

## **“As Usual, I’ll Have to Take an I.O.U.”: W.E.B. Du Bois, the Gift of Black Music and the Cultural Politics of Obligation**

### **Abstract**

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) W.E.B. Du Bois described African-American music as a “gift” to America, contesting the tendency to regard white interest in black culture as appropriation or theft. Yet this metaphor invoked the complex circuits of indebtedness and obligation that are intrinsic to gift exchange in anthropological accounts of the practice, challenging white recipients of the gift to make adequate response. This challenge is most systematically addressed in a sequence of films that tell stories about white enthusiasm for the blues. *The Blues Brothers* (1980), *Crossroads* (1986), *Blues Brothers 2000* (1998) and *Black Snake Moan* (2006) depict the blues as a gift and explore how whites might appropriately acknowledge and reciprocate for receiving it in a culture distorted by racial inequalities. The films develop a distinct set of narrative conventions for handling the politics of racial obligation, vacillating between seeing black music as a transracial cultural resource on the one hand and as a racially-defined, inalienable possession of African Americans on the other. Using these same conventions, *Honeydripper* (2007) invites us to see the process of cultural exchange from a different perspective in which the problematic status of the blues as racialized property is diminished.

### **I. You Can’t Steal a Gift**

Sometime in 1958 in Birdland, the New York jazz club named in honour of Charlie “Bird” Parker, the white saxophonist Phil Woods was overcome by a terrible sense of having taken more from black music and black musicians than he could ever repay. Not only had Woods modelled his entire playing style on the recently deceased

Parker's, he had married Parker's widow, adopted Parker's children, and inherited Parker's legendary King alto sax which, in the eyes of certain critical observers, he had the temerity to bring to the bandstand. On this particular night, openly tearful and self-medicating with heroin (Parker's narcotic of choice), Woods was so visibly distressed as to alarm fellow musicians Dizzy Gillespie and Art Blakey, who took him to Gillespie's home in order to calm and counsel him. There, as Woods remembers it, he was able to share his acute sense of racial guilt:

I asked them if a white guy could make it, considering the music was a black invention. I was getting a lot of flak about stealing not only Bird's music but his wife and family as well.... And Dizzy said, "You can't steal a gift. Bird gave the world his music, and if you can hear it you can have it."<sup>1</sup>

Woods was comforted. That his African-American peers—both close Parker associates and as integral as Parker himself had been to creating the sound of modern jazz—accepted that he had as much right to this "black invention" as they did gave him the confidence to persevere with the music and, ultimately, feel at home in it.

Yet what Woods's account doesn't reveal is whether Gillespie was aware that his words of solace directly echoed an idea initially formulated half a century before by W.E.B. Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) Du Bois defined the music of African Americans as "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."<sup>2</sup> Presenting black music as a gift to America from those it had enslaved and continued to scorn was part of Du Bois's strategy of promoting black culture as a vehicle for earning the respect of whites and facilitating racial integration. But it was also a telling rejoinder to his great predecessor Frederick Douglass, who had viewed white interest in black music much more antagonistically, as cultural theft and economic exploitation. In 1848 Douglass denounced blackface minstrels who claimed to perform in the authentic Negro style as "the filthy scum of white society,

who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens.”<sup>3</sup> And despite Du Bois’s intervention, the tendency to see white involvement with what are understood to be black cultural forms in terms of theft remains strong. Most recently, for example, the high profile of white rappers such as Macklemore and Iggy Azalea has prompted J. Cole to declare that “white people have snatched the sound” of hip-hop and Azealia Banks to protest that the message being sent to African Americans is, “You don’t own shit, not even the shit you created for yourself.”<sup>4</sup>

However, it would be wrong to understand Du Bois’s notion of the gift as an entirely conciliatory gesture that, in the service of an integrationist vision, offers up black culture for white appropriation without condition or demur. For, as a student of anthropology and a friend and colleague of Franz Boas, the founder of American cultural anthropology, Du Bois was aware of the manifold moral and social significances that attach to gift-giving in tribal cultures.<sup>5</sup> Principal among these is the fact that there is no such thing as an innocent gift. Gift-giving is always entangled in—indeed, is designed to create and perpetuate—circuits of exchange and reciprocation which establish relationships of obligation; these in turn regulate the flow of power, respect and solidarity between individuals and groups within the broader society. This insight, developed by Du Bois’s friend Boas, is most fully elaborated by Marcel Mauss in his 1924 study, *The Gift*. Drawing on Boas’s analysis of gift exchange in the Pacific Northwest, Mauss noted that gift-giving always takes place “in a manner at once interested and obligatory.” Giving gifts does not just create and strengthen the bond between donor and recipient, but is a means by which different communities negotiate their relative social status: “The lasting influence of the objects exchanged is a direct expression of the manner in which sub-groups within

segmentary societies ... are constantly embroiled with and feel themselves in debt to each other.”<sup>6</sup> In so far as gifts cannot be refused and must always be reciprocated, gift-giving can in some instances constitute an act of coercion or outright hostility, depending on the nature or value of the materials involved. Finally, for Mauss, the historical transition from “archaic” social forms to modern, capitalist market relations does not curtail the dynamics of gift exchange; rather, these latter extend into market societies, not only in those dwindling enclaves that persist beyond commodity relations but also within certain aspects of commodity exchange itself.<sup>7</sup>

Embedded in Du Bois’s notion of black music as a gift to white America, then, is a cleverly-disguised and multivalent anthropological understanding of the obligations that acceptance, use and enjoyment of such a gift place upon the recipient. In fact Shannon Sullivan goes further, arguing that “calling black contributions ‘gifts’ ... is a covert reclamation of black property and personhood and an implicit confrontation with white repression and guilt.” In this view, the idea of the gift stands not so much as a concession to white America as a challenge to white racial identity which, by the 1920s, Du Bois had come to see as dependent on the theft of collective resources and disfigured by an obsession with property. “[T]his Soul of White Folk,” he asserted, is a “divine thief” and “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” Thus, in the context of the evolution of DuBois’s political thought after publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the notion of the gift takes on increasingly militant overtones, connecting to his growing interest in the development of separate black economic resources and the elicitation of white guilt and shame as strategic moves in challenging racism.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect it is important to note that post-Maussian anthropology has stressed the unique status of those particular gifts which are not simple objects but

rather symbolically-important cultural practices or knowledges, among which we might include music. This type of gift is especially powerful because it imposes maximum obligation on the recipient and can never truly be separated from the giver. It is a form of what Annette Weiner calls “inalienable possession” that resists full integration into the circuits of exchange even while it can be offered up to them. Imbued with the power of “cosmological authentication” in so far as they are “key markers of identity and history for groups and individuals,” inalienable possessions form the basis of a social practice Wiener calls “keeping-while-giving,” a practice designed simultaneously to guard in-group identity and resources whilst building reciprocal relations with outsiders.<sup>9</sup>

We can see this ambivalent and paradoxical dimension of gift-giving at work not just in Du Bois’s ideas about music but also, and especially, in Langston Hughes’s. Following Du Bois, Hughes declared that, “the Blues and the Spirituals are two great Negro gifts to American music.” He stressed the universality of these gifts which contain “something that goes beyond race or sectional limits, that appeals to the ear and heart of people everywhere.” As the musician heroine of one of his stories announces, “How white like you and black like me ... are the blues ... I’m playing.” And yet Hughes jealously guarded the blues as an inalienable African-American possession that was particularly vulnerable to theft and misappropriation. His angry poem about the commodification of black culture, “Note on Commercial Art” (1940), revolves around the refrain, “You’ve done taken my blues and gone,” and in the 1950s he objected to the increasing number of white musicians profiting from cover versions of blues and rhythm and blues songs, denouncing the practice as “highway robbery across the color line.”<sup>10</sup>

The effect of this posture of keeping-while-giving is to remind the recipient that the gift can never be entirely theirs, prompting intellectual and practical reflection on the nature of ownership and the proper actions and relationships that flow from a sense of obligation. Such reflection has become an increasing feature of the discourse around American popular music as understanding of its indebtedness to styles rooted in African-American communities and traditions has spread. By the latter part of the twentieth century white performers who embraced these styles were expected publicly to acknowledge and pay due respect to their sources. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, some were going further, tackling issues of cultural appropriation and racial guilt in their work, as in Macklemore’s self-lacerating “White Privilege” (2005) and “White Privilege II” (2016). Yet it is in the medium of popular narrative film—rather than in the music itself, or in music history and criticism—that the most interesting, complex and revealing engagements with the obligations that come with accepting the gift of black music have occurred.

