Highway 61 Revisited

Figure 1. Jon Short performs on an improvised stage at the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival. Clarksdale, Mississippi, August 2005. (Photo by Paige McGinley)

Paige McGinley
I’m not American, but I’ve seen enough movies to know. Look at American culture. Blues is definitely American culture. Definitely, definitely, definitely. And traveling, it’s part of the American culture. Maybe that’s the reason it’s so . . . symbolic to America: blues and traveling. [...] We are the new nomads.

—Nathan Miller (2005)

A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. Even the elements of his dwelling are conceived in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987:380)

At a certain moment, on the drive south on Highway 61 from Memphis, the world dropped out from under me. The sudden shift in the landscape, from rolling hills to an impossibly flat alluvial plain, signified my arrival in the Mississippi Delta. Already, however, a misidentification, a multiplication: a delta is usually present at the mouth of a river, an area of land created by sedimentary deposits from centuries of river flow. This area, some 350 miles north of where the mouth of the Mississippi empties into the Gulf of Mexico, is not, technically speaking, a delta. Already doubled, multiple, the Mississippi Delta is a sidestep, a delta not at the mouth (endpoint of the weaving yet linear history that is a river’s flow), but off to the side; it is an alluvial plain that is off to the side. Created by years of flooding, and maintained by levees that now strain to maintain the integrity of the Mississippi’s banks—levees like the ones that failed miserably in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina—the Mississippi Delta’s position as “off to the side” corresponds with perceptions of this place as somehow removed from the mainstream of American culture.

The 2005 American Community Survey, administrated by the U.S. Census Bureau, notes that over 20 percent of Mississippi residents live in poverty, a rate higher than that of any other state. In the city of Clarksdale, 36 percent of the residents live below the federal poverty level; in the predominantly African American neighborhood of the “New World District,” the poverty rate is over 60 percent. Just over one-third of the adults in this neighborhood have a high school diploma. In an effort to bolster local economies, towns in the Mississippi Delta have attempted to capitalize on the music-centered tourism that has thrived in cities such as Nashville and Memphis in Tennessee, and, until recently, New Orleans, Louisiana. Towns throughout the Delta—Tutwiler, Cleveland, Leland, Greenwood, Greenville, and especially Clarksdale—have emphasized their critical role in the history of American vernacular music, hoping to draw

1. While the majority of the Mississippi Delta is either African American or white, popular understanding of the Delta as biracial simplifies the diverse ethnic backgrounds of many of its residents. Chinese immigrants arrived in Mississippi during the Reconstruction, serving, for a time, as replacement laborers for planters forced to release African American slaves. Today, many towns in the Delta have a “Wong’s Grocery Store,” attestig to the continued presence of Chinese families in the rural Delta (Cobb 1992:173). Contemporary migrations continue to complicate the monolithic black/white binary that many use to define “the South.” Italian, Lebanese, Mexican, and German immigrants live in Clarksdale; there is currently a group of Mennonites who live devoutly among other Clarksdalians, operating a local restaurant named the Dutch Oven. This ethnic multiplicity is frequently ignored by travel guidebooks in favor of preserving a history of the South that cements the black/white binary. While the treatment of African Americans by white people has been a template that has guided interethnic relations throughout the history of racism in the United States, it is essential not to overlook the vast multiplicity that characterizes not only the largest cities, but also some of the country’s most rural areas.

2. For these and more statistics regarding the socio-economic demographics of Clarksdale, see the results from the 2000 United States Census.

3. As of April 2007, tourism is returning slowly to New Orleans. Mardi Gras and the New Orleans Jazz Festival have both brought tourists to the city and served as an occasion of return for many displaced residents. In a stunning example of disaster tourism, Gray Line Tours has even begun offering bus tours of areas of New Orleans hardest hit by Katrina (see Gray Line Tours 2007).
tourists with money to spend. As the largest city in the northern Delta, Clarksdale (pop. 20,000) has more or less successfully staked its claim as “ground zero” for blues music and culture. However, the ontological claims of priority throughout the Delta, and throughout Clarksdale itself, are multiple and conflicted.

Contemporary “blues tourism” is, in effect, a practice that remembers black diasporic and migrational patterns of “blues traveling.” I set the terms “tourism” and “traveling” in play to distinguish the economic, social, and political circumstances that (often radically) differentiate these two modes of being “on the road.” Blues tourism functions as both a touring of performance and performance history, and as a performance practice in and of itself. These two modes of performance—blues traveling and blues tourism—exist not in a relationship of opposition, but rather in a relationship of dialectical exchange. While one might assume that blues tourism is a present-day affair that remembers historical blues traveling, I suggest that blues tourism participates in a history broader than that which it purports to remember. Likewise, blues travel continues today, as is evidenced most recently by the massive diaspora initiated by Hurricane Katrina and the colossal governmental failures that preceded and followed it.

In considering the “sound travels” of blues tourism, my primary concern is the role of performance as a mode of collective memory in blues traveling and blues tourism. Concentrating specifically on Clarksdale, I have noted several revelatory aspects of blues tourism: competing claims regarding the origin of the blues, the domestic architectures thought to house the blues, and assertions of blues’ alleged death or disappearance. The ghosting of a haunted Delta landscape suggests that, as Joseph Roach argues in Cities of the Dead, the black subject in this circum–Atlantic drama is “forgotten but not gone” (1996:33). Embracing the theatricality of the Delta, my analysis focuses not only on blues tourism as a touring of performance but as performance itself, remembering frequently—but not always—forgotten pasts of black diaspora that (as Hurricane Katrina makes evident) are not gone. My analysis of the multiple birth and death sites of blues suggests that blues tourism offers alternative frameworks for thinking through questions of “seeing” the sights/sites of an imagined authentic. Delta tourism embraces a multiplicity of authenticities, interrogating the concept itself: the multiplicity...
ity of surrogacy replaces the singularity of the authentic (Roach 1996). Surrogacy allows the singular to be made multiple, set in motion, set out on the road. By its inability to definitively mark a substantive site, blues tourism sets authenticity in motion, constructing it as always mobile and multiple. Blues tourism, and the domestic architectures that make up some of its many sites, stage the dialectical tension between being at home and being on the road.

