

Introduction

BEALE ON BROADWAY

Every Tuesday and Thursday night, hundreds gather at Beale on Broadway, a blues bar and music venue located in the shadow of Busch Stadium in downtown St. Louis, Missouri. Only partially shielded from the heat and the rain by a corrugated tin roof, patrons crowd around wobbly wooden tables and perch on green plastic lawn chairs, many of which end up pushed aside when the dancing begins in earnest. The bartender pours gin in plastic cups; the occasional delivery of takeout food serves as a proxy for an in-house kitchen. The outdoor stage, with its wooden planks and kitschy Southern-themed décor, was designed by the owner, Bud Jostes, to resemble “a rickety front porch in the Mississippi Delta,” that place famously described by Alan Lomax as “the land where the blues began.”¹ From this outdoor patio one can see the Union Pacific tracks in the middle distance. As if employed to complete the *mise-en-scène*, freight trains rumble by from time to time, on their way from Memphis to Chicago, perhaps.

The domesticity of the stage set suggests that these performers are talented down-home amateurs, rather than paid professionals. The crowd—an unusually heterogeneous group in this strikingly segregated city—has come to see and hear Kim Massie, a self-identified and crowd-confirmed “St. Louis diva.” Massie, who is black, sings in churches and in musicals at local theaters, but she is best known as a cover artist. With her band, the Solid Senders, Massie twice-weekly thrills audiences with her uncannily precise imitations of black female singers and their most iconic songs: Etta James (“At Last”), Georgia White (“I’ll Keep Sitting on It [If I Can’t Sell It]”), Dinah Washington (“Evil Gal Blues”), Aretha Franklin (“[You Make Me Feel like a] Natural Woman”), and Whitney Houston (“I Will Always Love You”). Massie’s repertoire is imaginatively extensive, however, and she also covers songs originally popularized by men, including B. B. King’s “The Thrill Is Gone” and Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love.” Massie not only exhibits musical mastery of material usually

associated with other singers but also assumes the characteristic gestures and recognizable physical attitudes of the songs' past performers. Massie's performance of "I Will Always Love You," for example, captures both the delicate and determined long counts of the word *I* and the familiar tilting upward of the head, a sweeping backward of the right arm—a physical integration of singing with longing that is so very Whitney, a choreographic reanimation offered up as poignant tribute.

While some cover singers attempt to interpret their songs anew, moving "beyond" the copy to showcase their own originality, Massie's exactitude embodies a moving homage to performers passed and past. "I try to mimic whatever it is that I admire," she says.² Her uncanny embodiment of the gestural and affective repertoires of singers from the 1920s to the end of the twentieth century stages a living and lively genealogy of black female song as it has passed through and shaped theater, radio, and live concert events. Even if an audience does not know Georgia White's "I'll Keep Sitting on It (If I Can't Sell It)," Massie's very funny and suggestive routine provides context, placing the song and the singer—then and now—within a recognizable tradition of cabaret entertainment. Massie leaves no double entendre unexploited: sing-speaking the lyrics to the audience ("You can't find a better pair of legs in this town/And a back like this, not for miles around!"), she performs an elaborate choreographic routine of standing up and sitting down on a chair—ostensibly the subject of the song—while offering herself as a living likeness of some nearly lost bits of black vaudeville theater and classic blues performance.

As a cover singer, Massie reanimates collective cultural memory; she also revises histories and memories long gone unquestioned, such as when she covers Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love," a perennial crowd favorite. Massie bears little physical resemblance to Robert Plant, but she assumes his vocal affect with absolute precision, even as she slows down the tempo of the song to turn up its soulful volume. Taking on Plant's gestural repertoire of hip swivels and sexual guarantees ("I'm gonna give you my love"), Massie's performance *corrects the record* by calling received narratives of music history into question. As Massie keeps pace with the driving electric guitar, Plant seems to converge with the sexual frankness of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, whose "Daddy, won't you shave 'em dry?" seems a fitting prelude for "Shake it for me/I wanna be your backdoor man." Pointing to the history of British borrowing of African American musical traditions while simultaneously recuperating the queer life of early women's blues, Massie corporeally reanimates a tradition of theatrical women's blues often effaced by histories of British blues and rock—a tradition that this book places at the center of blues' performance history.

In a city well known as a historically important destination and transfer point for Southern black migrants, Massie excavates embodied histories of blues performance in a location that is anything but singular. Evoking Memphis's Beale Street, Mississippi's Delta, and New York's Broadway, the Beale on Broadway porch-stage is a geographic palimpsest—a sedimentation of various musical places and an imagined archetypal blues scene that conflates the front porch and the proscenium architecture of the theatrical stage. Channeling Delta imaginaries, this porch-stage points, indexically and poetically, to histories and memories of Southern black migration, road-show itineraries mapped along railway lines, and transatlantic tours; its familiarity suggests its potential to body forth performances of the past. Aware of her reputation as a tourist attraction, as well as the venue's proximity to the business district, Massie often starts up an enthusiastic call-and-response, prompting some in the crowd to shout out the names of their hometowns. Chicago, Houston, Tokyo: against the backdrop of train tracks, the exclamations of these dislocated travelers nightly reshape Beale on Broadway as a modern-day roadhouse, a site of comings and goings, of arrivals and departures, where contemporary leisure tourism and business travel echo the migrations and relocations that were the founding conditions of the blues songs Massie now sings.

Like the early twentieth-century blueswomen whose repertoires she has mastered, Massie gives a performance that is shaped by decades of interplay between blues performance and the architectures, devices, and practices—the trappings—of the popular theater.³ It is this theatrical genealogy of blues performance that is the subject of this book. Conventional tracings of the origins and histories of blues often marginalize or sidestep histories of theatrical practice that have buttressed blues' stage life. Recognizing the instability of Eurocentric generic distinctions between music, dance, and theater, this book seeks to recover the theatrical histories of blues—both in the period of “classic” blues of the teens and twenties, and throughout the twentieth century—and place them center stage. I have not attempted to write a comprehensive account of blues and its intersections with theatrical histories and devices; indeed, the capacious variety of the music known as blues and the difficulties of genre formation make such a task impossible. Instead, I trace a linked but discontinuous genealogy of theatrical blues performance, highlighting its early emergence in the touring tent show and exploring the way theatrical conventions and debates have remained at the heart of blues performance practice in the decades since. By charting the theatrical roots and routes of a musical form that leads us, among other places, to the contemporary performances of Massie,

this study analyzes the most “authentic” of black vernacular musical forms, revealing the theatrical histories and practices at the heart of blues as both genre and cultural product.

BLUES’ THEATRICAL TRAPPINGS

It may seem as though the front-porch-styled stage at Beale on Broadway, like the stages at the well-known chain House of Blues, represents something of a Disneyfication of blues—a late-capitalist fiction that bears no resemblance to the “real thing.” But such a claim only holds water if we neglect the intensely intertwined histories of blues performance and the popular theater—histories that throw into question the premise that the “real thing” ever was. Far from descending from authenticity into theatricality, black vernacular blues have moved in tune and in time with theatrical conventions since the moments of their earliest emergence. But this early conjunction between blues and theater is haunted by sinister histories. A “shack,” a bale of cotton, a bottle of liquor, a fence line, a front porch: these are the trappings of an imagined Southern life and landscape, bequeathed in large part by scenic conventions of blackface minstrelsy and nineteenth- and twentieth-century pastoral fantasies of the South. To put it another way: a pastoral tradition of “staging the South”—a performance genealogy, largely authored by whites and traceable from the early days of antebellum minstrelsy through the songs of Stephen Foster, from Tom shows and plantation musicals to melodramas of stage and screen—constitutes the milieu in which theatrical stagings of the blues often were and are presented and received. It is a milieu in which white producers, audiences, and cultural brokers have demonstrated a possessive investment.⁴

