Motions in Captivity:
Theorizing the Politics of Mobility in Slavery and the Blues

Jae Hoon Lee

Introduction: (Re)politicizing the Blues

The blues has been accorded a central role in African American history and politics. As widely known, the blues is a hybrid genre, a combination of native African music tradition, spirituals, field hollers and work songs. The result is a unique, versatile form of music through which the descendants of the enslaved voiced their experiences and histories, whether they be personal or collective. In its sound and rhythm of syncopation and improvisation, the form encompasses various kinds and aspects of African American lives. As Paul Oliver, one of prominent blues scholars, writes in *Blues Fell This Morning*, the blues carries "the major catastrophes both personal and national, the triumphs and miseries that were shared by all, yet private to one" (11). The private and social "catastrophes" mainly refer to the economic problems of the time, both rural and urban, including migrations, family problems, and violence (Oliver 11), which are themselves the ramifications of racial oppression. Amidst all these harrowing circumstances, Oliver notes, the blues was to the black population the epicenter of "the security, the unity, and the strength" (11). Later, another blues specialist Albert Murray succinctly

captures the politics of the blues as follows:

> [The blues] is a statement about confronting the complexities inherent in the human situation and about improvising or experimenting or riffing or otherwise playing with (or even gambling with) such possibilities as are also inherent in the obstacles, the disjunctures, and the jeopardy. It is also a statement about perseverance and about resilience and thus also about the maintenance of equilibrium despite precarious circumstances and about achieving elegance in the very process of coping with the rudiments of subsistence. (250-51)

While Oliver is interested in the specific historical contexts and events that gave birth to the blues, Murray's concern is more specifically on the general principle of the blues: it comes face to face with hardship and makes use of it, turning it into productive possibilities. But both Oliver and Murray delineate the political possibility of the blues in overcoming precarious situations. Similar (and as much insightful) arguments on the politics of the blues have largely consisted the main thread in the discussion of the genre. Yet, I feel the strong need to go further and deeper down to see how the blues *really* operates and what the blues *really* talks about. I cannot dismiss the thought that the political implications of the blues can be stated rather *concisely*. When scholars try to provide the definitions of the blues concerning its politics in racial issues as instanced above, their words, though poignant, seem at times redundant to the extent of being somewhat tautological. For example, Oliver enumerates the instances of "catastrophes" reflected in the blues with the parallel repetitions of the phrase "In the blues (were)" at the beginnings of each sentence (10-11); Murray also relies on the parallelism by using the phrase "[the blues] is (also) a statement about" twice and the conjunction "or" and "and" frequently in defining the blues.

While we can easily concur with Oliver and Murray that the blues is

all of which, how *exactly* the blues confronts and overcomes obstacles remains obscure. In other words, what specific counteractions are taken in the blues to achieve "equilibrium"? Even further, what *exactly* is the blues taking issue with? I mean, what creates the disequilibrium in the first place? To answer such questions, one must enumerate examples and synonyms again and again under the existing method of defining the blues. It is my theory that once further down to the heart of the blues, following the myriad veins of those examples and synonyms, one can find where the pulse comes from: mobility. Mobility has often been recognized only as one—though prominent one—of many recurrent motifs in the blues.[1)] But I see in mobility something much more than just a motif. I see the very origin and foundation for the certain political discourses and possibilities the blues can offer.

I propose that the blues captures the history of slavery and its politics in the form of stories about mobility. To be sure, the timeline of slavery and that of the blues do not quite overlap: as many have noted, the emergence of the blues roughly dates the late nineteenth century, around 1870, which is after the emancipation. But this is precisely where the politics of mobility in the blues becomes interesting. African American history since the beginning of slavery hinges upon the problem of mobility. In the post-slavery periods such as the Jim Crow era,

---

1) For instance, Keren Omry focuses on commercial and gender aspects of mobility in blues (48-54), along with other features of blues such as repetition (46-48). Her argument is based on the historical context of the time where African Americans could now freely move as long as they could pay for tickets and discusses how female subjects negotiated and explored the possibility of female narratives of mobility against "the male prescription of mobility-as-escape" (49). This view, though inspiring, is limited in its scope of timeline (after the emancipation) and its degree of emphasis on how central mobility is in the blues politics. I want to go further and dilate upon the politics of mobility in blues encompassing the long history of slavery and afterwards.

racial oppression often entailed immobilization, and African American resistance was primarily built upon mobilization. This mobility-immobility axis, as I would call it, is visible from the time of slavery, even from the very first moments of the slave trade on ships crossing the Atlantic. And it is my contention that the blues reflects this history full of motions in its musical and literary figures, exploring the politics of mobility against immobilizing oppressions.