Mine is not an ontological argument about blues and its travels; I concentrate on the discursive and cultural practices and performances that are mobilized by blues tourism, and their relationship to historical performances. Whether knowingly or not, these contemporary performances of pilgrimage, amplifying sound's mobility, refer to and dialogue with sound-traveling performances of blues on the road. On the one hand, I have endeavored toward playing the part of a participant ethnographer; on the other hand, I have maintained my own status as a tourist. But, in addition to being a “blues tourist,” I have been a tourist of the tourists, a tourist of tourism itself. As a tourist of tourism, my analysis is based on: close readings of travel guidebooks; participant observation at a variety of musical performances; interviews with professionals in the tourist industry, tourists themselves, and community members; as well as a reflexive analysis of my own touristic performances, my own aural spectatorship, my own “blues journey.”

**Ground Zero**

*Birthplace of the Blues*

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, various cities and towns in the American Deep South, Mid-South, and Midwest developed a tourist economy that capitalizes on the recent surge of interest in blues, folk, and so-called “roots” music. Fans, tourists, and road trippers (from locales as varied as California, England, Indonesia, and Estonia) have begun to flock to these sites in significant numbers; with a fervor sometimes akin to that of religious devotion, these “pilgrims” to the “holy sites” of this musical history both consume and produce a genealogy of blues performance. Concomitant with this rise in interest is a rapidly developing tourist industry designed to cater to these “blues travelers,” promising a trip through an American soundscape that is also a journey through history.

One of the most popular routes for blues tourism follows an historic route of black migration that wends its way from New Orleans to Chicago, Illinois, passing through what Alan Lomax (1993) termed “the land where the blues began”—the Mississippi Delta. This route of the “Blues Highway” follows Route 61 and the Illinois Central Railroad, approximating one of the key routes of the Great Migration. Travelers along this route follow in the footsteps of the diasporic migration of African Americans from the agrarian rural South to the industrialized urban North that reached its peak in the middle decades of the 20th century. All along this route, different styles of blues flourish (electric blues in Chicago, zydeco in Louisiana, etc.), but no place along the trail captures the tourist imagination more than Clarksdale. Muddy Waters was born here, Bessie Smith died here, and at the famous crossroads of Routes 61 and 4.

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4. My deployment of “authenticity” throughout always presumes the impossibility of “fixing” that the term suggests. Following Benjamin Filene’s argument, I am not attempting to enter a debate of “pure” versus “impure” and “authentic” versus “inauthentic” (2000:3). Just as Filene explores “how these dichotomies have been constructed and how they have shaped the way American music has been understood” (3), I am attempting to explore the ways in which claims of authenticity are deployed, practiced, and performed as efforts to establish some sort of “truth” of blues history.

5. I have traveled several times to the Mississippi Delta; the reflections in this essay are mainly drawn from two “blues journeys” I undertook, one in March 2004 and another in August/September 2005.

6. “Ground zero” is, itself, already multiple. There are three sites of ground zero that spring immediately to mind: the Trinity test site in Los Alamos, New Mexico, that marks the detonation of the atomic bomb in 1945; the site of the World Trade Towers in downtown Manhattan, destroyed by the attacks of 9/11; and Morgan Freeman and Bill Lackett’s blues club in Clarksdale, Mississippi, opened in May 2001.
49, blues guitarist Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the devil for the greatest musical talent ever bestowed upon anyone.

The most important historical factor contributing to the contemporary cultural interest in blues tourism was the blues “revival” of the 1960s that introduced this African American musical form to white audiences. Sprunging from the folk revival movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the blues revival resulted in the re-release of “race” records, the development of the House of Blues franchise, and the long-overdue recognition of blues’ influence on American and British rock and roll music (Titon 1993:220–40). The blues revival also made the transatlantic travels of the blues evident; suddenly, “people realized the British Invasion (particularly the music of the Rolling Stones) was blues-based” (Titon 1993:225). The Yardbirds, the Stones, Clapton: all had absorbed the musical lessons of American blues and had repackaged and exported this music back to its home country. Referring to white Americans’ “reversed ventriloquism” of the black musical voice, Joseph Roach suggests that “the degree to which this voice haunts American memory, the degree to which it promotes obsessive attempts at simulation and impersonation, derives from its ghostly power to insinuate memory between the lines” (1996:69). Blues tourism remembers this forgotten voice, tours the sites of its hauntings, but often only with the goal of “discovering” the music that white rockers had drawn from, without attribution, years before.

Many blues travelers include their tour of the Delta in a larger journey by car that follows the entire route of Highway 61. These tourists perform a reenactment of the Great Migration or, in the case of a journey from Chicago to New Orleans, a reenactment in reverse, a supposed return to the “roots” of American music (i.e., the “Deep” South). Other tourists undertake a journey of more limited scope—flying into Memphis, renting a car and driving the length of Mississippi, and then flying out of New Orleans. Blues tourism dropped sharply immediately following Hurricane Katrina but has been gradually building back up to pre-hurricane levels (Talbot 2006). The annual Sunflower Blues and Gospel Festival in August 2006 attracted 25,000 people to the Clarksdale region, reassuring those whose livelihood depends on tourism that the industry has not been permanently damaged.

Dean MacCannell’s The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class (1976) is an ethnographic and theoretical account of late 20th-century practices of tourism (see also MacCannell 1992).

Figure 2. The legendary crossroads of Routes 61 and 49 at Clarksdale, Mississippi, where it is said Robert Johnson made a deal with the devil to sell his soul in exchange for his brilliant musical gifts. (Photo by Mike and Suzanne Boyle)

7. The very term “revival” suggests that blues was dead and gone; still, I use it here for clarity. The “blues revival” was primarily and problematically used to signify white cultural interest in and recognition of the blues.

