sing to millions of people every day. Posthumous fame is a mundane fact of everyday life” (253). Invoking Smith, Holiday,
Leadbelly, and Johnson as muses, this chapter’s poets seek to wrest them from this mass-mediated Muzak realm and instantiate them as multifaceted historical figures, highlighting the reasons why their music and their personal narratives have stood the test of time. Evolving these icons’ legacies to reflect the sociopolitical and aesthetic discourses of their own era, these poets contribute their voices to the provocative body of knowledge that the blues tribute subgenre represents. It is useful then to consider their tributes as palimpsests that bear the traces of previous invocations while actively renovating them to reflect more contemporary perspectives.

In particular, the poets that follow complement and extend the work of chapter 4’s poets—Sherley Anne Williams, Rita Dove, and Harryette Mullen, among others—in calling attention to the fraught history of black celebrity and the black body onstage. In recent decades, scholars have also begun to investigate a more comprehensive history of fame and indeed celebrity studies (a theoretical reference point for this study), has become institutionalized, as the October 2011 issue of the Publication of the Modern Language Association dedicated to this field of study readily attests. In this issue, Anne Anlin Cheng usefully intervenes in the discourses of both race theory and celebrity studies by asking some key questions: “What does modern celebrity—predicated on constant self-production and tied to commodity culture, to the ascension of the public persona, and to the politics of performance—mean for someone seen at once too much and not at all? How do we talk about agency, consent, and embodiment in this highly mediated context?” (“Shine” 1023). The poets in this chapter provide some preliminary

---

103 To my knowledge, Rainey has not been poetically invoked in recent years; however, as it has been throughout this study, it is possible to view this chapter’s poetic homages and interventions in blues icons’ legacies as both specific to the individuals invoked and symbolic of broader literary and social trends regarding the role of the blues formally, thematically, and epistemologically in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American poetry.
answers to Cheng’s query by (re)presenting the history of blues women’s stardom in ways that account for the vexed experiences of non-white stars, and Jess and Young explore similar paradoxes in their tributes to Leadbelly and Johnson respectively.

While all stars struggle to control their public images and to preserve the separation between their personal and professional lives, these early African-American blues stars, the poets considered here suggest, faced even greater challenges. Dehumanized and stereotyped, they were not conceived of, at least by most white Americans, as having the kind of awareness and interiority upon which the distinction between public and private is predicated. As a result, Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson have often been portrayed as natural entertainers whose music is an authentic personal expression, rather than a performance aimed at securing them acclaim and financial security. Building on the solid foundation laid by their feminist predecessors and counterparts, this chapter’s poets counter these assumptions and affirm that blues men and women consciously performed and subverted the gendered and racialized roles that they were expected to play. Illuminating the ways in which racial discourses in particular complicate systems of mediation and celebritization, the tributes that follow thus echo Cheng in denaturalizing the often assumed relationship between whiteness and celebrity.104

104 Because of America’s racial hierarchies, until quite recently celebrity was almost always the exclusive domain of Anglo-Americans. Of course, there were often token people of color in films—Hattie McDaniel won Best Supporting Actress for her role in Gone With the Wind (1939), for example—and in certain arenas, such as music and sports, African-Americans frequently gained national acclaim. Indeed, a central aim of this study is to draw attention to the experience of non-white blues stars and the ways in which poets have maintained their posthumous fame. Generally speaking, however, the stars that reached celebrity status were white. See Richard Dyer’s White (1997) for an in-depth explanation of the privileging of whiteness within the film and photography industries (and the lighting techniques used to optically reinforce white superiority). See also Michele Wallace’s “Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visibility in African-American Culture” (1991) for an explanation of the limited domains in which African Americans were historically been permitted to gain fame.
Drawing attention to the competing notions of what blues icons have symbolized, both poetically and in the culture at large, Feinstein, McElroy, Hoagland, Hayes, Shockley, Young, Jess, and Moten also index a postmodern, poststructuralist theoretical shift away from identity politics and essentialist discourses and toward more nuanced interpretations of the cultural meaning(s) of blues icons. They observe, for example, the instability of what S. Paige Baty terms “iconic rememberings” (18): “Remembering is about creating what is real; it is about finding stories to tell ourselves about the present and the past. . . . Yet these rememberings are always shifting, as is the ground of the virtual network of mass-mediated culture” (31). In this regard, Feinstein, Hoagland, Jess, and Moten foreground their artistic processes of mediation, acknowledging both the dynamic process of representation that icons undergo and their own complicity in the mythmaking surrounding the icons they represent. Nevertheless, they willingly accept the risks involved in invoking historical figures because, as I argue in regard to all of this chapter’s poets, they recognize the need to rehumanize blues icons as multifaceted men and women. In fact, while I separate this chapter into two sections, distinguishing between those who are and are not part of what has been termed the post-soul generation of African-American writers, this diverse group of poets all suggest the limitations of race and gender as markers of identity; and, at the same time, they continue to bear witness to the racism and sexism that this study’s icons endured.

In considering these shared ideological commitments, this chapter pursues the following questions: What poetic strategies do these tributes employ to demystify the stereotypes and symbolic qualities ascribed to blues icons, while also exposing a long and troubled history of oppression? Moreover, given their awareness of the instability and
limitations of representations, how do these poets represent blues men and women to twenty-first century audiences without purporting to advance definitive representations? Finally, in what ways do they extend and, conversely, depart from the work of their predecessors and contemporaries examined in the previous chapters, and what might these tributes then suggest about the future of the blues tribute subgenre?

“something for the cat to play with”

Continuing the work of her African-American feminist counterparts but complicating the exclusively African-American lineages that many of them delineate, Colleen J. McElroy’s “Mae West Chats It Up with Bessie Smith” (2001) stages a dialogue between West and Smith that elucidates the commonalities between these women’s bawdy and assertive personae. In the process, she reshapes Smith’s legacy so that she is venerated not only as the star of the “race” records market but also as a part of a twentieth-century feminist consciousness that West, who gained fame as both a sex symbol and an uninhibited wit and personality, similarly fostered in her work. Enacting the camaraderie between these women by making their comments to one another indistinguishable, McElroy then engages readers in conceiving of Smith’s and West’s legacies without cleaving to racially-segregated lines:

once I found a cowboy who thought he could
ride me into the New West and God
put rollers on the bed to make his journey smoother
last time I saw him he looked the worse for wear
hair all but gone gut eating his belt
he was a sight all laid out in a new suit

(same one I bought him). (1-7)

Linguistically, neither Smith nor West is marked by a vernacular difference that would indicate race or class distinctions. Moreover, since the poem must be read as a dialogue and not dueling monologues, McElroy formally realizes the similarities in West’s and Smith’s worldviews, showcasing their shared wit and sexual humor and inviting readers to consider them as part of the same early twentieth-century tradition. As Pamela Robertson observes, “West adopted a style of singing characteristic of ‘dirty blues,’ similar to that of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and maintained this style in a somewhat modified, censored form in her films,” which Robertson contends “aligns her [West] with black female working-class sexuality but also enables her to address her position as a sexual subject and object” (35). Arguably, Smith’s negotiation of the same sort of agency and objectivity is one of the reasons that she continues to fascinate music fans and poets alike, as the many Smith tributes in this study demonstrate. McElroy recuperates this often elided history of West’s appropriation of and homage to Rainey’s and Smith’s blues styles and stage personae and, implying the ways in which they all utilized humor and sexual innuendos in order to convey messages of women’s empowerment, elucidates their importance as early feminists.105

As the poem progresses, West and Smith continue their banter and share lines such as “cept he dropped his paints and showed me / something for the cat to play with” that underscore their liberated views of sex and love (15-16), which for most women

---

105 Although neither Smith nor West identified themselves as activists for women’s rights, they are now viewed by many contemporary feminists as trailblazers in the struggle for women’s independence from the traditional domestic roles of wife and mother and, in the case of black women in particular, subservient caretaker.
during the early twentieth century was inextricably bound to marriage and childbearing. As previously noted, however, Smith’s and Rainey’s overt sensuality could be interpreted not as subverting but affirming the pervasive assumptions about black women as hypersexualized. Making Smith’s and West’s sexualized banter indistinguishable, McElroy then troubles the white/black binary on which this stereotype is predicated. Moreover, she implies that Smith’s and West’s liberated views were not based on innate promiscuity but rather a privileging of their careers as performers over opportunities to settle down into monogamous relationships:

you gotta know who you’re aiming for just aim
for the light of one cigarette to the next
always someone there with a match and an itch
to scratch what hurts long as your voice holds. (21-25)

Concluding the poem with West and Smith echoing each other’s assurances that there are always other men (and women for that matter) who are available for companionship, McElroy continues the work of her black feminist colleagues, particularly Sherley Ann Williams, in calling attention to early twentieth-century challenges to patriarchal social structures that confined women to the domestic sphere. Casting both Smith and West in a shared lineage of famously independent and outspoken American women—importantly, a lineage not circumscribed by racial hues—McElroy’s dialogue poem also expands the ancestry that Williams and others have charted. As such, this poem exemplifies the trend in contemporary blue tributes to approach American history from a less racially factionalized perspective that seeks to illuminate the cross-cultural influences which dominant narratives have long ignored.
“That's all I have, Billie”

Turning now to a jazz and blues critic who has explicated varied and often conflicting poetic portraits of Holiday, in “Miss Brown to You (1915-1959)” (2001), Sascha Feinstein offers his interpretation of her legacy. Written in a narrative style with a first-person speaker (seemingly Feinstein himself), the poem is ostensibly a tribute to one of his favorite vocalists. Yet, Feinstein also acknowledges the discontinuity between Holiday’s private and public experiences and addresses the tendency to interpret her music autobiographically:

Nobody, you once wrote, really loves me.

They just love my music. I’m listening
to the end of your life, sessions
from ’58, and forgive me for thinking

That’s all I have, Billie.

Because you were right. I’m not the woman
in this photo, signing autographs
behind the enormous letters
of your name. To your left,
one of the men checks to see
if you’ve spelled his right;

another watches your downcast

I wish I had a moment

like that to remember you by, though
with ‘Don’t Explain,’ I’m sent to a blue room,
your scratched voice like winter wind
under the door, pushing forward. (1-17)
Exposing the lacunae of his own portrait, which is based on recordings and a photograph of Holiday signing autographs rather than a personal relationship, Feinstein suggests the central tension facing many (if not all) blues and jazz tribute poets: their perspectives are always already informed more by the attributes that they perceive and admire than by first-hand knowledge of their muses’ actual lives. As Joseph Roach points out, “Performers are none other than themselves doing a job in which they are always someone else, filling our field of vision with the flesh-and-blood matter of what can only be imagined to exist” (9). Feinstein can “wish I had a moment / like that to remember” Holiday, but he has to satisfy himself with the music and images that she left behind. Therefore, he can only imagine that “If it were ’58, you’d probably give a wink / to the rhythm section, sing / for everyone you thought didn’t love you” (23-25), knowing that the figure he creates on the page is ultimately more about Feinstein than Holiday.