The staging of the imagined South is not “just” a scene but a set of relations, an architectural and perceptual matrix where ideology and representation meet. To look at the choreographies, costumes, and scenic design of blues performance may seem a bit of an afterthought—a project secondary to the “real” work of musicological or lyrical analysis, of which there is comparatively little of in this book. Surely we might dismiss these props, costumes, and choreographies as simple adornment, meant to either enliven a bare stage or solve practical concerns, such as seating for the musicians. And yet it is the pervasiveness of these trappings that makes them distinctly worthy of attention: their ubiquity has produced their invisibility. I am interested in what happens when we subject the *mise-en-scène* of blues performance to critical analysis, and how such analysis might trans-

form our understanding of the relationship between blues and the popular theater. In the pages that follow, I turn my attention to the performances of musicians that have been enframèd by the devices and practices of the theater. This book traces the circulation of these theatrical effects and examines them for what they reveal, not only about the cultural histories of blues performance but also the unspoken assumptions about Southernness, race, and performance that govern the reception of blues, past and present. It follows, then, that the *stage* or *staging* of blues that I describe signifies multiply and refers to the wooden planks of the front-porch music venues as well as the perceptual imposition of a theatrical frame that isolates an event *as* performance. While these stages, these scenarios, are not always identical in form or function, they share enough in common that they are easily recognizable and often instantly evocative of an imagined Southern landscape of plantation labor and racialized poverty. Notable for their constancy as well as their iterability and mobility, these scenarios reappear across space and time, erupting in new cultural moments and media, even as they hearken back to an imagined referent of the Old South.⁵

The theatrical conventions of staging the South are inseparable from the region's designation as "scenic" by everything from tourist pamphlets to Southern Agrarian literature, a designation that, frequently, reinscribes the aesthetics and the politics of the pastoral. To speak of the South's scenic qualities is always to keep alive multiple meanings of the word: "of or belonging to the stage," a usage that stretches back to the seventeenth century; "of or belonging to natural scenery," a nineteenth-century innovation; and "applied to a road that has been planned and landscaped so as to provide fine views," first recorded in 1914.⁶ The scenic multiplicity of the South, as a place given to be both visually and theatrically consumed, brings to mind Shreve's exclamation in *Absalom, Absalom!*: "Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theater, isn't it."⁷ For the Canadian Shreve, the South—what the historian Jennifer Greeson calls "an internal other" to the nation—is more theatrical than the theater itself, more scenic than the stage.⁸ But for all that it shows, the scene also occludes. It is shadowed by other scenes—of enslavement, poverty, and environmental degradation. The paraphernalia of the scenic South all too often entraps, producing an overdetermined stage arrangement that links land and landscape, forced labor and musical performance.

But does the deployment of theatrical devices—the costume of the criminal, the *mise-en-scène* of pastoral contentment—always yoke "innocent amusements" to violence?⁹ Put another way, do trappings always equal

entrapment? The performers in this book—among them Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Bessie Smith, Rainey, and Huddie Ledbetter (known to many as Lead Belly)—stepped into scenic environments of front porches and bales of hay, bringing with them their training, their repertoires, and what the critic and scholar Paul Oliver calls the “conscious artistry” that characterizes theatrical blues.¹⁰ While I am interested in the iterability of the *mise-en-scène* of blues performance, including its transnational repetitions and persistent performativity, an exclusive focus on these repetitions across space and time runs the risk of taking our eyes off the creative power of the artist, who is always working *with and within* the *mise-en-scène* of the stage. To make use of the devices of the theater necessarily means to risk the instability of audience reception and the unpredictability of fellow performers’ adjustments, night after night. Keeping this variability in mind, I track the deployment of these theatrical devices, but I also track the bending of their implied rules and the double codings that emerge when performers take these devices into their own hands. This struggle over theatrical signification—a struggle that often played out between black performers and white producers—is an ever-present backdrop to many of the live performances examined in this book.

The performance histories explored here are shaped, in part, by their proximity to racial violence, by small acts of resistance to violence, and by ambiguous acts that, because they took place within the proscenium arch of the stage, were, and are, difficult to interpret. The variety format of many of the performances explored here makes it particularly challenging to identify acts of full-scale resistance; as Jayna Brown has noted, the malleability of the (often unscripted) variety act sometimes makes it “impossible to prove in which directions the artists may have gestured.” But the evanescence of variety also offered its performers some room in which to move, to occasionally express a hidden transcript that made visible, if only momentarily, the conditions of oppression and the demands of hypervisibility placed upon the black body. Brown continues: “Some aspects of the revue form encourage a space of dialogic interchange and public critique. . . . Constant improvisation, versioning, and multi-signification were possible in this space.”¹¹ Such constant reworkings allowed for the tailoring of acts to specific audiences, and, indeed, different audiences may have read the same performance action in different ways.¹² What seemed to be acquiescence to some may have read as refusal to others; many of the performers explored here found a way to inhabit racialized types and to simultaneously—by the grain of the voice, by the corporeal insinuations of the body—disturb the smooth finish of these all-too-familiar representations.

That blues emerged, in large part, within a theatrical tradition of Southern black entertainment—both in the vaudeville theaters of cities such as Memphis, Jacksonville, and Indianapolis and in the tented minstrel shows that toured to towns such as Clarksdale, Mississippi, and Columbus, Georgia—is a key premise of this book, but it is one that is all too frequently marginalized in blues scholarship. This sidelining of the role of popular theater in early blues has an impact on the narration of the history of this performance form: what is attended to and what is left out (there are few detailed assessments of blues singers' costumes, for example). While it is not my intention to establish a new master narrative about a performance form as difficult to define and sundry as “blues,” I do aim to shift an understanding of blues performance and its histories by treating its relationship to theatrical practices as central, rather than secondary. If the theatrical history of blues is established as fact, why is it so frequently mentioned only as an aside? Certainly one issue is methodological: accessing and analyzing recorded performances is perceived to be more straightforward, methodologically speaking, than assessing the rural tent show proceedings, which leave behind few scripts and little photographic evidence. But there are other factors at play—one of which is an exceptionally prevalent “cult of authenticity,” evocatively described by Benjamin Filene as “a thicket of expectations and valuations” that has historically informed blues' production and reception, especially since the revival period of the 1950s and 1960s, when widespread white attention to the blues intensified and blues histories and criticism were written in earnest.¹³ As Filene notes, the concept of authenticity grew nearly intractable roots during the middle of the twentieth century, when cultural brokers—critics, record producers, managers, and other intermediaries—labored to establish American blues music and musicians as authentic and, therefore, valuable. Nowhere else was the notion and performance of so-called authenticity more hotly debated than in the world of blues fandom, scholarship, and musicianship.

The irony is that as midcentury artists and critics assiduously worked to establish blues' singularity, blues was already in a state of revival, in a moment of repetition and revision, already “again.” In these and the decades that followed, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, and Mick Jagger took center stage, identifying themselves as heirs to an African American musical tradition with which few white Americans were familiar. Simultaneously, folk revivalists embraced blues, and Alan Lomax released album after album of his recordings; the political economy of revival came to de-

pend, increasingly, on a paradox that can only be described as theatrical: repetition that labored under the illusion of the first time. Fans, critics, and scholars of this period doggedly advanced a rhetoric of authenticity—an arbitration of musicians according to whether or not their blues were real. But such debates, though explosive during the midcentury, were not new. Decades before the blues and folk revivals, folklore scholars had already effectively expunged theatrical histories of blues music from the record, as Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff have demonstrated in their analysis of Howard Odum's recordings in Georgia and Mississippi in the early twentieth century. Odum rejected the theater, maintaining that his work "was not concerned with songs performed on the professional stage" and segregated stage performance from "informal" singing that took place "within the 'folk-life' of indigenous black southern communities."¹⁴ Yet Odum's recordings belie his separation of the theatrical from daily life and demonstrate the impossibility of keeping ragtime, coon songs, and other theatrical influences *out* of folk blues. I shall further explore this antipathy between folklore and theater—and folklore studies and theater studies—in chapter 2.

