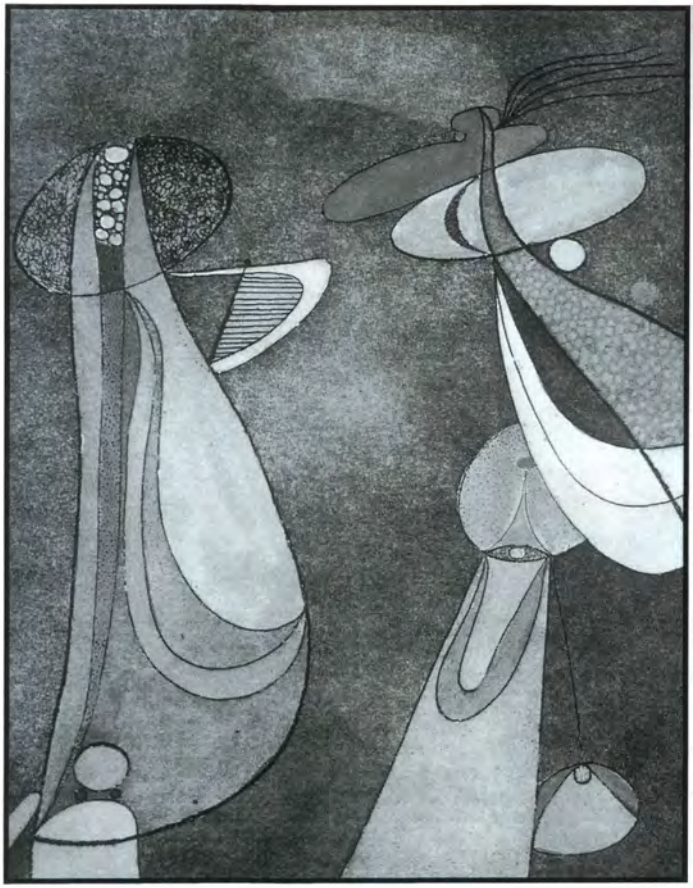
RACE TRAITOR

Surrealism in the USA



SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE

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Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity

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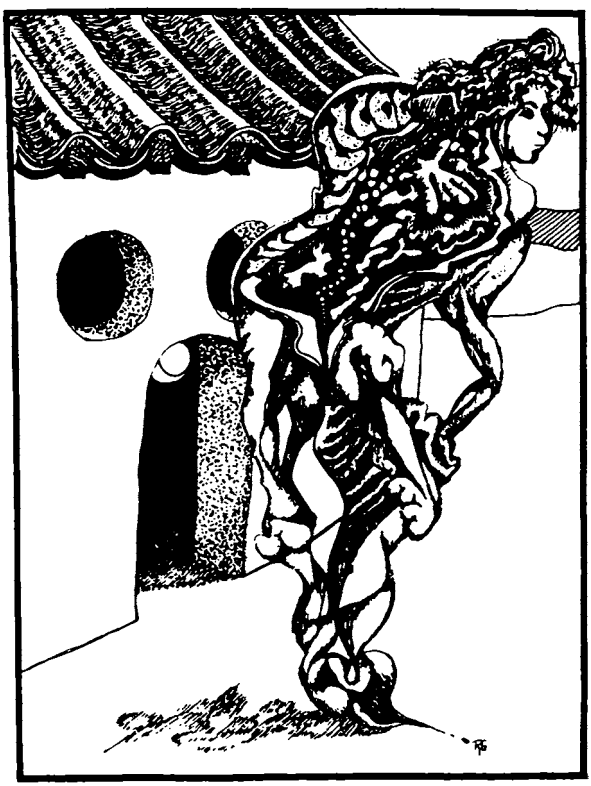
ON THE COVER: O. W. Neebe, "We Mask Reality" (detail), hand-colored etching



Robert Green, "Drawing from Seditious Mandibles*"*

Paul Garon

"You Don't See into the Blues like Me"

