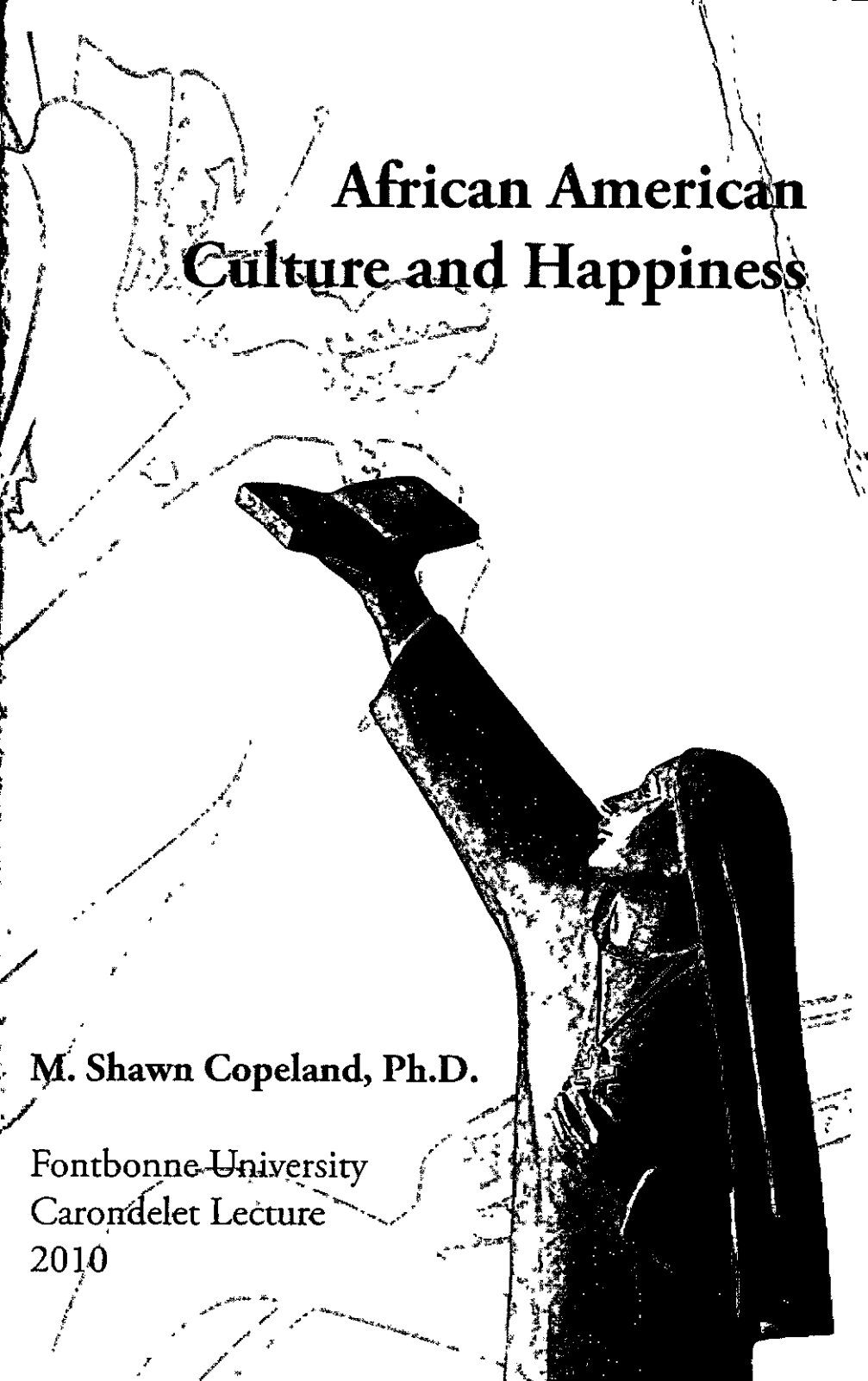
African American Culture and Happiness



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Fontbonne University

Carondelet Lecture

2010

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AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AND HAPPINESS

M. SHAWN COPELAND, PH.D.

Introduction

Can the people who brought you the blues be happy? African Americans are happy sometimes, although we are not like our Irish cousins whose wars are said to be merry and whose songs are said to be sad. In the diverse and complex matrix that is African American culture, perhaps the closest approximation to this old favorite about the people of the Emerald Isle is the New Orleans "jazz funeral"—a slow, sorrowful lament ushers the body to the cemetery; a quick, jazzed second-line leads the mourners to the joyful remembrance that follows. Sometimes, African Americans are not happy: like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we nod ironically when misunderstood, misused, and maligned; and, like them, we take up bittersweet, sometimes self-deprecating, humor to "change the joke and slip the yoke."[1] Of course sometimes we are happy; although we are not like our Anglo-Saxon cousins, who often pay out their pleasure either in ponderous measure or jaded excess; at home we enthuse, spill over, laugh at our predicament as well as ourselves, but often, when visiting, we carry ourselves with gingered ease. Like our Italian brothers and sisters, we are expansive and animated in the delight of the table—family and cherished ones, good and plentiful food, lively and teasing talk—although we may drink a little less wine.[2]

These broad-brushed strokes of cultural comparison evoke humor of a gentle sort; they also paint happiness as a rather "homely," even simple, pursuit. Can the people who brought you the blues be happy? The question intimates the basic paradox of happiness: all people want happiness, few can define it, even fewer report achieving it completely. Poet, dramatist, and

[1] Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 45-59, in his *Shadow and Act* (1953; 1964; New York: Random House, 1972).

[2] Carlo Rotella, "Italian-Americans: The Dons of Suburbia," *The Boston Globe*, Opinion Page, A9, 11 October 2010.

essayist LeRoi Jones, perhaps better known to some of you as Amiri Baraka, anticipated this query nearly fifty years ago, stating that African Americans are "blues people." We might test his assertion with a syllogism:

Major Premise: African Americans are blues people.
Minor Premise: The blues narrate irony and sorrow.
Conclusion: Therefore, African Americans or blues people are not happy.