In elaborating and theorizing this connection between slavery and the blues, Vincent Brown's rereading of social death, an influential concept coined by Orlando Patterson which alludes to the detrimental, irreparable effect of slavery, and Houston A. Baker Jr.'s theory of the blues as a "matrix" have been especially helpful. In fact, my thesis mainly consists of rereadings of these two eminent scholars. Both Brown and Baker display excellence not only in providing profound insights into slavery and the blues respectively, but in hinting that mobility plays the core function in those current matters. It should be noted that the problem of mobility is not their main concern, but this problem certainly lies at least latent in their words and ideas, which provide valuable starting points to build bridges between slavery and the blues. By rereading them, I hope to find ways to put forth a concise and concrete proposition for the new political power of the blues.

In the following pages, I will first show how mobility has been so crucial in enacting social actions, creating a sense of community among slaves and their descendants. Then I argue that the blues captures this politics of mobility in literary and figurative levels by discussing Baker's theory and the bluesman Robert Johnson's most famous number, "Cross Road Blues."

Mobility-Immobility Axis in Slavery and Social Action

The history of African American slavery is a history of journey. The enslaved left their birthplace and crossed the Atlantic, and then dispersed throughout domestic America. And their journey was, of course, ever so egregious one: the migration was not at all voluntary and in every way violent. As Hortense J. Spillers claims, the slave trade caused "a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation. The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness" (68). The mobility of slaves marked here by "shifts," in fact, is, at a closer look, thoroughly under surveillance and circumscribed by immobilizing circumstances of 'shipping.' Spillers' main interest lies in reclaiming and reconstituting the symbolic order of the African native family and especially the subjectivity of African American females, but her research also provides a valuable historical perspective regarding the immobility of the enslaved during crossings of the "Middle Passage." The white male captor-traders on board took on "the business of dehumanized naming" (69), giving the captives nicknames that would help disintegrate their subjectivity and "were not curious about this 'cargo' that bled, packed like so many live sardines among the immovable objects" (Spillers 70). The enslaved aboard, counted as "immovable" loads and fishes, could not mobilize themselves, when they were, both virtually and ironically, on the move.

The signs of this irony inherent on the slave ships were also everywhere on the domestic scene, initiated right after docking. The captives were now forcibly 'mobilized' to travel across thousands of miles of the continent in immobilizing fetters and chains, and only in directions where the captors and buyers wanted to lead them. It is as if the model of 'shipping the cargo' across the Atlantic was the prototype of the very

problem of mobility that would continue to persist through the long history of American slavery. But here in domestic America the signs against the irony have also been apparently visible: the enslaved struggled to find ways to mobilize themselves out of their masters' holds. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, among many, most famously tells such a story of self-mobilization, as when Douglass assures his fellow slaves that mobility is a crucial part of human dignity: "half was gained the instant we made the move; . . . we were now ready to move; . . . and if we did not intend to move now, we had as well fold our arms, sit down, and acknowledge ourselves fit only to be slaves" (89). Though fictional, in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison further complements this story of slaves' inland, voluntary mobility through the harassing journeys of Sethe and Paul D. One could endlessly enumerate such examples of both historical and literary mobilization on the part of slaves.