This should be no surprise given American cinema’s long and conflicted relationship with black music stretching back to *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Hollywood’s very first sound film.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as Fredric Jameson has argued, narrative is the principal structure through which otherwise intractable social and historical problems are made intelligible for popular audiences and subjected to cultural and ideological management. Storytelling provides imaginary resolutions to real social contradictions.<sup>12</sup> Fictional narratives about the white adoption of African-American music, therefore, serve an important purpose in staging and exploring the ethical and political ramifications of that process for a predominantly white audience that is increasingly aware—albeit in inchoate fashion—of popular music’s entanglement with questions of race, power, money and respect. This is especially evident in an

intermittent but distinctive sequence of films that deal with what is often held to be the most fundamental and definitive form of black music—the blues.

Beginning with *The Blues Brothers* (1980), the \$30 million blockbuster that sparked a popular revival of blues and rhythm and blues among white audiences, this sequence developed a set of storytelling tropes and devices designed to explore and ultimately legitimize white use and stewardship of African-American musical resources rooted in the blues. Central among these is the figuration of black music in Du Boisian terms as a gift. It is as if the narratives are organized precisely to address the questions Mauss placed at the head of his study: “what is the principle whereby the gift received has to be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?”<sup>13</sup> In doing so they show how the idea of black music as a gift cannot be disentangled from a broader web of exchange relations that raise questions about the ownership of cultural materials, about cultural appropriation and compensation, about white guilt and obligation, and about how far black music can be considered a universal resource or a racially-defined inalienable possession. As mass-cultural texts, the films move towards imaginary resolutions to the real contradictions of race, class and power relations that comprise their determinate social and historical pretext: race-inflected tensions are moderated, power relations are equalized, and transracial identification through the agency of African-American music is celebrated and affirmed. But if their resolutions are wishful and too often evasive, their engagement with the underlying contradictions is serious and sustained enough to illuminate the role played by black music in ideological struggles around race in American popular discourse and to demonstrate the efficacy of Du Bois’s concept of the gift in eliciting white introspection and efforts at reciprocation.

## II. “Everyone’s been compensated”: *The Blues Brothers*

Emerging from a *Saturday Night Live* comedy skit that spawned a successful touring band and a chart-topping, double-platinum album, *The Blues Brothers* film was from the first hedged around with the kind of self-justifying rhetoric that betrayed its creators’ understanding that they were encroaching on racially sensitive terrain. As music historians Hatch and Millward noted, by the 1980s “the concept of black music ha[d] become something of a shibboleth to the extent that even to question its pre-eminence amount[ed] to heresy.”<sup>14</sup> In this context, even an apparently innocuous, madcap musical comedy that depicted two white, blues-obsessed deadbeats as keepers of the music’s flame had to tread carefully indeed, particularly when it gave its white stars precedence over subsidiary characters played by a who’s who of real-life African-American musical greats. Thus, Universal Pictures took care to market the film as “a tribute to black American music.” Its three principals—co-writer and director John Landis, co-writer and star Dan Aykroyd, and comic lead John Belushi—likewise strove to establish their musical and racial bona fides. “John and Danny are very knowledgeable about music, not dilettantes,” Landis explained. “They understand who black musicians are and what they are doing, and they wanted to honor and be part of that great tradition.” Meanwhile, Aykroyd defended the project against accusations of cultural theft and exploitation. Conceding that the music he and Belushi made was “ersatz,” Aykroyd nonetheless insisted that the purpose of the Blues Brothers act was to expose white fans to the genius of the authentic African-American sources that inspired it. Moreover, the film’s success would have the beneficial effect of reinvigorating the careers of the black artists who appear in it. “We haven’t ripped anybody off,” he insisted to *Rolling Stone*. “Everyone’s been compensated.”<sup>15</sup>



Like the publicity campaign that surrounded it, the film itself is pervaded by an acute consciousness of the responsibilities and obligations that come with acceptance and use of the gift of black music. In a series of deeply reflective pre-emptive gestures, *The Blues Brothers* develops a set of narrative strategies that would become structuring conventions in the blues-oriented feature films that emerged from it. Above all, it strives to establish its white heroes' credentials to perform in a black musical idiom, principally by invoking what Joel Rudinow calls the "experiential access argument" for blues authenticity. This holds that "one cannot understand the blues or authentically express oneself in the blues unless one knows what it's like to live as a black person in America." Acquiring the requisite credentials through personal suffering, struggle and most importantly immersion in what Houston Baker calls the "blues matrix"—the field of social, cultural and psychological forces in which the music was forged—is vital and must be made apparent.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, the brothers' backstory reveals them to be orphans who have been adopted by a black father figure, Curtis, played by jazz and blues veteran Cab Calloway. Du Bois's metaphor of the gift is refined here in terms of familial and racial inheritance as Curtis hands down to his white sons, Jake and Elwood Blues, his own love and understanding of black music which sustains them through the physical and spiritual bondage they must endure as inmates of the repressive Catholic orphanage where Curtis is employed as janitor.

The brothers acquire further credentials through their adult experiences of exploitation, oppression and incarceration. As working bluesmen they are ripped-off by managers, promoters and club owners. Echoing the feelings of black musicians down the years, Elwood replies to a promoter's insistence on putting in place "the right kind of exploitation" for a gig by remarking, "I know all about that stuff. I've

been exploited all my life.” Moreover, as apostles of this black musical subculture they are persecuted by a white power structure represented by the cops, the National Guard and the IRS, by whom they are pursued throughout. In an allusion to racist policing practices, the film’s climactic chase sequence begins with a police-car dispatcher announcing that “the use of unnecessary violence in the apprehension of the Blues Brothers has been approved.” As race traitors and proponents of integration they are targeted by the Illinois Nazi party.<sup>17</sup> And both are familiar with the condition of unfreedom, being habitués of Joliet prison. The film opens with a sequence detailing Jake’s release from his latest spell inside, establishing its master theme about white America being little more than a giant prison for those on its racial and cultural margins. Throughout these tribulations, the music provides sustenance and a sense of emotional and spiritual liberation.

However, the depth of the film’s engagement with the political and ethical implications of the gift is indicated by the fact that its entire narrative is organized around the brothers’ “mission” to repay the debt they believe they owe Curtis for teaching them the music. They dedicate themselves to raising the \$5,000 in unpaid taxes on the orphanage where Curtis still lives and works, to prevent its closure and their adoptive African-American father being made homeless and destitute. In a scene set in an all-singing, all-dancing black Baptist church, the brothers receive divine blessing for their mission from a minister played by “Godfather of Soul,” James Brown. Thus the script is scrupulous in ensuring that the film’s white protagonists are equipped with the qualifications and experiences deemed necessary for blues authenticity; that they are endorsed by great figures of the music’s history (indeed, by the god of the black church himself); and that they are motivated entirely by a sense of gratitude to its black sources and a desire to repay, in material as well as moral

terms, what they feel they owe them. In order to do so, the brothers undertake to perform a benefit concert. But first they must acquire new instruments and equipment for their band that, we learn, had dissolved in chaos and acrimony on the occasion of Jake's last imprisonment.