On the other hand, a recent study by University of Pennsylvania economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers argues that African Americans are getting happier.[4] The two economists conclude that although the percentage of whites who self-identified as "'not too happy'—as opposed to 'pretty happy' or 'very happy'—remains at 10 percent," as was the case in the 1970s, blacks are happier.[5] Why? The shrinking disparity in income and wealth between whites and blacks may explain much, Stevenson and Wolfers observe, but does not explain everything.[6] These researchers suggest that the decline, although not the eradication, of day-to-day anti-black racism, hostility, and insult may account for far more than money.[7]

Happiness, the most desired of human goals, remains tantalizingly elusive; happiness defies logic, expectation, and economics. What is happiness? What conditions or experiences constitute it, and on what does it depend? If happiness is the highest good as Aristotle thought, how should we live in order to be happy? To what extent might the realization of happiness exist within our control? Is it possible to be truly happy if one's life is shattered by suffering, illness, or oppression? To what extent might a relationship with God affect happiness?

How might we respond to these questions from within the complex contours of African American culture? To what does African American culture refer? With the phrase "African American culture,"[8] I intend those meanings and values which, dynamically in the past and into the present, continue to inform the way the descendants of the enslaved Africans live in the United States. Those meanings and values emerge from the joy and sorrow, love and labor, genius and suffering of incarnate originating principles, and are expressed in their living, and in their material as well as spiritual expressions of music, literature, art, and philosophy. Through probing some of these artifacts, we may tease out some responses to these questions about happiness.

[3] LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963).

[4] In the past few decades, economists, sociologists, psychologists, and neurobiologists have joined theologian, ethicists, and philosophers in research on happiness. The literature is large and sprawling; two examples, Sissela Bok, *Exploring Happines: From Aristotle to Brain Science* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), and Bruno S. Frey et al, *Happiness: A Revolution in Economics* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2008)

[5] David Leohardt, "For Blacks, Progress in Happiness," *The New York Times*, Business Day, B1; see also, Julia Baird, "Blacks Are Getting Happier," *Newsweek*, August 27, 2010.

[6] David Leonhardt, "For Blacks, Progress in Happiness," *The New York Times*, Business Day, B12.

[7] Ibid.

[8] In this lecture, I use the terms African American and black interchangeably, but in both cases it denotes the descendants of the enslaved people in the United States. I am *not* referring to immigrants of African descent either from the Contintent or the Diaspora.

Our inquiry into the relation of African American culture and happiness will move in three stages: we begin with the contradiction that bondage or chattel slavery presents to happiness. To ask about African American culture without attending to the anvil of chattel slavery would be to erase a defining and signifying, although not determining, event of the black lifeworld. The experiences of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs provide coordinates by which to probe the impact of chattel slavery on human happiness. Next, our inquiry presses the connections between identity, value, social life, and happiness. Here, the disparate work of W. E. B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston set the coordinates for reflection. Finally, once more, we ask, "Can the people who brought you the blues be happy?" And here the reflection focuses on the blues.

HAPPINESS, BONDAGE, AND FREEDOM

Consider philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's statement of the theme of his *Social Contract*, written in 1762: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains."[9] During spring 2010, this work was required reading for students in a course I teach regularly, "Person and Social Responsibility" (known at Boston College as PULSE). During the same semester, a doctoral student and I together read material centered on his interests in postcolonial identity, hybridity, Caribbean philosophy and theology. This directed readings course included C. L. R. James's trenchant discussion, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* and eight or nine other texts.[10] Reading Rousseau in the wider cultural and social context generated by these works and the questions they generated exposed the gaping chasm between his conceptualist and metaphoric chains and the bruising metal chains binding enslaved Africans, whether in Haiti, Baltimore, or North Carolina. Philosopher Lewis Gordon engages this bitter paradox and reformulates Rousseau's statement: "The slave is born in chains, but she has freedom in her bosom—how is this possible?"[11]

Frederick Douglass knows the yearning of freedom and meditates on its meaning and the meaning of being human in his autobiography, *My Bond-*

[9] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 156.

[10] C. L. R James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* 2nd rev. ed (1938; New York: Random House, 1963).

[11] Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 44.

age, *My Freedom*.[12] Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in February 1818. His mother, Harriet Bailey, was a slave and his father an unknown white man. For the first six years of his life, he lived with his grandmother Betsy Bailey. In the following passage, he recalls the day on which his grandmother delivers him, at the age of six, to Holme Hill Farm on the plantation of slaveholder Edward Lloyd.[13] Douglass reconstructs in minute detail the fear, confusion, even dread that he felt as his grandmother led him on a twelve-mile journey through the woods in stifling heat. He remembers his first glimpse of the "great houses loom[ing] up in different directions, and a great many men and women at work in the fields."[14] And he recalls the moment of his staggering realization that he was a slave:

> I was a slave—born a slave—and though the fact was incomprehensible to me, it conveyed to my mi`nd a sense of my entire dependence on the will of *somebody* ...Born for another's benefit, as the firstling of the cabin flock I was soon to be selected as a meet offering to the fearful and inexorable *demigod*, whose huge image on so many occasions haunted my childhood's imagination.[15]

Harriet Jacobs's account of her grasp of her condition of bondage is equally poignant. Born in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813 to Delilah and Elijah, a carpenter of exceptional skill, Jacobs lived the first six years of her life in what she describes as a "comfortable home,"[16] untainted by the shadow of slavery. Forty-five years later, writing under the pseudonym of Linda Brent in order to evade identification, capture, and reenslavement, Jacobs opens her narrative with these words: "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away."[17] Jacobs's lightly complected father Elijah contracted with the woman who held him in slavery, to pay her roughly two hundred dollars per year in order to be allowed to live with his wife and their two children, John and Harriet, to manage his affairs, and to support himself. "His strongest wish," Jacobs recalled, "was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded."[18] She continues:

[12] Fredrick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855; New York: The Modern Library, 2003).

[13] Ibid., 11.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 10.