This in turn leads us to think about whether the enslaved on board could and did too fight back. If, as I have argued, the oceanic slave trade had embodied the politics of mobility for the ensuing domestic scene, would it not be possible that the self-mobilization of slaves against the immobilizing devices of slavery appeared as early as its inchoate stage? If that is the case, the political implications and possibilities of mobility as a central problem of slavery can become even more *visible*. As shown above in the instances of Douglass' slave narrative and Morrison's novel, the politics of inland mobility is from the start unmistakable, since it often covers extensive scales of miles in interstate migrations. On ships, however, the longest width of which could never amount to a mile, the possibility of the 'cargo' mobilizing itself seems low, and once aboard, slaves could not dream of escape unless they risked, or rather, gave up on life. But this is precisely why it is important for us to give attention to what might, or might not, have happened on those ships. If we could detect there certain signs of mobility, even in the size of minute *motions*,

and find in them some political meanings that would guide us to see what that mobility can achieve, then a more wholesome picture of the history and politics of slavery would come into view.

This perspective is supported by many African American theorists who have shown much interest in ships as a focal point of discourse on slavery. Indeed, slave ships have attracted many black scholars since Paul Gilroy's pioneering work entitled *The Black Atlantic*. Deeply engaged in delineating the transnational geography of pan-African black diaspora, Gilroy described the image of ships as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (4). To him, ships were not just one "abstract" mode of travel but "something more" concrete, that is, "cultural and political units" as "a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production" (17). Gilroy goes on to say that "Ships also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade" (17). The implication here follows naturally that we need to regard "micro" events and incidents both on and below deck as likely to carry political and cultural imperatives.

But the problem is that records about the 'cargo' are indeed "half-remembered," as Spillers and Gilroy respectively lament their paucity. And when there are records gleaned enough to discuss the political and cultural meanings of slaves' (im)mobility, one comes to feel discomfited and even indignant at the sheer calamity of history as does Ian Baucom. Right after surveying the logbook of the *Zong*, Baucom concludes from the "individual tragedies [recorded] . . . as little more than a chain of numbers" that "this voyage, this cargo," or "their captivity" was of no interest to anyone *actively* involved in the trade and its history (14). In short, the captives on the voyage were, to the eyes of slavers, nonhuman, "immovable objects" all along, devoid of self-maneuver unless being thrown overboard by their owners.

Yet still on those ships can be found both visible and recordable signs

of mobility of the enslaved, however "micro" they may be. Andrew Lewis writes that, on the second day of the infamous *Zong* massacre (November 30, 1781), there were ten slaves who "jumped into the water by themselves" (364). Lewis does not provide any further comments on this, and the Wikipedia entry for this particular incident plainly says that it was "a display of defiance at the inhumanity of the slavers." But I see "something more" than that. What we should note about the ten is that they practiced a series of detectable motions unexpected on the part of the captors. In fact, the irony of the enslaved being immobile during mobile 'shipping' process is utterly intensified here: the slavers chose to mobilize the slaves not to detain them where they would be useful, which was usually the case in the system of slavery, but rather to lead them to the ultimate form of immobility, that is, certain death. But here another kind of irony arises, which is that the ten mobilized themselves to hasten their deaths. They moved not to stay alive nor to win any other goals for that matter; they moved because the very act of self-mobilization itself was worth a few hours or days of their lives. The suicide pact, then, was not simply a gesture of defiance but precisely a movement that insistently restores and declares their mobility in the immobilizing "system in motion." Thus, while the *macro* mobility of slaves inland was so much visible, slaves aboard did fight in "micro" levels for their own mobility.

But then one could ask, what is it worth exactly? The display of mobility at will often invokes free will and humanity and, as Douglass urged, proves that the enslaved are by no means "fit only to be slaves." However, there is a discrepancy between the abstract, rather romantic notion of freedom and humanity, the legacies of the Enlightenment, and the objectives that were imperative to the early generations of the enslaved on voyage, those who never yet set foot on the western premises and surely did not speak their masters' language. We can imagine without difficulty that there must have been much more at stake than the for-

eign ideals. The key to unfolding this part of the history of slavery lies in understanding the politics of mobility in *social* terms.