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The tourist, MacCannell argues, is a “real person” in all his particularities, but he is also a model for “modern man in general” (1976:1). MacCannell identifies a relationship between tourism and diaspora that locates them as “two ways of being out of place” (1976:5). Though primarily concerned with the status of the tourist, MacCannell also suggests a dialectical relationship between tourism and diaspora, arguing that “it would be theoretically and morally wrong to equate the forced nomadism and homelessness of the refugee and the impoverished with the supercilious voluntaristic Abercrombie and Fitch tourist or other soldiers of fortune.” MacCannell’s analysis calls our attention to the obvious differences in capital (economic, cultural, political) between the tourist and the “refugee” or “nomad” (1976:xxiii).

One need not look very far to see this dialectic at play. On one of my visits, I arrive in Mississippi on 2 September 2005, four days after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast and broken levees inundated New Orleans, some 300 miles to the south. Chaos still reigns in New Orleans, while thousands of displaced people are in the midst of spreading throughout the United States. While lost power and some downed trees are the only “direct” results of Katrina here, there is a significant indirect result: the sudden and continuous influx of displaced people into northern Mississippi. At a gas pump in Cleveland, I wait in a long line and fill up my car as much as the $20 fuel conservation cap will allow. Inside, at the counter, an older man announces to the cashier: “I’m moving here today.” All week long, I am introduced to cousins from Waveland, friends from New Orleans, strangers from Bay St. Louis, all of whom greet me politely with a dazed look and ask me where I’m from and why I’m here.

Much has been written on performances produced for so-called “cultural” tourists. But what of tourism itself as performance? In what ways do certain tourist practices themselves embody a kind of theatrical wandering? MacCannell refers to the touristic experience as a “stage set” (1976:100), but, in doing so, implies that there is no veracity to the experience for the tourist—and that there is an authenticity that exists elsewhere. Drawing on Erving Goffman’s concepts of “front” and “back” regions (Goffman 1959:144–45), MacCannell concludes that the tourist never has access to the authentic back regions of a culture that is not one’s own. This division between authentic and inauthentic tourist consumption prevails in tourist literature, particularly guidebooks; it is, historically, what the entire tourist (and colonial) experience seems to be all about. But what if the tourist seeks or enjoys or gets something else? In contrast to the promises of authentic experience proffered by guidebooks and advertisers, John Urry suggests that there is “no authentic tourist experience, that there are merely a series of games or texts that can be played” (Urry 2002:11). After authenticity, Urry argues, there is “merely” performance. However, blues tourism, with its interrogation of notions of authenticity, is not a Baudrillardian simulacrum of authenticity’s evisceration, but a space of authenticity’s multiplicity and mobility. This space of multiplicity and mobility is accessed through “mere” performance.

“Performance means: never for the first time,” argues Richard Schechner, who defines performance as “twice-behaved behavior” or, alternately, “restored behavior” (1985:36). While both terms imply a kind of doubleness or repetition, “twice-behaved behavior” implies a doubleness localized to one actor: the actor in rehearsal and then in performance, for example, or the teacher who introduces herself anew at the beginning of each semester. “Restored behavior,” however, gestures toward a repetition that is not limited to a single actor. Rather, it suggests a cultural or collective repetition. In this way, historical reenactors can “perform” a history they have never directly experienced, or a priest can perform cultural rituals in repetition, even at his

8. My use of “dialectical exchange” to describe the relationship between blues travel and blues tourism, as well as that between fixity and mobility, is not intended to be a celebration of Enlightenment progress narratives. Dialectical exchange, as I use it here, is not about achieving some kind of teleological resolve, but about irresolvable oscillations back and forth between two related positions. The dialectic of the tourist and the refugee, of being at home and being on the road, is one of constant oscillation, of coexistence. Still, we must not neglect the material conditions that make these fundamentally different positions incapable of being resolved in any sort of Hegelian synthesis.

9. For an excellent example of such work, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s Destination Culture (1998).

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very first Mass. “The original ‘truth’ or ‘source,’” Schechner argues, “may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed” (35). Scholars and artists have embraced and built on Schechner’s formulation, although protesting the supposed “original” that precedes the restoration of behavior (Roach 1996:3).

Performances of tourism are always “restored behavior,” even though a tourist may be “new” to a given locale. While there are certainly repeat visitors to any tourist locale—and the Delta is filled with such repeat visitors—most tourists understand themselves to be experiencing a place for the first time. But are they really? Despite an oft-professed desire to get “off the beaten path,” most tourists are, in fact, traveling a well-trodden path. Following guidebooks, websites, and word-of-mouth recommendations, many tourists consciously replicate the paths of others who have come before them. The recent proliferation of heritage trails or paths make these tourist performances even more explicit.

The “blues highway” or “blues trail” is just one in a series of tourist trails in the U.S. that promises a reenactment experience. Blues tourism is performance as restored behavior, remembering and constructing an “original” of black diaspora, even as it forgets its most powerful lessons. This diasporic movement of blues travel encompasses historical migrations, both forced and chosen, from West African slave capture and transport to the Americas, to the two major African American exoduses of the Great Migration (with waves between 1920 and 1930 and again between 1940 and 1950), to what some scholars are now analyzing as a black “return” to Southern “homes” (Stack 1996). Blues travel, then, is both a set of historical, social, and economic conditions, as well as an aesthetic that governs blues music.

References to geography, travel, and mobility are ubiquitous in blues, particularly Delta blues. The sound of the recurrent train whistle punctuates these diasporic narratives. But travel and mobility are not just thematic objects. Prominent themes in terms of content, they are also, argues Houston Baker Jr., constitutive of a broader blues aesthetic. Blues, according to Baker, is never stable, immobile, fixed. Rather, the blues aesthetic itself, and the cultures for which it serves as a “proper figuration” are mobile, diasporic, multiple (Baker 1984:3). Suggesting the potential for diasporic thought and culture to serve as an alternative to positivist Western Enlightenment models, Baker encourages the cautious embrace of blues’ mobility. Baker’s project aligns a blues ideology of wandering with deconstructionist deferral: “Like signification itself, blues are always nomadically wandering. Like the freight-hopping hobo, they are ever on the move, ceaselessly summing novel experience” (8). Blues tourists, then, not only mimic the wanderings and migrations of blues travelers, but the blues aesthetic of the endless deferral of signification, the never-arriving that signification and blues travel perform. The train never, ever arrives. And the tourist never, ever finds the crossroads. One never arrives. Still, this does not stop her from searching.