[16] Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* enlarged ed. (1861; Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, 5. Jacobs used this pseudonym and changed the names of the principal persons in the narrative because either they or their close relatives were still alive at the time of her writing. Dr. Norcom is disguised as Dr. Flint, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer as Mr. Sands.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

> [T]hough we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to [my parents] for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment.[19]

The death of Jacobs's mother Delilah breaks this charmed circle. By way of overheard conversation, Jacobs not only learns that she is a slave, but also that slaveholder Margaret Horniblow and her mother were brought up together.[20] Like Douglass, Jacobs is taken away from a familiar and affectionate home and turned over to Horniblow, who teaches the child to read, to spell, and to sew.[21] But unlike Douglass, Jacobs considers the six years that follow as "happy days—too happy to last. The slave child had no thought for the morrow; but there came that blight, which too surely waits on every human being born to be chattel."[22] Margaret Horniblow dies and in her will bequeaths the twelve-year-old girl to a three-year-old niece.[23] Now Jacobs is moved to the household of Dr. James Norcom, Horniblow's brother-in-law.[24]

Young Douglass and young Jacobs are happy in the way that children are happy: they are content. To some degree, their basic vital and psychological needs are met; they accept their circumstances as given.[25] But, as Raymond Belliotti observes, "Human beings are not static characters trying to find a fixed point called 'contentment.'"[26] Douglass and Jacobs experience contentment, but the painful disclosure and consciousness of their bondage quite cruelly alter their putative happiness and freedom. Douglass weighed his condition in these words:

> As I grew older and more thoughtful, I was more and more filled with a sense of my wretchedness. ... I used to contrast my condition with the black-birds, in whose wild and sweet songs I fancied them so happy! Their apparent joy only deepened the shades of my sorrow. [27]

Jacobs also takes notice of the mocking contrast between her condition and that of the natural world. About the age of fifteen, Jacobs reaches puberty and Dr. Norcom initiates a relentless barrage of unwelcome and lewd sexual

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 7.

[21] Ibid., 1vii.

[22] Ibid., 8.

[23] Ibid., 1viii. The neice is Mary Matilda Norcom, daughter of Mary Matilda Horniblow and Dr. John Norcom.

[24] Ibid., 1vii.

[25] Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book I, 1100a) argues that children cannot be happy, because happiness requires a virtuous and complete life.

[26] Raymond A. Belliotti, *Happiness In Overrated* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 59-60.

[27] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 66-67.

advances:

> It was on a lovely spring morning, and when I marked the sunlight dancing here and there, its beauty seemed to mock my sadness. For my master ... had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire. ... When he told me that I was for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt so strong.[28]

Jacobs and Douglass are caught, but they are not trapped. The content of their strategies differ, but each is motivated by possibilities of freedom and action. Each confronts and commands what had been denied and forbidden. Both come to an existential moment when they are "thrown into a process of imagining"[29] themselves beyond the boundaries of their condition. Douglass experiences this when Mrs. Auld abruptly ends his reading lessons. Upon his arrival in Baltimore, Douglass described the household of Hugh Auld as an "abode of happiness and contentment." Mrs. Auld was

> a model of affection and tenderness. Her fervent piety and watchful uprightness made it impossible to see her without thinking and feeling—*'that woman is a Christian.'* ... Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of [her] excellent qualities, and her home of its early happiness.[30]

Stressing the incompatibility of education and slavery, Mr. Auld advised his wife to terminate the reading lessons. Mrs. Auld not only complied with her husband's instructions, she becomes violently opposed to Douglass' learning. If she saw him with a newspaper or book, Mrs. Auld would snatch the material from him in rage. She monitored Douglass' whereabouts and would not allow him to linger in a room separate from the Auld family for any length of time. Suspected of reading, young Douglass reads—wherever, whenever, and whatever he can. The knowledge of bondage and freedom weighs heavily on him:

> I was no longer the lighthearted, gleesome boy, full of mirth and play, as when I landed first at Baltimore. Knowledge had come; light had penetrated the moral dungeon where I dwelt ...I was wretched and gloomy, beyond my ability to describe. I was too thoughtful to be happy. ...Once awakened by the silver trump of knowledge, my spirit was roused to eternal wakefulness. Liberty! the inestimable birthright of every man, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of this great right.[31]

Jacobs too feels the weight of bondage and freedom not only in her spirit, but also in her body. Dr. Norcom refuses to allow her to marry the freeborn black carpenter, whom she loves. She breaks with him, refusing "to link his fate with [her] unhappy destiny."[32] Determined to possess Jacobs sexually, Norcom has a small cottage built for her in a secluded part of town. Emotionally overwrought, Jacobs takes a calculated risk and enters into a consensual sexual relationship with the white unmarried Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. Looking back at her fifteen year-old self, Jacobs calls her decision a "plunge into the abyss." [33]

> I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair.[34]

Jacobs's feelings were confused and she knew it: "Revenge, and calculations of interest were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness. I knew nothing would enrage [Norcom] as much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way."[35] Jacobs was convinced that the physician would be so outraged at her sexual and emotional choice of Sawyer that he would sell her; she was equally convinced that Sawyer would buy her and that she easily could obtain her freedom from him. Thus, when Norcom ordered her to move into the cottage, Jacobs adamantly and triumphantly refused.

> I told him I would never enter it. He said, "I have heard enough of such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there."
>
> I replied, "I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a

[28] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 21.

[29] Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 51.

[30] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 79 [emphasis in the original].

[31] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 83-84.

[32] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 41.

[33] Ibid., 69.

[34] Ibid., 70.

[35] Ibid., 71.

mother."

> He stood and looked at me in dumb amazement, and left the house without a word. I thought I should be happy in my triumph over him. But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched. Humble as were their circumstances, they had pride in my good character. Now, how could I look them in the face? My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave. I had said, "Let the storm beat! I will brave it till I die." And now how humiliated I felt.[36]

Harriet Jacobs used her body, her sex, to gain some measure of psychological freedom from Norcom's sexual advances and from the thrall of slavery. "It seems less degrading," she wrote, "to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment."[37] Although her action sorrowed her grandmother, Jacobs never was alienated from this good woman. When a second child by Sawyer was born and she learned it was girl, Jacobs was pained. "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."[38]

Jacobs and Douglass were caught, but not trapped; each escaped. For nearly seven years, with her grandmother's assistance, Jacobs concealed herself in the attic of the woman's cottage. Huddled in the cramped garret, peering through a tiny hole in the roof, Jacobs observed the busy street below, an unseen and solemn witness to the pathos of the world slavery made. Throughout those years, Norcom repeatedly threatened and harassed her family and, pulled on by false leads Jacobs was able to throw out, traveled three times to New York in search of the young woman who was concealed practically in his own backyard.[39] Jacobs reached Philadelphia in 1842, but she had gained freedom already through her fortitude and insurgent posture, shrewd planning, and bold action. Jacobs's story ends with freedom for herself and her children, but the dream of a home of her own, a home created in the image of the one her parents had made for her and her brothers, eluded her.