Not all musicians resisted the designation of "theatrical": speaking to Val Wilmer in the 1960s, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, one of the great blues, gospel, and rock-and-roll singers of the twentieth century, proclaimed: "Blues is just the theatrical name for gospel."¹⁵ Tracing a genealogy of popular music, Tharpe invoked theatricality as particular to blues, and, by extension, to rock and roll. Tharpe's own performance style reflected her claim: on stage, she distinguished herself with an ever-changing array of wigs, glittery costumes, and, most important, her shining-white Gibson electric guitar, which she played with flamboyant virtuosity. Tharpe's frank embrace of theatrical elements (costumes and wigs that enabled protean transformation, an identifiable shift to a stage persona, and a highly energetic performance style that was brazenly conscious of itself *as* performance) and her performed citations of her actress-singer forbearers, Rainey and Bessie Smith, make it easy to identify her celebrated style as theatrical. But critics and audiences alike have often condemned the deployment of theatrical elements by blues musicians, especially the so-called authentic pioneers. In a 1964 review of performances of Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson, Oliver took both performers to task for indulging the (unnecessary, to his mind) trappings of stage performance. His critique of Williamson decried the singer's costume: "[Williamson] now affects a Harlequin suit of grey and black alternating and gloves, umbrella, and a derby hat. It is an ensemble that doesn't really add anything to the performance." Meanwhile, he skewered Howlin' Wolf's performance style

by claiming that “Howlin’ Wolf is an actor, and just about the biggest ham actor on the stage.”¹⁶

But clothes on stage are always a costume: whether a performer wears a “Harlequin suit” or overalls, whether the “theatrical” Tharpe swings her guitar or the “authentic” Mississippi John Hurt hunches silently over his, corporeal practices and material objects on stage can never *not* signify. Though he has repeatedly drawn attention to the fact of blues’ emergence in the popular theater, Oliver’s review is representative of a more widespread antitheatricalism in blues criticism, which dismisses the theatrical trappings of blues performance as secondary, feminized, derivative, or affectively excessive.¹⁷ This approach to blues performance has extended to blues scholarship, which tends to emphasize recordings at the expense of the live. Even when specific live performances are discussed, these analyses often tend to marginalize the scenic and choreographic dimensions, prioritizing the musical content and providing little analysis of costume, set, or gestural choices. And while the history of antitheatrical prejudice invites us to place the bona fide and transparent authentic in contradistinction to the imitative and debased theatrical, this work extends the much-needed exploration of the theatrical histories and presents of blues performance. Extending the premise that authenticity is produced theatrically, on stage, in the context of the performance event, my analysis works to eradicate the binary relationship between theatricality and authenticity that has governed much popular and scholarly blues criticism and emphasizes, instead, theatricality’s and authenticity’s intertwined and interdependent stage histories.

“THE DEVIL’S MUSIC”

Long before white midcentury fans and critics dedicated themselves to policing authenticity, black aversion to blues performance manifested in religious, class, political, and regional terms; throughout the twentieth century, blues, especially theatrical blues, were alternately understood as immoral, lowbrow, too minstrelsy, or simply too Southern. If there is one phrase that is synonymous with blues, a kind of shorthand expressive of both blues’ spiritual peril and transgressive thrill, it is *the devil’s music*. In his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, W. C. Handy famously recounted his parents’ horror at his purchase of a guitar:

I waited in vain for the expected congratulations. Instead of being pleased, my father was outraged. “A box,” he gasped, while my mother stood frozen. “A guitar! One of the devil’s playthings. Take it away. Take

it away, I tell you. Get it out of your hands. Whatever possessed you to bring a sinful thing like that into our Christian home?" . . . My father's mind was fixed. Brought up to regard guitars and other stringed instruments as devices of Satan, he could scarcely believe that a son of his could have the audacity to bring one of them into his house.¹⁸

Handy's description of his parents' revulsion at the sight of the guitar crystallizes what, for many performers, was a paradigmatic moment of attempted dissuasion from blues by their ministers, teachers, and parents. For many, especially early twentieth-century Christian Southerners like Handy's parents, their aversion to the devil's music came from deep-seated beliefs in the potent reality of Satan and a religious suspicion of stringed instruments. Though religious mistrust of blues persists today, particularly in the rural South, musicians and fans, powerfully influenced by the tale of Robert Johnson, have taken up the devil's music with pride, using the phrase to entitle books, albums, and even stage musicals.¹⁹ But the phrase does not fully account for some black people's antipathy to blues, especially when one considers that the historical relationship between black secular and sacred music is decidedly more complex—and the line between the two more blurry—than "the devil's music" allows. Indeed, by exploring blues songs in church and the crossover of many musicians who recorded both blues and gospel, Lawrence Levine has demonstrated that the "barriers" between sacred and secular music were "never complete."²⁰

While many Christians, particularly Southern Christians, singled out blues for condemnation in the interwar period, many of its musicological tropes found their way into gospel music—and vice versa—during this time. Thomas A. Dorsey, known as the father of gospel music, began his career as a pianist and arranger for Rainey and toured with her for nearly four years; Tharpe, a foundational innovator in both blues and rock, was primarily known as a gospel singer; Kim Massie, like many contemporary performers, sings both sacred and secular music, in church and at the club. If the devil's music tells only part of the story, how else to account for black intellectual and popular resistance to blues performance? Though a rhetorical division between secular and sacred black music at times held firm, this demarcation often had as much, if not more, to do with the environmental and sociological frames around the music's performance than it did with musicological distinctions. As Dorsey explained of the teens, "Well, blues was in, but the people were not accepting them. They said it was something bad. But it wasn't nothing wrong with the blues, it was just the places where they was playin' 'em in!"²¹ In other words, more problem-

atic than the music itself were the venues of performance and what went on there: the drinking and dancing of juke joints, rent parties, and barrel-houses and the sensual titillation of the popular theater presented a critical threat to public morality and Christian living.

Nearly a century before Jonas Barish's influential analysis of antitheatrical prejudice in Euro-American history, W. E. B. Du Bois was exploring the Christian aversion to both popular theater and popular music from an African American perspective. The place of amusement and entertainment was a central issue in turn-of-the-century black public debate for several reasons—religious, political, and representational. In addition to the moral skepticism that greeted popular blues and popular theater, the question of how to respond to the denigrating practices of blackface minstrelsy engendered a protracted conversation—sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—between black public intellectuals, political leaders, critics, and artists about black participation in popular entertainment, particularly stage entertainments.

The concurrency of black performers' politically ambiguous appropriation of the minstrel mask and the beginnings of theatrical blues performance shaped early twentieth-century intellectuals' ambivalence about both popular theater and popular music. Racialized performances by both enslaved persons and blackface minstrels during the antebellum period, more than half a century before the emergence of blues music, laid the groundwork for an antitheatrical distrust of popular performance. Saidiya Hartman's detailed account of the compulsory performances demanded of enslaved persons—the coffle, the coerced gaiety at the slave market, the display of bodies on the auction block—demonstrates in horrific detail the abuses of theatricality turned against an entire people. Nineteenth-century theatrical conventions, particularly the sadistic mockeries of blackface minstrelsy and the insidious trope of the singing and dancing slave, further underscored the compromised and compromising dimensions of black theatricality before and after the Civil War. It is no wonder, then, that the black intelligentsia of the early twentieth century, though supportive of "high" art, looked upon the emergent black entertainment industry, with its close proximity to minstrelsy, with some degree of trepidation.