This they do in the film's central sequence, set around a Southside Chicago music store owned and operated by a character called Ray (played by another black-music godfather, Ray Charles) and called, pointedly, Ray's Music Exchange.<sup>18</sup> This is a complex sequence which introduces a kind of circularity into the processes of cultural gift-giving and reciprocation according to which the narrative is structured. Initially a straightforward commercial transaction, this exchange is soon revealed to obey the logic both of the gift as described by Mauss and of the inalienable possession as defined by Weiner. Ray is compelled to coax music out of a particularly stubborn electric piano the brothers wish to buy, as only he has the appropriately intuitive touch. This provides occasion for a musical set-piece built around Charles's vocal and instrumental prowess which demonstrates the universal appeal of black music, as the Blues Brothers band joins in and a multicultural crowd breaks spontaneously into joyous dancing in the streets surrounding the store. In order to clinch the deal on the piano Ray offers to "throw in the black keys for free," but he ultimately has to accept with good humour that he will receive no payment at all from the impecunious white bluesmen. "As usual," he remarks, "I'll have to take an I.O.U."

Here the film at one and the same time recognizes and disavows the music's entanglement within both a gift economy on the one hand and the unequal and race-inflected networks of capitalist exchange and exploitation on the other. In some ways it wants to see the music in Du Boisian terms as a gift freely given and respectfully received; but it cannot in good faith ignore the history of deep racial and economic

inequality that distorts the processes by which African-American musical resources have crossed over to the American cultural mainstream. This is further reflected in the ambiguity of Ray's demeanour in the scene. Initially he is presented as a jealous custodian of the music as a commercial asset and legal property. He pulls a gun on a black kid who sneaks into the store to steal a guitar, then brazenly tries to overcharge the brothers for the equipment they require. But these demonstrations of ownership are followed by his giving the music away—first as he coaxes the stubborn piano into life through his own innate musical gift, then as he satirically offers the black keys for free, and finally as he surrenders the instruments without payment. For Ray, the music is both a valuable commodity *and* an inalienable possession that can be given away whilst being simultaneously retained. Indeed, offering the music as a gift rather than in terms of a standard market transaction only deepens the indebtedness of the recipients. “The gift not yet repaid,” according to Mauss, “debases the man who accepted it, particularly if he did so without thought of return.”<sup>19</sup> And the scene produces another level obligation for the brothers: the first is to Curtis, for whom they are on “a mission from God”; the second is to Ray, whom they must now also recompense. Moreover, while the gift relationship places the giver in a position of power and moral superiority, it also serves the film's overall project of demonstrating the construction of interracial solidarity through music. Mauss further notes of gift exchange that, “the objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them; the communion and alliance they establish are well-nigh indissoluble.”<sup>20</sup> No doubt Du Bois was fully aware of the implications of the concept for his integrationist vision when he presented the transmission of black music to America in terms of the gift.

The scene at Ray's Music Exchange demonstrates above all the film's burning awareness that the exchange of cultural resources can never be innocent, particularly when it occurs in a wider context dominated by commoditization and unequal power relations. The entirety of *The Blues Brothers* is an attempt to register and compensate for this. Thus, after having received the gift of the music a second time at Ray's, the brothers' mission climaxes with their performance at the Palace Hotel Ballroom of the Solomon Burke R&B classic, "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love." Elwood introduces the song by riffing on its title theme of "Everybody" to suggest that black music is a universal resource that can and should be shared unselfconsciously by all, regardless of heritage or background, race, class or political inclination. "Please remember, people," he reminds the crowd, "that no matter who you are, and what you do to live, thrive and survive, there are still some things that make us all the same. You, me, them, everybody. *Everybody*." (Elwood's "them" generously includes the cops, Nazis and country-and-western-loving racists who have harried the brothers throughout.) The music's origins might be African-American, the film concedes, but it can be universally owned because it transcends barriers of skin-colour, culture, class and ideology to speak to the common human condition.

Thus the film wavers between, on the one hand, a commitment to the music as an inalienable possession of African Americans and, on the other, a desire to universalize the music beyond the constraints of the marketplace or the racial politics of cultural appropriation and crossover in the United States. But the series of utopian feel-good moments of multi-racial celebration around which the film's musical numbers are arranged can never quite banish the spectre of unequal cultural and commercial exchange. The Palace Hotel Ballroom scene ends with our attention being drawn to the fact that the brothers take no part of the \$10,000 advance they are offered

by a record company executive impressed with their performance; rather they instruct him to use it to pay the band and clear their outstanding debt to Ray. But the film remains haunted by a sense of the ultimate inadequacy of any monetary or market-based recompense for the gift of the music. As if to acknowledge this, its final act raises the stakes surrounding indebtedness and obligation to encompass the very condition of liberty itself. And as it does so, its protagonists' blues credentials are re-emphasized as the brothers spend most of the final act of the film in accidental blackface.

A scrape with Jake's homicidal girlfriend in a sewer beneath the Palace Hotel Ballroom leaves the brothers with a liberal coating of mud on their clothes, hands and faces. Thus blacked up, they face down the oppressive might of the white power structure long enough to deliver the \$5,000 to the IRS and secure their adoptive black father's continued independence. The moral and cultural debt is finally reciprocated with an emancipatory gesture that goes beyond the value of the cash involved and which, significantly, costs the donors their own liberty. The sequence ends with a close-up on the blackface duo's hands being roughly cuffed while massed ranks of cops and National Guardsmen train their weapons on them in a further deliberate echo of the historical violence inflicted on African Americans by the repressive agencies of the state. While reviewers did not spot the presence of literal blackface in *The Blues Brothers*, some quickly linked the film disparagingly to the overtly racist nineteenth-century practice of blackface minstrelsy. Cecil Brown, attacking it as a "1980s version of A Trip to Coon Town," argued that it "fits neatly into the history of whites as players in blackface minstrelsy." Yet recent scholarship has complicated this view of blackface performance as irredeemably racist and unambiguously appropriating, stressing minstrelsy's politically subversive, *anti-racist* qualities. As a working-class,

anti-elitist practice, it is argued, minstrelsy—especially in the antebellum period—revolved around “a very real cross-racial energy and recalcitrant alliance between blacks and lower-class whites,” and was inhabited by “utopian or emancipatory moment[s]” of the kind we can see clearly at work in *The Blues Brothers*.<sup>21</sup>

The film closes with Jake and Elwood back in Joliet prison, performing a suitably knowing version of “Jailhouse Rock” in tribute to their precursor Hollywood white Negro, Elvis Presley. The song sparks a jubilant, multiracial prison riot, and the music’s role in the dialectic of bondage and emancipation recommences. This conclusion confirms that the sense of obligation incurred for accepting the gift of black music cannot be discharged with any straightforward reciprocation that might be reduced to an I.O.U. or a calculus of utility or financial value. Rather, it requires the recipients, finally, to offer up their own liberty in what Jean Baudrillard would call a sacrificial “countergift,” the kind of unquantifiable gesture that establishes “the outline of a social relation based on the extermination of value.”<sup>22</sup> The brothers’ countergift, an act of transracial historical empathy, starkly demonstrates Mauss’s claims regarding the compelling “force” of “the thing given” and the “indissoluble” nature of the “communion and alliance” it establishes between donor and recipient. And it seems to enact the Du Boisian ideal of “two world-races ... giv[ing] each to each” gifts that transcend the dominant American logic of commercial exchange, or what Du Bois disparaged as “a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.”<sup>23</sup> This circulation, alongside the music itself, of the experiences of bondage and emancipation as gift, countergift and sacrifice, so conscientiously worked out in *The Blues Brothers*, becomes a central pattern in the films that follow from it and return to its implications.