Douglass fled Maryland on September 8, 1838. He assumed the identity of a sailor and used the man's free papers as proof and protection to reach New York City. An attempt at escape two years earlier with a group of five young

[36] Ibid., 72.

[37] Ibid., 70.

[38] Ibid., 100.

[39] Ibid., 126-168; see, *Joanne M. Braxton, Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 32.

men had been betrayed. But during those years, literary critic Robert Stepto points out, Douglass "created the self who can [escape] alone."[40] Douglass recalls:

> In less than a week after leaving Baltimore, I was walking amid the hurrying throng, and gazing upon the dazzling wonders of Broadway. The dreams of my childhood and the purposes of my manhood were now fulfilled. A free state around me, and free earth under my feet![41]

Happy? Of course Douglass is happy—and more than happy. He is free.

> I have often been asked, by kind friends to whom I have told my story, how I felt when I first found myself beyond the limits of slavery; and I must say here, as I have often said to them, there is scarcely anything about which I could not give a more satisfactory answer. It was a moment of joyous excitement, which no words can describe. In a letter to a friend, written soon after reaching New York, I said I felt as one might be supposed to feel, on escaping from a den of hungry lions. But, in a moment like that, sensations are too intense and too rapid for words. Anguish and grief, like darkness and rain, may be described, but joy and gladness, like the rainbow of promise, defy alike the pen and pencil.[42]

Joy, excitement, and relief wash over him. He has interrupted decisively what was to have been a permanent state of social alienation—slavery. He has restored himself as a human being to his humanity, to himself, and to humanity. Such public restoration of self or resurrection of a "new" being signifies and performs a new way of being in the world. To borrow and transpose a phrase from Gordon, this new way of being constitutes an attempt "to live as a 'yes'" in the world,[43] an attempt at identity, an attempt at happiness.

[40] Robert B. Stepto, *A Home ElsewhereL Reading African American Classics in the Age of Obama* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 22.

[41] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 199.

[42] Ibid., 199-200.

[43] Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 53.

HAPPINESS AND IDENTITY

For nearly a century, sociologist, historian, educator, journalist, and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois held a firm place among leading intellectuals of the United States. Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War and five years after the Emancipation Proclamation; he died on the eve of the Civil Rights March on Washington in 1963 in Accra, Ghana. His parents, Alfred and Mary Silvina Burghardt Du Bois, were of African, Dutch, and French Huguenot descent. When Du Bois was about two years of age, Alfred Du Bois deserted his wife and child, leaving them to struggle on the kindness of family and neighbors. Du Bois's intellectual gifts were recognized early on by teachers, who encouraged him in his studies. After earning a degree at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, Du Bois enrolled at Harvard College and in 1890 earned a bachelor's degree *cum laude*. A travel fellowship permitted him to pursue graduate studies at the University of Berlin. Du Bois returned to Harvard, earning a doctorate in 1895 with a dissertation on "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America." Du Bois devoted his life to his people and their condition. Du Bois taught at Wilberforce University, the University of Pennsylvania, and founded the Department of Social Work at Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University). He produced formal scholarly works as well as journalism, writing more than 4,000 books, articles, essays, chapters, reviews, and columns. And he was an activist—co-founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), promoting Pan-African solidarity, and opposing scientific racism and eugenics. Soon after the independence of Ghana, President Kwame Nkrumah invited Du Bois to Ghana in order to direct the *Encyclopedia Africana*,[44] but his health declined and he died on August 27, 1963.

Du Bois opens his 1903 classic collection, *The Souls of Black Folk*, by asking, "How does it feel to be a problem?"[45] In response, he poses a phenomenology of recognition of difference, of "otherness," and narrates "the strange [and] peculiar" experience of being a problem, of experiencing the descent of the veil, the struggle to create a true self.[46]

Du Bois remembers himself as "a little thing," suggesting that he, like Douglass and Jacobs, is naïve, innocent of the wider social condition and its implications.[47] He describes the venue as a "wee wooden schoolhouse" and specifies its geographic location—tucked in southwestern New England, where the winding Housatonic River touches Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York. Then, the adult Du Bois recounts the moment when the "merry exchange" was halted, when happiness cooled and "the shadow swept across [him]."[48]

> [S]omething put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. [Then] one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.[49]

With her refusal of his visiting card, the "tall [white] newcomer" precipitates Du Bois's loss of innocence. He is "other-ed," deprived of simple friendship so vital to human happiness. This event changes the young Du Bois, changes the way in which he relates to those around him. He resolves to use his intellectual gifts to wrest academic honors from his white schoolmates. Du Bois "revel[ed]" in these triumphs, Stepto declares. "Yet he calls them his mates, which suggests that an allegiance exists along with the animosity."[50] At the same time, Du Bois sadly observed how other black boys of his acquaintance "shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted [their youth] in a bitter cry."[51]

This childhood insult grounds Du Bois's singular meditation on identity, belonging, and double consciousness. The modern racialized American world within which African Americans find themselves both filters and limits their social self-consciousness. Yet, they possess the gift of second sight or double-consciousness[52], even as they are compelled to look at themselves

[44] DuBois concieved *Encyclopedia Africana* as a comprehensive exploration of the black experience on the continent and in the diaspora. Although, Du Bois was unable to complete this project, it inspired *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Expereience*, edited by and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999) with a second edition published by Oxford University Press in 2005.

[45] William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Modern Library Edition, 2003), 4.

[46] Ibid., 3-4,6.

[47] Stepto, *A Home Elsewhere*, 28.

[48] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 4.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Stepto, *A Home Elsewhere*, 30.

[51] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 5.

[52] Ibid.

> through the eyes of others ... measuring [their] souls by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels [one's] twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[53]

Du Bois uncovers racism's role in bruising psychic sensitivity.