Vincent Brown's "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery" offers such a key. Here he tells another story of self-mobilization during transport, and this time it is even more "micro." Brown observes that, referring to William Butterworth's firsthand descriptions, a death of a revered African "songstress" caused "a minor political tumult" on the *Hudibras* (1231). At the moment of her death, the surviving female captives who were members of her circle were interrupted during their mourning ritual and supposed to be "herded" down the deck, but they refused and "began a vehement protest," having the captain worried about insurrection and accordingly "let several of the women out of the hold" (Brown 1231). This story is Brown's foundation for refuting Patterson's well-known concept of social death. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson maintains that slavery made the enslaved Africans lose connection with each other and become socially dead entities. Brown comments on this that social death is not only a pessimistic but ahistorical view on the capacity of slaves to reconstruct their social community. According to him, African American social bond is not something irreparably destroyed: the incident on the *Hudibras* "enabled [the women] to express and enact their social values" as collective and, more than anything, newly constructed social beings in the midst of deaths and the absence of original "social ties" (1232), and was therefore "an act of accounting, of reckoning, . . . one among the multitude of acts that made up the political history of Atlantic slavery" (1233). The implication of Brown's argument is currently twofold: first, the priority for slaves on board was not about fulfilling the ethereal concept of freedom or humanity, but about making a social world where they could still hold on to the sense of connection with each other; second, this sociality is achieved by certain "acts"—like mourning—that were "micro" but deservedly ob-

served and recorded.

And it leads directly to my contention that these political "acts" often, if not always, entail the exertion of mobility. In other words, it is mobility that enables and empowers social actions which in turn make possible "political life" as opposed to social death. On the *Hudibras*, the "herd" of women could earn the right to mourn their fellow human being precisely because they *moved* "*out* of the hold" of their masters.[2] If they had remained immobile *in* the hold, the mourning and its political effect would not have been possible.

To be sure, Brown does not explicitly refer us to mobility as the crucial component of social actions. But his text can be read in a sense against the grain so as to underscore the importance of mobility. Brown gives further accounts of political "acts," which amount to his conclusion that "the violent domination of slavery generated political action; it was not antithetical to it. . . . [O]ne sees [the slavers'] power as productive and the fear of social death not as incapacity but as a generative force—a peril that motivated enslaved activity" (1244). Instead of succumbing to the macabre concept of social death, Brown envisions here a much livelier kind of social action, where "the very terms and conditions of social existence" (1244) in turn propelled slaves' persistent struggle for community. And note how Brown's language—"generated," "productive,"

2) The importance of mobilization in creating a social community among slaves is further reported elsewhere. For instance, even though the lower part of ship was jammed, "mobility among the enslaved was often possible, even among the shackled and manacled men, so potential rebels could move around, find one another, and talk" according to Marcus Rediker (292). Rediker's book *The Slave Ship* also recounts a story of a captive girl named "Sarah" by Captain Jenkin Evans—Spillers would, of course, have found the naming offensive—on the *Hudibras*, the very same ship from which Brown finds a story to tell (20-21). Beautiful and a good dancer, she was one of the two "'favourites'" (20) to the captain, and, using "her great freedom of movement" this "privileged position" granted her, helped organize and execute the rebellion on the ship (Rediker 21).

"generative," "motivated"—all indicates a certain kind of power source that drives "enslaved activity," that is, "the particular acts of communication that allowed enslaved people to articulate idioms of belonging, similarity, and distinction" (1245). Brown's syntax implies that the system of slavery itself is such a source.

I contend, however, that mobility, rather than slavery, is a more immediate source of power for "the particular acts of communication." Brown is right that we should see the "generative" side of slavery, but even in his "productive" view it is inevitable that slavery only *negatively* "generated" such acts. To say that slavery directly produced social actions sounds somewhat too optimistic: one must rather closely examine the micro-sized chain of events that results from slavery to see that it was really the enslaved, and not slavery, that made slavery "productive." It was the slaves who had to make decisions against all odds, risking their lives and often ending up dead like the ten slaves on the *Zong* who threw themselves overboard. In this seemingly more somber picture is a possibility to make visible the politics of mobility as the core basis for political actions. Slavery did not directly beget actions toward "social reconnection" (Brown 1233); what it did was to put limits on the social lives of slaves. And these limits materialized, more than anything, in the form of immobilization as discussed. This is as far as the 'productivity' of slavery gets and no more. From here, slavery and its terms became "productive" only when slaves responded and resolved to take actions. And, as I have shown in the cases of the *Zong* and the *Hudibras*, the acts that the enslaved performed in response to the immobilizing threat of slavery were by nature immediate self-mobilization. It is these actions, or rather, *motions* that really made slavery and social death "productive." As a direct product of slavery and simultaneously a preliminary stage of social action, motion offered slaves a transition from social death to po-

litical life.[3)]