Houston Baker's Blues Position

What I would like to do today is take a look at the development of blues criticism and relate this development to some of my own views and to some ideas of Houston Baker's, as set forth in his *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1984). My opinions, as published in *Living Blues* magazine, in *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* and *Woman With Guitar*, not to mention in several surrealist periodicals and in *Race Traitor* and elsewhere, are what have made me controversial. These views are easy to summarize: "The blues finds its inspiration in the material aspects of working-class African American life in the United States." That's it! Yet since the early 1970s, when I first began to insist on this — a rather obvious statement, it seems to me — there have been countless objections from parties whose main interest is in defending the legitimacy of white performers of the blues.

I will say at the outset that my view wasn't a harmless plea. As a principal articulator of the editorial policies of *Living Blues* back in 1970, I helped put this view into practice: *Living Blues* focused only on African American performers. The vituperation to which this led was striking.

One aspect of *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* that I found most compelling was Baker's enumeration of the chronological development of the various styles of African American literary criticism: Integrationist, the Black Aesthetic, and the Reconstructionists. Without pretending to do justice to Baker's schematic, let me attempt to summarize it this way:

Integrationist Poetics was the dominant theoretical mode of the 1950s and early 1960s. An excellent example of the integrationist view

was set forth by Richard Wright in his "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" in *White Man, Listen!* (Anchor Books, 1964). In this view, African American literature was becoming indistinguishable from white, "mainstream" literature. Borne along by the optimism that followed in the wake of the 1954 Brown decision, Wright believed that African American writing would be judged by the same standards applied by white critics to writing by whites, and the lack of discrimination that would follow Brown would guarantee a world where no separate critical standard was needed. On the other hand, Wright felt that Black vernacular expression — for example, the blues — was not subject to the same stipulations and would, by its very existence, continue to proclaim its separate identity as a sign of an equality not yet established, as a sign of separateness and inequality.

This view, that our writing is no different than their writing, and would therefore be treated the same by critics and readers, could not survive in the era of the Black Power movement, and indeed it did not. It was swept away by a new notion, the Black Aesthetic, as articulated by writers such as Addison Gayle, Amiri Baraka, Hoyt W. Fuller, Stephen Henderson, and Larry Neal. Their view was that African American literature must reflect the exigencies of Black life in America. It must look to its roots and its heritage, or the poetic categories through which literature is created and through which it is understood will not be legitimate or useful. Its legitimacy and usefulness are tied to realistic aspects of Black life, regardless of how far from realism the forms evolve. As Baker noted, one aspect of the Black Power movement, of which the Black Aesthetic was a vital part, was "a direct counterthrust by an emergent generation to an Integrationist Poetics' call for a general, raceless, and classless community. . ." (Baker, p. 72).

Reconstructionism was born in the mid-seventies after it became evident that the white power structure of capitalist America was too easily capable of resisting the radical ferment of the 1960s and early 1970s. Especially in academia, Black scholars demanded an independence from political ideology, a claim for a "liberty" that would have been anathema to followers of the Black Aesthetic. These new scholars were part of the new Black middle class, and they insisted on professional theoretical/critical standards that befit their new role. Let me quote Baker here: "One result of a class-oriented professionalism among Afro-American literary scholars has been a sometimes uncritical imposition upon

Afro-American expressive culture of theories and theoretical terminologies borrowed from prominent white scholars" (Baker, 88-89).

Bearing these themes and their evolution in mind, let us take a look at the evolution of blues criticism. I am making no attempt to link stages of blues criticism with stages of African American literary theory. Rather, I am using Baker's categories and schematic as an inspiration and pattern — dare I call it a matrix? — to understand certain tendencies in the evolution of blues commentary. As in Black literary criticism, the evolution of blues criticism in the last several decades has been reflective of — if not firmly grounded in — the evolution of blues itself.