Authentic identity can emerge only in creative constitution of personhood and in construction of a human and humane world. This creative work may be understood as a spiritual work, which gives rise to a "better and true self."[54] This better and truer self incarnates African and American meanings and values that have been critiqued, engaged, and intertwined, but neither one subjugating the other. Put differently, these two cultural selves interact dialectically in a kind of Hegelian *aufhebung* through which neither of the selves is lost and each is preserved and changed. From this process, something new comes to fruition as "a mighty people with a unique soul."[55] The end or *telos* of this striving is realized in an enhanced capacity to make a gift of one's abilities, powers, genius, and virtues to all for the common good. For community is a "necessary vehicle for human flourishing."[56] This is happiness: knowing oneself and being known, having one's gifts and person received and respected within a community.

In probing the *meaning* of being black, Gordon observes, Du Bois "announced a hermeneutical turn, a designation that could be held by different groups at different times and as such is both concrete and metaphorical."[57] Du Bois's identification of the color line "exceeds its own concrete formulation;" it is the "line between" society's construal and judgment about what are "'normal' and 'abnormal' identities."[58]

Novelist, playwright, folklorist, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston was a feisty, daring, bold, outsized personality of wit and intelligence. Bringing the sassy Hurston and the sober Du Bois together in this essay is a bit of mischief on my part—privately Hurston called him "Dr. Dubious."[59] But identity was also her theme. In a 1928 essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston nearly crows:

> I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow damned up in my soul or lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.[60]

These comments reflect high appropriation of the blues aesthetic. Carefully considered, Hurston's words do not absolve institutionally or personally mediated anti-black racism: the "low-down dirty deal" comes *not* from nature, but from human choice and will, from human decision and action. And like Du Bois, Hurston commits herself to the quest of "the pearl," the rare, the fine, the valuable.

She concludes:

> I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Society that surges within the boundaries. ... Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It's beyond me. [61]

No "twoness," no "unreconciled strivings," no "warring ideals" for Hurston. This essay, her biographer Valerie Boyd contends, offers "a memorable manifesto of individuality—of Zora's singular and affirmative sense of *me*-ness."[62] Zora Neale Hurston loved herself: She once said, "I love myself when I am laughing and then again when I am looking mean and impressive." Perhaps, Hurston clung to advice from her dying mother: "Don't you love nobody better'n you do yo'self. Do, you'll be dying befo' you time is out."[63]

Born in Alabama in 1891 to John and Lucy Potts Hurston, Zora Neale Hurston was reared in the small all-black town of Eatonville, Florida. The death of her mother was a severe blow to the dreamy, imaginative, tough little girl, and nine-year-old Hurston was moved around from relative to relative—eventually rejected by and rejecting her father and young stepmother. Soon, Hurston found her way to Baltimore and enrolled in Morgan Academy (now Morgan State University). She then matriculated at Howard University, obtaining an associate degree and taking courses there off and on from 1920 to 1924. Quite likely, the sporadic character of her studies was due to a lack

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 4.

[55] David Levering Lewis, "Introduction," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, xvii.

[56] tu Wei-Ming, "Happiness in the Confucian Way," 105, in *In Pursuit of Happiness*, ed., Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 105.

[57] Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 63.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York and London: Scribner, 2003), 436.

[60] Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me (1928)," 404, in *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000).

[61] Ibid.

[62] Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, 172.

[63] Ibid., 69.

of finances, since Hurston worked at a variety of jobs—manicurist, secretary, and maid. Finally, Hurston obtained a scholarship to Barnard College in New York, where she made her way to Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, who were teaching anthropology at Columbia University. In 1927, Hurston began the first of her motor trips to collect the stories, "lies above suspicion," and folktales that poured from the lives and lips of the women and men of Eatonville. The material she gathered resulted in four novels, two collections of folklore, an autobiography, several short stories and articles, as well as plays. Unlike Du Bois, Hurston died unacclaimed and in poverty in 1960. Her celebrated rediscovery by Alice Walker has accorded her wide posthumous influence among African American women writers.

Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,[64] makes memory and identity thematic, pricks intraracial skin color preferences, and probes the relationship between black men and black women. *The plot in sum*: after many years, Janie Crawford returns to the small town in which her grandmother, Nanny, a former slave, had brought her up. The muddy men's overalls she wears, her thick wavy hair swinging free, and her long stride immediately attract the attention and indignation of a group of porch-sitters. Janie's best friend, Pheoby Watkins, leaves the rumor mill to find out what, in truth, has transpired. The two sit together on the back porch steps of Janie's house, and Janie recollects and unrolls the trajectory of her life: childhood dreams and longings; Nanny's cautions; the difficult marriage to Logan Killicks, which assaulted her spirit; her escape into what she hoped was romance with Jody (Joe) Starks; the surprising love stirred by and shared with free spirit Vergible Woods, nicknamed Tea Cake; his tragic death at her hands, and her return to the place from which her journey began.

The first aspect of identity formation that Janie faces pertains to sexual awakening. Janie harbors a momentary crush on young, good-looking Johnny Taylor, who kisses her at her front gate. Nanny observes this relatively innocent act and is troubled by it. She admonishes Janie harshly, then tells her that she intends to arrange a marriage for her with the stolid farmer Logan Killicks. Janie is repulsed and says so. "Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have," Nanny says, "it's protection. ... Mah daily prayer now is tuh ... see you safe in life."[65] Nanny's experience of sexual degradation under chattel slavery stalks her memory. She wants Janie to be free from such humiliation; *she aches for her to be safe, to be somebody*, but marriage represents the only route to respectable and honorable selfhood (read: womanhood) that she can imagine. Janie is alone, her parents unavailable, and she—Nanny—is old. The thought of her beloved granddaughter "bein' kicked around from pillar tuh post" makes the old woman desperate.[66] Nanny loves Janie with a fierce but misguided love and so "shapes her to the demands of the racist and patriarchal culture as an art of survival."[67]

The marriage to Logan Killicks sours: Janie wants romance, Killicks wants unpaid labor. When he grows verbally abusive, Janie surrenders to the charms of Joe Starks, who courts her hurt not only with romance and an offer of marriage, but with adventure and freedom. Starks is a risk: he aims "to be a big voice" and elbows his way into power and, thus, becomes mayor by acclamation of a small colored town. Starks expects Janie as his wife to echo his voice, not to speak in her own; to do his bidding, not to propose or to plan; to mirror his power and presence, and to wait silently, obediently on the pedestal he has erected for her. This relationship, too, cools and fills Janie with fear: she has begun to lose the self she thought she had found. When Starks slaps her, she closes down completely.