As the poem continues, he contextualizes the disjuncture between Holiday’s public and private personae within the hierarchical society in which she lived, suggesting that the alienation that she felt as a woman adored by fans but loved by “Nobody” was heightened by the racial hypocrisy and discrimination that she endured:

all the things you had to become
for others: ‘restricted’ diners flashing
the bus window pink, how even
Basie once asked you to wear
brown make-up, skin not dark enough,
the backstage mirror reflecting your white
gardenia as fingers slowly spread
the new color across your cheek,
red lips seeping into the darkening rouge. (29-37)

Feinstein underscores the paradoxes of fame for Holiday and the ways in which it becomes nearly impossible to separate these incidents from her musical legacy. While she was asked to sign autographs and perform all over the world, she was also denied the right to a meal at “‘restricted’ diners” or even to appear onstage without altering her skin color to assure white audiences that she was indeed African American, and, thus, it was permissible to treat her as inferior. Accordingly, the reflection of the gardenia—a sign of Holiday’s self-fashioning—is immediately eclipsed by the image of Holiday applying both blackface makeup and red lipstick, suggesting the racialized and gendered masks that she was forced to wear in order to maintain her career.

Taking the poem’s title from one of Holiday’s early hits, Feinstein employs it as a synecdoche for these vexed experiences in the limelight. As a black woman in a pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era, Holiday was seen, as is evident from the racially-charged incidents exposed in the poem’s final lines, as an embodiment of an essentialized blackness—her “brown” skin was the primary trait by which many Americans identified her. Further, the title’s “to you” implies the multiple personae that Holiday and other stars necessarily maintain. She is the personification of her songs such as “Miss Brown to You”—“The loveable, huggable little Miss Brown to you / Is baby to me”—to fans, but
her personal identity is distinct from her music, as she acknowledged in the quote that becomes Feinstein’s first line: “Nobody, you once wrote, really loves me. / They just love my music.” Foregrounding the poem’s own limitations both in terms of the speaker’s lack of personal knowledge and, more obliquely, as written from the perspective of a non-African-American man, Feinstein still maintains the importance of considering the history of race and gender oppression that made Holiday’s experiences with fame even more painful and alienating (“all the things you had to become for others”) than they are for stars not burdened by institutionalized discrimination. Elucidating the specific sociocultural circumstances that make distinguishing the art from the artist difficult in Holiday’s case, “Miss Brown to You” provides part of the justification for the continued poetic and public interest in the relationship between Holiday’s biography and her music. At the same time, Feinstein’s poem evinces the concern among contemporary tribute poets with avoiding the race and gender essentialism of many of their predecessors and paying homage to Holiday in a way that acknowledges the inevitable distinction between Holiday the historical individual and the one brought to life on the printed page.

“Shut up and listen”

Tony Hoagland’s “Poem in Which I Make the Mistake of Comparing Billie Holiday to a Cosmic Washerwoman” (2003) similarly exposes the difficulty in disassociating Holiday from an African-American history of pain and suffering. In particular, Hoagland evinces the tendency among Anglo-Americans like him to view Holiday and, by extension, other famous musicians through racialized lenses, rather than appreciating them as distinct artists and individuals. Casting Terrance Hayes in the role of
the speaker’s interlocutor (his African-American friend “Terrance”), Hoagland obliquely refers to the friendship between these two poets and their influence on one another’s work. Arguably, Hoagland’s poem is specifically in conversation with Hayes’s “Lady Sings the Blues” (1999), and, as we shall see shortly, Hayes’s emphasis on Holiday’s complexity. For instance, Hoagland’s poem begins with Terrance urging the speaker to purge his stereotypical notions of blackness and listen to Holiday on her own terms:

We were driving back from the record store at the mall
when Terrance told me that Billie Holiday
was not a symbol for the black soul.

He said, The night is not African American either, for
your information,
it is just goddamn dark,
and in the background
she was singing a song I never heard before,
moving her voice like water moving
along the shore or a lake,
reaching gently into the crevices, touching the pebbles

107 Hoagland and Hayes began exchanging poems while Hoagland was teaching creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh, and Hayes was beginning his career at Carnegie Mellon University. During this time, Hoagland was composing the poems that would become part of What Narcissism Means to Me, the collection in which “Poem in Which I Make the Mistake of Comparing Billie Holiday to a Cosmic Washerwoman” was first published. In a 2006 interview, Hayes discussed the ways the two men influenced each other’s work: “We would look at our poems and talk about the edits and the technical stuff, but we would also have these conversations about family, gender, race, all kinds of things which would inform the poems in ways that can’t really happen in a more formalized workshop” (71). Given the nature of their friendship and the timing of the publication of Hoagland’s Holiday tribute, it is likely that his representation of Holiday was influenced by these discussions with Hayes.
and sand. (1-12)

The conversation between the speaker and Terrance dramatizes Holiday’s symbolic meaning for many white Americans who, according to Terrance, invest her with reductive notions about blackness, as the humorous analogue to the metaphoric associations with night suggest—“The night is not African American either // it is just goddamn dark.” Showcasing her subtle sensitivity (“reaching gently into the crevices”), Holiday’s voice thus lingers “in the background” as an omnipresent muse calling for the speaker’s and, by extension, readers’ and listeners’ individualized attention.

Nevertheless, as the poem progresses, the speaker remains unable to fully separate Holiday’s emotive delivery from the historical injustices with which he has always associated it, suggesting the difficulty of conceiving of Holiday’s musical legacy without considering her marginalized social position:

and I know he’s right, Terrance is right, it’s

so obvious.

But here in the past of that future,

Billie Holiday is still singing

a song so dark and slow

it seems bigger than her, it sounds very heavy

like a terrible stain soaked into the sheets,

so deep that nothing will ever get it out,

but she keeps trying.
she keeps pushing the dark syllables under the water
then pulling them up to see if they are clean
but they never are
and it makes her sad
and we are too

and it’s dark around the car and inside also is very
dark.
Terrance and I can barely see each other
in the dashboard glow.
I can only imagine him right now
pointing at the radio
as if to say, Shut up and listen. (34-54)

The speaker recognizes that “Terrance is right” and that he should appreciate Holiday’s music without imagining her as a symbol for the “black soul” and the long and troubled history of race and gender oppression, but he continues to hear this suffering as he listens.

The title then exemplifies this tension by highlighting the “mistake” in conceiving of Holiday as a “cosmic washerwoman,” a label that suggests both her stature as a transcendent (“cosmic”) muse and her role in exposing and resisting racial injustice, metaphorically cleansing and rinsing out America’s dirty laundry. In the context of labor history, this “washerwoman” profession is particularly apt, since scores of African-American women were employed as domestic servants in which they were charged with cleaning the laundry of wealthy white Americans; as previously mentioned, Holiday
herself worked as a maid prior to breaking into the music business. Accordingly, Hoagland’s speaker imagines Holiday not as an artist but as a working-class African-American woman whose music testifies to the consequences (the “terrible stain”) of America’s racial caste system. Thus, though “it’s / so obvious” that the speaker should appreciate Holiday’s music as a distinct artistic expression, Hoagland exposes the struggle with separating the discrimination she endured from what the speaker hears. While he has been warned by Terrance not to view her as emblematic of African-American authenticity (“a symbol for the black soul”), he nevertheless interprets her music as testimony of her struggles as a woman burdened by institutional oppression: “it makes her sad / and we are too.”

Grappling with Holiday’s symbolic meaning(s) on the page, Hoagland does not resolve the concerns he raises as much as he draws attention to contemporary efforts to honor famous individuals without relying on essentialized notions of race and gender. On the other hand, Hoagland’s speaker’s preoccupation with the oppressive history that Holiday’s songs call to mind affirms that, as Ammons put it earlier, “we do not live in a postrace world—or a postgender, postnational, postcolonial, postheterosexual one either” (79). As his allusion to his own conversations with Hayes implies, Hoagland positions Holiday and her music as catalysts for these cross-cultural dialogues about race, gender, and fame. In so doing, Hoagland enacts what David Román describes as the sociopolitical potential of artistic performance to “rehearse key questions or our time” and “allow us to renegotiate the way these questions are conceived of in the first place” (4). The poem does not offer an antidote for the speaker’s internal struggle between

108 In her autobiography Lady Sings the Blues, Holiday recalls beginning work at sixteen: “minding babies, running errands, and scrubbing those damn white steps all over Baltimore” (9). She further recalls, “When I went into the scrubbing business it was the end of roller skating, bike riding, and boxing, too” (10).
Terrance’s admonishment about racially essentialist thinking and the speaker’s tendency to view Holiday through a racialized lens, nor does the anxiety about these tendencies disappear, as is clear by the speaker’s assumption that Terrance is thinking “Shut up and listen” even as the poem ends. Yet, gesturing toward O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died,” Wright’s “The Secret Life of Musical Instruments,” and Mullen’s *Muse & Drudge*, Hoagland does identify Holiday’s musical performance as the vehicle through which these sociocultural issues are negotiated. As a result, he encourages readers to investigate their own reliance on stereotypes via the dialogue that he stages, perhaps imagining a future in which Holiday’s experiences with discrimination are not forgotten, but her recordings are appreciated as consciously crafted works of art, rather than natural expressions of black suffering.

**Post-Soul Blues Tributes**

In varied ways, Terrance Hayes, Kevin Young, Evie Shockley, Tyehimba Jess, and Fred Moten complement Feinstein and Hoagland in reimagining the legacies of this study’s icons to account for their individuality and complexity on the one hand and the oppressive social schemas that they endured on the other. Moreover, many of the poets that follow highlight, in Baty’s words, the “iconic rememberings” that preceded theirs and self-reflexively acknowledge their participation in shaping cultural understandings of blues men and women. These similarities notwithstanding, the tributes that the next section takes up exemplify the nuanced blues poetry of the post-soul generation, which Mark Anthony Neal describes as
children of soul, if you will, who came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to de-industrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past . . . but firmly in grasp of the existential concerns of this brave new world. At the core of this indulgence is a radical reimagining of the contemporary African-American experience, attempting to liberate contemporary interpretations of that experience from sensibilities that were formalized and institutionalized during earlier social paradigms. (3)

There are, of course, other labels—“the hip hop generation,” “post-black culture,” “the new black aesthetic,” and “NewBlack,” to name a few⁴—that have been employed to describe this generation of African-American writers born during or after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.¹⁰⁹ In terms of the blues tributes considered here, however, the post-soul label and what Bertrand Ashe posits as the “post-soul matrix” provides the most compelling framework for distinguishing the work of this generation of African-American poets from previous ones. Ashe’s “matrix” sets out the following criteria for a writer “to be credibly seen as post-soul”: “the cultural mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness; and, lastly, the signal allusion-disruption gestures” (613).