However, while on a narrative level the film strives to pre-empt and settle arguments about the ownership and exchange of black music, in its existence as a commodity it only served to exacerbate them. As Daniel Lieberfeld has noted, the financial dividends reaped from the Blues Brothers franchise—encompassing not just the films but several gold- and platinum-certified albums, four top-forty singles, lucrative concert tours, the House of Blues restaurant and nightclub chain, a long-running syndicated radio show, an animated TV show, novelizations, comics and a Ray-Ban sunglasses sponsorship deal—were at best unevenly distributed in favour of the act’s white principals and associated white entrepreneurs and corporate business interests. Moreover, others lament the “ill effects” of the film’s popularity on contemporary performers’ and audiences’ understanding of musical and cultural history. *Ex-Living Blues* editor Paul Garon complains that, “For many new white performers the notion of the blues’ ‘black heritage’ is indeed a mystery; the only ‘heritage’ they know is sun glasses, black suits and fedoras.” Aykroyd might protest that “Everyone’s been compensated”; James Brown might assert that the film “open[ed] the door” for black musicians in the 1980s; and John Lee Hooker might be satisfied that “that was good, *good* publicity for me.... I got credits, that’s cool.” But where popular music is concerned, *The Blues Brothers* teaches, the racialized dynamics of the market are not so easily transcended.<sup>24</sup>

### **III. “I’m the Bluesman; he’s from Long Island”: *Crossroads***

Walter Hill’s 1986 film *Crossroads* takes up the concerns of *The Blues Brothers* in an even more explicit fashion. The film’s title not only invokes a privileged *topos* of African-American and blues folklore, it signals a central concern with the cultural and commercial intersections and exchanges between black and white America with



respect to music. Eugene Mantone is a white teen prodigy studying classical guitar at New York's Julliard School of Music. However, he's obsessed by the blues and believes in the existence of a lost, unrecorded song by legendary Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson; if he could discover and record the song it would be his passport to blues immortality. Eugene's Julliard professor disapproves of his meddling with blues (especially his penchant for re-arranging Mozart in the blues idiom). Invoking both the "proprietary" and "experiential access" arguments about blues ownership and authenticity, he informs Eugene that, "Excellence in primitive music is cultural. You have to be born to it."

A similar view is offered by salty blues veteran Willie Brown, whom Eugene discovers languishing in a Brooklyn prison hospital. Willie is the "friend boy" the real, historical Robert Johnson namechecks in his 1936 recording "Cross Road Blues," one of the two minor race-music hits that Johnson enjoyed in his brief, obscure, but posthumously lionized, career.<sup>25</sup> Willie leads Eugene to believe that he knows the lost Robert Johnson song as, he claims, he was with Johnson when the blues legend wrote it. Eugene pleads with Willie to teach him the song so that he can do for it what English rock 'n' rollers Cream and The Rolling Stones did for Johnson's profile with their celebrated cover versions of his songs "Crossroads" and "Love in Vain." Willie rebuffs the appeal on the basis that Eugene is looking to perpetrate cultural theft and has not paid sufficient dues to earn access to the song: "Just one more white boy rippin' off our music," he complains, telling Eugene, "You ain't deserving. No mileage!" Yet, echoing *The Blues Brothers'* concern with the circuits of cultural and commercial exchange, Willie ultimately concedes that he will give Eugene the song if the aspiring bluesman helps him bust out of the prison hospital and return home to the Mississippi delta of his blues-singing prime. For when

it comes to learning the blues, Willie tells Eugene, “Ain’t but one school—straight on down in the Delta. That’s where it all started.” Thus, in a variation of the experiential access argument, and in distinction from Eugene’s music professor, Willie holds that the blues *can* be learned. It’s a matter of paying one’s dues, of being “deservin’” in the eyes of one’s African-American surrogate father, and of immersing oneself wholeheartedly in the social, cultural and psychological forces that comprise the blues matrix. For Eugene this involves a journey into the blues’s geographical and historical origins during which he is initiated into what the film holds to be the essentials of the blues experience: penniless hard travelling, police harassment, racial hostility, and sexual and emotional ecstasy and torment.

Eugene thus repays his surrogate father, Willie, for the gift of the music by providing the blues veteran with his physical liberty, with access to his past and a revitalising return to the music’s wellsprings. As with Jake and Elwood Blues, this involves Eugene’s offering of a sacrificial “countergift”: he stakes his own liberty by going up against an oppressive legal, judicial and penal structure in order to free Willie and escort him home. Willie insists on remaining the arbiter of cultural authenticity, however, when he asserts at one point in their journey that though Eugene might have entered “bluesville” he’s not yet a “bluesman,” a term the kid presumptuously uses to introduce himself to another character. “*I’m* the bluesman,” Willie clarifies; “*he’s* from Long Island.” Ultimately, though, Eugene is adjudged to have paid his dues when he achieves acceptance from the initially-hostile clientele of an all-black Mississippi juke joint where he jams with Willie and earns his first money from playing the music. “You come in the juke with your guitar, dressed to play? A black man’s juke?” inquires an incredulous customer. “I’m surprised you can walk, boy. You got balls *this* big!”

The film climaxes with a further twist in the complex process of cultural exchange between Willie and Eugene. Of course, there is no lost Robert Johnson song. This is a piece of blues mythology that Willie has cleverly exploited to manipulate Eugene into helping him. And it transpires that he requires further help from Eugene. As a young man Willie—like, reputedly, his friend Robert Johnson—made a deal with the devil at the local crossroads in which he promised to forfeit his soul in exchange for musical prowess. The devil now appears to Willie, demanding payment on the note. Eugene volunteers to take part in a guitar cutting contest with the devil’s musical representative, the result of which will determine ownership of Willie’s soul. Initially unwilling to let Eugene enter the contest—the kid, now risking spiritual bondage as well as physical incarceration on behalf of his mentor, stands to lose his own soul if he fails—Willie is overruled. He equips Eugene for victory in battle by furnishing a further gift—a Louisiana ‘mojo hand’ or voodoo charm. “The winning boy’s magic,” Willie calls it. “You see there’s only one last true mojo left in the world,” he explains. “Take it, Lightnin’ ... I’m giving you all the magic I’ve got.” Bolstered by the additional gift of African-American folk belief, Eugene wins the contest, finally discharging his obligation to Willie with the reciprocal gift of metaphysical, as well as physical, emancipation. But this final gesture of giving and reciprocation is further complicated by the fact that it is Eugene’s mastery of the European classical repertoire that secures Willie’s freedom: he defeats the devil’s emissary (who, incidentally, is white— played by New York rock-guitar virtuoso Steve Vai) with a scorching slide-guitar rendition of Paganini’s “Caprice #5”.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the debt owed for the transmission of the blues from African-American father to white son is repaid at least twice in *Crossroads* as it is in *The Blues Brothers*. But in its climax the film gestures towards a current of cultural exchange that flows in

the other direction when European classical music secures Willie's spiritual emancipation. The two musical traditions fruitfully co-exist and intertwine as Willie tells Eugene, "You gotta move on without me. Take the music someplace else. Take it past where you found it.... We got a deal?" The film ends with a vision of the blues evolving into something new now that all debts are paid, into something informed centrally by a relationship to European musical forms as well as to "deservin'" white inheritors of the black legacy.