The history of modern blues criticism begins only four decades ago, in 1959, with Samuel Charters's *The Country Blues* and Paul Oliver's *Blues*

Penelope Rosemont, "The Night Time Is the Right Time"

Fell This Morning. Books published prior to these tended to either be about jazz or about Black song, especially religious song. Of course there were insightful discussions of blues before 1959 — by such writers as Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke — but they were largely restricted to ephemeral works and did not receive the attention they deserved. However, with the publication of the widely circulated books by Charters and Oliver, two major precedents were established, and major critical writing over the next 40 years tended to follow one of these two paths.

Charters's work was a straightforward narrative history of the blues recording business, with the emphasis on the artists and, secondarily, the recording companies. Almost simultaneously, Paul Oliver, a British professor of architecture, published *Blues Fell This Morning*, with an introduction by Richard Wright. Oliver's emphasis was on certain aspects of Black workingclass life in the United States and how its features were reflected in the blues lyrics themselves. Here are a few examples:

I've always liked Mercy Dee's verse about the rigors of farm life: "If I ever get from around this harvest, I don't even want to see a rose-bush grow. And if anybody asks me about the country, Lord have mercy on his soul." Or Lonnie Johnson's couplet on life during the Depression: "People raving about hard times, I don't know why they should. If some people was like me, they didn't have no money when times was good."

Only a few books about songs like these departed from the two models of Charters and Oliver. My own work did investigate new ground, emphasizing psychological and surrealist perspectives. Looking at the blues from the surrealist point of view was something new. Not everyone understood how the blues partook of the marvelous and the fantastic, as a surrealist would understand it. Think of this verse: "I may get over this, baby, but it sure is doing me mean. I've been having worry and trouble since my name's been 3:15." This recording is by "3:15 and his Squares"!

Or listen to this lyric by Elmore James, recorded as "1839 Blues" in the spring of 1954: [*spoken*] "Hey, Joe. You know I'm a young man this time. You know I ain't seen my baby since 1839. I gotta find her." [*sung*] "Well, I ain't seen my baby since 1839 [*repeat line*], Well, if I don't find my baby, I'm gonna lose my mind."

"She Brought Life Back to the Dead," by Sonny Boy Williamson No. 2 (Rice Miller) is a classic:

When I first heard about her, I didn't believe what they said. [*2x*]
But I found out for myself that she brought life back to the dead.
She walked in that morning, the doctor said he was dead,
People started walking out, crying, shaking their heads. . . .
She stayed in there 24 long hours and brought life back to the dead. . . .
I found out for myself that she brought life back to the dead.

The blues singers invoke the most marvelous images: "If I had wings like the bullfrog on the pond" (Yank Rachell, "T-Bone Steak Blues"). And these lines from "West Texas Woman" by Alex Moore: "The wolves howled till midnight, wild ox moaned till day. [*2x*] The man in the moon looked down on us, but had nothing to say." And this from Peetie Wheatstraw, who called himself the Devil's Son-in-Law and High Sheriff from Hell: "Let me be your King Spider, I want to build my web on your wall" ("King Spider Blues").

How could a surrealist not be drawn to songs like these? Moreover, its emphasis on love, humor, the night — its attitude toward work and play, the church and the police, desire and freedom — seemed to us to reflect a sensibility that has much in common with surrealism's own priorities. We heard the blues as an oppositional poetry, a true poetry of revolt, part of the "accursed tradition" that advanced capitalism despised but which the surrealists have specialized in encouraging and bringing to light.

In spite of the unique aspects of the perspective in *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, its founding in the material reality of African American life (as opposed to its Christian aspects) made it Oliver-derived enough so that theologian Jon Michael Spencer denounced me in his *Blues and Evil* as an "Oliverian." One of Spencer's preoccupations was with the theological implications of certain Black exclamatory phrases like the constant use of "Lord have mercy" in the blues, and why Oliver and I seemed to ignore them. But here I'm reminded of Géza Róheim's defense of Freud: "I never think it necessary to emphasize the obvious. After Freud managed to dive to the bottom of the ocean, people now tell us that the ocean has a surface" (*Psychoanalysis and Anthropology*, International Universities Press, 1950). Plainly, Oliver and I were trying to analyze aspects of the blues that were not immediately apparent to our readers.