Roach’s Cities of the Dead articulates a genealogy of performance that is constituted by circum-Atlantic mobility and travel; without framing it as such, his work takes MacCannell’s “two ways of being out of place” (tourism and diaspora) to heart. Roach’s emphasis on the practices and performances of everyday life, such as parades and funerals, expresses the ways in

10. While there are many, many trails, paths, and tours that function as a mobile linking system between attractions (the Freedom Trail connecting historic sites of the American Revolution in Boston, for example), some trails explicitly promise tourists a reenactment experience. While the Lewis and Clark trail following the path of the explorers across the U.S. to the Pacific Ocean has received perhaps the most press of any cultural tour, a quick internet search reveals dozens of tours throughout the world that invite travelers to “follow in the footsteps” of Alexander the Great, Charles Darwin, Jesus, Miguel de Cervantes and his hero, Don Quixote, and Harry Potter. The prospect of following in the footsteps of another has gained a kind of affective hold in American (and global) culture.

11. “Memphis Blues” (1912; by W.C. Handy) and “Walking Blues” (1936; by Robert Johnson) are but two examples of blues’ localization. Even more frequent, perhaps, are the blues songs that suggest or narrate a journey for its singer. For example, singing “Goin’ Where the Southern Cross the Dog” (1903; composer unknown) sets the music and the musician in motion.
which collective memory rhizomatically erupts, repeats, and reinvents itself through a process of surrogation. Surrogation, Roach argues, always has an imagined relationship to what it constructs as origin: “[T]he doomed search for originals by constantly auditioning stand-ins is the most important of the many meanings that users intend when they say the word performance” (1996:3). Blues tourism, I argue, performs through surrogation as a cultural remembering and reinvention of blues travel. Even as they traverse the spaces of the Delta and consume the Delta’s cultural products, many blues tourists express little understanding of themselves as repeating and revising black diaspora.

Whether we know it or not, blues tourists (and I myself) replicate journeys that have gone on before. Not only is blues tourism mimetic of blues travel and traveling blues, but it also reenacts the journeys of other blues tourists like myself: researchers, questers, pilgrims of a kind. De Soto is haunting me. “The first Delta tourist,” according to a local tourist guide, he and I are involved in a strange affair (Clarksdale Press Register 2004). As traveling academics, people of cultural and (sometimes) economic capital, do we ever relinquish our status as “tourist”? Clarksdale, I’ve heard, gets “a lot of media, or documentarians, people working on a dissertation, photographers, writers” (Stolle 2005). Implicated in a history of touring the wandering stages of the American South, we blues tourists are enthusiastic participants in a sonic move of repetition and difference. When John and Alan Lomax welded a 350-pound recording machine to the back of their car in 1933 and traveled throughout the South recording vernacular music, they were embarking on a journey that was always already in repetition of others that came before (Filene 2000; Lomax 1993). The ecstatic and disappointing realization of all tourists (and tourist-academics): Others have been here before me. I am not unique.

Sites of blues tourism are, primarily, “birth” and “death” sites, and Clarksdale has plenty of both. There are competing places of the origin of blues, and each place draws its share of visitors. It’s not as though visitors subscribe to a specific origin, however; rather, blues tourism is constituted, in part, by visiting the many birthplaces of the blues. The competitive claims on blues’ birth reflect the challenge in establishing criteria for determining the site of a musical form’s generation. The multiple sites of blues’ “origin”—and the apparent lack of drive to reconcile these multiple claims—suggest a compelling argument regarding blues travel, blues tourism, and sites of origin. The irreconcilability of these claims, and their peaceful coexistence, promotes an alternative discourse of tourism, one that embraces the multiplicity and contradictory nature of its sites, refusing to reduce them to the unitary, the singular, the One.

Still, deterministic origin stories persist. Dockery Farms, the home of Charley Patton, is often cited as the locale where Delta blues was first played. The town of Tutwiler, too, stakes a claim as the birthplace of the blues; the giant water tower on Highway 49 that leads into the town proclaims: “Welcome to Tutwiler, MS. Where the Blues Was Born.” It was here that W. C. Handy dozed off while waiting for a train at the railway station, awakening to the music of an unknown guitarist who sang “Goin’ Where the Southern Cross the Dog.” Though Handy was not the first publisher nor composer of blues by a long shot, he brought the blues to a wide audience in compositions and recordings, earning him the (overstated) title “Father of the Blues” (Palmer 1982:45).

Still others cite Hopson Plantation as the location where the blues were born. This claim is based less on the musical histories of the late 19th century and more on the material conditions of the mid-20th century engendered by developments at the plantation: the mechanical cotton picker was invented at Hopson in 1944. This invention, combined with the growing use of defoliants (a chemical that causes the leaves to fall off prior to harvest), resulted in major job losses for many African American tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The major northerly migration from Mississippi occurred during this time, with hundreds of thousands of black workers and families leaving for the North. For these reasons, Bill Talbot (2005) claims Hopson as the birthplace of economic and cultural blues, the blues of being on the road, of leaving home.
House of Blues

The association of Mississippi (“the hospitality state”) with “home” is one of the most persistent tropes in American regionalist discourse; this Delta motif participates in a dialectic between home (fixity) and being on the road (mobility). Appearing repeatedly in the iconography and marketing of blues tourism, the Delta home invites visitors to leave home in order to come home. Upon entering the state on Interstate 55, a road sign greets me: “Mississippi: It’s Like Coming Home.” When read alongside other representations of home in the Delta, the grammatical construction of this sign emerged as striking. In 2003—designated by the U.S. Congress as the “Year of the Blues”—Martin Scorsese produced a series of seven films for public television that explored various aspects of the blues; the series, sponsored by Volkswagen (who had obviously picked up on the associations between blues and traveling), was accompanied by a website that encouraged visitors to take their own virtual blues “road trip” (PBS 2003). Scorsese himself directed the first film, titling it Feel Like Going Home, a title that is echoed throughout other touristic productions. A King Biscuit Blues Festival poster is perhaps most explicit: “Blues is like coming home.” The trope of “coming home” or “going home” in relation to the blues proliferates in blues lyrics as well. Note that blues is not like home, but that blues is like coming home. The peculiar grammatical construction here hints that while blues is indeed constitutive of home, it is never fixed in the way that “home” suggests. Rather, blues is like “coming home,” a gerund forever in motion, never arriving, at home on the road, always in progress, a continuous happening.