Accordingly, Hayes, Young, Shockley, Jess, and Moten often foreground multicultural influences and, alluding to and departing from their predecessors, they strive to fill in the gaps and silences effaced by cultural nationalist narratives of the past. At the same time

¹⁰⁹ See the Introduction to Daniel Grassian’s Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip Hop Generation and “These-Are-the-Breaks: A Roundtable Discussion on Teaching the Post-Soul Aesthetic,” a discussion led by Bertram Ashe, for explanations of these terms and their usage. Ashe’s “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction” also provides a comprehensive overview of the characteristics of post-soul literature (both in African American Review 41.4).
that they resist essentialist discourses of race, these poets remain deeply rooted in
African-American cultural and literary traditions. They gesture toward recognizable blues
tropes—repetition, “worrying the line,” and double entendre, for example—and, perhaps
most importantly, they keep the defiant “laughing to keep from crying” ethos of the blues
alive in the minds and ears of twenty-first century audiences. Thus, the poets that follow
perform similar cultural work to Hoagland, Feinstein, and McElroy, but they also
elucidate the distinct formal and thematic strategies of a new generation of African-
American blues poets, providing a glimpse of the modes of representation that tribute
poets will take up in the decades ahead.

“the lady unpetals her song”

In a recent interview, Terrance Hayes said of his approach to poetry, “I’d like to
think of myself simply as an apprentice to history, the history of poetry, of Black folk. I
walk in the footsteps of public and personal history” (1081), and his “Lady Sings the
Blues” reflects this interest in representing Holiday through both personal and collective
memories. Providing a counternarrative to sensationalized and commodified accounts of
Holiday’s life and art, Hayes draws attention to Holiday’s glamorous stage persona, her
humanity as an individual, and the emotive poignancy of her music. Indeed, the poem
begins with Holiday’s trademark gardenia as a synecdoche for the radiant beauty she
projected onstage and the sensitivity and delicacy of her vocal delivery:

Satin luscious, amber Beauty center-stage;
gardenia in her hair. If flowers could sing
they’d sound like this. That legendary scene:
the lady unpetals her song, the only light

in a room of smoke, nightclub tinkering

with lovers in the dark, cigarette flares,

gin & tonic. This is where heartache

blooms. Forget the holes

zippered along her arms. Forget the booze.

Center-stage, satin-tongue dispels a note.

Amber amaryllis, blue chanteuse, Amen.

If flowers could sing they’d sound like this. (1-12)

Capturing the blues mood of Holiday’s vocal style, which was notable for her ability to
render melancholic lyrics with subtlety and often buoyancy that transcended the subjects
of which she typically sang, Hayes suffuses these lines with images of inviting colors
(“Amber amaryllis, blue chanteuse”) and textures (“Satin luscious” and “satin-tongue”) that keep the despair of “the holes” and “the booze” at bay. Moreover, he suggests that she enthralled her audiences in a blues-infused world where “heartache / blooms” but is confronted and overcome, at least through the ephemeral span of a song.

Hayes’s description of the stage specifically recalls her performances of the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit” at Café Society in 1939 where, as David Margolick describes, “all service stopped. Waiters, cashiers, busboys were immobilized. The room went completely dark, save for a pin spot on Holiday’s face” (33). Similarly, Hayes
describes “the legendary scene” in which Holiday is “the only light / in a room of smoke” and, as with many of his predecessors, poetically enacts Holiday’s captivating performance. Yet, whereas O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” imagines Holiday late in her career as a romantically tragic “whispered” voice and Hughes’s “Song for Billie Holiday” interprets her music as a personal lament that is “dusted with despair,” Hayes resurrects Holiday as a glamorous star who performed a carefully constructed and empowered image (“Beauty center-stage / Gardenia in her hair”). As he underscores the distinction between the transcendent Lady Day she played onstage and her personal struggles off of it (5), Hayes echoes his feminist predecessors—Jackson, Dove, and Mullen, for example—in calling attention to Holiday’s complexity as an artist and individual.

The poem’s next section exposes the ways in which her battles with drug addiction and dysfunctional relationships have been turned into melodrama, beginning with her ghost-written autobiography Lady Sings the Blues and continuing with the 1972 biopic that bears the same title:

This should be Harlem, but it’s not.

It’s Diana Ross with no Supremes.

Fox Theater, Nineteen-Seventy-something.

Ma and me; lovers crowded in the dark.

The only light breaks on the movie-screen.

I’m a boy, but old enough to know Heartache.

We watch her rise and wither
like a burnt-out cliché. You know the story:


In the asylum scene, the actress’s eyes
are bruised; latticed with blood, but not quite sad
enough. She’s the star so her beauty persists.

Not like Billie: fucked-up satin, hair museless,
heart ruined by the end. (13-26)

Hayes critiques this Hollywood film’s portrait of a weak and disempowered Holiday ("bruised; latticed with blood") for exoticizing and trivializing her suffering. Through the poem, however, Hayes mourns the painful and permanent consequences of her actual hardships: the deterioration of the beautiful stage persona ("fucked-up satin, hair museless") that has inspired so many poets to invoke her as muse, as well as the physical damage to her well-being ("heart ruined") that led to her untimely death.

In the third and final part of the poem, Hayes transitions into a personal reflection and affirms that, despite this commodification of her persona, Holiday’s music and the blues ethos that she imparts still emotionally resonate with her fans:

The houselights wake and nobody’s blue but Ma.

*Billie didn’t sound like that,* she says.

as we walk hand in hand to the street.

Nineteen Seventy-something.

My lady hums, *Good Morning Heartache,*
My father’s in a distant place. (27-32)

The visceral connection to Holiday’s sound felt by the speaker’s mother (*Billie didn’t sound like that*, she says”) resonates with the opening section and the captivating performance that Hayes dramatizes, thereby recuperating Holiday’s artistic legacy so that she is memorialized not as a “Brutal lush. Jail-bird. Scag queen” but as a woman who delicately “unpetals her song.” Concluding the poem with an allusion to “Good Morning Heartache”—“Might as well get used to you hanging around / Good morning heartache / Sit down”—a song that I would argue Ross is unable to do justice to in the film but that Holiday renders movingly, Hayes concludes by praising the emotive and resilient spirit of Holiday’s music.

As Rowan Ricardo Phillips, another contemporary African-American poet, puts it, “The blues does not suggest cures; the blues is its own cure” (101). Just as Holiday’s blues style facilitates catharsis, Hayes’s poem bears witness to historical (“Strange Fruit”’s condemnation of lynching) and familial struggles (“My father’s in a distant place”) and utilizes the medium of the poem to confront and negotiate them. In the process, Hayes alludes to and disrupts one-dimensional portraits of Holiday and illuminates instead the multiple facets of her legacy, structurally instantiating this complexity through the poem’s three sections. As we observed in Hoagland’s poem, Hayes’s attention to the public versus the private and the historical versus the symbolic Holiday has similarly inspired other poets to reflect on how we know what we know about Holiday—a task that both of their tributes pass on to us as readers.

*“you can say that again, billie”*
Advancing a more formally experimental Holiday tribute than her colleagues, Evie Shockley’s “you can say that again, billie” (2006) joins Hayes and many of this chapter’s other poets in reimagining Holiday as a socio-politically engaged performer and not the iconic symbol of tragedy that she is often “remembered” as. For instance, through her repeated allusions to William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*, Shockley emphasizes Holiday’s equal significance as a seminal American artist whose performances of “Strange Fruit,” which began at Café Society in 1939, poignantly protested the racially-motivated tragedies that *Absalom, Absalom* shed light on only three years prior:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{**southern**} & \quad \text{women serve strife} & \quad \text{keep lines of pride open} \\
\text{**trees**} & \quad \text{are not taller than broad vessels} & \quad \text{femmes who} \\
\text{**bear**} & \quad \text{fully armored knights} & \quad \text{clinking from the womb} & \quad \text{but} \\
\text{**a night in whining ardor**} & \quad \text{means black women compelled} & \quad \text{how} \\
\text{**strange**} & \quad \text{brown vessel on a bed of greed needles} & \quad \text{ingests the} \\
\text{**fruit of georgia**} & \quad \text{let that gestate} & \quad \text{but be-gets no child of the} \\
\text{**south**} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{**blood**} & \quad \text{tells the story} & \quad \text{will you salute old gory} & \quad \text{were you born} \\
\text{**on**} & \quad \text{a white horse or a black ass} & \quad \text{everything depends upon} \\
\text{**the way your rusty lifeflow writes**} & \quad \text{sutpenmanship} & \quad \text{if it} \\
\text{**leaves**} & \quad \text{blond scribbled across your scalp} & \quad \text{hurray} \\
\text{**and blue inscribed in your eyes**} & \quad \text{praise the cause} & \quad \text{your literary} \\
\text{**blood**} & \quad \text{wins the gene pool} & \quad \text{it’s a prize} & \quad \text{hide your mama baby} \\
\text{**at worst you’re a breast-seller**} & \quad \text{compelling octorune} & \quad \text{but}
\end{align*}
\]
the best cellars are dark and earthy humid places where fears take root and grow up to be cowboys yee haw!

In this highly allusive tribute, the first two lines of “Strange Fruit” frame the italicized left margin and anchor the poem in Holiday’s rendition of the song, while the lines that follow riff on passages from *Absalom, Absalom*, the first line of William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” (“so much depends upon” becomes “everything depends upon”), and numerous other phrases from popular culture, suggesting the ways in which these varied “high” and “low” cultural fragments reflect and inform America’s long and troubled history of racial taxonomies and violence.

Central to the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom*, for instance, is miscegenation in the antebellum South and the anxieties that arose as a result of the challenge that biracial children posed to America’s strictly enforced racial hierarchies. In the novel, Thomas Sutpen, a plantation owner who desires wealth and stature, abandons his “octorune” wife and their child, Charles Bon, when he learns of his wife’s racially-mixed heritage and later marries and fathers two children by the Southern belle Judith. While Judith’s son, Henry Sutpen, becomes heir to his father’s vast plantation (Sutpen’s Hundred), Sutpen rejects Charles, who is eventually shot dead by Henry because of his African blood—as Shockley puts it, the “brown vassal” “be-gets no child of the south.” Accordingly, the final lines of the poem “where fears take / root and grow up to be cowboys yee haw!” indicate that the imperialistic “cowboy” mentality that long justified the persecution of non-whites is “rooted” in the fervent desire to defend the supposed superiority of Anglo-Saxon bloodlines, which are of course constantly threatened by widespread miscegenation and bi-racial offspring (“hide your mama baby”).
Moreover, Shockley links Holiday’s and Faulkner’s radically different experiences with fame to this same racial caste system. Whereas Faulkner’s “literary / blood wins the gene pool” and, therefore, the Nobel Prize in Literature (“it’s a prize”), Holiday has typically been perceived not as an artist but as “the tragic, ever-suffering black woman singer who simply stands center stage and naturally sings of her woes” (Griffin If You Can’t Be Free 31). Subverting the race and gender barriers that historically excluded Holiday and other African-American women from the esteemed canonical stature of white men like Faulkner and Williams, Shockley implies that Holiday’s performances of “Strange Fruit” were (and still are) equally vital to grappling with racial violence and injustice as acclaimed texts such as Absalom, Absalom.