In this manner the "micro" politics of mobility in the history of slavery comes fully into view within the dynamics of a triad: slavery, motion, and social action. The implication of this triad with motion at the center becomes even fuller when our concern is not simply slavery's past but present. Brown relates that the funeral on the *Hudibras* exemplifies "continuous struggles" (1249) against social death not as the final but ongoing "state of being" (1248) and therefore "connects the politics of the enslaved to the politics of their descendants" (1233). In other words, the politics of mobility in the Atlantic slave trade mattered and has continued to matter even for the post-slavery generations. For example, just as the women on the *Hudibras* had to get "out of the hold" to mourn their leader, African Americans during the Jim Crow era also performed this kind of "micro" mobility: when "repressive structures and institutions circumscribed black mobility and access to public space," black people often rejected segregation in public transportations even at the risk of arrests (Kelley 71). The mobility-immobility axis, as it were, continues to be present in the long history of slaves and their descendants. African American motions, however "micro," retain "a politics of belonging, mourning, accounting, and regeneration" (Brown 1248) intact in the face of various forms of detainment.

But how exactly was it transferred down to today? For the remaining

3) This type of reading is supported by Brown's own line of argument. Brown is more than careful to specify that what he means by "political action" is not really avowed, big-scale resistance but rather the very act of overcoming social alienation, since slaves' actions "imply a politics of survival, existential struggle transcending resistance against enslavement" (1246). I readily agree with Brown that the political actions of the enslaved do not have to be a size of heroism (1244) and should include even "conflicts over the most elemental aspects of social life" (1246). Hence, I cannot but delve into such "micro" levels of slavery and see what *really* happened.

pages, I propose that the blues can be a point of departure for answering such a question. Having emerged after the emancipation, the blues can be regarded as one modern version of social actions, articulating both synchronic and diachronic "idioms of belonging, similarity, and distinction." What distinguishes the blues from other "particular acts of communication" is, however, its self-knowledge: the blues *knows* and *shows* that it operates through motions. It is no coincidence that the blues contains such abundant and coherent stories of mobilization across generations.

'Socializing' at the Crossroad: Brown, Baker, and Johnson

Not only that mobility is the main power supply for the blues, but that the blues is social action are neatly captured in Houston Baker's theorization of the genre. His classic *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* provides an unexpected but valuable framework for regarding the blues as an act toward, to borrow Brown's words again, "political life." In his introduction of the book, Baker describes the blues as "a matrix," a network "of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (3). The very image of "a web" here immediately invokes a "productive" possibility of collective communication and social connection. The blues is not really "a rigidly personalized form," but rather "a phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience" (Baker 5). Here Baker indeed understands the core character of the blues to be a race-specific mode of communication, which is highly reminiscent of Brown's definition of social action: "collective forms of belonging and striving, making connections when confronted with alienation and finding dignity in the face of dishonor" (1236). The blues connects scattered and alienated parts of myriad African American experiences.

The blues, as it were, offers a stage on which individual conditions of existence assemble and articulate their social imperatives as a whole. And when this comes into sight, the blues becomes a political act of communication that disavows the ongoing state of social death.

Baker's theory further brings the opportunity to recognize the importance of motion as central component of social action. As Baker hinted above in his usage of words like "ceaseless" and "transit," the blues, since its origin, has always been "*in motion* in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (5; my italics). This mobile image of the blues becomes more fully concretized when he portrays it with

> an image of the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song. The railway juncture is marked by transience. Its inhabitants are always travelers—a multifarious assembly on transit. . . . . Polymorphous and multidirectional, scene of arrivals and departures, place betwixt and between (ever *entre les deux*), the juncture is the way-station of the blues.
>
> The singer and his production are always at this intersection, this crossing, codifying force, providing resonance for experience's multiplicities. Singer and song never arrest transience . . . . Instead they provide expressive equivalence for the juncture's ceaseless flux. Hence, they may be conceived as translators. (7; original italics)