There have also been blues plays, blues poetry, blues fiction, and studies of all these. Nonetheless, the overriding tendency in blues

criticism — not counting reviews of current performances — is the purely and simply historical, with or without consideration of social and cultural factors that affect the songmakers.

To understand the fate of these patterns of criticism, it is important to reprise, at least briefly, what I call the "white blues question." When the blues first came to the attention of a wider, and whiter, public — i.e., starting from the 1920s and through the 1950s and into the 1960s — it was received with a view quite analogous in certain ways to the Black Aesthetic. No one doubted that the blues was the voice of the working-class African American, founded solidly on the "genuine emotional referents and authentic experiential categories of Afro-American life," to quote Baker summarizing Baraka.

The blues was stirred in a ferment of discrimination, oppression, and even murder and mass terror, but what emerged was a powerful poetry filtered through the processes of fantasy and imagination, fanned by desire, and finely elaborated by the creative processes. It was unique in our time because it arose from an unusual constellation of forces. Because of the repressive nature of the society in which the blues came to life, the subject matter of the blues rarely dealt directly with prejudice and discriminatory behavior, much less the more extreme forms of racism and white crimes against Blacks. Nonetheless, it was evident to many that the blues contained an eloquent protest against the depredations of white society, even if such calumny could rarely be called by its name.

Thus the blues singer came to protest almost everything else: her mistreatment at the hands of her man, his mistreatment at the hands of his woman, two-faced preachers, the police, the landlord, the prison guard, poorly paid employment, no employment, the mean old train, or the conductor who made the train impossible to ride, the high cost of liquor, the absence of liquor, and the ill effects of liquor on those who finally got hold of some. (Liquor was illegal during the entire first decade of blues recording.)

This disjunction or lack of evident fit between what we might call the latent content of the blues (slavery and discrimination) and its manifest content (love troubles and whiskey) would be the grounds for monumental miscomprehension at the hands of new white fans and players. While many white blues enthusiasts of the 1950s and 1960s had spent years, if not decades, listening to blues singers somewhere on the continuum between Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and

Lightnin' Hopkins, a newer group of enthusiasts, those coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s, had a familiarity with the blues that was distinctly more pallid: Eric Clapton and Paul Butterfield were their blues heroes. Worse, far worse, was the latest crop: fans who came of age watching the blues as played by the Blues Brothers, Dan Ackroyd and John Belushi. I have no particular quarrel, at least here and now, with the skit itself, but I'm stunned by the fact that a whole generation of so-called white blues artists was inspired by what was in fact a joke.

This result is not funny, nor is it a mere mistake. Seeing enough "white blues" artists in fedoras and sunglasses is proof enough. What possible link of associative mental material can there be between performers who drew their inspiration from the legacy of slavery and discrimination in the United States, on the one hand, and those who draw their inspiration from Saturday Night Live, on the other?

I am not suggesting that fans of Bloomfield, Butterfield, Musselwhite, et al. ignored blues by Black artists, although I'm not sure the same can be said of the followers of Eric Clapton. But even when African American performers are recognized, what so often happens? Robert Johnson CDs sell phenomenally well, making one white producer a millionaire (from CD sales alone), while Robert Johnson's estate accrues a far smaller amount of money in so-called royalties, as yet undistributed. One newspaper that carried the story of the new white millionaire gave a figure of $45,000 for the amount in escrow for Johnson's relatives. As R& B singer Fontella Bass testified in the PBS film, *Record Row*, "They give me 10, they keep 10,000."

While my examples here are dramatic, they barely scratch the surface. Yet their purpose is to emphasize how different are the blues worlds of Black and white players. Earlier I mentioned the disjunction between the latent and manifest content of the blues. For white musicians who had little notion of Black life or Black history, it was easy to see the blues as a music about broken hearts and alcohol, no different than country and western music, or even rock and roll, except for the lack of material about school and dating. For these musicians, the blues became not only stripped of its latent content — insofar as that was possible — but it was stripped of its African American associations as well.