Importantly, Holiday’s relationship to the racialized familial tragedies that this novel narrativizes is not limited to her incorporation of “Strange Fruit” into her repertoire. Beyond the discrimination she routinely experienced as a African-American woman in a pre-Civil Rights/Black Power era, Holiday’s father died because he could not receive medical treatment from a white hospital while on tour in Texas, and she claimed in Lady Sings the Blues that “Strange Fruit” resonated with her because, “It seemed to spell out all of the things that had killed Pop” (84). Holiday also asserted that the pervasive raping of African-American women by white male slave owners which Shockley exposes—“brown vassal on a bed of greed needles ingests the / fruit of Georgia”—was part of her own family history, explaining that her maternal grandfather “was half Irish and named after his father, Charles Fagan, who was straight from Ireland” (8). She further recalled that Charles’s mother
had been a slave on a big plantation in Virginia and she used to tell me about it. She had her own little house in the back of the plantation. Mr. Charles Fagan, the handsome Irish plantation owner, had his white wife and children in the big house. And he had my great-grandmother out in the back. She had sixteen children by him, and all of them dead by then except Grandpop. (8)

As with much of the family history included in Lady Sings the Blues, this story is not entirely accurate. Stuart Nicholson points out that Holiday’s great-grandmother, Rebecca Fagan, was only thirteen when slavery was abolished and, therefore, “was hardly in a position to have mothered some sixteen children during her enslavement” (22).

Regardless of the historical veracity, it is clear that Holiday considered this narrative to be an important part of her family lore and her personal understanding of the painful contradictions and consequences of slavery. Evoking the history of white slave owners raping their black women slaves (“black women compelled”), Shockley likewise suggests the significance of this part of Holiday’s autobiography for reconstructing her legacy so that she is recognized not as a passive victim but as an astute critic of racial hypocrisy and injustice. Indeed, Holiday undoubtedly brought all this knowledge of racially-motivated tragedies—her father’s death, the lynching of thousands of innocent black men and women, and the story of her grandmother’s sixteen biracial children—to bear on her renditions of “Strange Fruit”; in turn, Shockley’s tribute urges readers to listen to Holiday’s vocal protest and to engage in the painful but necessary reckoning with America’s past that she facilitates.
As such, Shockley joins her post-soul peers in revising Holiday’s legacy so that she emerges as a socially-conscious artist whose cultural achievements are celebrated alongside canonical novelists such as Faulkner. Although Shockley maintains that she is “fairly suspicious of the ‘post’” (“These Are the Breaks” 789) in post-soul, her tribute to Holiday reflects both the multicultural influences and the nuanced approach to the past that have become hallmarks of post-soul literature. In *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012), Kevin Young writes, “The boundary between black influence and American culture was thin at best—and imposed and segregated at worst. Post-soul as a term describes these new cultural forms, applying as well the range of responses to that change and conducting a remapping that is part of the storied African American tradition” (282). Correspondingly, Shockley exemplifies what Ashe described as the “cultural mulatto,” as she eschews the socially-constructed boundaries that have historically separated Holiday’s performances of “Strange Fruit” from what was considered the “high” artistic production of white men such as Faulkner and Williams. Of course, Holiday did not compose “Strange Fruit”—Abel Meeropol (written under the pseudonym Lewis Allen), a Jewish schoolteacher and amateur composer did—but her haunting rendition of the song certainly made it famous. Therefore, the song itself reflects the collaboration of artists from distinct backgrounds working toward the common purpose of ending lynching. Likewise, staging a dialogue between Holiday and Faulkner (among others), Shockley emphasizes the importance of viewing Holiday and, more broadly, American history through a multicultural lens that is not predicated on a cultural nationalist or racially essentialist paradigm that would categorically segregate these black and white artists.
Appropriating and reconfiguring the lyrics to “Strange Fruit,” Shockley also follows Mullen’s example, as she “sing[s] it in my voice / put words in like I want them” (Recyclopedia 125). Shockley thus inserts herself into a long line of blues men and women who, as Davis noted previously, considered their songs to be the “collective property of the black community.” “A blues sung by one person,” Davis continues, “and heard, remembered, revised, and resung by another belonged as much to the second performer as to the first” (136). Although “Strange Fruit” is not a blues song, Holiday imbued all of her songs with a blues spirit, as I have observed throughout this study. Self-reflexively drawing attention to the reconstructed phrases from this song and Faulkner’s novel, Shockley participates in this blues tradition, and, as the title’s call-and-response mode suggests, she echoes Holiday’s message of protest—in a sense, singing “Strange Fruit” again for a new “post” audience who continues to expose and confront the injustices that this song laid bare.

“a series of riffs”

Much more expansive in scope, Young once described his 2005 collection To Repel Ghosts: The Remix as “a series of riffs of Basquiat’s work and of historical rifts that lead into lots of other places” (“Interview” 43). As with Jean-Michel Basquiat’s avant-garde paintings and the work of his post-soul peers, Young’s poetry references a diverse array of literary and cultural materials: the painter’s graffiti-style trademarks; ekphrasis; the Western epic; the elegy; African-American musical traditions including blues, jazz, and hip hop; and myriad other forms of popular culture. As he poetically explores the life and art of Basquiat, Young similarly represents the achievements and
struggles of many of the twentieth-century African-American athletes and musicians, including Holiday and Johnson, that Basquiat paid tribute to in his paintings. Young exposes the tension that these figures felt between their own personal and professional desires and the expectations of the American public that they abide by certain gendered and racialized codes of behavior. Not unlike Basquiat’s oeuvre, To Repel Ghosts is not so much about repelling these black celebrity ghosts as it is an effort to fill in the gaps and silences of their lives, highlighting their personal accomplishments and the commonalities that they share with Basquiat as African-American celebrities in a white-dominated society. Moreover, while Young’s poetry bears little resemblance to either Holiday’s or Johnson’s music, his homages continue to celebrate the blues as an essential vehicle for resisting Anglo-American hegemony.

In addition to his poetic representations of blues figures, Young is the editor of the Blues Poems (2003) and Jazz Poems (2006), anthologies with sections of poems dedicated to Smith and Holiday respectively: “Finale (for Bessie Smith) and “Muting (for Billie Holiday).” In fact, many of this study’s tributes appear in these volumes, particularly Blues Poems, which, though they do not have their own sections, also features tributes to Leadbelly, Johnson, and Rainey. As part of the Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets series, Blues Poems and Jazz Poems are accessible to a general readership that may have little prior knowledge of these icons’ biographies before reading the poems Young has selected, including his own “Stardust.” Thus, Young not only looks to Holiday and Johnson for poetic inspiration in To Repel Ghosts. As an editor who selects and omits the poetic portraits that appeal most to his own understanding of the blues and particular blues men and women, Young plays a key role in shaping their legacies for
twenty-first century audiences—a reality that is important to keep in mind when considering the broader impact of his poetic interventions.

In *The Grey Album*, Young distinguishes his interpretation of Holiday’s legacy from clichéd narratives: “I don’t mean to make Holiday emblematic of victimhood, or a martyr to a sacrificial god. Rather, victimhood is what Billie Holiday sang about, and against” (223). He also credits Holiday with “not just reworking or ‘recomposing’ a tune but also rewriting the notion of how we sing” (225). Young brings this interest in revising a well-worn tale of Holiday’s victimhood and/or martyrdom as well as his admiration for her musical virtuosity to bear on “Stardust” and offers a portrait of Holiday that, like Hayes, humanizes her personal struggles, including the race and gender discrimination that she endured, without detracting from her artistic accomplishments. In his painting “Discography (One),” which is a tribute to the famed alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, Basquiat indirectly refers to Holiday through the tune “Billie’s Bounce” that Parker recorded. Young’s “Stardust” moves beyond this casual reference and considers Holiday’s experiences in the limelight, particularly the ways she defied social expectations for black women both through her artistic choices and her subversive lifestyle.

Beginning the poem with the lines “Lady sings / the blues / the reds, whatever” (1-3), Young, to use Baty’s term, “remembers” conflicting aspects of her public narrative. He refers to her moniker Lady Day, the title song from Holiday’s 1956 album, her autobiography *Lady Sing the Blues*, and the aforementioned 1972 biopic starring Diana Ross. At the same time, “the reds, whatever” references her well-known drug use, implying that she indiscriminately consumed “whatever” drugs were available to her.
This paradoxical portrait—an elegant star (the one and only “Lady Day”) and a desperate drug addict—continue throughout the poem, reflecting the opposing themes of transcendence and debasement that have characterized Holiday’s posthumous fame:

God bless
the child
that’s got his own

& won’t mind
sharing some—
“BILLIE’S BOUNCE”

“BILLIE’S BOUNCE”
Miss Holiday’s up
on four counts

of possession, three—
fifths, the law
—locked up—

licked—the salt
the boot—refused
a chance to belt
tunes in the clubs. (7-22)

Young recalls Holiday’s famous “God Bless the Child,” a song that Holiday co-wrote, and simultaneously affirms and undercuts the song’s message of self-reliance—“Mama may have, papa may have / But God bless the child that’s got his own”—again by alluding to her dependence on narcotics. Moreover, just as Holiday and other blues musicians make use of double entendre and innuendo, Young’s punning enjambments require readers to keep multiple meanings in mind: on the one hand, Young portrays Holiday as an empowered woman who has fulfilled the American dream of bootstrap capitalism by being “the child / that’s got his own”; on the other hand, he implies that her achievements were undermined by both addiction and dependence on men in order to supply her with drugs (“& won’t mind / sharing some”). Although she reached celebrity status as the poem’s title suggests, she was still not financially secure (at least in part) due to her drug use. At the same time, Young’s allusions to Holiday’s imprisonment and the subsequent revocation of her cabaret card—the result of the long-term harassment by the police and FBI agents after she dared to make the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit” a part of her repertoire (Griffin If You Can’t Be Free 25)—also establish the link between these personal and financial struggles and her race and gender. Evoking the memory of slavery in the line “three—fifths, the law” (the same percentage used to account for African-American slaves in the U.S. Constitution), Young affirms that Holiday’s professional success (whether she was an addict or not) was consistently threatened by institutionalized racism.