The image of railroad, compared to "web," instantly adds to the picture of the blues the element of mobility. In this picture, egregious experiences or existential conditions surrounding blacks across America can turn out to be "productive," precisely because they do not stay static. Once connected, those experiences start to flood ("ceaseless flux") into the "way-station," where the blues singer welcomes the traffic, however "durative" and "unceasingly oppressive" they might be. The singer then

repeatedly ("lustily") "transform[s]," or rather, "translat[es]" the "force" of the streams of experiences accumulated at the juncture into the "energies" of language and sound for social expression. It is as if the railway station is a power plant: its raw material is mobile experiences, and the plant yields from them the "energies" that in turn activate the blues. To put it differently, it is "crossing" motions of "travelers . . . on transit" that propel the blues.[4)]

What must be further noted here is that African American experiences occupying the vast network of the blues are *already* mobile: they are, and have been, "always" traveling. It is not that they suddenly become mobile only when the blues singer playing at the plant decides to summon them. And it is here that the trope of the blues matrix comes to represent not simply its own mechanism but the politics of African American history in general. The blues, from the onset, understands not only that it runs on mobility, but that mobility is the very nature of black experiences. Thus, it "never arrest[s] transience," nor hinders "arrivals" and "departures" of "travelers"; it preserves their motions intact, since it knows that they are its essential source of power.

And, building upon this knowledge, the blues "codif[ies]" African American experiences in stories of mobilization. When "translat[ing]" those experiences, the blues does not remove any of their mobile ingredients but lets them flow, making them into narratives that amount

---

4) Again, Baker does not, like Brown, explicitly concern himself with the politics of mobility nor its specifics. Baker's main line of argument points rather to the inclusiveness of the blues matrix that embraces such a "vastness" (7) of black experiences. But I see from his trope of blues as "driving force" (9) a figure for motions that empower social actions. If blues is one variety of political actions that connects "species experience[s]," and if at the same time the very act of connecting operates through motions, Baker's trope, I contend, though allusively, presents a solid starting point to recognize the centrality of mobility in the mechanism of blues.

to “expressive equivalence” for motions that are observable in those experiences. Precisely by talking about mobilization in its lyrics, the blues overtly displays that the problem of (im)mobility runs through African American politics. “[S]pecies experience[s],” then, become coded into a coherent narrative that encourages its readers and listeners to understand the political possibility of mobility. This guides us to see the connection between Baker’s theorization of the blues and Brown’s explanation of the funeral on the *Hudibras*, the latter of which is nicely recapitulated in Stephanie Smallwood’s words that Brown quotes: “The connection Africans needed was a narrative continuity between past and present—an epistemological means of connecting the dots between there and here, then and now, to craft a coherent story out of incoherent experience” (1241). The blues not only connects “the dots” of black experiences that are scattered throughout America, but goes further as to pull “a narrative continuity” out of those experiences for a more concrete and fuller political expression.

Robert Johnson, among possible candidates, offers a fine example of such “a coherent story” on the politics of mobility. Johnson was arguably a leading figure in the Delta blues scene of the thirties and, as a countless number of musicians after him testify, one of the most, if not the best, influential bluesman.[5] In his signature blues number “Cross Road Blues,” Johnson tells a story of mobilization, assuming the persona who feels desperate to move again.

> I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
> I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
> Asked the lord above, “Have mercy, now, save poor Bob if you please”

---

5) Just to name one, the legendary British rock band Led Zeppelin released in 1990 “Travelling Riverside Blues,” which is a cover of the original song by Johnson.

Yeeooo, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride
ooo ooo eee, I tried to flag a ride
Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroad, babe, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroad, babe, eee eee eee, risin' sun goin' down
I believe to my soul now, Poor Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
(th)'at I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, babe, I'm sinkin' down

And I went to the crossroad, momma, I looked east and west
I went to the crossroad baby, I looked east and west
Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh-well babe, in my distress
(*Centennial*)[6)]

This song is composed in traditional blues stanzas in which the first two lines are analogous and the last line comments on or adds further information to the previous lines (AAB). In this simple form, Baker's figure of the blues, the African American blues singer-guitarist at the juncture, is at once present at lyrical, literal levels: the speaker is at the "crossroad," which is without a doubt another version of the railroad junction. And it is also clear that the story told by the speaker is from the outset about the problem of mobility. The speaker mobilized himself ("went") to the juncture, then became immobile ("fell down on my knees") at the spot.