Janie had hoped to explore the horizon, "the biggest thing that God ever made," but it had been "pinched ... into such a little bit of a thing" and now it chokes her.[68] She cannot flourish in living the constrained lives chosen for her by others—her grandmother, Logan Killicks, and Jody Starks. Only in the relationship with Tea Cake does Janie Crawford bloom as a woman in a joyous sexual relationship and thrive as an autonomous human. Tea Cake sees Janie: he sees who she is and helps her find her way out of herself to herself. He talks with her, not at her; listens to her and hears her. Theirs is a partnership—equal, imaginative, companionable, and fulfilling. Above all, Tea Cake loves Janie and loves her into herself. Tea Cake was "a glance from God."[69]

Janie journeys from object to subject. Her decision to strike out with Joe Starks as well as to follow Tea Cake reveals her growth in autonomy and agency. Janie gradually is transformed through experience, risk, and self-reflection. In the closing pages of the novel, Janie sits with Pheoby and recollects the disappointments and hurts, joys and discoveries of her long inner journey:

> It's a known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know where. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves.[70]

Janie does not so much find happiness as deep peace in the flourishing of proper self-love, in treasuring herself. The horizon, the field or scope of human desire and possibility, which once had choked, now is enlarged through

[64] Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

[65] Ibid., 15.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Sherley Anne Williams, "Introduction," Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; 1978| Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), xxv.

[68] Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 89.

[69] Ibid., 106.

[70] Ibid.

love and loss. Janie has traversed the wide geography of the human soul. She reaches out to the horizon and "pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see."[71]

HAPPINESS AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE BLUES

Can the people who brought you the blues be happy? This is a crossroads question, for the blues is crossroads music. Crossroads literally sit removed from city and village, far from the familiar and customary. Figuratively, crossroads not only evoke potentiality and opening, but also caution and chaos. The woman or man who stands at the crossroads must expect danger and promise. This negotiation calls for acuity and sensitivity to situations and opportunities, proficiency in reading signs and relations, wisdom in discerning good and evil as well as truth and falsehood. For the lessons of the crossroads seldom forgive: here doors open or close, future meets limitation, chance revises choice. Crossroads signify a place or moment of imposing mystery, of access to dense and opaque power—human as well as divine.[72] Here is legendary blues man Robert Johnson's signature mediation of crossroads potential and limits:

I went down to the crossroads / fell down on my knees
I went down to the crossroads / fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above for mercy / save poor Bob if you please

Standing at the crossroads / I tried to flag a ride
Standing at the crossroads / I tried to flag a ride
Ain't nobody seem to know me / everybody pass me by[73]

Can the people who brought you the blues be happy? There is a cadence, a rhythm that rises from within American culture. It refracts and wails the massive, maldistributed, transgenerational, oppressive communal social

[71] Ibid., 193.

[72] Crossroads imagery appears in the *mythos*, ledgends and sagas of nearly all cultures. African and African-derived peoples come to their knowledge of the crossroads through oral tradition, ideograph, ritual, and aesthetics. In the Kongo-Atlantic world, the sign of the crossroads merges witht eh BaKongo 'sign of the cross' to express in ideograph the point of contact, of relation and passage, of mediation and communication between the Ancestors and the living.

[73] Robert A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 5.

suffering of black human beings.[74] That cadence, that rhythm, carries the "extraordinary and elusive" phenomenon of black vernacular culture—the blues.[75] Yet the blues has serious ramifications not only for African American culture, but rather for *all human life* and especially wherever and whenever that life is threatened by force, coercion, and cynicism. For the blues narrates and authenticates *human* feeling, *human* desire, *human* hope. The blues belongs to anyone who finds him/herself, as folklorist Alan Lomax once declared, "utterly miserable, physically exhausted, totally humiliated [and] overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, [and] dare [not] complain or talk back, because [his or her] fate" rests in the hands of implacable power.[76]

These critical, aesthetic, healing songs and sounds "did not just happen," Ollie Stewart stated. "There is a history to the birth and form of our music. [The blues contains] every element of life—[not just sex, but] religion, romance, tragedy, faith, hope and abandon—brought together and paid for at a tremendous price."[77] In his analysis, literary critic Houston Baker shows how blues synthesizes "work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, humor, elegiac lament, and much more."[78] The blues bristles with motion and meaning, fuses geography and suffering, records and comments on displacement, transformation, and becoming. Pulsing with the spiritual and ritual dynamism of black religion, the blues generates a force-field in which events or characters or feelings expressed in discrete blues songs relate to one another intertexually,[79] sometimes resolving dissonance, sometimes witnessing contradiction, sometimes embracing multiple meanings. And, while the blues forms neither a set of propositions, nor a reductive interpretation of the black lifeworld, theologian James Cone perceptively grasps the blues as "*a state of mind in relation to the Truth of black experience.*"[80]

Emancipation, the abolition of slavery and manumission, cleared space for the freed people to experience, enjoy, and express "a humanity impossible under slavery," and this included leisure.[81] LeRoi Jones suggests that while the new sharecroppers and laborers might still draw on the shouts and hollers they sang while enslaved and working at communal labor in the fields, now "each man [and woman] had his [or her] own voice and ... way of shouting—his [or her] own life to sing about."[82] If freedom might nourish

[74] William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 21-22.

[75] Houston A. Bake, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

[76] Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Bantam Doubleday/ Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1993), 274.

[77] Ollie Stewart, "What Price Jazz," *The Chicago Defender*, 7 April 1934, 12, cited in Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), xxvi.

[78] Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, 5.

[79] Ibid., 6,7.

[80] James H. Cone, *The Spirtluals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (1972; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 102.

[81] Jones, *Blues People*, 61.