However, through the poem’s metaphorical boxing bout, Young channels the blues ethos that Holiday’s songs convey by suggesting that, though she was “up / on four
counts” and “refused / a chance to belt,” she consistently defied the authorities’ attempts to prevent her from performing. In fact, in her autobiography Lady Sings the Blues, Holiday recalls, “I used to like boxing. In school they used to teach us girls to box. But I didn’t keep it up. Once a girl hit me on the nose and it just about finished me. I took my gloves off and beat the pants off of her. The gym teacher got so sore, I never went near the school gym again” (10). Obliquely referencing Holiday’s own recollection of both her love of boxing and her defiant attitude, Young’s boxing analogies emphasize Holiday’s strength as a formidable figure capable of holding her own despite her vulnerable social position as a black woman dependent on white men to sustain her career. In so doing, he alludes to and disrupts the narrative that Sanchez’s “for our lady” advances, which cites Holiday’s lack of a heterosexual relationship with “some blk / man” (14) as the source not only of her personal troubles but her lack of overtly political lyrics: “ain’t no tellen what / kinds of songs / u wud have swung” (5-7). Subverting this image of Holiday as the brokenhearted victim, Young honors her without fitting her into an essentialized narrative of heteronormative African-American womanhood.110

As the poem continues, Young draws attention to Holiday’s artistic talent not just as a singer but as an improver when he describes her comeback after she was released from her year-long imprisonment111:

WARMING UP
A RIFF—

---

110 See my discussion in chapter 2 of Sanchez’s “for our lady” and “liberation / poem” (1970), a poem that similarly characterizes Holiday as a symbol of passivity and despair.
111 Holiday spent one year and one day in Alderson Federal Prison from 1947-1948 as a result of a narcotics possession charge. Young identifies the year as 1945, but I speculate that he refers to the detoxification she underwent there and her subsequent return to the stage upon her release.
she’s all scat,
waxing—
SIDE A

SIDE B
OOH
SHOO DE

OBEE—
detoxed, thawed
in time

for Thanksgiving—live
as ammo, smoking
—NOV. 26 1945—

Day cold as turkey— (29-43)

Holiday did not scat like her hero Louis Armstrong or her contemporary Ella Fitzgerald, but Young employs these jazz vernacular expressions in order to highlight Holiday’s ability to improvise on standard tunes and, in the process, gain the agency and power that the oppressive forces beyond the stage sought to deny her. As O’Meally observes, “In art, she [Holiday] found the power to move the world” (21), and Young’s analogy “live / as ammo, / smoking” vivifies this emboldened portrait of Holiday. Comparing Holiday to a
turkey that has been “detoxed, thawed.” Young also suggests that Holiday was treated like a commodity who was put on display for the American public just “in time / for Thanksgiving.” In many ways, Holiday was dehumanized and recognized less as an artist than an object—in Cheng’s words, Holiday was “seen at once too much and not at all” (“Shine” 1023).

Yet, affirming the resilient outlook that underwrites the blues tradition, “Stardust” concludes triumphantly as Holiday publically defies the narrative of black female deviancy that the FBI and the majority of the Anglo-American public had created for her as she takes the stage sober (“cold as turkey”) and gives a “smoking” performance. Kimberly Benston writes of the “Coltrane Poem” as “that orphic-elegiac struggle to articulate the inchoate pulse of agony, (re)forming it in a gesture that is not merely mournful but defiant” (146). Young similarly pays tribute to Holiday in a way that celebrates (rather than mourns) her as dynamic and multifarious: she is at once an inspiring artist, a drug addict, a victim of racial harassment and persecution, and an embodiment of African-American women’s empowerment. Thus, as with his post-soul counterparts, Young refuses to reduce Holiday to a symbol of tragedy, while he maintains the importance of bearing in mind the unrelenting racism and sexism that she implicitly (and at times explicitly) resisted every time she took the stage.

In “Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta” (2005), Young thematizes many of the same complexities in regard to Robert Johnson. Unlike Holiday, however, Johnson never achieved national fame during his lifetime. In fact, the term “undiscovered” implies that the paradoxes of African-American celebrity—specifically, between agency and objectification—were inverted for Johnson. He experienced routine
and systematic discrimination as a black man living in the Jim Crow South, but, because he did not achieve notoriety during his lifetime, he was liberated from the intense scrutiny and pressure of what John Yao describes as “the weight of being regarded as representative of an entire culture” (92). Also, as discussed in chapter 3, the many unknowns about Johnson’s biography have meant that rather fantastical mythologies, such as his supposed Faustian bargain, have dominated his posthumous legacy. Alluding to the capitalized phrases from Basquiat’s painting by the same title, Young refers to the man and the myth and, not unlike Gander’s “Life of Johnson Upside Your Head, a Libretto” (1993), recalls the many “iconic rememberings” of Johnson:

From Hazlehurst

Mississippi’s

Most Diversified County

From Hazlehurst

Center of Copiah

Down Hazelhurst way

He split like

a boll weevil

wanting no part of no

COTTON

ORIGIN OF
picking only
that guitar of his
cross every jook

in the Delta—
  music his alpha
& omega—his Satan—he slid easy

like the neck of a guitar

IV: THE DEEP

SOUTH 1912-1936-1951. (1-21)

Young identifies Johnson’s supposed birthdate and birthplace (Hazlehurst 1912) and the year that Johnson recorded his now legendary songs (1936), while he also represents Johnson as an iconic embodiment of the plight of African Americans living in the Jim Crow South to whom sharecropping “COTTON” was the only professional option made available. As William Barlow observes, “When Johnson composed his songs, the region was still a backward, almost feudal, agricultural stronghold dominated by a small group of wealthy white plantation owners and merchants. The black population continued to outnumber the white population by nearly four to one, and African Americans remained confined to the Delta’s lowest social stratum” (50). Just as Basquiat appreciated Johnson’s defiance of this social reality, Young honors Johnson for investing in the blues.
(“his alpha / & omega”) and an itinerant lifestyle that allowed for a freedom of movement that was otherwise impossible for black men at that time. Furthermore, because he was not “discovered”—in other words, he was not being managed by white men such as Holiday’s and Smith’s promoter John Hammond—Young implies that he escaped many of the perils of fame that this study’s other icons endured.

As the poem progresses, Young humorously celebrates Johnson’s liberated behavior regarding sex and companionship as he traveled the Delta busking and playing juke joints:

Find you the ugliest
    pug ugliest
    woman in town

Love her & she’ll
    treat you swell—
Awww wouldn’t we

have a time babe—
    He made a killin
    each town he played. (28-36)

........................................
then rambling on.

FIG. 23: cigarette low
from his lip—
Married secretly
& didn’t much care
whether a lady
be spoken for—
Even better
if she was— (46-54)

Perpetuating the legends of Johnson’s womanizing, Young again emphasizes the fact that, because Johnson was not “discovered,” he was not publically scorned or harassed (as Holiday was for her narcotics addiction) for violating social mores such as the sanctity of marriage. On the other hand, Young implies that Johnson’s relative obscurity during his lifetime has meant that, regrettably, many of the details about this now iconic blues man have been all but lost to recorded history. Referencing the photograph of Johnson (one of only three known to exist) with his cigarette dangling “from his lip” and the phrase “FIG 23,” which also appears in Basquiat’s painting above a sketch of Johnson’s face, Young indicates his desire to instantiate the legendary Johnson with a corporeal, rather than a mythic, presence. Yet, like Sterling Plumpp before him, Young is ultimately unable to resurrect the historical Johnson, and he continues the tradition of referencing Johnson’s supposed Faustian bargain as a means of narrativizing the musician’s life: “He wed the underworld” and, referring specifically to

---

112 Ted Gioia notes that “Researchers have followed Johnson’s trail as much through his girlfriends as by his music” and that “Johnson developed the habit of identifying a specific woman in the audience, and directing his songs at her—a method that, for all its merits in romantic conquests, contributed to Johnson’s untimely death at the hands of a jealous husband” (175).
images from “Hellhound on My Trail,” “Hear them dogs closing like a train” (75) and “Hellhounds—heels” (97).

In fact, Young suggests that the difficulty of representing Johnson stems from the lack of concern that the dominant society paid to poor black men like Johnson whose birth, marriage, and death records have been so difficult to locate and authenticate precisely because he was considered irrelevant by the white power structure. Again, he was an “undiscovered genius,” whereas the “discoveries” of other blues men and women meant that they were expected to become spokespersons for the entire black community. Mobilizing the capitalized words that stretch across Basquiat’s painting—“MISSISSIPPI MISSISSIPPI / SLAVE SHIP” (93-94)—Young constructs Johnson as a symbol of America’s racist past, implying that Johnson’s legacy is inextricably bound up in a larger history of America’s race taxonomies and unjust social schemas. He then concludes the poem by reiterating the symbolic parallels that Basquiat draws between Johnson and Mark Twain:

before the blues caught

up & hounded him

MARK TWAIN

MARK TWAIN

MARK TWAIN

TWAIN

out his cotton pickin mind. (140-146)
Just as Twain’s fiction continuously returns to the moral indignities of slavery, Young limns Johnson as an embodiment of America’s history of racial injustice and strife that is both personal to Johnson’s experiences and emblematic of broader sociopolitical and economic inequities. Therefore, “Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta” continues in the tradition of Young’s predecessors in striving to honor Johnson as an artist and individual while also imbuing him with symbolic values that attenuate these efforts. As Patricia R. Schroeder observes, “The truth about Robert Johnson hardly matters. We invest the images of and stories about Johnson with our own values, leaving Johnson as another ‘evanescent presence’. . . drained of his own history as he comes to signify something about ours” (13). Accordingly, “Undiscovered” speaks more to twenty-first century concerns with addressing and reconciling America’s long history of racial oppression than to Johnson’s own identity. As such, Young renders Johnson, much as he is within the culture at large, symbolically profound but personally elusive.

“between king kong and tarzan”

Published the same year as To Repel Ghosts, Tyehimba Jess’s book-length leadbelly (2005) similarly reshares Leadbelly’s posthumous legacy to account for his paradoxical experiences with fame. More comprehensive in scope, however, Jess thematizes events in Leadbelly’s life beginning with the musician’s childhood along the Louisiana-Texas border, moving to his years in Angola and Sugarland prisons, his

---

113 In addition to his essays and short stories, in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Pudd’nhead Wilson Twain grapples with the injustices of slavery and, later, Jim Crow. As Forrest G. Robinson recently pointed out, Twain “could not conceive a narrative that led to a just and peaceful resolution of the deeply conflicted history of racial oppression to which he felt himself a guilty party. The accusing truth of the past was invariably proof against his bad faith impulse to deny it in fiction. It was thus a story he returned to compulsively precisely because it was a story he could not complete” (10).
contentious relationship with his promoter, the ethnomusicologist, John Lomax, his final years in New York City, and concludes with his death and the elegiac poem “leadbelly: christened.” Jess’s formally innovative series of homages incorporate numerous voices—including those of Leadbelly’s parents, his wives, his guitar, his bluesmen colleagues, and John Lomax—and include both historical documents and imagined testimony. Through this polyvocal approach, Jess alludes to and disrupts Amiri Baraka’s and Jayne Cortez’s representations of Leadbelly as a proto-black nationalist and represents him as a complex man who viewed playing the blues as an opportunity to escape the limited opportunities he was afforded as a black man in the Jim Crow South.