There is an embattled circularity to *The Blues Brothers* (not least in its beginning and ending in jail) which stems from its inability to believe that the sense of obligation haunting its protagonists can ever fully be discharged, despite their most diligent, self-sacrificing efforts. That film remains to the end painfully conscious of the economic inequalities of cultural exchange, whereas *Crossroads*—notwithstanding Willie's grumbles about "another white boy rippin' off our music"—avoids sustained engagement with the commercial contexts of black music in favour of a knowing recycling of blues folklore and mythology. And even here it adopts a lightly ironic rather than romantically reverent tone. Eugene's belief in the Johnson legend and the attendant blues mythology is depicted as a mark of his naïveté and his experiential distance from the social and psychological wellsprings of the blues. By the end of his journey with Willie he's able to declare, without compromising his love of the music, "I don't believe in any of this shit anyway." Similarly, Willie's commitment to what Charles Keil calls "the delta origin myth of the blues" is revealed to be in part a strategy to manipulate Eugene and in part an old man's nostalgia for his romanticized youth.<sup>27</sup> As he finally hands the music over to Eugene he declares, "Let's go. I'm sick of this down-home Mississippi," and demands to be taken to Chicago in an aeroplane. Through the ironic deployment of blues lore and the skirting

of the economics of cultural exchange *Crossroads* is able to imagine a relatively cut-and-dried musical succession from black originators to white inheritors. By contrast, the apparently more irreverent and slapstick *Blues Brothers* recognizes the intractable nature of the circuits of obligation, of gift and countergift, that attend the transmission of the blues in a culture that is not just racialized but profoundly marketized too.

#### **IV. “Vital American legacies”: *Blues Brothers 2000***

*Crossroads*' concern with inheritance and the evolution of the blues tradition into the present and future is central to three subsequent blues musicals: *Blues Brothers 2000* (1998), *Black Snake Moan* (2006), and *Honeydripper* (2007). In *Blues Brothers 2000* (hereafter *BB2K*) Elwood Blues, newly out of Joliet and in despair after the deaths of his brother Jake and surrogate father Curtis, learns that he has a stepbrother, fathered by Curtis while he was still a travelling musician in a brief liaison with a music fan. The destitute Elwood approaches his “long lost brother” Cab for a small financial stake that will allow him once again to reform the Blues Brothers band and re-inject purpose into his life. Cab is sceptical: not only, he points out, is he African-American whereas Elwood is white, he is also a Commander in the Illinois state police, longstanding enemies of the Blues Brothers and their brand of law-defying, music-inspired anarchy. Elwood ends up accidentally stealing Cab's wallet and using its contents to form a new incarnation of the band and embark on a tour that takes them, like Eugene Martone in *Crossroads*, to the reputed birthplace of the blues—the Deep South. Pursued by brother Cab and the Illinois state police (as well as by Russian gangsters, enraged Catholic nuns, and more organized white supremacists), the band reaches Louisiana. Here they participate in a battle of the bands contest that is presided over by a Voodoo queen (played by contemporary R&B star Erykah Badu)

who embodies the music's links not just with the Deep South but back to African cultures and folk practices too.

In contrast to the first Blues Brothers film, where a complex act of exchange with an African-American father figure (Ray Charles) was central to the brothers' ability to reform the band and discharge their debt to their original mentor and father, Curtis, *BB2K* places an act of theft—albeit an accidental one—at the centre of its plot mechanics and ethical reflections on the interaction between black and white in the evolution of the blues. The money stolen by Elwood from his “brother” Cab is a figure for the broader cultural theft of black music by white performers and business interests that for some commentators, as we have seen, is intrinsic to the process of musical crossover. As we have also seen, certain critics made the same point about Aykroyd's and Belushi's parlaying of what some dismissed as a minstrel act into an international blues empire encompassing albums, concert tours, restaurants and clubs, TV and radio shows, as well as movies and merchandise. And, in the period since the first film, the debate about the ownership and appropriation of black music acquired additional dimensions. The emergence of new crossover forms such as hip hop inspired a more militant sense of cultural ownership among young African-American musicians and scholars, producing heightened consciousness of what Amiri Baraka called “The Great Music Robbery” in which the Du Boisian idea of the music as a gift was explicitly repudiated. Indeed, the NAACP launched a legal challenge to the right of white entrepreneurs to organize and profit from blues festivals, whilst other campaigners demanded that the music business pay a special share of the financial reparations due African Americans in compensation for slavery and its legacies. “The blues was stolen from the black community,” argued one activist, “it was not given

away for free. Billions of dollars were made on the blues. It is time for the music industry to pay the bill.”<sup>28</sup>

In *BB2K* co-writer-star Aykroyd and co-writer-director Landis seem to be responding to this context by acknowledging their complicity in the white appropriation and commercial exploitation of the blues to which the first Blues Brothers film had undeniably contributed. Yet, as if deliberately invoking Eric Lott’s account of the racial politics of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, the film turns Elwood’s theft quickly into an act of love. First, in the build-up to the climactic battle of the bands, Elwood delivers a rousing motivational speech to his fellow musicians in which he berates them for contemplating abandoning the music and establishes his theft as integral to the sacred mission of preserving and perpetuating the African-American cultural heritage passed on to him and the departed Jake by their black father, Curtis. Their enterprise, he declares, is to guard “the vital American legacies of Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Jimmy Reed, Memphis Slim, Blind Boy Fuller, Louis Jordan, Little Walter, Big Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson One and Two, Otis Redding, Jackie Wilson, Elvis Presley, Leiber and Stoller.” It is telling that Elwood’s blues lineage concludes with white figures central to the same process of cultural crossover in which he himself is engaged. The implication is that without white Negroes like Elvis, Leiber and Stoller, or Elwood Blues the tradition would wither.

Second, pursuit of his stolen \$500 leads Cab into an encounter with the power of black music at a tent revival meeting presided over by holy-rolling musical ministers played by R&B godfathers Sam Moore and—reprising his role in the first film—James Brown. Here Cab is compensated for the theft of his money by receiving the gift of the music from which he has been alienated by his cop identity and

servitude to the white power structure. In a moment of revelation that recapitulates Jake's conversion at the Baptist church in the first Blues Brothers movie, the power of the music causes Cab to be raised aloft by a divine beam of light that emanates from above; in a transport of ecstasy he sloughs off his cop uniform and is miraculously transformed into a dark-suited, fedora-and-shades-wearing Blues Brother. Henceforth, Cab fronts the band alongside Elwood and other new (and white) brothers, Mighty Mack and fugitive orphan child, Buster, whom Elwood has taken under his wing just as Curtis did the orphaned Elwood himself.

The tent revival scene in *BB2K* is as central, as complex and as contradictory as the Ray's Music Exchange scene in the first Blues Brothers film. In it, Elwood repays Cab for the theft of his money by emancipating him through music from his buttoned-up, repressed, white-power-structure-serving cop persona. This gift of musical emancipation is also further repayment to Elwood's and Cab's common father Curtis (played by Cab Calloway, after whom Cab is named) who, Elwood reminds Cab, "gave us the music." And as Du Bois envisaged, it serves "the ideal of human brotherhood," establishing a cross-racial bond of brotherly love between Cab and Elwood and the rest of the band. In this utopian gesture the scene seeks to dissolve any racial barrier to brotherhood. Yet at the same time it invokes quasi-racial notions of "blood" to explain Cab's conversion from repressive authority figure to hip blues apostle. In the build-up to his conversion, tent revival preachers James Brown and Sam Moore exhort the cop to "acknowledge your own flesh and blood" as they attempt to dissuade him from arresting Elwood and draw him into their liberating musical ritual built around the gospel classic "John the Revelator." Later, the converted Cab thanks Elwood for bringing him to this moment of musical revelation: "Elwood, this is my calling," he exclaims. "The calling of the blood!" Cab, the figure



who early on reminds Elwood that while they might in some senses share a father they are definitively separated by blood (“Have you noticed, Mr. Blues,” he asks Elwood, “that I’m an African American?”), now appears to acknowledge a degree of consanguinity between them. He has accepted Elwood as his “own flesh and blood” in the same moment that his acceptance of the blues is figured in quasi-racial terms as his answering “the calling of the blood.”