The sheer dominance of the legacy of blackface minstrelsy meant that any and all African Americans in early twentieth-century public life, particularly those who appeared on the stage, inevitably performed in relation to this theatrical history. Sometimes the relation was direct: performers in tent shows were referred to and described themselves as minstrels, regularly covered their faces in black makeup, and performed comic chicken-stealing

scenes, much to the delight of black and white audiences. At other times, blackface minstrelsy operated in a more ghostly fashion: barely visible, but present just the same. In Houston Baker Jr.'s words, "it was in fact the minstrel mask as mnemonic ritual object that constituted the *form* that any Afro-American who desired to be articulate—to speak at all—had to master during the age of Booker T. Washington"—and, arguably, beyond.²² And, indeed, the relationship between black performers and the brutal history of their ventriloquized stage life preoccupied critics of early twentieth-century entertainment, such as Sylvester Russell, whose columns for the *Indianapolis Freeman* regularly, if implicitly, posed the question: how can—and should—a black performer speak from the stage? Performers explored in this book, such as Bessie Smith, Ledbetter, and Cousin Joe, reckoned with this very question, attempting to navigate minstrelsy's vicious hangover, which remained very much in evidence throughout twentieth-century blues performance. As Baker suggests, the mastery of (the minstrel) form may not have been pleasant or palatable, but from time to unpredictable time, it provided the performer the privacy of masquerade—a space of concealment from which to speak, "float[ing] like a trickster butterfly to sting like a bee."²³ The performers who populate these pages—especially those who lived and worked in an era when blackface was still a popular practice—did not shy away from the musical and theatrical pleasures of the minstrel form, even as they sometimes attempted to steer their performances away from its debasements. At the same time, however, we would do well to heed Kevin Gaines's suggestion that "black cultural expression, while in part contained within the mass cultural industry of minstrelsy, might bear an anterior or independent relationship to it."²⁴ While Gaines's analysis is historical, it also operates as an incisive reminder to the contemporary critic: while performers at times navigated their proximity to blackface minstrelsy in pointed and particular ways, modifying minstrelsy may not have always been their central project, or even a significant concern.

Theater was a problematic site for the New Negro-era project of uplifting the race; often African American artists and critics left the entire medium of theatrical performance out of their oeuvres and polemics, turning instead to photography and literature in order to produce fully realized portraits of black respectability.²⁵ While artists and intellectuals advocated for more complete and richly textured representations of African American life in every medium, theater was, in many ways, the thorniest site: arguably, it was the site where the indulgence of black stereotypes had been most explicit.²⁶ Literature and visual art had produced more than their fair share of retrograde and pastoral visions of the South, but theater's

pleasure, comedy, and instability of meaning making and reception challenged many efforts to secure the script of black respectability.²⁷ But for a handful of prominent New Negro intellectuals, the derogatory stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy demanded to be deposed from within minstrelsy's own medium. Furthermore, these figures, among them Du Bois, Sterling A. Brown, and James Weldon Johnson, did not see black theatrical efforts as incompatible with, in Gaines's words, "the struggle for a positive black identity in a deeply racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation through an ideology of class differentiation, self-help, and interdependence."²⁸

"The Problem of Amusement," a speech delivered by Du Bois in 1897 at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (later published in the school's *Southern Workman*), offers a compelling and broadening supplement to the notion that Du Bois, who popularized the concept of the talented tenth, was generally hostile, or at least indifferent, to all things popular.²⁹ In the speech Du Bois assesses not just popular theater but recreation in general, and its significance for young people. "There is nothing incompatible," he argues, "with wholesome amusement, with true recreation." Amusement was not to be pursued for its own pleasure, however, but for the finer effects that it allowed: "For what is true amusement, true diversion, but the re-creation of energy which we may sacrifice to noble ends, to higher ideals." Du Bois identifies the black Christian rejection of amusement as originating in English Protestant austerity, particularly in the Methodist and Baptist churches. "Transported to America," he claims, "this religion of protest became a wholesale condemnation of amusements, and a glorification of the ascetic ideal of self-inflicted misery." Despairing over a "fusillade of 'don'ts'" addressed to young people, Du Bois mounts a spirited defense of amusement, proclaiming: "I have long noted with silent apprehension a distinct tendency among us to depreciate and belittle and sneer at means of recreation, to consider amusement as the peculiar property of the devil, and to look upon even its legitimate pursuit as time wasted and energy misspent."³⁰ Amusement, Du Bois concludes, is as necessary and as natural as the pause between two heartbeats.

Du Bois continued to develop these ideas, suggesting in later years that amusement, particularly theater, could be channeled into the broader project of African American uplift. In his essay "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement" (1926), Du Bois argues that "a new Negro theatre is demanded," one in which the Negro character "emerge[s] as an ordinary human being with everyday reactions," as opposed to being represented as a minstrel figure, designed to appeal solely to

the desires of a white audience.³¹ Du Bois had already ventured into theater artistry himself; his massive 1913 *The Star of Ethiopia* employed spectacle, music, and hundreds of performers to stage a pageant of black history that celebrated transnational connections to Africa and the black diaspora throughout the Americas. But while he advocated for moderation in all things, Du Bois nonetheless revealed a preference for “art” over “amusement,” and certain kinds of art over others, reflecting a broader New Negro preoccupation with the distinction between art and entertainment, a distinction frequently drawn along regional and class lines. While occasionally expressing tolerance for ragtime, blues, and jazz, both Du Bois and Alain Locke nevertheless preferred the spiritual, which had been swiftly anointed by the former as “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” and by the latter as “the most characteristic product of the race genius.”³² The distinction drawn by Du Bois between musical art and entertainment is instructive: writing in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois proclaimed “Negro ‘minstrel’ songs, many of the ‘gospel’ hymns, and some of the contemporary ‘coon’ songs” to be “debasements and imitations” of the sorrow songs that gave “true” voice to black Americans. According to Du Bois, popular songs were theatrical copies—“debasements and imitations”—of the “real thing” that were sorrow songs.³³

For Du Bois, and for many other intellectuals of the day, realism and historical drama were the privileged forms of the new black theater. Musical comedy, with its proximity to minstrelsy and to the popular, was more difficult to swallow. James Weldon Johnson, a frequent collaborator with numerous musical-theater artists, including his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson; Bob Cole; Paul Laurence Dunbar; Will Marion Cook; George Walker; Bert Williams; and Aida Overton Walker, made the advancement and preservation of black musical comedy one of the causes of his life. Though primarily known as a literary author, Johnson wrote several opera libretti and worked as a Tin Pan Alley songwriter. A passionate lifelong theatergoer and critic, Johnson amassed a huge collection of reviews, playbills, photographs, and other ephemera relating to black theater both uptown and downtown, collating these into four large scrapbooks, each entitled “The Stage.” Taken together, these scrapbooks paint a lively picture of black theater in New York in all its forms, from the vaudeville-inspired work created by Cole, both Johnson brothers, Williams, and Walker in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the “exile” of black theater from downtown and the concomitant development of a Harlem-based theater in the 1910s, to the watershed 1917 production of Ridgely Torrence’s *Granny Maumee*, *The Rider of Dreams*, and *Simon the Cyrenian*, which featured actors

from the Negro Players company, to star vehicles for Ethel Waters (*Africana*) and Florence Mills (*Dixie to Broadway*) in the 1920s, to the groundbreaking *The Green Pastures* of 1930. These scrapbooks, in turn, form the research corpus for Johnson's major published contribution to black theater history: *Black Manhattan*. In *Black Manhattan*, his comprehensive history of black life and culture in New York, Johnson dedicates significant time and energy to exploring the transformations in black theatrical culture in the early decades of the twentieth century. He does so in a way that is broadly inclusive of both "high" and "low" forms, and he embraces popular music to a greater degree than many of his predecessors. Identifying the 1890s *Creole Show* as the beginning of a "line which led straight to the musical comedies of Cole and Johnson, Williams and Walker, and Ernest Hogan," Johnson charts a course for black theater history: from minstrelsy to black musical comedies that were performed before primarily white audiences to the development of a Harlem-based theater, where the black artist "found himself free from a great many restraints and taboos that had cramped him for forty years. . . . For the first time [black artists] felt free to do on the stage whatever they were able to do."³⁴