Actual houses on the tourist trail literalize the motif of home so prominent in blues tourist rhetoric. It comes as no surprise that the trope of home finds its expression—its performance—in the domestic architectures (stages) that proliferate in blues tourism, as both sites to visit and places to stay. I offer Muddy Waters’s cabin and the Shack Up Inn as paradigmatic examples of the literalization of what I’m calling the “home on the road” dialectic—the irresolvable tension between being at home and being on the road that blues tourism stages. Investigations of domestic Delta architecture demonstrate the ways that homes move on, that they are both the site of authenticity and its undoing.

The Shack Up Inn, located on the Hopson Farm—formerly the Hopson Plantation—and run by self-described “old hippie” Bill Talbot, consists of half a dozen “shotgun shacks” formerly

12. The idea of “the South”—and especially Mississippi—as “home” relies to a great extent on the notions of home produced by ascent and descent narratives in African American literature. Robert Stepto’s studies in African American literature and narrative are particularly instructive in this regard. Stepto’s From Behind the Veil explores immersion narratives, which follow African Americans’ diasporic movements throughout the United States. Stepto’s analysis allows us to consider blues tourism as an immersion narrative, defined as a “ritualized journey into a symbolic South” (1979:167). Blues tourism, then, is mimetic not only of the black diaspora away from the South, but a reenactment of the immersion narrative of “coming home” (Nyong’o 2005).
inhabited by sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and their descendants throughout the Mississippi Delta (Talbot 2005). Relocated to the Hopson Farm in Clarksdale by Talbot and the other co-owners of the Inn (“the shackmeisters”), pressure washed, and updated with heat, electricity, and running water, the cabins are available to travelers for around 60 dollars a night. While each cabin dates from the early 20th century and was usually separated from its neighbor, the setup of the Shack Up Inn places these cabins close to each other, creating a kind of street that evokes the architectural arrangement of slave quarters in the 19th century. History slips and slides at the Shack Up Inn; it is unclear exactly which era the Inn is meant to evoke. As a destination for many who travel to Clarksdale to consume its musical history (the renowned Delta Blues Museum is located downtown), the Shack Up Inn interrogates the very nature of shacking up itself, of performatively imagining history by sleeping in history’s bed and drinking on history’s porch. It is both charming and insidious, appealing and terrifying. The effect evokes the sense of a fun house, a place out of place, a place of displacement. The stability of this home, its fixity as a site, is already becoming undone, unmade.

When I asked Talbot for his advice as to which cabin I should choose upon my arrival, he suggested the Robert Clay Shack, explaining “it’s a soulful shack.” Thinking Robert Clay might be an obscure bluesman, I searched the web but turned up nothing. Upon my arrival, however, the reasons for the shack’s “soulfulness” were clear: it was the most recently inhabited of all the cabins, by a man named Robert Clay, who had lived his whole life in this home without the heat, plumbing, and electricity that now made it suitable for my stay. He had died only five years previously.

The shacks are filled, floor to ceiling, with objects—stuff, clutter. Like the tourist-academic walking in the door of the Robert Clay shack, these furnishings and décor are all out of place and, yet, don’t seem so at first. Everything, like the cabin itself, has a sense of age about it—even the piano in the corner is old and missing keys. It is, more or less, a collection of kitsch, of castoffs, and of garbage. Not only that, there are many objects that appear to have been left behind by previous tourists (or tourist-academics). The evidence planted for future investigators includes: business cards, tiny bottles of shampoo, CDs, a flute, Mardi Gras beads, magazines, books, funeral cards, as well as empty bottles of bourbon, wine, and many, many kinds of beer. The walls are covered with family photographs of unknowable families, needlepoints of black children in cotton fields, certificates and awards, and theatrical masks. The place is a pastiche of assorted fantasies of Southern histories, blues music, and various paraphernalia of all kinds of vacation vices.

Rather than functioning as a modernist location of authenticity in the primitive, the Shack Up Inn is a postmodern wink at authenticity’s possibilities. It is not the 19th-century museum, nor 21st-century reality television, but some strange marriage of the two. Museum and stage, artifact and prop, authentic and fake…the objects that fill the space are undecidable, dislocated in time and space. It is this refusal of the certainty of the authentic that lends the Shack Up Inn to the theatrical. The masks on the wall, the script of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof on the top of the piano, the proscenium arrangement of the porch in relation to the street, and the sheet music for John Lennon’s “Imagine” at the piano are all self-referential markers of the Shack Up Inn’s theatricality.

The Shack Up Inn reflects the trope of South-as-stage, and its artifacts tell a story. The objects establish and perpetuate the trope, with the South as a stage of incomplete history, of history as and of detritus. They name and create the way blues emanates from this place—and how the very architecture, furnishings, and landscape of the Inn and the Plantation call forth these historical performances. The Shack Up Inn produces a genealogy of blues performance. Tourists are invited to stay in the houses that (quite literally, to some) gave birth to the blues. Like stages filled with remnants of some performance that took place long ago, we see the ghosts and instruments of performance everywhere. The phantasmagorical character and the trash of history at the Inn evokes historical actors, historical scenarios, informed by the tourist’s
presence, her perspectives, her fantasies—and her own contributions and modifications to this space, as the invitation is that each visitor might leave behind an object, a kind of calling card, a memento for future wayfarers.