Here, in the same gesture, the film both erases and re-inscribes a racial understanding of the blues legacy and its transmission. Elwood’s status as a Blues Brother (and by extension Mack’s and Buster’s) is acquired through experiential access to the blues matrix: they respect their sources and pay their dues sufficiently to qualify for the gift, and whatever element of theft might be involved in their use of it is mitigated by love, by a deep sense of “indissoluble” obligation, as Mauss suggests, and by various selfless acts of reciprocation which aspire to the condition of the Baudrillardian counter-gift. Cab’s status as a Blues Brother, though, seems to depend on the elicitation of an innate racial essence, “the calling of the blood,” that requires no dues-paying or “mileage,” to employ Willie Brown’s formula.<sup>29</sup> Yet, as if unable to reconcile or deal with the implications of this apparent contradiction, *BB2K* quickly retreats from the complexities of the tent revival scene and shifts its focus away from the relationship between transracial brothers Elwood and Cab. In a resolution that recalls *Crossroads*’ evasion of the music’s entanglement with the market and disavows the complex circularity of the first Blues Brothers film, where obligation can never be fully discharged and gift exchange is inseparable from market relations, Elwood unproblematically hands the blues legacy on to a new generation of white custodians personified by his adopted son, Buster. Here *BB2K* ducks the implications of its parent film in that it would rather accept cultural exchange as a *fait accompli*

and affirm that white stewardship will see the music “further on up the road,” as Elwood puts it, than dwell on the economics and racial politics of the gift’s historical dynamics.

#### **V. “These collisions of race, class, gender”: *Black Snake Moan***

The politics of gift exchange in Craig Brewer’s 2006 film *Black Snake Moan* are further complicated by the centrality of questions of gender and sexuality. Lazarus Redd is a Mississippi blues veteran who has renounced the devil’s music for a quiet life of farming, prayer and bible study. However, Lazarus’s wife’s abandonment of him for his younger brother intensifies the sense of sexual humiliation and resentment he already harbours due to her unilateral decision to have an abortion some time in their past. Lazarus’s barely contained rage overflows when into his life erupts Rae Doole, a nubile, white-trash, backwoods nymphomaniac who is dumped on his doorstep an unconscious bloody mess after one risky sexual liaison too many. Rae’s libidinal compulsion stems from childhood abuse and a self-destructive despair caused by separation from the love of her life who has enlisted in the army in a vain attempt to provide them both with some prospects beyond their limited, class-bound horizons. Lazarus vents his misogynistic rage on Rae by determining to cure her of her nymphomania with stern patriarchal discipline. He imprisons the virtually naked girl in his cabin, binding her to his radiator with a heavy iron chain and subjecting her to a barrage of stern biblical moralising leavened with a diet of fresh greens from his garden and moonshine liquor from his still.

This set-up is the film’s way of creating in microcosm a version of the blues matrix in which, it insists, both Lazarus and Rae, irrespective of skin colour, have been forged. In so far as it defines the blues matrix in terms of the afflictions of love

and sex, the film's presiding father figure, the authenticating historical antecedent of the Lazarus Redd character, is legendary delta bluesman Son House. Monochrome archive footage of House from the 1960s is periodically interpolated into the film to articulate its particular understanding of the music's fundamental impulses. "Ain't but one kind of blues," House declares in the film's prologue. "And that consists of between male and female that's in love." But to this essentially sex- and gender-defined situation, white writer-director Craig Brewer adds an important class and interracial dynamic to flesh out his film's depiction of the blues matrix. "The South is the Mesopotamia of American music," Brewer has said, "and it all came from poverty.... Everything good and bad, great and terrible, in the South has come about through these collisions of race, class, gender."<sup>30</sup>

The film's most arresting and provocative element is Lazarus's subjection of a near-naked white girl to the indignity of physical bondage, an act which appears to reverse the racial polarities of American slavery. (Whether it also realizes some of the most extreme sexual fears or fantasies associated with Southern race relations or critically addresses the misogyny that some commentators have identified in the blues are further points for debate.) Referring to this potentially incendiary scenario, the film's African-American producer, John Singleton, declared, "This is some revolutionary shit—we're tying up white women in Mississippi!"<sup>31</sup> However, in terms of its narrative development, the film is quick to retreat from the more explosive implications of this relationship to a position of reconciliation, and it does so by invoking Du Bois's notion of the gift and attaching it to the theme of inheritance.

Lazarus's subjection of Rae to a form of bondage with sexual overtones turns out, inevitably, to be part of the process of both characters' redemption and emancipation. Their relationship climaxes with Rae beseeching the bluesman to

exhume his guitar, to return to the devil's music and play for her. This Lazarus reluctantly does. His visceral and cathartic interpretation of the 1926 Blind Lemon Jefferson blues, "Black Snake Moan," releases both from their respective sexual ordeals and equips them to move on with their lives. Lazarus removes Rae's chain, his gift of the blues having released her from her libidinal pathology. But by the same token, Rae's unguarded provocations and openness regarding her sexual torment have freed Lazarus to return both to the blues (he celebrates his new freedom by playing a gig at the local juke joint) and the sexual battlefield (he begins a relationship with a local lady admirer). Finally, *Black Snake Moan* presents the blues as a universal resource forged in an interracial matrix. The origins and ownership of the music are determined less by racial factors than by regional and emotional ones, and the giving and receiving of the music are reciprocal, circulating back and forth across the colour line and reaffirming Brewer's essentially utopian view of crossover: "Some of our greatest things have happened when whites and blacks ... come together to make some music."<sup>32</sup>

Despite its director's desire to present a blues matrix comprised of powerful psycho-sexual, racial and class forces, *Black Snake Moan* tends to dwell on the former and to treat the blues as an ahistorical essence. "When you deal with blues music," Brewer claims, "you're dealing with sex and the devil and heaven and god. There's this constant desperation and this constant repetitive articulation of what is eating at them."<sup>33</sup> The music is an emotional or psychological atavism with a largely therapeutic function—a "constant repetitive articulation"—as opposed to an evolving form that responds to changing social and economic contexts and has anything like a commercial and technological history. In evading this history the film is able, like *Crossroads*, to celebrate the music as an interracial project of mutual giving and

mutual emancipation undistorted by the complex market forces in which the crossover of black musical styles into the cultural mainstream always occurs.

Nonetheless, in providing narrative closure the film does gesture towards questions of evolution and development. Lazarus completes his duties as Rae's surrogate father (her own parents having abandoned her) by reuniting the reformed nymphomaniac with her lover and arranging their wedding, at which he gives her away. Rae is now positioned as the inheritor of the music; Lazarus teaches her some songs on his guitar and she takes the music with her as she moves on down the road. *Black Snake Moan's* conclusion echoes those of its immediate predecessors in the sequence. From *Crossroads* on, these films end with the motif of a youthful white inheritor travelling down a road which leads the music into a future defined by some kind of wider, transracial engagement with American culture at large. In so doing, they complete the project begun in *The Blues Brothers* of imagining a process of cross-racial reciprocation in which the obligation incurred for receiving the gift of the blues can be discharged and the more uncomfortable political and economic implications of musical crossover can be managed.

#### **VI. "In the white folks' big room": *Honeydripper***

An interesting variation on this pattern is writer-director John Sayles's 2007 film, *Honeydripper*. Sayles employs the by now well-established tropes and conventions characteristic of blues movies from *The Blues Brothers* on and which structure other black-music films such as *8 Mile* (2002) and *Cadillac Records* (2008). Veteran blues piano player and proprietor of the Honeydripper roadhouse Pinetop Purvis must save his business by organising a Saturday night attraction that will allow him to pay off his debts and retain his independence. Independence to Pinetop is key to his manhood

as an African American in the rural, Jim Crow Alabama of 1950 (the film's setting) and a corollary of the condition of emotional and spiritual emancipation associated with the blues in the films already discussed. To this end he breaks with his musical policy of offering only old-fashioned piano-based music of the kind he himself plays (classic blues and boogie-woogie) and hires electric bluesman and star of radio and records Guitar Sam from New Orleans. When the notoriously unreliable Sam fails to show, a desperate Pinetop hands the gig to the untried Sonny Blake, an itinerant young guitar player with a home-made electric rig who has drifted into town and is lodging at the Honeydripper. Sonny successfully impersonates Guitar Sam, the night is a great success, and Pinetop is able to keep the Honeydripper going via this newfangled, electrified variant of the blues, placating alike the black gangster and the white sheriff who threaten to dispossess him.