[82] Ibid.

solitude, it also encouraged movement. For the first time, thousands of black men and women traveled freely—walking and riding—throughout the South, learning the geography of the United States with their hearts and questions, eyes and feet. Their music soon began to reflect and incorporate the complexities of this new social and cultural landscape.[83]

As artistic creation, the blues emerges from certain contexts and those contexts contain both limitation and possibilities. To sing the blues is to meet, deal with, and endure adversity, yet come back struttin.' To sing the blues is to transcend the blues, for the lyrics mediate what being human means in crossroads conditions. Blues songs muse about the big questions—love, sex, and marriage; life and death; tragedy and hope. But daily life was analyzed carefully in the blues: paying the rent and losing a home, gambling and fighting, trains and shipwreck, the bo-weevil and moonshine, cities and cemeteries, friends and friendship, being abandoned by and abandoning a lover, being tired and alone, hard luck, bad luck, and no luck at all. In "Jail House Blues," Bessie Smith complained:

> Thirty days in jail with my back turned to the wall, turned to the wall
> Thirty days in jail with my back turned to the wall
> Look here, Mr. Jail Keeper, put another gal in my stall
>
> I don't mind bein' in jail, but I got to stay there so long, so long
> I don't mind bein' in jail, but I got to stay there so long, so long,
> When every friend I had is done shook hands and gone.[84]

T. Wallace sang "House Rent Blues:"

> On a cold, dark and stormy night
> On a cold, dark and stormy night
> They want to put me out and it wasn't daylight
>
> There on my door they nailed a sign
> There on my door they nailed a sign
> I got to move from here if the rent man don't change his mind.[85]

And here is Lovie Austin's "Bad Luck Blues:"

> Hey, people, listen while I spread my news
> Hey, people, listen while I spread my news
> I want to tell you people all about my bad luck blues.[86]

[83] Ibid., 62.

[84] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 302.

[85] Ibid., 291.

[86] Ibid., 200.

Lawrence Levine in his study of black culture and black consciousness argues that the blues blurs the sacred and the secular. "Blues was threatening," he wrote, "because its spokesmen and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of religion in the past."[87] These lines from "Hot Springs Blues," sung by Bessie Smith seem to affirm this conclusion. Moreover, the song resonates with a story of a crippled man lying near the pool in Jerusalem as told by the author of the Gospel of John.[88] Here are the lyrics:

> If you ever get crippled, let me tell you what to do
> Lord, if you ever get crippled, let me tell you what to do
> Take a trip to Hot Springs, and let 'em wait on you
>
> When they put you in the water and do the bathhouse rag
> Lord, they'll put you in the water and do the bathhouse rag
> And if you don't get well, you'll sure come back
>
> Some come here crippled, some come here lame
> Some come here crippled, some come here lame
> If they don't go away well, we are not to blame.[89]

The Gospel writer takes us to a healing sanctuary with a pool of water and five covered porches. There children, women, and men afflicted with paralysis and other illnesses lie in wait for the water to be stirred, so that they may enter and be cured. Jesus of Nazareth catches sight of a crippled man, who had been waiting for thirty-eight years without relief. With a word, Jesus heals him, ordering the man to "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (John 5:8). "Hot Springs Blues" does not mock faith or faith healing, but it surely signifies its power, possibilities, and liminality.

Angela Davis in her study of black women and the blues emphasizes the cultural and social forces, which complexify and shape these women. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, along with dozens of other women, may have been

> rowdy and hardened [but they were] not simply female incarnations of stereotypical male aggressiveness. Women's blues cannot be understood apart from their role in the molding of an emotional community based on the affirmation of black people's—and in particular black women's—absolute and irreducible humanity. Blues wom[en] chal-

[87] Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 237.

[88] John 5: 1-9 narrates the basic story of the healing; the remainder of the chapter presents Jesus' debate with the religious authorities about work on the Sabbath.

[89] Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 290.

lenge in [their] own way[s] the imposition of gender-based inferiority.[90]

Davis considers these "rough-and-tumble" women to be the "spiritual descendant[s] of Harriet Tubman." They possessed great courage and willpower in order to produce their art. Segregated travel, hotel accommodations, and restaurants were notorious. And Bessie Smith once is reported to have faced down the Ku Klux Klan, which attempted to disrupt one of her outdoor tent performance by trying to pull up the tent pegs in order to collapse the structure. Smith challenged the intruders and shouted obscenities at them until the shocked white-robed men left.[91] As Davis concludes, blues women "forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings."[92] So it was that Ida Cox sang:

You never get nothing by being an angel child
You'd better change your ways and get real wild
I want to tell you something, I wouldn't tell you no lie.
Wild women are the only kind that ever get by
'Cause wild women don't worry, wild women don't have the blues.[93]

Sterling Brown captures this same defiant spirit in the following blues lyrics:

I'm goin' down to the river, sit down and begin to cry,
If the blues overtake me, I'll drink that old river dry.

And,

I got the world in a jug, and the stopper's in my hand.

Or,

Yuh can read my letters but yuh sho cain't read my mind.

And,

When you think I'm laughin', laughin' just to keep from cryin. [94]

If "the blues," as Ralph Ellison once argued, "is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism,"[95] then the blues represents no terrain for happiness—at least, not as

[90] Ibid., 36.

[91] Ibid., 37.

[92] Ibid., 41.

[93] Ibid., 38.

[94] Sterling Brown, "The Blues as Folk Poetry," 550, 551, in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

ordinarily conceived. African American vernacular culture offers no utopian vision of perfection. Rather it delights in the liminal and transgressive, embraces tradition even as it values improvisation—bricolage, fluidity, interdisciplinarity, fusion, "the wide open ensemble … sliding into the break."[96]

Integrity in its most complex mode reverberates and sustains the blues. Black singer and songwriter Tracy Chapman has earned international recognition with multiple platinum recordings and four Grammy Awards. Chapman is neither a blues singer nor a blues songwriter, but her music has been enriched by engagement with her culture's music. These lyrics radiate with integrity so essential to the blues:

Oh my mama told me
'Cause she say she learned the hard way
She say she wanna spare the children
She say don't give or sell your soul away
'Cause all that you have is your soul
So don't be tempted by the shiny apple
Don't you eat of a bitter fruit
Hunger only for a taste of justice
Hunger only for a world of truth
'Cause all that you have is your soul[97]

All that you have is your soul: this, of course, is what Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, W. E. B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston learn. This is the most profound lesson of every truly *humane* and human culture.