There is a TV in my cabin (circa 1970), but it only has one channel: “Blues TV.” Blues TV has no picture; it is a sound-only music channel. That an apparatus usually thought of as part and parcel of visual culture is evacuated of its visual capacities, only to be replaced by sound, is indicative of what Talbot calls “the spiritual-audio thing” that characterizes blues tourism (2005). There is a VCR as well, and a video, nothing short of amazing: the 1985 blockbuster hit Back to the Future (Zemeckis and Gale 1985), a film that is symptomatic of the broader project of the Shack Up Inn. In the movie, 1980s teenager Marty McFly befriends Doctor Emmett Brown, an eccentric mad-professor type. After a series of mishaps, Marty finds himself accidentally catapulted back in time in Doc’s time machine. Landing in 1955, Marty must stay out of the way of the burgeoning relationship between his high school–age father and mother—whose sexual desire complicates the scenario as she begins to fall for Marty. As the certainty of Marty’s future birth is called into question, he finds his image disappearing from a 1985 photograph, a souvenir from the future. Driven by Oedipal anxiety, Marty deflects his mother’s desire and assists in his parents’ courtship at the high school dance. Joining a young Marvin Berry on the stage, guitar-playing Marty transforms the African American band’s doo-wop sound into pure rock ‘n’ roll as he leads them all in a rendition of “Johnny B. Goode.” We see the band leader excitedly on the phone with his cousin, shouting “Chuck! Chuck! It’s Marvin—your cousin, Marvin BERRY. You know that new sound you’re looking for? Well, listen to this!” And he holds out the receiver to Marty’s music. Marty, then, is given credit not only for saving himself and his siblings, but for essentially inventing rock ‘n’ roll by steering it away from black music. When Marty returns to 1985, he finds his parents hip and in love, his siblings successful and happy, and a new pickup truck in the garage, ready and waiting for a “camping trip” with his girlfriend. Black music props up Back to the Future; it functions as an unacknowledged engine that drives history forward, yet one that must be only alluded to, never centered. Through the time travel of Emmett Brown and Marty McFly, black music is reimagined as invented by whites.13

Just like the music of Chuck Berry in Back to the Future, blues music is ostensibly at the center of the tourist enterprise of the Shack Up Inn, but surprisingly marginalized, displaced to make room for a sense of leisure. Blues emerges from labor, from work songs, from the cotton fields that are right outside the back door. But as a tourist destination, the Shack Up Inn must recenter its narrative to be a narrative of leisure, one in which pianos, Mardi Gras beads, and liquor bottles dominate. The most disturbing aspect of blues tourism is its “making a fetish of the work of others” (MacCannell 1976:6). The worst part of this displacement and recentering is that it happens nearly entirely along racial lines. It is effected, in part, by the necessity of making white tourists (and they are almost all white) feel “at home” here—while reveling in feeling out of place. Indeed, if my visits are any indication—and my research suggests that this is the rule rather than the exception—tourists staying at the Shack Up Inn can experience the “birthplace of the blues” surrounded entirely by Euro-Americans and Western Europeans. Contrast this with Red’s, a juke joint in the center of town, or the Riverside Hotel—places that bring together black and white locals and tourists in both serious analysis and playful celebration of Clarksdale’s painful histories and musical legacies. But at the Shack Up Inn, the white theatrical mask, the photograph of the white family that hangs on the wall, an antique tintype photograph of an anonymous white man tucked casually inside the picture frame that holds a larger photograph of Robert Clay—this trash of history serves as a crucial component of its rewriting, a way of refocusing and recentering racial history as economic history and economic history as musical history.

13. Director Spike Lee is perhaps the most well-known person to criticize Back to the Future’s rewriting of musical history—I’m certainly not the first—but this movie’s seemingly coincidental presence in the Shack Up Inn invites a reconsideration of the history, genealogy, music, and time travel that it narrates (Lee 2001).
The Shack Up Inn concludes that race is not the authentic marker of the blues; rather, geography and poverty are its conditions. The blues is born not from slavery, nor from racial discrimination, nor from Jim Crow—but from impoverishment, from a lack of running water, heat, and electricity. While other hotels might let visitors off the hook with their ahistoricism and amnesia, the Shack Up Inn both does and does not. It displaces racial discrimination to the margins, but indicts the poverty of Mississippi, and of Clarksdale, specifically. Located in one of the poorest counties in the poorest state, the Shack Up Inn initiates a conversation on class and standards of living, even as it circumvents the racism that makes poverty's racial and ethnic distribution fundamentally unequal.

The Shack Up Inn is a motel for weary travelers—former homes turned into homes-away-from-home. Blues travel and blues tourism are suffused with this rhetoric; the history of Muddy Waters’s cabin, for example, literalizes the ways in which blues travel and blues tourism are represented as being at home on the road. McKinley Morganfield—known as Muddy Waters to his friends and, eventually, the world—was born in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, in 1915, but moved to Stovall Plantation, just outside Clarksdale, at the age of two. Waters popularized an urbanized (electric) version of Delta blues after moving to Chicago in the midcentury; Alan Lomax recorded Waters in Mississippi in 1941/1942 and mythologized the experience in his book, The Land Where the Blues Began (1993). Lomax recorded Muddy Waters on the front porch of Waters’s cabin at Stovall; not surprisingly, a theatricality of blues travel accrues to the very architecture of Waters’s home, which perhaps explains his cabin’s own circuitous routes throughout the United States.

Waters’s home was frequently visited by blues tourists until 1996, when the House of Blues franchise removed it from the site. The conditions of its removal are unknown. Official reports claim that the cabin was leased by the House of Blues from the Stovall family; some local residents have suggested to me that House of Blues stole the cabin in the middle of the night. Regardless, this much is clear: Waters’s cabin was dismantled, reconstructed, and then taken on tour throughout the country, used “to spice up stage sets at concerts” (Knight 2001:132). It was also displayed at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta (Cheseborough 2004:87). Not only do front porches of sharecroppers’ cabins act as a kind of proscenium stage, the homes themselves function as a mise-en-scène of blues performance. The home is the key stage set; only the railroad runs a close second. But these homes are rarely fixed, located. Rather, these are quite literally mobile homes; just like the Shack Up Inn cabins, Muddy Waters’s cabin is also a home set out on the road, an acoustic instrument that travels throughout the United States.14

14. Many of the homes in the Mississippi Delta functioned as actual musical instruments. A piece of wire—often from the handle of a broom—was fastened vertically to a house, which became a kind of diddly-bow. The empty house functioned as a sonic resonator when the wire was plucked, and the whole house made music (Talbot 2005).
architectural homes are mimetic of their former residents—out on the road, performing their mobilized soundscape.