Pinetop is the father figure whose role is to hand the music down to a new generation of players, reluctantly coming to terms with the evolution of the music's form as he does so. Sonny is the inheritor of Pinetop's blues mantle who must acquire the credentials necessary to perform the music with conviction and credibility. In the space of a few days he undergoes displacement and wrongful arrest, is coerced into picking cotton without pay by the corrupt sheriff and a racist judge, and laments his condition by singing the blues in his jail cell. Thus being black is not in itself sufficient for blues authenticity, as the earlier films in the sequence implied.

*Honeydripper* requires Sonny to suffer an ordeal-by-adversity similar to those endured by earlier white protagonists in order that he may acquire experiential access to the music. His short sojourn in the town of Harmony recapitulates in microcosm the African-American experience from transportation to the New World, through bondage, plantation labour, emancipation and the emergence of secular black music in

a commercial entertainment context. And Sayles's careful delineation of the social, economic and political aspects of the community, as well as its cultural life, provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the blues matrix than do *Honeydripper's* predecessor films.

As with *Crossroads*, *BB2K* and *Black Snake Moan*, *Honeydripper* concludes with the motif of the blues being passed on from one generation to the next. "Sounds like the music movin' on again," muses Slick, the husband of Bertha Mae, the singer of old-fashioned vaudeville-style blues whose demise is caused by the arrival of Sonny's brand of electrified proto-rock 'n' roll. "It always do," he continues. "Time to make room for whatever's comin' next." And the blind street musician, Possum, a throwback to the itinerant, acoustic country-blues masters of the pre-war era, leaves town acknowledging that he's no longer required and that indeed the music must head on "down the road." However, *Honeydripper* imagines this process of musical transmission, inheritance and evolution very differently from its predecessors. In Sayles's film there are no white blues aficionados seeking to qualify and make compensation for receiving the gift of the music. Indeed, the only white character of any significance is the vaguely menacing Sheriff Pugh who oversees the rigid separation of black and white worlds that obtains in segregated small-town Alabama.<sup>34</sup> And yet the centrepiece of the film is an act of interracial musical exchange that recalls those around which *The Blues Brothers*, *Crossroads*, *BB2K* and *Black Snake Moan* are constructed. This one, though, takes place off-screen, perhaps two hundred years before the story's mid-twentieth-century setting. In the lull before the Saturday night gig, Pinetop sits at his piano (about to be displaced from the centre of the bandstand by Sonny's electric guitar) and enters into an extended meditation on the origins of the blues. These origins can be traced back, he imagines, to the first

African bold enough to extract music from this strange European instrument, the property of the same white master that owned him. “Must have been the first one ... back in slavery days,” Pinetop muses, speculating on how this blues forerunner borrowed European technologies and musical forms and adapted them to his own still substantially African sensibility. Pinetop’s imaginative reconstruction of this founding moment in American cultural and musical history, a moment he sees taking place “in the white folks’ big room,” suggests that moments of origin can never be racially unmixed: the process of racial and cultural crossover is always already present in American music, based as much in the black fascination with and appropriation of European cultural materials as in the white acquisition of black resources.

*Honeydrinker* thus approaches cultural exchange from the African-American side of the colour line rather than from the perspective of grateful but onerously obliged white recipients of Du Bois’s gift. It therefore feels no obligation to justify and legitimize the process. It presents the blues not so much as a legacy to be preserved and perpetuated under enlightened white stewardship (the heritage view of the blues endorsed by *Crossroads*, *BB2K* and Congress’s 2003 “Year of the Blues” proclamation<sup>35</sup>) nor as an unchanging essence, a “constant repetitive articulation” of eternal emotional, sexual and psychological states associated with an ahistorical blues matrix (*Black Snake Moan*’s position). Nor does it concern itself with the necessity of white reciprocation for the gift of black music. Rather, it invites us to see the blues as a series of moments in a process of African-American cultural, political and economic negotiation with a white mainstream that is itself also in flux. Because it identifies African-American creative appropriation of European or white cultural materials—rather than the transmission of a black gift to white recipients—as central to the music, *Honeydrinker* is less burdened by the complex and contradictory sense of



obligation, guilt and reciprocation that structures its predecessors and, ultimately, derives from the ambiguity of Du Bois's notion of the gift around which they revolve.

This does not necessarily mean that *Honeydripper* is more historically accurate or culturally truthful than these other films. Nonetheless it opens up more complex and nuanced ways of understanding African-American music's relationship with broader American culture. Rejecting the view of the music as an *object* or cultural property that is transmitted (with or without consent) from one racially-defined social group to another allows us to see it rather as a *process* in which the transracial circulation of cultural resources goes in all directions, thus defying attempts to identify racially-pure points of origin or assert claims of exclusive racial ownership. In this respect *Honeydripper* takes us closer to the position of those musicologists who question the definition and characterization of musical forms according to an essentialism of race, rejecting conceptual distinctions between "black music" and "white music." Acceptance of such terms, according to Phillip Tagg, is "tantamount to posing the racist hypothesis that there are physiological connections between the colour of people's skin and the sort of music people with that colour skin produce." Not only are they empirically insupportable they are politically regressive; deconstructing them is a necessary task for what Paul Gilroy calls a "radically non-racial humanism" that seeks to move political and cultural discussion beyond the rigid antinomies of race in which it too often seems imprisoned.<sup>36</sup>

This, after all, was the vision toward which Du Bois intended *The Souls of Black Folk* to contribute. "We have brought our ... gifts and mingled them with yours," he states, stressing that black lives, labour and cultural resources have become inextricably entangled with those of whites "in blood brotherhood."<sup>37</sup> The films discussed above begin from this insight. Like Du Bois, they envisage African-

American music as a gift which, in Maussian terms, carries a “force ... which compels the recipient to make a return.” As vehicles for working through, in the realm of popular discourse, the political and ethical implications of accepting such a gift, they perform an important cultural function, bearing out Mauss’s assertion that, for the recipient, “the obligation is expressed in myth and imagery, symbolically and collectively.”<sup>38</sup> While they might on one level mystify by providing imaginary resolutions to real contradictions, on another they are driven and shaped by the genuinely progressive desire to overcome social and historical antagonisms. “[T]he images to be managed by the mass cultural text,” argues Fredric Jameson, “are necessarily Utopian in nature,” tending as they do toward “a symbolic affirmation of human relationships.”<sup>39</sup> Like blues historian William Barlow, then, the films find in the dynamics of obligation and reciprocation that flow from the gift precisely that which “gives the blues culture its utopian potential”—namely its “proclivity to break down cultural barriers and ... refashion race and social relations along more egalitarian lines.”<sup>40</sup> Of course, the blind spots, evasions and contradictions that inhabit the narratives’ celebration of white enthusiasm for what they understand to be black music should caution us not to minimize what David Roediger calls “the difficulties of rooting hopes for racial justice in the alleged ‘crossover’ of cultural figures from white to Black forms.”<sup>41</sup> But where Du Bois deploys the somewhat evasive notion of “mingling,” the films have the virtue at least of seriously addressing the complex politics of such instances of cultural crossover. These politics, as I have shown, shape their narratives and remind us that in market societies, as Mauss also observed, gift exchange can never fully be disentangled from commodity relations and the inequalities of power these entail.