Johnson was one of the early members of the Harlem intelligentsia to speak out in praise of the blues. He chronicled their emergence in *Black Manhattan*, placing them on par with the spirituals that Du Bois and Locke had elevated to the exclusion of other forms: "1912 was also the year in which there came up out of the South an entirely new genre of Negro songs, one that was to make an immediate and lasting effect upon American popular music; namely, the blues. These songs are as truly folk-songs as the Spirituals, or as the original plantation songs, levee songs, and rag-time songs that had already been made the foundation of our national popular music. . . . It is from the blues that all that may be called *American music* derives its most distinctive characteristic."³⁵ In a review of Handy's *Blues* a few years earlier, Johnson had similarly championed the form, while bemoaning the fact that black folk rarely received credit for many of their most significant cultural contributions, such as social dance and secular music, which had been unceremoniously co-opted by white composers for black-face minstrel tunes. "But the tide has set in the other way," he remarks, positioning himself as one who would redeem and chart the significance of black popular entertainment.³⁶ Though his rhetoric was evenhanded and noncombative, Johnson had delivered the chink in the armor to the bourgeois bulwark against blues.

An enormous wave of Southern migrants settled in Harlem in the 1920s, making rent parties and cabaret culture a way of life for the newly arrived

and, eventually, bohemian whites. Concerned about the rapid transformation of Harlem, many members of the black intelligentsia bemoaned “a moral and spiritual crisis among younger black migrants, as well as a crisis regarding their own cultural authority.”³⁷ The antipathy toward cabaret entertainment and blues was not only moral and spiritual but also class and region based, as urbanity began to be seen as a crisis for the Southern black migrants who could not navigate the seductions of the city, and toward whom much of the city’s burgeoning entertainment industry was directed. Furthermore, blues and cabaret seemed to stand in opposition to the morality of the aspirational middle classes: blues’ celebration of the pleasures of alcohol during a period of Prohibition, its assertion of a right to sexual pleasure, including same-sex desire, and its embrace of leisure instead of (morally improving) labor all countered uplift ideology, queering the Harlem Renaissance—for some, beyond recognition.³⁸

Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and their peers determinedly sought to refigure this narrative of decline. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes seized on the opportunity to skewer the “Nordicized Negro intelligentsia” who rejected “the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues”; for Hughes, celebrating blues and incorporating its rhythms into *Fine Clothes for the Jew* and *The Weary Blues* enabled a critique of the normative class and sexual orientations of uplift ideology.³⁹ In “Negro Artists and the Negro,” an essay published in *The New Republic* in 1927, Thurman summed up the intervention that he, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Bruce Nugent, Aaron Douglas, Gwendolyn Bennett, John P. Davis, and Hughes made with their 1926 publication of *Fire!!*, a new literary journal for “younger Negro artists.” Of the journal, Thurman wrote, “It was not interested in sociological problems or propaganda”—a direct challenge to representative Du Boisian works *The Philadelphia Negro* and “Criteria for Negro Art.” “Its contributors,” Thurman went on, “went to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeoisie for characters and material. They were interested in people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every respect save color of skin.”⁴⁰ Though only one issue of *Fire!!* was published, its polemic signaled a sea change in the understanding of blues and popular theatrical performance as central to New York cultural life at the heart of the Jazz Age. While Hughes hailed the blues as a proletarian form, Hurston celebrated blues and popular entertainment as distinctly Southern. Raised in Florida and deeply immersed in fieldwork in the rural South, Hurston criticized those who rejected blues: “I met the type which designates itself as ‘the better-thinking Negro.’ I was thrown off my stride by finding that while they considered themselves Race

Champions, they wanted nothing to do with anything frankly Negroid. . . . The Spirituals, the Blues, *any* definitely Negroid thing was just not done.”⁴¹ It was Hurston’s work—in her critical writings on folklore and in her theatrical revue *The Great Day* (explored in chapter 2)—that suggested that blues might not simply be a symbol of urban decay and decline but a remembering of a rural life and landscape left behind. And she had some measure of persuasive success: “Dr. Locke . . . had opposed [*The Great Day*] at first. . . . To his credit, he has changed his viewpoint.”⁴²

THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINS

In an early scholarly study of “downhome” blues, the ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon articulates the difficulty of determining the origins of blues: “Finding evidence to support a theory of blues origins is so problematic that one becomes impatient with guesswork and is tempted to agree with [the *Urban Blues* author Charles Keil] that those who seek the origins of blues are sticking their heads in the sand.”⁴³ And yet a great deal of early blues scholarship was concerned with exactly these questions of origin. Scholars such as Titon, William Barlow, Oliver, Lawrence Levine, and Amiri Baraka have significantly and variously advanced our understanding of blues’ emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁴ Growing out of the vaudeville and ragtime tunes of popular entertainment and the work songs that regulated black labor in the unreconstructed Jim Crow South, blues was, from its beginnings, a hybrid form, musically and generically indebted to a variety of early influences: male and female, rural and urban. Rather than institute a new narrative of origin, it is the relentless *pursuit* of origins, rather than their essences, that I wish to interrogate here. What blinders have pursuits of singular origin produced? And what insights are possible when one examines the scholarly and popular investments in specific narratives of origin?

Building on tenets of poststructuralism, scholars in the field of performance studies have offered useful critiques of the Western obsession with origins and the productive difficulty the human activity of performance poses to a unitary concept of origin. Performance itself, a medium rooted in mimetic action and repetition, offers a rejoinder to the privileging of authentic originals; it is, in Rebecca Schneider’s words, “indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational, and remaining.”⁴⁵ Repetition, rather than the singularity of authenticity or origin, is a key characteristic of performance and its analysis. Yet performance is a paradoxical thing: composed always in repetition, it behaves as if (and spectators often behave as though) “something else . . . preexists it.”⁴⁶ The presumed origin, though,

is always elusive; performance propagates copies without originals. The pursuit of presumed origins is, as Joseph Roach provocatively argues, “a voyage not of discovery but of erasure.”⁴⁷ Tracing origins, especially of a performance form documented by fraught and incomplete archival evidence and burdened with racism and neglect, inevitably erases as much as it preserves. And while performance theory enables a Foucauldian- and Derridean-inspired critique of the obsession with origins that has governed so much early blues scholarship, blues itself already offers its own riposte: the formal structure of an A–B lyric is always already doubled. Repetition and revision—or “rep and rev,” as Suzan-Lori Parks calls it—are the foundational elements of a twelve-bar blues; “never for the first time,” these performances are always “for the second to the *n*th time.”⁴⁸

This study, then, is organized as a genealogy. It does not attempt to determine a singular point of origin for blues nor does it narrate an unbroken series of events generated by sequential causes and effects.⁴⁹ Rather, the genealogy isolates scenes of blues’ theatricality as socially, politically, and economically produced, “record[ing] the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality,” and historicizing those feelings, tropes, and scenarios that masquerade as universal, or that seem to be outside of history.⁵⁰ By examining discrete performances of theatrical blues, this book traces decisive shifts in the uses and abuses of theatrical scenarios of blues travel, without shoehorning its analyses into a “discourse of the continuous.” A genealogical pattern of descent—a means of tracing links between events that are connected not by direct chains of causation but by accident, rupture, and discontinuity—emerges as the most effective way to examine this performance history, a history that is fundamentally *embodied*. The “acts of transfer” that characterize performance transmission are primarily contingent on embodied acts of imitation, repetition, and revision that are traceable through a descent model, one that constructs the connective tissue between the discontinuous studies that make up this book. Descent “attaches itself to the body” and foregrounds the practices of moving bodies: the tent-show tours, black migrations, and cultural-tourism routes that participate in the transmission of images, lyrics, themes, and scenarios that attach themselves to bodies in motion.⁵¹