Waters's home is now installed, in semi-reconstructed form, as an exhibit at the Delta Blues Museum. Its time on the road is, apparently, complete. Transformed from a traveling sight to a site of travel, Waters's house nonetheless retains its iconic status. Visitors can walk inside Waters's home, where they find photos, guitars, records, and a telegram from the Rolling Stones. There is also a life-size, lifelike mannequin of Muddy Waters, sitting on a stool, playing an electric guitar. Dressed in a fancy suit and tie and playing electric, this is clearly the urban (famous) Muddy Waters, returned home, in a sense, to his old Delta shack. It is as if Waters, too, is a kind of Delta tourist, home for a visit. Next to the mannequin is a marker, but one that suggests a gravestone—made out of granite, engraved with his formal name, McKinley Morganfield. If the sense of being at home on the road were not clear enough, there sits in the corner, incongruously and without any sort of identifying context, an old wooden highway marker that reads, simply, “61.”

The architectural homes in the Delta—and here, I have used the Shack Up Inn and Muddy Waters's cabin as examples—transform the trope of home from one of fixity to one of mobility. At home on the road, the home of the blues is always moving on. The “authentic” sites of blues’ birthplace are set into motion, stolen in the middle of the night, relocated, and pressure washed. Travelers feel at home here, where the road sign proclaims “Mississippi, the Hospitality State.”

Late night at Red’s, celebrating bluesman Robert Belfour’s 65th birthday: After a barbecue sandwich from the pit on the sidewalk, I’m inside, drinking Bud Light from a can, swatting mosquitoes, and chatting with tourists, “locals,” musicians, and Red himself, who wears dark glasses indoors and calls me “Rhode Island.” Big T, a local musician, and I start to talk about his recent tours to Boston and Seattle. He wears a football jersey and we talk about the favorite conversation of travelers: the weather. New England winters, we realize, are rough for both of us. The itinerancy of blues musicians has, in a sense, been replaced/commodified by the tour. Favorite stories are passed around, usually about food and weather, about how Belfour tried to get fried fish in Italy and ended up with calamari.

The ghost of Robert Johnson hangs over blues tourism in the Delta. Johnson is mythologized as the preeminent blues musician, one whose radical talent came from a negotiation with the devil enacted at the famous crossroads. Tourism has sprung up around the legends of Johnson's mysterious death and the selling of his soul; tourists routinely visit Johnson's multiple alleged graves. They also always head down to crossroads, the intersection of Highways 49 and 61 where Johnson reportedly sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his great musical gift. The crossroads has become such a clear and convenient metonym for Clarksdale’s blues heritage that a tacky guitar marker now stands at the intersection of 49 and 161 (old 61). Still, residents and guidebooks both insist that the “real” crossroads are located elsewhere, though where exactly “elsewhere” is remains indefinite. The roads have been widened and moved several times; the feasibility of determining a substantive site is all but impossible.

Johnson’s death and burial are as mysterious as his life, and blues tourism has capitalized on this ambiguity. Reportedly poisoned by a jealous husband in Three Forks Store in the town of Quito, Johnson died in 1938 at the age of 27, somewhere in the nearby town of Greenwood. Where he was buried has been a constant source of debate among Mississippi residents and, especially, tourists. At present, there are three sites that bear gravestones to Johnson; accounts that Johnson was buried at “Zion Church” have led researchers and enthusiasts to erect gravestones to Johnson at sites in Morgan City, Quito, and along Money Road, just north of Greenwood. In guidebooks, all three sites are always listed, and many tourists visit all of them (Knight 2001:107–08; Cheseborough 2004:123–26).

John Connell and Chris Gibson locate the concept of musical authenticity in relation to place (2003:27). But blues, both presently and historically, subverts the idea that music might indeed have an originary site. Or, perhaps, it establishes its site(s) as transitive, rather than substantive:
a sited non-site, a site in motion. It is the multiplicity of “authentic” sites, I argue, the unfindability and indeterminacy of the crossroads, that is a common feature across blues tourism; unable or unwilling to locate singular positivist sites of birth, death, and event, blues tourism embraces the multiplicity of these sites, acknowledging that there is always more than One. The sites of blues tourism and blues travel are forever always moving on, deferred, never arriving.

As Robert Palmer argues, “the familiarity and ubiquity of the crossroads in Delta iconography lends an added immediacy to Johnson’s tale of terror” (1982:162). The ubiquity and unidentifiability of blues’ sites, the fact that they are, in a way, without ground, or only the ground that they stand on, marks them as what Nick Kaye terms “transitive” sites. Kaye’s argument unhinges the concepts of “site” and “site-specificity” from a positivist ontology that would ground the site, definitively fixing and locating it. Making a distinction between “substantive” (positivist) and “transitive” (mobile, difference) definitions of site, Kaye argues that it is performance that works to destabilize substantive understandings of site (2000:12). Performance displaces the site, sets it in motion. Mobile performances undermine the idea that “site-specific work might even assert a ‘proper’ relationship with its location, claiming an ‘original and fixed position’ associated with what it is” (1). Setting sites in motion troubles the distinction between “real” and “imaginary” sites, locating sites as radically contingent, theatrical. The mobilization of the road trip that takes the tourist from birthplace to birthplace, from crossroads to crossroads, ungrounds the substantive site of blues tourism and makes it transitive, displaces it, sets it in motion. These transitive sites of blues tourism always move on from each other; they are generated in circulation by the flow of tourists, the embrace of the multiple.