## Notes

1. Gene Lees, *You Can't Steal a Gift: Dizzy, Clark, Milt, and Nat* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 96.
2. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 179.
3. Frederick Douglass, "The Hutchinson Family – Hunkerism." *The North Star*, 27 Oct. 1848.
4. J. Cole, "Fire Squad," *2014 Forest Hills Drive* (Dreamsville Records, 2014); Azealia Banks interview, Hot97 Radio, 18 Dec. 2014. These are all versions of what Joel Rudinow defines as the "proprietary argument" about black music: "the blues ... belongs to the African-American community" and when whites "perform the blues they misappropriate the cultural heritage and intellectual property of African Americans." Joel Rudinow, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Volume 52, No 1 (Winter 1994), 130.
5. On Du Bois and anthropology see the special edition of *Critique of Anthropology* Volume 12, No 3 (Sept. 1992). On DuBois's relationship with Boas see Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Vernon J. Williams Jr., *Rethinking Race: Franz Boas and His Contemporaries* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).
6. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Form and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen and West, 1954), 31.
7. *Ibid.*, 73-75.

8. Shannon Sullivan, "Remembering the Gift: W.E.B. Du Bois on the Unconscious and Economic Operations of Racism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* Volume 34, No 2 (Spring 2003), 218; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920), 52, 30.
9. Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 6, 9-10.
10. Langston Hughes, "Songs Called the Blues," *Phylon* Volume 2, No 2 (1941), 143, 145; Hughes, "The Blues I'm Playing" (1934), in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1995), 626 (ellipses in original); Hughes, "Note on Commercial Art," *The Crisis*, Mar. 1940, 79; Hughes, "Highway Robbery Across the Color Line in Rhythm and Blues," *Chicago Defender*, 2 Jul. 1955, 9.
11. Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and the American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Peter Stanfield, *Body and Soul: Jazz and Blues in American Film, 1927-63* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
12. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981).
13. Mauss, 1.
14. David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 116.

15. *The Blues Brothers* pressbook (Universal Pictures, 1980); Abe Peck, “The Blues Brothers Ask the \$32 Million Question,” *Rolling Stone*, 7 Aug. 1980, 30.
16. Rudinow, 130, 132; Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.
17. The brothers’ gleeful disruption of a neo-Nazi political rally makes them a target of the Illinois police and the National Guard, suggesting a link between American law-enforcement and white supremacy that upsets the film’s more conservative viewers. Indeed, *The Blues Brothers* draws much opprobrium on right-wing Internet forums devoted to denunciation of “the most Anti-White movies.” See, for example, Vanguard News Network’s movie discussion thread at <http://www.vnnforum.com/showthread.php?t=61861>.
18. Charles was surely selected for this part due to his role in bringing black music into the pop mainstream in the 1950s and for his history of synthesizing disparate musical cultures with previously strong racial identifications. Of his audacious 1962 move into the purportedly “white” field of country music, Charles observed, “It was just one of those American things. I believe in mixed musical marriages, and there’s no way to copyright a feeling or a rhythm or a style of singing”—a smart summation of what could be identified as *The Blues Brothers*’ position on race and music. Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles’s Own Story* (New York: Dial Press, 1978), 173.
19. Mauss, 63.
20. *Ibid.*, 31.

21. Cecil Brown, "Blues for Blacks in Hollywood," *Mother Jones*, Jan. 1981, 59; W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Jump Jim Crow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), viii; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 51. See also Dale Cockerell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). The entire Blues Brothers concept is steeped in awareness of its connections to minstrelsy and the ambiguous racial politics of blackface performance. See, for example, Annie Leibovitz's *Rolling Stone* cover portrait of Aykroyd and Belushi in blue face-makeup from the 22 Feb. 1979 edition.
22. Jean Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 120, 119.
23. Du Bois, *Souls*, 8.
24. Daniel Lieberfeld, "Million-Dollar Juke Joint: Commodifying Blues Culture," *African American Review* Volume 29, No 2 (Summer, 1995), 217-221; Paul Garon, "White Blues," *Race Traitor* 4 (Winter, 1995): <http://racetractor.org/blues.html>; Peck, 30; Charles Shaar Murray, *Boogie Man: The Adventures of John Lee Hooker in the American Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), 541.
25. On Johnson's posthumous transformation into a mythic figure see Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch, *Robert Johnson Lost and Found* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), Patricia R. Schroeder, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* (Chicago, IL: University

- of Illinois Press, 2004), and Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2004). The contentious case for the existence of undiscovered Johnson material is made in Tom Graves, *Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson* (Spokane, WA: Demers Books, 2008). The historical Willie Brown was a Mississippi bluesman who recorded a handful of sides for Paramount race records in 1930 and mentored the young Johnson. He was not to be found in a Brooklyn prison hospital in the 1980s having died in Mississippi in 1952.
26. The scene was initially filmed with black bluesman Shuggie Otis in the Steve Vai part, playing blues rather than classical music. According to *Crossroads*' musical advisor Arlen Roth, "they cut it because they didn't want to portray a white man beating a black man." See *The 80s Movies Rewind*, <http://www.fast-rewind.com/crossroads.htm>. While the film's narrative moves towards a conclusive expiation of white guilt for acquiring the blues, its casting and scoring decisions were nonetheless influenced by such guilt.
27. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 233. Keil questions the conventional view—both reaffirmed and gently teased by *Crossroads*—that the Mississippi delta is the birthplace and spiritual home of the blues, suggesting that this is a romanticized history constructed by white folklorists in search of cultural authenticity, racial purity and rural simplicity.
28. Amiri Baraka, "The Great Music Robbery," in Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, *The Music* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 328-332; *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People v. City of Helena* (E.D. Ark. 1999) (No. H-C-99-152); Don Santina, "Reparations for the Blues," *The Black Commentator* 128, 3 Mar. 2005,

[http://www.blackcommentator.com/128/128\\_reparations\\_blues.html](http://www.blackcommentator.com/128/128_reparations_blues.html). On the legal argument for specific music-related claims in the reparations campaign see Kevin J. Greene, “‘Copynorms’: Black Cultural Production and the Debate over African-American Reparations,” *Cardozo Arts and Entertainment Law Journal* Volume 25, No 3 (2008), 1179-1229.

29. The blood metaphor features in several influential accounts of the blues that argue for exclusive racial ownership of the form. Self-styled “Father of the Blues,” W.C. Handy, asserted that “[t]he art of writing blues ... cannot be delegated outside of the blood,” while Amiri Baraka, insisting that “the materials of the blues were not available to the white American,” characterized the music as “a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood.” W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1961), 231; Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow, 1963), 148. Aykroyd’s spoof biographical notes to the first Blues Brothers album (the phenomenal success of which persuaded Universal to bankroll the first film) have the young Jake and Elwood Blues engaging in a blood-brothers bonding ritual by slicing their fingers with a string taken from blues legend Elmore James’s guitar. *The Blues Brothers, Briefcase Full of Blues* (Atlantic SD 19217, 1978).
30. *Black Snake Moan* DVD special features.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Sayles consciously set the film prior to the rock ‘n’ roll revolution and the emergence of the modern civil rights movement, events that would drive these



two worlds closer together than ever before. Thus he exempts *Honeydripper* from having to address the political, economic and cultural implications of contemporary musical crossover, despite professing a strong interest in the interracial dynamics of rock 'n' roll. See Andrew O'Hehir's interview with Sayles, "Beyond the Multiplex," *Salon*, 3 Jan. 2008, <http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/review/btm/2008/01/03/sayles>.

35. H.Con.Res 13 (108<sup>th</sup>): "Recognizing the Importance of Blues Music," 27 Jan. 2003.
  36. Phillip Tagg, "Open Letter about 'Black Music,' 'Afro-American Music' and 'European Music,'" *Popular Music* Volume 8, No 3 (1989), 288; Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 15.
  37. Du Bois, *Souls*, 186.
  38. Mauss, 31.
  39. Jameson, 287, 293.
  40. William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989), 346.
  41. David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 214.
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