OFF-THE-RECORD PERFORMANCE

It is undeniable that the story of blues’ emergence is parallel to—and sometimes conjunctive with—the emergence of recording technologies and economies. As the phonograph industry and the (race) record in-

dustry became widespread, supplanting and eventually surpassing the sheet-music industry, and as portable recording technologies became more widely available to researchers, folklorists, and archivists, blues was constituted as an object to be sold, collected, archived, and marketed. An instructive paradoxical attitude toward live performance pervades blues fandom and scholarship. On the one hand, music magazines fetishize attendance at live blues performances; the claim “I was there” stands as evidence of unmediated access to a music’s essence. On the other hand, blues scholarship has had a tendency to neglect the live scene as a site of specific investigation. Recordings are routinely used as a primary source of evidence, overlooking a live-performance scene that includes visual elements, architectural frames, and, especially, audiences. As Christopher Small has economically put it: “Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do.”⁵² Records tend to be thought of as *records*, as immutable and objective archival documents of musical history. Yet such an approach sometimes fails to appreciate that the process of recording was inflected with raced, gendered, and economic hierarchies, as well as a massive decontextualization of music making from the environment in which it was often performed. One only need imagine Rainey singing into a phonograph (something she had never done) in rural Wisconsin (a place she had never been), separated from her adoring tent-show audiences (who were anything but passive), to speculate on the enormous changes, musical and otherwise, that the recording scene wrought. Records do not tell the whole story. As Elijah Wald makes clear in his account of blues as a popular, commercial form, early records, especially, were a by-product of show-business success; passed down to us today as primary sources, they are, more accurately, secondary documents made in response to performance successes, like sheet music. Though we may see these records as foundational, it was the repertoire of live performance, Wald suggests, that was the primary site of blues entertainment in the early decades of the twentieth century. Exclusively focusing on recordings results in a neglect of all the music that went unrecorded, in part because record companies or folklorists deemed it too white, too Northern, too commercial, too ragtime, or too popular.⁵³ The performance scenes of dances, tent shows, vaudeville theaters, and juke joints also go unacknowledged by many recordings. As Wald indicates, relying too heavily on records produces a skewed historical analysis of blues. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff similarly argue that the history of recorded blues provides only a partial account of blues’ varied performance histories:

Phonograph records have long been the major jumping-off point for blues and jazz scholarship. . . . Old recordings are relatively easy to access, certainly a more convenient and enjoyable reference tool than old newspaper accounts or oral histories, and more familiar to the general public. However, far too much focus on the commercial recording industry has distorted the prevailing concept of the history of American popular music. It seems to be accepted as a matter of faith that mainstream America was first introduced to blues through the medium of phonograph records. But long before blues records became available, the compositions of W.C. Handy and other blues writers were repeatedly performed in street parades and on circus lots in countless locations throughout every inhabited part of the United States and much of Canada. Generally speaking, white America was introduced to the blues by sideshow annex bands of the World War I decade.⁵⁴

This is not to say that records cannot offer any information about the live scene of performance; furthermore, explorations of the conventions and innovations of live blues must resist fetishizing these performances as any more authentic, true, or pure than their recorded counterparts.

While music plays an important role in my analysis, this book is often more directly focused on the sets, costumes, and choreographies of sometimes avowedly stagey performances. Though I make use of recordings, I aim to recenter the role of live performance in blues scholarship and to use the methodologies of theater history and performance studies to both reconstruct and interpret the live-performance event.⁵⁵ Performance, as Small notes, “does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.”⁵⁶ These aspects of blues’ stage scenarios can be accessed musically (such as by carefully listening for dance breaks that masquerade as musical interludes) and by turning to archival sources, particularly press accounts, the form of which demanded that the journalist or critic communicate visual and sonic elements to an absent reader. A great deal of information about the early performance, circulation, and dissemination of blues acts, for example, is contained within the pages of the *Indianapolis Freeman*. Its influential column *The Stage*, which published reports filed by traveling companies, facilitated communication among performers working in such diverse stage idioms as musical comedy, tent shows, vaudeville, and ragtime. These entertainers, male and female, developed their repertoires through models of reciprocal exchange and imitation.

Though Rainey claimed to have incorporated blues singing into her stage act as early as 1902, the earliest published account of blues being sung in a public setting appears in a 1910 newspaper description of the black vaudeville performer Johnnie Woods's act at the Airdrome Theater in Jacksonville, Florida. Trained on the medicine-show circuit, Woods was celebrated for his skills as a female impersonator, buck-and-wing dancer, and, most significantly, ventriloquist. Inspired by the Punch and Judy shows he had seen in his youth, Woods, dressed in a fine, light-colored suit, performed a popular ventriloquist act that climaxed in "Henry," a black dummy clad in a conductor's cap and a checked suit, getting drunk and singing the blues.⁵⁷ This first published description of theatrical blues singing was reported in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, with blues emerging as a performance form first and foremost: the 1910 account of Woods's act was published two years before Handy, the self-nominated "Father of the Blues," published the first piece of sheet music with *blues* in the title, and ten years before Mamie Smith became the first black woman to record blues for Okeh Records.⁵⁸ Inscribed texts—sheet music or pressed wax—make up only some of the body of evidence that provides contemporary access to early twentieth-century blues music. The story of Johnnie Woods and Little Henry underscores the lively theatrical environment of off-the-record blues performance that remains and the bodies that evidence themselves in memory and ephemera, in apocryphal tales and archival traces. These traces—photographs, columns, reviews, pamphlets, advertisements, and gossip—constitute, in part, the evidentiary corpus of this book, assisting in the reconstruction of the live-performance scenes of theatrical blues singing, events that, by virtue of their assessed ephemerality, have largely—though not completely—evaded historical preservation.

GENDERING GENRES

In the account of the ventriloquist and his dummy, theatrical blues materializes as a throwing of the voice, a deliberate disorientation that engendered confusion about the "real" source of sound. Early blues singing manifested an analogous throwing of the voice, but one with a more disturbing cast, rife with appropriation. Gravitating toward black popular song and imitations of black vernacular music popularized by blackface minstrelsy, white theatrical entertainers such as Sophie Tucker, May Irwin, and Claire Vance made a name for themselves as blackfaced "shouters" of "coon songs." These ragtime-inspired tunes, many of them written by black composers, were prominent on vaudeville stages beginning in the late 1890s. In refer-