CONCLUSION

Can the people who brought you the blues be happy? When Professor Jill Raitt invited me to give this lecture, I was teaching Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, which spends some pages reflecting on happiness. Aristotle wrote of happiness in the context of the philosophic life or the life of wisdom. Eudaimonia or happiness or flourishing is the telos or goal of that life and, ideally, it is achieved by living in accord with reason and by practicing virtue. But

[95] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," In *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1972), 78-79.

[96] Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 112; Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 87.

[97] Tracy Chapman, "All That You Have Is Your Soul," http://www.lyricsfreak.com/t/tracy+chapman/#share.

Aristotle also reckoned that happiness includes created goods, although these can never satisfy completely, and he acknowledged that happiness meant different things to different people.[98]

My discussion of African American culture and happiness may be characterized as existentialist or, at least, having existentialist leanings. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs each oriented his and her compass by freedom *from* bondage *for* the exercise of liberty and for this *end*, each literally risked life and limb. Soon after his escape, Douglass was drawn into the orbit of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and gave himself to that noble cause with passion and intelligence. But all too soon Douglass is confronted with the paternalism of his liberal friends: "Give us the facts," urged John Collins of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, "we will take care of the philosophy."[99] Collins, Garrison and others deemed his speech and bearing as lacking the diction and manners of the plantation. They urged Douglass to bend himself to the expectations of an audience which sought, intentionally or unintentionally, to exoticize him. Douglass refused.[100] He had not come so far to circumscribe himself or to be so circumscribed again. Similarly, Harriet Jacobs participated in northern movements for abolition and received encouragement for the publication of her life's story from white liberals, but little interest from publishers. Eventually, Jacobs sought out Lydia Marie Childs, who wrote a preface for the narrative. Harriet Beecher Stowe had been eager to fold Jacobs's story into her own novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. To agree to this arrangement would have ensured the publication of Jacobs's narrative, which had become doubtful with the bankruptcy of Boston publisher Thayer and Eldridge. But to do so would have erased her voice. Jacobs refused. She had not endured such cruel concealment to be erased and so poorly used again.

W. E. B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston mapped the movement of black human flourishing, the journey from object to subject. Both studied the psychic bruises inflicted by anti-black racism, and Hurston those of sexism; both understood freedom as a spiritual striving. Brought by luck, exceptional intelligence, and singular discipline to scholarly levels to which only a handful of whites held access. But Du Bois was consigned to live behind "the veil," the trope he deployed to connote the psychic experience of racial segregation and abuse. The veil was to be transcended, embraced, used, or held in contempt, and throughout his life Du Bois variously demonstrated those responses with brilliance, pride, and melancholy. Hurston, on the other

[98] Aristole distinguishes among those human beings who are free, those who are slavish by nature, and those who are good individuals. Free persons are capable of orienting themselves and their actions toward the common good of their households and of the state (*Metaphysics*, trans Hugh Tredennick (1935; 1936; 1947; 1958; cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Loeb, 1962), 12. 10, 3). Slaves lack the freedom to control their lives and no real capacity for virtue; hence, like children, they cannot be happy, see Mary P. Nichols, "The Good Life, Slavery, and Acquisition: Aristotle's Introduction to Politics," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* Vol. 11, No. 2 (May 1983): 171-83; see also Sir David Ross, who writes, "It is, though regrettable, not surprising that Aristotle should regard as belonging to the nature of things an arrangement that was so familiar a part of everyday Greek life as slavery was" Aristotle (London: Methuen, 1953), 241. I thank Stephen Pope, my colleague in the Department of Theology at Boston College, for reminding me of this and referring me to the critique of Aristotle's position in Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (April 1979): 167-197, especially 193-194.

[99] Douglass, *The Narrative and Selected Writings* (New York: Random House, 1984), 160.

[100] Ibid., 161.

hand, simply refused to negotiate the veil. She met the hard luck of life with grit, determination, and swagger—shaving years from her age, rearranging her biography, confronting and facing down personal and social demons of all sorts. Blues women would have admired her.

As noted earlier, current social scientific research indicates that blacks as a group are happier than they were 40 years ago, even if their income has not reached the levels of most of the white middle-class. Tentatively, this conclusion correlates black happiness, at least in part, not so much with money, but with the decline in day-to-day racial insult or assault. Yet this decrease does not signal the arrival of "post-racialism" or a "post-racial state." To borrow another phrase from Du Bois, it is still possible to "feel like a problem."

Black religion and the historic black church have functioned as the chief mediator of individual and communal black consciousness, self-transcendence, and transformation. Although I am a theologian, in this presentation I have given no attention to church or religion; at the same time, I am critically aware that African American culture refrains from driving a wedge between sacred and secular, instead choosing to create a distinctive blurred and fruitful space for their engagement in the nitty-gritty of daily living. As a gesture of regard toward my culture's noble commitment to sustain and to live in this tension, let us consider the hymn, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow,"[101] which, written by white Americans, has become canonical in the repertoire of gospel music. Some of us may be fortunate enough to remember and, perhaps, even more fortunate to have heard the voice of the great Mahalia Jackson. Through rhythm and cadence, phrasing and timbre, she transforms the lyrics and the melody so that the hymn mediates all the rich irony, subtle humor, and rending complexity of being black in the world, shading into blue sorrowful joy.

Why should I feel discouraged / Why should the shadows come
Why should my heart feel lonely / And long for heaven and home

When Jesus is my portion / A constant friend is he
His eye is on the sparrow / And I know he watches over me

I sing because I'm *happy* / I sing because I'm free
His eye is on the sparrow / And I know he watches me.

Can the people who brought you the blues be happy? The people who brought you the blues are a sorrowfully joyful people. Through our musings, stories, folktales, art, and music, we black folk continually nudge ourselves and the world to think on and to dream about what might have been and what still might be.

[101] Written by lyricist Civilia D. Martin and composer Charles H. Gabriel in 1905, the hymn takes its inspiration from Matthew 10: 29-31: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." And, Matthew 6: 26: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

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