In a recent interview, Jess explained his objectives for leadbelly: “I wanted to explore the way Leadbelly treads the line with his music between several different functionalities: first, minstrelsy, or performing his art in order to accommodate the expectations and stereotypes of white folks; second, the performance of his art form as a true expression of the self; and third, the performance of his art as a tool that would feed, clothe, and set him free” (“Writing Double Jointed” 16). He brings all of these intentions to bear in “leadbelly’s role: March of Time Newsreel No. 2, 1935,” a poem that voices Leadbelly’s perspective on the infamous newsreel that initially marred his reputation among African Americans, many of whom labeled Leadbelly an Uncle Tom after seeing his subservient attitude toward Lomax portrayed in this film.114 Specifically, Jess characterizes Leadbelly’s begrudging complicity in performing what he knew to be demeaning stereotype in order to gain the white audience that he needed to make a living as a professional musician:

114 See chapter 2 for a discussion of the reasons why Leadbelly struggled to gain respect and admiration from black audiences during his lifetime, and chapter 24 of Wolfe and Lornell’s The Life and Legend of Leadbelly (1992) for further elaboration on this aspect of Leadbelly’s legacy.
ANNOUNCER: To the Louisiana State Penitentiary goes John A. Lomax, 

LOMAX: Just one more, Leadbelly! (Leadbelly plays a tune in his cell)

LEAD: Thank you, sir, boss. I sure hope you send Gov. O.K. Allen
a record of that song that I made about him, 'cause I believe he’ll turn me loose!

in this movie i play the minstrel,
the shadowbox shuffle on the silver screen
shining between king kong and tarzan.
i play myself. jailtime, crimes, 49 years,
and brown’s bad luck make a monster
of mangled-up dream, a demon that throws
its rusty leg ‘cross my back, hooks its fingers
in the crooks of my jaw, riding me into this grin
that i ride into the scalding camera light,
ghostin’ myself through the window
of a black and white picture factory,
a house of reeling shadow that stares me dead
in the face, the light burning me into fame,
shadow folding me into memory. (70)

Revising this simplistic film’s narrative of Leadbelly’s subservience to Lomax, Jess sheds
light on both the psychological and physical compromises that Leadbelly was forced to
make as he enacted the role of the primitive and potentially dangerous “monster.” As
noted in the Introduction, “At the same time that the Lomaxes promoted Leadbelly as the voice of the people, they focused on his convict past and depicted him as a savage, untamed animal” (Filene 610). Dramatizing this depiction on the page, Jess draws attention to the ways that Lomax used Leadbelly as his minstrel “shadow” in order to aggrandize himself as the wise and benevolent discoverer of folk and blues music. Simultaneously, he emphasizes Leadbelly’s awareness and frustration with his role as the primitive savage (“between king kong and tarzan”), thereby constructing Leadbelly as an active agent whose complicity was not based on ignorance but on a need to survive financially as a working-class African American who was doubly hindered by his status as an ex-convict.

In the poem that follows, “leadbelly: mythology,” Jess echoes Hoagland and Young in addressing the difficulty in appreciating Leadbelly the historical individual without considering the mythologies that have shaped his legacy. In particular, Jess illuminates the vested interests that authorities within the white power structure had in shaping the narrative of Leadbelly’s life and art to support their own agendas:

This man has been the recipient of wide publicity in various magazines of international circulation, the story usually being that he sang or wrote such moving appeals to the Governor that he was pardoned.

Such statements have no basis in fact.

He received no clemency,

and his discharge was a routine matter

under the

good time

273
law

which applies to all first and second offenders.

L. A. Jones, Warden, Angola Prison. (72)

Striking through these phrases, Jess highlights the ways in which the written word functions to both validate and invalidate the “facts” of Leadbelly’s and, by extension, all icons’ lives. In so doing, he stages the historical reshaping of Leadbelly’s mythology to reinforce dominant power structures—what Jess describes as “the way history is deleted or distorted to create myth” (“Writing Double Jointed” 17). He also demonstrates the importance of mythology as a tool to construct a larger-than-life image of Leadbelly, which Lomax and the national media propagated, and the resistance to this narrative by authorities, such as L. A. Jones, who were fearful of the implications of such legends.

In The Life and Legend of Leadbelly (a text that Jess cites in his “References”), Wolfe and Lornell indicate that Jones’s version of events is probably accurate; in other words, Leadbelly was not released solely because he composed a song for, in this case, Louisiana Governor O. K. Allen.115 Yet, Jess makes it clear that this legendary story was not meant to set the record straight or to benefit the musician but to advance the personal and often financial agendas of white institutions and individuals. For instance, both Lomax and white journalists were invested in promulgating the story of Leadbelly as an entertainer capable of singing his way to a pardon because it reinforced familiar images

115 Wolfe and Lornell point out that Gov. Pat Neff did pardon Leadbelly from the Texas prison Sugarland, but he did so a year after hearing the song when Leadbelly’s minimum sentence had almost been met (87). When Leadbelly was again imprisoned in Angola Prison in the 1930s, a similar scenario occurred. Again, Leadbelly pled his case to Gov. O. K. Allen in a song he wrote, and again he was eventually released. As the legend goes, John Lomax actually delivered the song to the Governor and pled Leadbelly’s case for him; however, according to prison records, Leadbelly was released in 1934 because of what was called a “double good time” provision that did not involve Lomax’s intervention on his behalf (120).
of black male minstrelsy, which allayed deep-seated fears about black virility\textsuperscript{116} and gave Leadbelly the notoriety that was necessary to increase Lomax’s profit margins. Further evidence of these insidious intentions appear in another poem in the collection, which quotes a 1937 \textit{Life} magazine headline that declares “Lead Belly: Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel” (83). At the same time, L. A. Jones was invested in ensuring that this same white majority as well as other black prisoners did not believe that Angola prison was unduly lax, which may have indicated a relaxing of the stiff sentences handed down to black men in the Jim Crow justice system.

Notably, Leadbelly is not cited either as spreading these myths or as correcting them, suggesting his lack of agency in controlling his own public narrative. Illuminating the social function of mythology and its distance from the historical subject (Leadbelly himself), Jess similarly implies his poetry’s own part in this process as he crosses out and, thus, reshapes the legacy of Leadbelly’s life and art to reflect his own twenty-first-century perspective. Yet, Schroeder observes that, if a “depiction of history also shows how the myth came to be constructed . . . an avenue opens up for recovering a more historically based image, or at least an alternative myth” (82). Jess does just that—by foregrounding the process of constructing and deconstructing the myths surrounding Leadbelly, he both recuperates a more historically-specific Leadbelly and leaves open the possibility for alternative interpretations of his legacy.

\textsuperscript{116} Anglo-American fears about black masculinity became rampant during Reconstruction, and, in many ways, this continued well into the Civil Rights era. As Robyn Wiegman asserts, “The legal enfranchisement of the black male slave made more urgent the prevailing threat to white masculine supremacy always underlying images of African-American males” (13-14). Minstrelsy functioned to ameliorate these white anxieties, as Kevin Gaines points out in \textit{Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century} (1996). He writes that “minstrelsy has more to do with white fears—and desires—than it had to do with African Americans. Minstrel performance rituals, both in public and at home, freed whites to entertain otherwise forbidden and dangerous ideas about sexuality, assuaged their guilt, and enabled them to maintain a sense of morality and racial superiority” (67).
In the subsequent series of “lomax v. leadbelly” poems, Jess more directly confronts the complicated relationship between these men by juxtaposing their perspectives in what he terms “double-jointed” poems that “give the idea of a struggle within the text—a struggle that may seem disjointed, but ends up being unified, double-jointed when seen as a whole” (“Writing Double Jointed” 17). In fact, these poems reflect Jess’s interest in mobilizing multiple viewpoints and approaching the past through a multicultural lens that allows him to reimagine Leadbelly’s life and art without relying on racially essentialist narratives. Exploring Lomax and Leadbelly’s contentious partnership, Jess thus allows for a reconsideration of both men’s legacies that more fully accounts for their reluctant dependence on one another for economic and professional success. For example, in “leadbelly v. lomax at the modern language association conference, 1934,” he formally enacts these complexities through two columns of text that can be read as either dueling monologues or a dialogue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a costume</th>
<th>an outfit.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dark overalls,</td>
<td>new blue jeans,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hankerchief,</td>
<td>clean head wrap,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and ugly-ass shitkickers</td>
<td>some simple, sturdy shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clutched like gifts in his outstretched hands</td>
<td>are a proper field hand’s uniform,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chase the stick of mule dirt back</td>
<td>down-on-the-farm-familiar:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>into my head. now he wants me</td>
<td>dressing down—it raises gods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to wrap my music in a brown bag of coon blues,</td>
<td>dark enough to capture the authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bringing southland to a crowd that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

276
says I need the genuine look of a farm boy says they want to hear how it sounds for a black
to sow blues’ dirty fingers between their ears to scrape heaven’s dusty starlight out of hell. (88)

Subverting the linguistic hierarchy that would mark Leadbelly’s non-standard English as a sign of ignorance, Jess characterizes Leadbelly as formally uneducated but nevertheless an analytical and self-aware artist who deeply resents having to play the role of a “farm boy” in order to prove his authenticity (“what folks ’spect to see” in a blues man). As Howard Rambsy II astutely observes, “Jess’s double-jointed poems echo and dramatize W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of double-consciousness in a visual manner” (562), and this poem in particular highlights Leadbelly’s awareness that the white audience, in DuBois’s words, “looks on in amused contempt and pity” (12). Again elucidating Leadbelly’s frustration with the exploitative system that he participates in, Jess suggests that out of necessity Leadbelly capitulates to the carefully constructed image and narrative—a performance of “southland” and “authentic blues”—that Lomax designs to meet the expectations of this elite white audience at the MLA Conference.

As the poem concludes, Jess further evinces Leadbelly’s bitterness toward Lomax but also both men’s recognition that America’s racial hierarchies had, in essence, predetermined this outcome as well as their imbalanced partnership:

let’s face it
   i’m parole on parade, I’m an ex-con’s keeper,
   wanted poster on a short leash, something I can’t much forget
   bidding time beneath the law in this prison choked country—

277
of a master I chose myself. I cannot absolve this man of
that faded rucksack of yassuh his greatest crime—the crime of race—
growing one load heavier binding us all to blood,
with each slow grin cutting through skin,
stitched across my lips burning through history. (88)

Read as a monologue or a dialogue, these final stanzas characterize Leadbelly and, in many ways, Lomax as reluctant participants in the master-slave dynamic that the racial caste system prescribed. Jess does not exonerate Lomax for his exploitative role nor does he apotheosize Leadbelly; instead, he represents Leadbelly and Lomax in their historical moment and testifies to the myriad sociocultural forces of oppression that Leadbelly endured and the compromises he made in order to avoid being quite literally imprisoned by them.