ence to these white women, the press dubbed Bessie Smith, Rainey, and Clara Smith “up-to-date coon shouters.”⁵⁹ Together these black and white women gave rise to what Daphne A. Brooks has named “sonic blue(s)face performance,” “a vocal phenomenon . . . that had a ground-shifting impact on the histories of how we sound race and how we racialize sound in the contemporary popular imaginary.”⁶⁰ While the continued power of Bessie Smith and Rainey (and the concomitant fading away of Vance, Irwin, and Tucker) has been described as “the triumph of the real over the false,” blues performance from its beginnings has been a *mélange* of mimicry, a device of mistaken identity and masquerade, a scene where *who is singing* is forever in doubt.⁶¹ This scene stages an unstable relationship between the *I* of the songs’ first-person narration, the onstage singer, and the performer presumed to be (behind) the mask. Though ventriloquist blues acts were relatively rare, the tale of Woods’s bluesy ventriloquism is redolent of theatrical blues in general, especially the tension between performer and persona and the pliability of its first-person *I* employed in so many blues lyrics.⁶² This tension between performer, persona, and the first-person narrator will materialize several times in the pages that follow, especially in the analyses of the classic blues-singer-as-actress and Ledbetter’s complex relationship to his stage name, Lead Belly. What’s more, many of the most prominent blues performers had years of theatrical experience among them: Bessie Smith transitioned from vaudeville star to film actress; Waters starred in *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), and numerous other productions; Alberta Hunter played the lead in *Showboat* in London in 1928; and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, whose performance in *The Blues and Gospel Train* will be explored in chapter 3, were in the original Broadway cast of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Blues performers, then, were quite accustomed to inhabiting a persona on stage. This instability of persona was especially challenging to those critics, fans, and scholars who wished to emphasize the autobiographical authenticity of the blues artist; as a result, theatrical blues, often performed by women, were covered up and covered over, their status as a central genealogical line in blues performance minimized and maligned. As Elijah Wald has persuasively demonstrated, performances of “authentic” blues often emerged as a response to the demands of the record producers, folklorists, and scholars who demanded songs and styles that conformed with preconceived notions of blues as primitive folk music, linked directly to its African roots. But the theatricality of blues performance has remained ever present, despite attempts to suppress it.

While there is no doubt that the musical innovations of the male laborers of East Texas and the Mississippi Delta in the 1890s were extraor-

dinarily significant, this book contests historiographical narratives that position the female singers of the “classic” blues as either derivative or debauched imitators, on the one hand, or manipulated victims of the culture industry, on the other. In the face of narratives that suggest otherwise, it is difficult yet necessary for us to imagine a comprehensive history of the blues that positions Rainey and Bessie Smith, and others like them, as originators and as innovators. Attending only to the chronology of records is misleading. Rainey and Smith, for example, are most often discussed in terms of their late 1920s recordings; as a result, they seem to follow behind the innovations of Delta bluesmen, whose music is sometimes ahistorically collapsed with the distinctly different field hollers of agricultural workers and the call-and-response songs of convict laborers. But Rainey was born in 1886, before Big Bill Broonzy (1893), Charley Patton (1891), and Son House (1902). Bessie Smith was also a contemporary, born in 1894; both women began their performance careers in their teens, and they sang and composed blues years ahead of their male colleagues. Indeed, their touring was largely responsible for disseminating these innovations in the first place.⁶³ To position Smith and Rainey as innovators means to embrace the fact that blues was developed by “pros, not primitives,” and that blues was, from its beginnings, a commercial, theatrical form.⁶⁴ While folklorists such as John Lomax preferred to hear the blues as a pure folk expression—set apart from radio, theatrical entertainment, and the corrupting influence of popular culture—the emerging black theatrical entertainment industry and so-called folk musical expressions were intricately intertwined. Regular reports in the *Indianapolis Freeman* demonstrate that what Barlow calls the “tentacles of the American entertainment industry” abundantly extended throughout the rural South, especially the Mississippi Delta, from the very beginning of the twentieth century.⁶⁵

The gendering and “genre-ing” of blues performance has produced a series of binaries that has governed its analysis. While the details vary, many classifications of early twentieth-century blues establish two categories, “Country” or “Downhome” blues, and “Classic” or “Vaudeville” blues:

<i>Country Blues</i>	<i>Classic Blues</i>
Male	Female
Rural	Urban
Authentic	Theatrical
Folk	Commercial
Pure	Hybrid

Hazel Carby has summed up the impact of this binary classification as follows:

The field of blues history is dominated by the assumption that “authentic” blues forms are entirely rural in origin and are produced by the figure of the wandering lone male. Thus the formation of mythologies of blues masculinity, which depend on this popular image, has obscured the ways in which the gendering of women was challenged in the blues. The blues women of the twenties, who recorded primarily in urban centers but who employed and modified the full range of rural and urban blues styles, have come to be regarded as professionalized aberrations who commercialized and adulterated “pure” blues forms.⁶⁶

As Carby notes, the privileging of “mythologies of blues masculinity” results in the debasement of female blues singers. The fact that “classic blues” were sung primarily, but not exclusively, by women in a popular theatrical context is another strike against them.⁶⁷ As I suggested, the antitheatrical prejudice that pervades cultural histories of blues is profoundly gendered, and it accounts not only for the twin dismissals of “women’s blues” and “theatrical blues” but also for their amalgamation: theatrical blues, even when not sung by women, *become* feminized. Oliver’s review of Williamson’s performance, cited earlier, skewers the elegantly costumed performer for being “affected” and also, implicitly, effete.

These binary categories are not only inadequate; they are detrimental. The gendering of binary categories such as “downhome” and “vaudeville”—and the assignation of value to these categories—makes it all too easy to downplay the political, cultural, and artistic contributions of theatrically trained female blues performers. Despite the existence of male theatrical entertainers, such as Johnnie Woods, and female downhome blues singers, such as Memphis Minnie, the male-rural and female-urban dichotomies remain deeply difficult to dislodge. Though Titon ultimately organizes his analysis around these categories, in *Early Downhome Blues* (one of the earliest musicological and cultural-historical analyses of Delta blues) he is very careful to note their instability and regularly highlights their points of overlap. For example, Titon points out that the songs sung at Saturday-night dances in the Delta were just as diverse as the repertoire sung in the tent shows: coon songs, minstrel songs, blues, and ragtime.⁶⁸ Titon reminds his readers that blues is constituted as an object by institutional power—by race record producers, by scholars and folklorists, and by chambers of commerce bolstering their tourist economies. The scene of live performance was—and is—much less generically rigid and always more fluid than

musicological definitions suggest, and yet the categories themselves have remained nearly unshakeable.⁶⁹ This is not to say that there are not important cultural and musicological differences between the blues of, say, Patton and Hunter. But these distinctions are partially undone when we consider that musicians of both the downhome and vaudeville varieties were neither geographically static nor bound to the regions of their birth; they were constantly on the move. They had ready access to records of all kinds, and they also, quite literally, *crossed paths*. This book, therefore, considers blues not as a local or static phenomenon but as a migratory one: if “downhome” is a state of mind, it is a home on the road.

MAPPING A ROUTE

The materiality and the conventions of the theater were, and have remained, central to the staging of migration and travel that many blues performances enact. This study traces both the circulation of the mise-en-scène of the blues scenario and the figures who populated these stages. These figures—among them the blues actress, the convict turned folk hero, the touring professional, and the pilgrim tourist—were not characters in a psychological or naturalistic sense, but, rather, they were representative surrogates for the diasporic, migratory, and touristic travels of millions, both past and present. Circulating and reappearing across space and time, they pointed to the process and material realities of circulation itself: the circum-Atlantic trade in raw material, refined goods, and human capital that has characterized modernity. While managers and producers of these theatrical events deployed scenic fantasies of “the South,” individual performers attempted—with some success—to make the displacements that haunted these landscapes visible and audible.⁷⁰ Laying bare the often hidden histories of forced and chosen migration that haunt the American open road, these performers intimated that the mythology of the free traveler was—and is—deeply dependent on the performed memories of those whose mobility was limited, compromised, or compulsory.