If the opening shows that this song is concerned with (re)mobilization,

6) The lyrics are excerpted from the record titled *Robert Johnson: The Centennial Collection*, transcribed on the Robert Johnson Blues Foundation website, but to represent their sound quality properly (e.g. rhyme scheme), I made some changes (e.g. line breaks) on the transcription with my own listening to the record uploaded on *Youtube*.

the remaining story of "Cross Road Blues" takes us even more firmly back to Brown's and Baker's theories. Unable to move, the speaker turns to pray to god for his own survival. The statement "Have mercy, now, save poor Bob" at once sets the correlation between immobility and the danger of one's demise. But the demise the speaker dreads is not so much biological as social. In the second twelve bar stanza, the immobile speaker fears now something very much like social death, as he tries to remobilize himself with "a ride," only to find that "nobody seem[s] to" recognize him. Here the speaker's desire to be mobile corresponds to his desire to be socially involved at the crossroad where other mobile people come and go ("pass me by"), carrying their own experiences with them. The speaker seems to know that mobility is crucial for social survival, but what he does to remain a social being is not to retrieve his own mobility, but instead to mobilize others. He calls out to "You" who "can run," and asks the mobile listener to deliver his message to "my friend," which is another nomenclature for a certain kind of social relation. Hence, the triad that "connect[s] the dots" and makes up a social community: the speaker "I," the listener "you," and the third person addressee "my friend."

This social world is much larger in scale than one would imagine. The vastness of the social network Johnson portrays is sustained by the sheer inclusiveness of the triad. The speaker "I" and the listener "you" are always *plural*. In understanding this, Baker's accounts of the blues tradition are again quite helpful. Having made sure that the blues is "a phylogenetic recapitulation . . . of species experience," Baker goes on to say, "What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole. The blues singer's signatory coda is always *atopic*, placeless" (5; original italics). What he means is, to put it in simple terms, that the speaker is *not really* Robert Johnson and always interchangeable with any other black speaking subjects sharing

ethnic experiences. And the prime candidate for the position of the singer is the listener "you" that is frequently called upon in the blues: "the 'you' (audience) addressed is always free to invoke the X(ed) spot in the body's absence. For the signature comprises a scripted authentication of 'your' feelings. Its mark is an invitation to energizing intersubjectivity. Its implied (in)junction reads: Here is my body meant for (a phylogenetically conceived) you" (Baker 5). The image of "X" not only illustrates the empty spot that can be filled by African American audience at hand, but instantly signifies only one local branch of the "Polymorphous and multidirectional" crossroads that extend across America. In the blues matrix, there is no center: there are so many decentered "X"s, and plural "you"s rally to those spots from all over the place to become plural "I"s, to sound their social existence.

This is precisely the case of "Cross Road Blues." "Standin'" at the spot is the speaker, who, in the face of social demise, resorts to summoning and addressing the audience somewhere out there in the matrix, not just to *socialize* with them but to lend them his subjectivity as a singer who voices their own collective experiences of social existence. Indeed, Johnson forgoes his name and goes by the name of a third person "Bob," which defies a somewhat easy—and often lazy—autobiographical reading.[7] This is in turn to say that anybody can be "Bob," and that the position of the blues musician at the junction is open to any African American under the continuous threat of social death, whatever the specifics of their problems are ("*atopic*"). The crossroad is not fixed at one definite location but can be anywhere throughout America so long as there are intersecting points ("placeless"). It becomes clear then that the speaker

7) Johnson calls himself "Bob" also in "Stones in My Passway," another blues song lamenting immobility: "I got stones in my passway / and all my roads seem dark at night / . . . / My enemies have betrayed me / have overtaken poor Bob at last / . . . / I've got three legs to truck home / boys please don't block my road."