**Killing Yourself to Live**

There’s a Mississippi mystique that probably goes back to the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s, when this was a taboo land in that, you know, blacks wouldn’t come here. The ones that lived here probably lived in fright a lot. And if you were a long-haired hippie guy you didn’t want to come here—you’d get your hair cut off and strung up on a pole. […] It’s just got that element of being a scary place; it was that way for a long time because people were crazy here. You know, it was like the Free State of Mississippi. You’d get away with murder here, and a lot of people did get away with murder and it left that kind of feeling that people didn’t want to come here because they were actually afraid for their lives to come here. But now that cloud has lifted and now I think we’re like the last frontier because, you know, you’ve always heard about Mississippi and then you heard about the blues too. So there’s a lot of curiosity in the Mississippi mystique.

—Bill Talbot (2005)

There is a “cult of death” in blues tourism; obsessed with blues’ disappearance and absence, it morbily fixes on the death of blues musicians. Little Milton, R.L. Burnside, and Jessie Mae Hemphill all died between the summer of 2005 and the summer of 2006; each time a blues musician dies, the ubiquity of blues’ “passage” is mourned. The response to many of these passings has been a kind of generation veneration, a respect for and championing of blues musicians that both mourns and celebrates the so-called “death of the blues.” I read this insistence on blues’ death as a disavowal of present conditions, of the poverty, illiteracy, and poor healthcare that characterize the lives of many contemporary Delta blues musicians.

If blues’ sites are framed as homes, homelands, and birthplaces, such framing often suggests that blues is no longer at home; Delta blues are frequently framed as absent, dead, or dying. Not only do birth sites and homes (Shack Up Inn, Muddy Waters’s cabin, Dockery Farms, the Tutwiler train tracks, etc.) figure prominently in blues tourism, so too do various “death sites,”

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15. I am drawing the title of this section from Chuck Klosterman’s 2005 book, *Killing Yourself to Live: 85% of a True Story*. Klosterman, a writer for *Spin* magazine, narrates his own road trip throughout the United States, visiting death sites of famous rock musicians along the way. Why, he asks, is a spectacular death the greatest career move for a musician?
such as gravestones and graveyards. Although some argue for blues' continued vitality, dominant discourse constitutes blues as "on the way out." For example, Palmer, long considered an authority on the history and musicology of blues, claims that:

The area is no longer a source of musical innovation and hasn't been since the plantations automated and the northward migration that had begun before World War I finally peaked sometime in the 1950s. But Delta blues, deep blues, is still alive, especially in Chicago [...] And of course it's alive in California and New York and London and Paris and Stockholm and Moscow—wherever Delta bluesmen tour and Delta expatriates live, wherever, for that matter, people play or listen to blues-derived rock 'n' roll. (1982:202)

And while the claim of a dead or dying musical culture entices some tourists to undertake journeys that tourist-turned-resident Roger Stolle (2005) described to me as the “Dead Man Blues Tour” many tourists are surprised to find that “live” blues still thrives in the Delta, and that a new generation of musicians is continuing to innovate. Considering the large and growing number of young musicians learning and playing blues in Clarksdale today, such proclamations of blues’ “death” seem both macabre and hasty. Still, Palmer is not alone in his seemingly automatic invocation of discourses of “death” and “life” regarding blues. Despite the efforts of many to make blues disappear, there is a strong countereffort in the Delta to make sure that the blues remain. Blues and blues musicians remain, but they “remain differently” (Schneider 2001:101). They remain in motion.

The assumption that the blues is dead or dying is dominant in blues tourism discourse, as is the notion that blues is “disappearing” or absent. The fetishization of the death of a generation is symptomatic of this assumption. There are other ways, however, that Delta blues gets produced as dead, dying, lost. Films like Robert Mugges’s The Last of the Mississippi Jukes (2003), for example, cite these traditional performance venues as having disappeared, even though clubs continue to thrive in Clarksdale, Jackson, and Merigold. Countering Peggy Phelan's claim that performance “becomes itself through disappearance” (1993:146), Rebecca Schneider suggests that we “approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance (though not a metaphysics of presence)” (2001:103). Blues tourism—the “Dead Man Blues Tour”—scripts performance as disappearing, but, just as Schneider suggests, it cannot remain gone for very long.

Constructed as vanished or absent, blues, and the material conditions of black poverty and subjugation from which it arises, are disavowed. Furthermore, the (racialized) bodies of the performers themselves are disappeared (see Taylor 1997). The disavowal of impoverished black communities is persistent in U.S. culture, a percepticide of the highest order. The shocking events of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in 2005 demonstrated the degree to which poor black communities have been deliberately pushed to the margins of society by both the media and, most especially, by the current Bush administration. The shock of the world that African American poverty persisted with such appalling brutality in New Orleans strangely parallels that of the tourist’s “discovery” of this forgotten space of rural deprivation. The erasure of the blues is a political erasure, a determination to see racism only as an historical object, not as something that remains our most critical national emergency.

A counterdiscourse of remaining resists the discourse of blues’ disappearance. This counterdiscourse highlights the regularity of “live” blues happening in the Delta, as well as the various music schools that pass on the blues repertoire to young children. Indeed, it is in this “passing on” that blues remains.16 “Passing on” allows us to think through the contradiction that is produced when I insist upon blues’ remaining, but its simultaneous “moving on.” Without

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16. My figuration of blues as “passing on” is deeply indebted to Rebecca Schneider's work on the passerby (2003). I retain the doubling of the phrase “passing on,” in order to connote both remaining-in-motion as well as the euphemistic reframing of death as passing on.
resorting to pure presence as a counter to disappearance, blues’ remaining is always already moving on, moving out.

The myths of the crossroads produce the soundscape of the Delta as a haunted one; it is a landscape haunted by, and through, sound. On a quiet night at the Shack Up Inn, I am walking across the property. The soft sounds of blues music haunt the landscape; I’m not sure where this music is coming from. In the morning, I learn that the “Blues TV” is left on throughout the night, even in the uninhabited shacks. For a moment, the plucking of the guitar is like a ghost from my future.

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