While Jess joins his predecessors—Baraka, Cortez, Cornelius Eady, and Al Young, for instance—in praising Leadbelly as a symbol of African-American opposition to Anglo-American hegemony, the poems in leadbelly reflect a post-soul resistance to the cultural nationalist, often hagiographic impulses that characterize their tributes. Jess insists that truly honoring Leadbelly means confronting all of the aspects of his legacy, including the minstrel mask he wore in order to survive in the Jim Crow criminal justice system and, later, in a music industry controlled by white men. Discussing Josephine Baker, another early African-American star, Cheng observes, “She is neither the willfully subversive agent that critics hoped for nor the broken subject that history demanded” (Second Skin 172), and this paradoxical portrait of Leadbelly is the one that Jess similarly offers to a twenty-first century audience. While Leadbelly is complicit in acting out the
degrading caricatures that Lomax fashioned for him, he is also self-aware and deeply resentful that he lives in a society in which he cannot become professionally successful on his own terms. Thus, Leadbelly emerges as multidimensional and in many ways heroic to a contemporary readership who may initially conceive of his music and public persona as anachronistic. Moreover, Jess affirms the artistic inspiration he currently receives from Leadbelly’s investment in the blues as a means of affirming his humanity, protesting Anglo-American oppression, and fortifying his resilience—a blues epistemology that Jess insists is still vital for an empowered poetic rendering of America’s past, present, and future.

“the old new ooh ooh”

As with many of his peers, Fred Moten’s tributes to Holiday and Smith allude to the ways in which these women’s legacies have been continuously transformed, and he acknowledges his own participation in this process of mediation. In “billie holiday/roland barthes,” for example, Moten immediately signals through his reference to Barthes his awareness that representations of Holiday create and propagate various mythologies about her life and art. In “Myth Today,” Barthes writes, “Myth is not defined by the object of its message . . . there are no formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones” (109). In particular, Moten defamiliarizes the dominant narratives of Holiday’s tragic victimhood by underscoring her artistic complexity and the power she derived from her personal elusiveness:

billie holiday

grain, you changed on the hill past
baker, grain of sand, ignored every
star, folded every grain seared
to any other voice once knew.
never any other voice once knew just
seared to darken lavender to night

of the old new ooh ooh and the old.

new moon, wait a while, piercing
through, her seizure closes, after an
own aunt of mine, a triptych

before the break like clear satin,
microphone grain, fitted whisper
like a crack and pin. in satin on fifteen

rough edge surround me. you’re
breaking my heart. like clear satin
thick water streamed out your

mouth. the pitch of your transfer (1-17)

In order to describe Holiday’s distinctive sound, Moten employs various associations and
metaphors—the grain-to-bread process, for example—that are suggestive of Holiday’s
alluring appeal. “Grain” also recalls Barthes’s use of this term about which he writes, “The grain of the voice is not indescribable (nothing is indescribable), but I don’t think that it can be defined scientifically, because it implies a certain erotic relationship between the voice and the listener. One can therefore describe the grain of the voice, but only through metaphors” (“The Phantoms of the Opera”). Correspondingly, Moten responds to Holiday’s evocative voice without ascribing a fixed meaning or interpretation to what he hears; at the same time, he reconfigures the concept of “the grain of the voice,” wresting it from the realm of European opera, where Barthes positions it, and using it instead to pay tribute to the ineffable sound of a self-trained blues and jazz singer.

Moten alludes to, for instance, many of the lyrics from Holiday’s “You’ve Changed”—“ignored every / star,” “you changed,” and “you’re / breaking my heart” are all song lyrics—thereby situating his tribute within her oeuvre and the wider blues tradition. Moreover, though he resists the strictures of song as well as the conventions of traditional syntactic structures, Moten affirms the blues ethos through his emphasis on Holiday’s perseverance as a singer who exceeded her limited vocal range with impeccable timing and phrasing and was, thus, always “piercing / through” the torch songs and even the popular standards that she performed. “You’ve Changed” is actually one of the last recordings Holiday made, appearing on her final album, Lady in Satin (1958). Many critics and poets have panned Lady in Satin because of what they perceive as Holiday’s enervated voice,117 for she melodically speaks the lyrics over the sounds of a

---

117 As noted in chapter 4, the jazz critic Whitney Balliet once described her late recordings as proceeding “steadily and sadly downward” (102), and Glenn Coulter echoed him in panning her final album Lady in Satin as “very nearly total disaster” (105). Recently, more critics have embraced these late recordings with
string orchestra—as Moten puts it, she sounds like a “fitted whisper,” a “rough edge.” As we observed previously, Sholl’s “Don’t Explain” (1997) describes Holiday’s “voice totally shot by the end / as if the life couldn’t be kept out, / the music couldn’t keep itself from breaking” (70), and, in his poetic essay “Billie” (1984), Baraka writes, “By the end of her life Billie’s songs were genuinely frightening. You not only hear the song but the pain” (285). Moten resists this prototypical zenith to nadir trajectory and underscores his admiration for the way that Holiday continued to modulate her vocal delivery (“the pitch of your transfer”), even as the buoyancy of her youthful voice faded into the raspy timbre of her late recordings.

In his critical text In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (2003), Moten asserts, “the lady in satin uses the crack in the voice, extremity of the instrument, willingness to fail reconfigured as a willingness to go past” (107). He not only incorporates his critical interpretation into the poem but also the phrasing; on the same page in In the Break, he observes “the depth of the grain, grain become crack or cut” of Holiday’s voice. Through this self-reflexive interplay between his critical and poetic homages to Holiday, Moten suggests both his own interest in reshaping her posthumous narrative and the ways in which Holiday’s legacy is continuously transformed by the language used to describe her. With Barthes in mind, Moten then concludes “billie holiday/roland barthes” by foregrounding his inability to truly capture Holiday’s emotive sound and elusive persona on the printed page:

it’s a little alone, it’s a little alone,
the echo anticipate, the hard

O’Meally claiming that Holiday’s “last years were her greatest” (10), and Davis contending that Holiday’s art “became increasingly communicative” in her final years (172).
bloom underbreath, the album
eruption, urge graphics bend grain

and strife come turn the grain again
grain, fifteen grain, her long secret road
of hiding, surge and observation
roland barthes. (23-30)

Referencing the autobiographical interpretations of her work—“it’s a little alone” and
“strife come turn the grain again”—Moten evokes but ultimately avoids affirming a
causal relationship between Holiday’s personal misfortunes and musical performances, as
many of his predecessors were wont to do. Highlighting both her strength as a vocalist
(“the album / eruption”) and the subtleties and silences of her performances (the “the hard
// bloom” occurs “underbreath,” for example), Moten echoes Dove’s “Canary” by
implying that Holiday resisted the oppressive forces beyond the stage by remaining an
enigma and refusing to reveal what lay at the end of “her long secret road / of hiding,
surge, and observation.”

In this regard, Moten most notably signifies on Baraka’s “The Dark Lady of the
Sonnets” (1962) about which Moten writes: “Something problematic is at stake, though,
in what I above called Jones’s [Baraka’s, Jones in 1962], ‘oblique’ visual representation
of Holiday, in the overdetermined visualization of woman as oblique, vague, malleable,
interpretable, assignable in the process of more fixed signification” (“The Dark Lady and
the Sexual Cut” 164). Whereas “The Dark Lady of the Sonnets” describes Holiday as “A
voice that grew from a singer’s instrument to a woman’s. And from that (those last
records critics say are weak) to a black landscape of need, and perhaps suffocated desire” (25), Moten’s poem avoids directly referencing Holiday’s race or gender, thereby resisting an interpretation of Holiday’s music that is, to use his word, “overdetermined” by a stereotypical narrative of the tragic black woman. Following Barthes’s critique of the ways in which cultural myths become naturalized, he celebrates Holiday as a dynamic individual who actively challenged the stereotypes of African-American women that were nevertheless often deployed to describe her. Conceiving of Barthes and Holiday as part of the same lineage of influence on his poetry and poetics, Moten is, not unlike Shockley, a “cultural mulatto,” who is interested in “worrying” racially-segregated lines of artistic and theoretical descent. Indeed, as he defamiliarizes the mythologies surrounding Holiday’s legacy, Moten suggests the commonalities between the blues epistemology and a poststructuralist theoretical perspective by affirming their shared resistance to hegemonic narratives that circumscribe the lives and artistry of Holiday and other iconic figures.

In “bessie smith,” Moten continues to foreground the inspiration he receives from blues women but also the ways in which his and, by extension, all blues tributes are incapable of fully capturing the dynamic personae that these women self-fashioned. Thus, Moten calls attention not to Smith’s bold and bawdy persona, as McElroy does, but to the complexity of Smith’s music and star image:

```
seance open-lid eyes

called back a long time longed long

driven hold for a redelivery
```
and giving you back what you keep—

or a parable or

romance

photographer unidentified

give breath John’s gala brightness of James

through the snow of another village or strange

on the other hand your shit comes so heavy satin shadow for

song

for circle for long longed

up under two perfumes, hair shines so shows shone

so that it comes so hard on your pierce so blunt that you

off to the side for and turn smile long long say

she move through the dark velvet curtain. (1-15)

Employing the term “seance,” Moten suggests the ritualistic qualities that he accords to

Smith’s performances as well as the broader blues tradition; the repeated iterations of

“long,” for example, affirm a sense of yearning for the communal solace that Smith

provided. As the Piedmont blues guitarist John Cephas points out, “the blues singer sings

about common concerns, the changes that people go through” (16), and Moten affirms

that even Smith’s image gives the observer “back what you keep” by offering “a parable
or / romance” that provides temporary succor for the concerns they share both as individuals and as a collective.

Recalling the glamor that Hayden depicts in “Homage to the Empress of the Blues,” Moten also limns Smith as a “hair shines so” blues queen with a beaming smile (“gala brightness”), but he disrupts this transcendent image by implying that her music, which “comes so heavy,” is emblematic of the pain (“pierce so blunt”) experienced by early twentieth-century black women. Echoing Williams and Mullen, Moten thus portrays Smith as an empowered woman who fashioned a captivating persona but was also denied her subjectivity by a dominant society that conceived of her as a “shadow.” Ultimately, as with Moten’s representation of Holiday, Smith remains elusive, as the final image of her “move through the black velvet curtain” attests. As such, Moten suggests not only the ephemeral nature of performance but the impossibility of ever truly recreating Smith’s sound and image on the printed page.