Before this digression, I was discussing the two chief patterns of criticism, both historical, but one with a firm foundation in the cultural life of the performers and one without such a foundation. Socially embedded

criticism is anathema to white blues performers, as it can only invalidate their efforts by insisting on the essential nature and relevance of a background that they do not have. Thus we would expect to find a new, more superficial history burgeoning in support of these new performers, and the first blooms of such an effort are, I'm sorry to say, now with us.

Blues for Dummies — it had to happen! — isn't a terrible book. Like most books in the series, it's written for those who do not want a deep or comprehensive understanding of their subject. But it's an excellent example for its time and place. While two of the three authors are African American performers, it is written for the ever-escalating numbers of white aficionados, and there isn't a peep about the social factors that gave birth to the blues. Except for a few paragraphs about regional styles, the first two-thirds of the book is strictly biographical. The last third contains chapters on how to play the blues, or how to learn, along with various lists, and a chapter on how to throw a blues theme party.

But an interesting twist is given to blues history, one I've never seen before. Post-war performers of the 1945-1969 era are designated participants in the "Original Blues Heyday" and given the lion's share of space. Singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey through Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson — ca. 1920-1938 — are called "Early Legends," but from the space allotted to them, and from the category names themselves, one gets the impression that their actual function was simply to be predecessor stepping-stones to the "real" greats like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Little Walter.

Tellingly, the accompanying CD contains nothing prior to the late 1940s. The 25 All-Time Best songs contain only two such numbers, a piece from the 1930s by Robert Johnson ("Sweet Home Chicago") and a piece from the 1920s by Hambone Willie Newbern ("Rolling and Tumbling Blues"), although it is the 1950s version of this piece that is emphasized. The 25 best albums include one CD by Bessie Smith and one by Robert Johnson; the rest are from the 1950s or are on the borderline of "Heyday" and "Artists on the Contemporary Scene," the third section of the biographies. The list contains one album by Eric Clapton and one by Lonnie Brooks, the senior author of the book, certainly not even a close contender for a top-25 album, but perhaps that's poetic license. Once again, however, the effect is to suggest that it is the period from 1950 on that is most important in the blues' evolution.

What stands out in all these lists, personal taste and bias aside, is the distorted view of blues history they purvey. Twenty-five exciting years of blues history are being treated as merely a foretaste of what is purported to be the "real" blues, rather than as an integral part. For historians of the blues, it comes as a shock to see some of the greatest performers relegated to the periphery, simply because of a weak grasp of history. Decades ago it was trendy for collectors of early jazz to have a blues record or two in their collections, to show the roots of their music, i.e., where jazz (supposedly) came from. Blues collectors often kept an example of a chain gang song to show their own subject's roots. Now it's starting to sound like future blues fans will have only a single Ma Rainey or Blind Lemon Jefferson album to show their friends where Lonnie Brooks came from.

And this would be a shame. . . .But I see considerable hope in works like Baker's *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, an especially encouraging sign in a world where *Blues for Dummies* is displayed next to the latest *Blues Review* and its white cover artist. Baker's guiding supposition that African American culture is complex and reflexive, finding its "proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix," sustains a basis for blues criticism that guarantees the continuation of the bond between African American life and the blues. For Baker, the blues is not a function so much as a foundation, a "condition of Afro-American inscription itself." A key task for the future blues critic will be to assimilate Baker's analysis into the mainstream of blues criticism, thereby putting the proper emphasis on African American socio-cultural experience and reviving the richness and complexity of a comprehensive theory of the blues. The music may or may not be in a final stage of its evolution, but as we know from the study of literature, this is by no means too late for the formation of a lively body of critical appreciation.

After all, nothing's too good for the blues.

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Modern Language Association conference on the work of Houston Baker, December 29, 1999.