The thrill of the open road has historically shared a lane with a silent—and silenced—partner. In his 1986 travelogue chronicling his quest for “astral America,” the French intellectual-turned-tourist Jean Baudrillard found what he pursued: an amnesic experience of the open road that celebrated the unencumbered mobility of the traveler. He jubilantly describes his car “gliding down the freeway, smash hits on the Chrysler stereo.”⁷¹ But there is another side to the rhetorics of freedom, progress, and autonomy that govern imaginings of the open road: the Trail of Tears and the legacy

of Indian removal, the dust-bowl migrants and the failed farm policies that devastated a generation, and a sustained history of black displacement, from the Middle Passage to the Great Migration, from the auction block to Hurricane Katrina. These “shadow texts” of heroic American travel narratives suggest the ambivalence of the road-trip romance and reveal the forgetting of diasporic and genocidal histories at the heart of these triumphant narratives.⁷² Far from being an exclusively contemporary phenomenon, though, this slippage between migration, the musician’s tour, and recreational tourism is typical of many of the performances that I examine in the book, where migratory histories set in motion by forced removal refuse to disappear.

The Mississippi Delta, a crossroads for the touring tent shows which flooded the area at harvest time, served as a locus of repertoire development and exchange among traveling entertainers and itinerant agricultural laborers during the first half of the twentieth century. A frontier state as much as a Southern one, Mississippi’s agricultural economy was not developed until the late nineteenth century, and its field hollers and work songs are often described as direct forerunners of the blues. Mississippi is where this book begins and ends, but Mississippi is only one geographic point of origin for a polygenetic music that seems to have simultaneously developed in the Delta, in East Texas, in Missouri, and in the Piedmont. Significantly, however, Mississippi—and the Mississippi Delta, in particular—appears again and again as a *mythical* point of origin and as inspiration for the mise-en-scènes of the performances I examine in this book; as a frame of mind, Mississippi’s musical, racial, and political legacies are never far from the performances analyzed here. But this book is more concerned with routes than roots, focusing on the actual and imagined racial and sonic mappings that are effected by blues performance’s circulation, together with its material and mythical transmission and reinvention. Accordingly, the itinerant structure of this book is spatial as well as temporal, mirroring the historic circulation of blues scenarios from the tent shows of Mississippi to the cabaret stages of New York to the television studios of Northern England to sites of memory in Mississippi.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a transformational crossroads, a moment when blues underwent a major shift or reorientation in terms of performance, reception, circulation, or dissemination. Each chapter deeply dives into a key performance or series of performances at the heart of that crossroads, exploring the role of the actress in classic women’s blues in the teens and twenties (chapter 1), Ledbetter’s vaudeville-inspired performance career and his collision course with folkloric theatrical thinking

(chapter 2), the transatlantic circulation and translation of blues during the revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s (chapter 3), and the embrace of tropes of theatrical reenactment by the blues tourism industry in the 1990s and 2000s (chapter 4).

The first two chapters examine paradigmatic cases of theatrical blues in the interwar years when many black Southerners, threatened by economic insecurity and vigilante violence, headed north bringing their music with them, transforming the demographics and daily life of cities like New York, St. Louis, and Chicago. Southern blues performers, many of them women, represented this travel in their stage acts. Singing, dancing, and shticking in the vaudeville houses of the burgeoning Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuit, they provided many audience members of the teens and early twenties with their first exposure to blues singing. These artists also performed on the tented platforms of touring minstrel shows, where “wooden boards on a folding frame served as the stage” and “the footlights were Coleman lanterns”; in both these indoor and outdoor arenas, they were some of the first artists to widely popularize blues throughout the black South.⁷³ In chapter 1, I extend my critique of the gendered dimension of blues historiography, where “authentic” bluesmen are often celebrated at the expense of “theatrical” female blues singers, who disseminated blues within the context of black popular theatrical entertainments: minstrelsy, vaudeville, and touring tent shows. I focus my investigation on the careers and performances of two classic blues singers, Rainey and Bessie Smith. These women, particularly through their glamorous costuming, fashioned a new model of Southern womanhood, one that pushed back against the Topsy and mammy figures that dominated stage representations of black women. Their performances staged the South as a place of departure and return, their traveling blues simultaneously representing both migration and the theatrical tour. Though these are women whose names we know, they stand in as surrogates for the many performing women of this period whose names and lives are unknown to us. This chapter makes extensive use of the *Indianapolis Freeman* and illuminates the role played by blues performers within a set of debates about the so-called proper conventions of stage performance by black actors. These debates, chronicled in the *Indianapolis Freeman* by Aida Overton Walker, the actress and dancer, and Sylvester Russell, the critic, demonstrate the significance of the theater for the uplift movement and the threat that working-class blues posed to the bourgeois respectability to which black actors often aspired.

Chapter 2 is organized around the performance career of Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, a Louisiana songster who absorbed and reinvented

the music and dance of the blueswomen of the teens. While contemporary scholarship on Ledbetter generally focuses on the few years during the 1930s that he toured under the management of John and Alan Lomax (two men with their own vexed relationship to the theater), this chapter advances a more comprehensive analysis of Ledbetter's long career, which sustained the theatrical traditions of blues' "classic" period in spite of the increasing demands for authenticity by folklorists and, later, revivalists. Ledbetter's relationship with the Lomaxes emerges as a paradigmatic example of the uneasy relationship between "the folk" and those writers and academics who endeavored to present and represent black vernacular folklore to Northern urban audiences. Finally, this chapter offers a reconsideration of earlier assessments of Ledbetter as apolitical, and of the role played by theatrical blues in the pursuit of racial and economic justice by cultural-front artists in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

In the postwar years, the Southern system of sharecropping underwent a radical shift: planters overhauled the industry by introducing the mechanical cotton picker. This change resulted in massive unemployment and continued dissatisfaction for black workers, triggering an additional wave of the Great Migration. At the same time, blues gained new audiences in the United States and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. The revival of previously neglected musicians and the adoption of blues by white performers such as the Yardbirds resulted in an increased emphasis on authenticity, an authenticity frequently produced by theatrical means. The blues travel of many migrants began to be replaced by the tour as American blues stars spent more and more of their time performing in Europe. Chapter 3 examines some of the unique shifts in blues performance that occurred during this period of transatlantic exchange, particularly the use of theatrical practices and devices to translate the content of African American blues to an audience largely unfamiliar with its musical, theatrical, and political traditions. By exploring the performance of blues on stage and on television, this chapter provides a close reading of the 1964 live show and television program *The Blues and Gospel Train*, a site-specific event held at an abandoned train station decorated with the props of Southern detritus. A landmark event that presented Muddy Waters, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Cousin Joe to an audience of Mancunian teenagers, *The Blues and Gospel Train* crystallized the stakes of theatrical translation during the blues revival. While the arrival of blues in England is most often championed for the influence the music had on soon-to-be-famous British musicians, I emphasize the local significance of these transatlantic tours, and examine *The Blues and Gospel Train* within the specific historic, cultural, and economic contexts of Manchester.

The final chapter of the book explores the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century blues tourism industry of Mississippi Delta towns. In the context of the Clarksdale tourist economy, the theatricality that pervaded earlier iterations of blues performance leaps to the body of the tourist, who is invited to immerse himself or herself in an in situ performance environment. Throughout the Delta, tourist trails draw on living history and theatrical reenactment practices, encouraging visitors to walk in the footsteps of migrants. Accordingly, Clarksdale has staked its claim as the ground zero of blues music, not least because John Lee Hooker, Pinetop Perkins, and dozens of other blues musicians were born there. In the 1990s Clarksdale attempted to build up its local economy by turning its blues history into a tourist attraction: the Delta Blues Museum and the Sunflower Blues and Gospel Festival have since brought thousands of people to the region each year. The Shack Up Inn, a popular accommodation, opened on the site of the former Hopson Plantation, just outside town. Consisting of half a dozen “shotgun shacks” formerly inhabited by sharecroppers, the inn has updated these cabins with heat, electricity, and running water and made them available to travelers for around seventy dollars a night. I conclude the book by reading these and other “scriptive sites” of blues tourism as environments that invite white tourists to stage the blues in a period of late capitalism, remembering theatrical blues of the past, even while their own steps rewrite the history they consume.