Meta DuEwa Jones recently observed that “contemporary poets read, revise, and recite works by their artistic ancestors in order to maintain connections to the past while taking pleasure in their returns to and revisions of historical memory” (7). Accordingly, though there are significant formal and thematic distinctions between Moten’s blues tributes and Brown’s “Ma Rainey,” the connections between them remain clear, particularly in Moten’s emphasis on the ineffable qualities of the iconic women who sang the blues. Just as Brown’s Rainey “jes’ catch hold of us, somekindaway” (IV. 2), Moten insists on the uniqueness of Holiday’s sound (“never any other voice once knew”) and the “long time longed long” yearnings that persist for Smith’s image and music. Despite the eighty years that separate them, Moten’s and this chapter’s other homages attest to the
same desires to both honor and shape the legacies of famous blues men and women. At the same time, these poets are more self-conscious about the complexities of representing historical individuals. For post-soul poets, this distinction is often made clear through their allusions to and disruptions of the symbolic and mythic portraits of their forebears. Pivoting away from racialized and gendered readings, this heterogeneous group of poets—post-soul and non-post soul alike—also continue to draw attention to the history of objectification and discrimination that blues men and women experienced, but with greater consideration for their individuality and artistic achievements. Again the analogy of the palimpsest seems apt, for these poets evoke a history of cultural interventions into the public and private personae of this study’s blues icons, while simultaneously revising and reworking them to reflect the discourses of the contemporary era.
Coda

“We selectively bring back the musical dead on our own terms,” Joli Jensen asserts, “to help us out with our own, contemporary issues of what music means” (xx). Indeed, as poets resurrect Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly as creative inspirations, they transmute and evolve their sociocultural meanings, while also performing the important cultural work of keeping these figures in the public spotlight. Although the multicultural interest in blues tribute poems has been previously understudied, as we have seen, these icons have inspired a heterogeneous group of poets to pay tribute. Their varied representations register a wide range of sociopolitical perspectives, thereby shedding light on evolving discourses of race, gender, and fame across “the long twentieth century.” As such, the tributes in this study constitute a provocative body of knowledge, one which pressures traditional boundaries between history and mythology, music and poetry and offers alternative ways of understanding these historical figures as well as the blues itself.

Marking an important moment not only for Sterling Brown but for American poetry, “Ma Rainey” originated a poetic subgenre that is firmly rooted in an indigenous African-American musical form and counters claims of Anglo-European cultural hegemony by positioning blues artists, not classical goddesses, as muses. Immediately following Brown, poets paid homage to Smith (Myron O’Higgins and Robert Hayden) and Holiday (Elizabeth Bishop, Langston Hughes and Frank O’Hara), and, as in Brown’s portrait of Rainey, they characterized these women rather one-dimensionally as symbols of beauty, victimhood and/or tragedy. These early tributes set the precedent for blues icons to be represented as more mythic than actual, as they elide their muses’ physicality
and many of the complexities of the personae that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday cultivated for themselves as early twentieth-century African-American women celebrities. At the same time, positioning blues women in a role typically performed by Greco-Roman goddesses during a time in which working-class black women were arguably the most marginalized and disenfranchised members of American society, all of these poets’ homages implicitly protest America’s racial caste system and ensure that these women would be posthumously remembered as significant sociocultural figures.

During the late 1960s, as it became clear that the integrationist promises of the Civil Rights movement would not be easily realized, many young African Americans began to sympathize with the more militant aims of the Black Power/Black Arts movements, and, as a result, the blues and its icons underwent a similar transformation. While many middle-class white Americans were participating in a blues revival that celebrated the music and iconic blues figures as the sound of “authenticity” against the backdrop of post-WWII consumerism (as we observed in our brief reading of John Berryman’s “Dream Song 68”), Black Arts writers gravitated toward the radical new sounds of free jazz as the true sound of revolution. In the process, Sonia Sanchez and, to a certain extent, Larry Neal invoked Holiday as an analogue to a demoralized (and feminized) history in contrast to John Coltrane, who during the same period, was poetically exalted as an inspirational artistic force from the recent past that would guide African Americans toward a liberated future. Alternatively, Amiri Baraka’s and Jayne Cortez’s Leadbelly homages hail him as a proto-black nationalist and, thus, an artistic ancestor, effacing the history of his rise to fame among well-educated white liberals.
In chapter 3, we then observed African-American poets—Michael S. Harper, Sterling Plumpp, Al Young, Cornelius Eady, and Amiri Baraka—joining their Japanese- and Anglo-American American contemporaries—Lawson Fusao Inada, John Sinclair, and Forrest Gander—in emphasizing the viability of the blues ethos as well as the transcendence of this study’s icons during a time in which hip hop/rap was surpassing nearly every other musical genre in popularity. Arguably in response to the second-wave blues revival, which occurred mostly among middle-class white audiences, these poets sought to ensure that the blues and the history of racial oppression underwriting the music was not lost amidst a new era of commodification. As they elevate Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly to the pantheon of black heroes, however, many of these poets continue to construct them in mythic and symbolic terms, eliding the multifaceted personae that these figures self-fashioned.

The fourth chapter’s feminist poets—Sherley Anne Williams, C.D. Wright, Amina Baraka, Angela Jackson, Rita Dove, Patricia Spears Jones, Betsy Sholl, and Harryette Mullen—then reconfigure the historically silent and disembodied muse trope and reclaim blues women as inspiring and empowered forebears for their own poetic expressions of feminist consciousness. Marshaling discourses of authenticity, performance, and celebrity, among others, these poets suggest the parallels between blues women’s experiences and contemporary efforts to dismantle white patriarchal power structures. Moreover, for the first time in the history of the blues tribute subgenre, many of these poets—Williams, Baraka, and Mullen, in particular—draw attention to their muses’ physicality and the paradoxical positions that early blues women occupied as simultaneously objectified and empowered African-American women performers.
As we observed in the fifth chapter, a diverse range of poets—Sascha Feinstein, Tony Hoagland, Colleen McElroy, Terrance Hayes, Kevin Young, Evie Shockley, Tyehimba Jess, and Fred Moten—have continued this important cultural work and, in the case of Young and Jess, have similarly addressed the complexities of what Leadbelly and Johnson have symbolized for an American public deeply invested in race and gender stereotypes. Although I framed my discussions of all of the homages penned by African-American poets besides McElroy as examples of post-soul literature’s resistance to essentialist discourses, specifically about race and gender, the other tributes in this chapter reflect a similar interest in interrogating cultural mythologies about famous blues men and women. At the same time, these tributes continue to address the race and gender discrimination that blues figures struggled against and to pay homage to their creative acts of resistance. Elucidating the influence of postmodern and poststructuralist theories, many of these poets—Feinstein, Hoagland, Jess, and Moten, for instance—also foreground both their awareness and their participation in the mythmaking surrounding the blues figures that they invoke. Rather than viewing this awareness as a limitation, these poets consider it to be necessary in order to honor Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson as the complex and multivalent artists and individuals that they were.

Just as the representations of this study’s icons have been heterogeneous, the blues has manifested poetically in diverse ways, as tribute poets have selected various formal and thematic modes while still maintaining the blues’ underlying ethos. In *Stomping the Blues*, Albert Murray eloquently describes this blues worldview: “It is the disposition to persevere (based on a tragic, or, better still, an epic sense of life) that blues
music at its best not only embodies but stylizes, extends, elaborates, and refines into art” (68). Although many of this study’s poets mobilize standard blues tropes—for instance, African American vernacular English, “worrying the line” (repetition with a difference), and an emphasis on orality and performativity—from the 1960s onwards poets generally dispensed with the formal strictures of song but continued to affirm this “disposition.” Late twentieth century and twenty-first century poets recognize that the same oppressive social forces and artistic impulses that inspired the blues’ cathartic expressions of frustration, longing, and the “laughing to keep from crying” outlook still exist, and they urge their readers to keep the spirit of the blues alive and to recognize Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Johnson, and Leadbelly as figures who embody it.

Before concluding this study, I would like to offer a personal anecdote that exemplifies in pedagogical terms the transformative role that tribute poems play in shaping the legacies of both the blues and the icons studied here. In a recent undergraduate course titled “Jazz and American Literature and Film,” I led a Socratic seminar-style discussion on the “Billie Holiday Poem.” As I guided students through an explication of two contemporary Holiday poems—Rita Dove’s “Canary” (1989) and Kevin Young’s “Stardust” (2005)—I observed that the students were, just as I believe these poets intended, reevaluating their perceptions of Holiday as a symbol of tragedy whose music is largely autobiographical. In fact, I encouraged these readings, for my own interpretations of these poems and of Holiday’s personal and professional life have led me to similarly question the dominant narrative of Holiday, which I was first introduced to decades ago as a teenager reading her autobiography Lady Sings the Blues and listening to the haunting lyrics of torch songs such as “Don’t Explain” and “My Man.”
During this class period, I asked students to test the veracity of the popular mythologies about Holiday by listening and watching her captivating 1957 performance on the CBS special *The Sound of Jazz* with Lester Young. Then, we reviewed poetic representations of an enervated Holiday in the tributes of O’Hara, Hughes, and Sanchez. Comparing these portraits to “Canary” and “Stardust,” students noted a paradigmatic shift toward characterizing Holiday as complex and paradoxical, and aided by Holiday’s dynamic performance on television, the students were swayed to adopt a similar stance. They left the classroom with a distinctly different impression of Holiday than they entered with, and, admittedly, this was my objective. In fact, as an instructor, I am continuously shaping my students’ understandings of the legacies of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, Leadbelly, and Johnson, particularly because they often know very little (in some cases nothing at all) about these icons or the poems dedicated to them before enrolling in my courses. The point of this anecdote is to acknowledge, as I have throughout this study, that no poem or even interpretation of a poem that invokes a musician as muse is ideologically innocent. All poetic representations of historical figures are always already distinct from those figures’ lived experiences.

Poetry is not the only site, of course, for vivification and historical revisionism. Other mediums—novels, plays, biopics, liner notes, documentaries, and biographies, to name only a few—similarly intervene in blues artists’ legacies. Moreover, while my study examines the mutability of specific artists, there are numerous other poetic (as well as prose and filmic) representations of famous African-American musicians ranging from Nina Simone to Muddy Waters to their jazz, R&B, rock, and hip hop counterparts that similarly deserve scholarly consideration. Moving forward, it thus behooves critics,
readers, and instructors to consider what is emphasized and elided when historical figures are invoked on the printed page as well as the ideological commitments underwriting these invocations. Then, I hope, we will be able to more fully engage the epistemological questions that these representations raise, as well as the divergent, discursive, and often provocative answers that they elicit.
Works Cited


---. *Dutchman*. Harris 76-99.


Brunner, Edward. “Stepping Out, Sitting In: Modern Poetry’s Counterpoint with Jazz and


---. Something about the Blues Don’t Change: An Unlikely Collection of Poetry.