"I" and the listener "you" in "Cross Road Blues" occupy such a grand scale of social network, packed with "nameless" would-be singers around the country, ranging from those at close quarters (venues of the performance) to those far away. Collective voices of "you" burst freely from Johnson the "I" and circulate through the network afar, even though the second person pronoun implies that the listener is physically close to the speaker. "Cross Road Blues" is itself the blues matrix materialized in the form of text and sound.

And this picture of the "Cross Road Blues" matrix cannot be complete without considering its story of mobilization. In fact, the vast social network depicted above is possible only when African American mobility is at work. Of course, the speaker "I" tries to socialize with the listener "you" by addressing him directly ("You can run") against his own impending social death, signaled by the peak moment of his immobility ("Poor Bob is sinkin' down"). But note that there is still a third party that consummates the triad: "my friend Willie Brown." If the speaker is to have social life, it is imperative that he completes the triad. Who is this "Willie Brown" that is so important? Further, in light of the current discussion, what has it got to do with the politics of mobility in facilitating social connection?

It should be noted first that "my friend Willie Brown," unlike "Bob" or "you," carries a specific reference to Johnson's personal history. Brown was another famed bluesman in Johnson's time, though he was eleven years senior to Johnson and already famous around the Delta when Johnson was only a fledgling. A recently released Netflix documentary film titled *ReMastered: Devil at the Crossroads* relates the story of Johnson and Brown. Johnson, then a "novice" guitarist who wanted to earn "that real money" (17:27-39), would frequent juke joints where Brown and Son House played. House, also a renowned blues musician of the time, remarked, "He'd follow me and Willie around. And every time we

stopped to rest and set that ol' guitar over in the corner or something, he trying to play it and be just noising the people, you know" (17:44-59). Johnson was ejected from the venue lest he break a string on the guitar and then disappeared, until he showed up again after about a year at a juke in Banks, Mississippi. Both House and Brown recognized him—Brown said, according to House, "Oh, that's little Robert" (19:03)—and Johnson, this time, surprised everyone present with his skills that no one had ever witnessed as House said, "Now, ain't that fast" (20:04).

So came the famous myth: Johnson went to the crossroad and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the rapid development of guitar techniques. Now, if the story gave Keb' Mo' "a metaphor, a wake-up call for a person to go ahead and become who they are" (25:36-53), I see from the story another kind of metaphor for motions that lead to social connections.[8] Brown was for Johnson not simply the role model of a successful bluesman making money, but possibly the representative figure of the black blues singer at the juncture. Johnson's early days as a neophyte were full of motions, as he "followed [House] and Willie around," and, when rejected to be their company, he chose another path to be "little Robert." In other words, something about Brown (and House) led John-

8) The story of Johnson making a pact with the devil at the crossroad also offers a reference to an African American folklore, hoodoo. In the film, Chireau explains that "hoodoo has these stories of people going down to a crossroad and meeting up with an entity who offers some sort of insight or knowledge, to learn all kinds of things. So hoodoo was seen as a way of gaining control in a world that was suffused by violence and limited options. Hoodoo gave people other possibilities for living in that world" (22:44-23:11). The centrality of the image of juncture is clear once more, in that it is the center of species "insight or knowledge" of "all kinds of things." At the center is the figure of "an entity," and in Johnson' s case that "entity" was the devil, and, as it happens, the devil was frequently linked with blues as music against church ("the devil's music"). It is as if the blues singer himself is the devil, luring people to the crossroad and giving them "control" and "possibilities" for survival ("living") in the violent world.

son to *go* to the crossroad and find his way into the blues tradition, that is, to engage himself in the matrix "connecting the dots" along with his two colleagues. And whenever Johnson comes to be immobile and socially alienated *down the road*, he struggles to reach out to where it all started: Johnson returns to his forebears that once mobilized him, and therewith secures the continuity across generations. The social world of the triad, then, turns wholly around on the story of mobility: "I" goes down "to the crossroad"; "you" is requested to "run" to "I"'s "friend"; the "friend" is the one who mobilized "I" in the first place.

With the whole triad in view, however, there is something odd about its dynamics. There is no direct connection between "I" and his "friend." "Cross Road Blues" is a one-way trip: it is not "I" but "you" who in effect gets to talk to the man. In fact, the speaker does not even seem to expect his "friend" to "run" to his aid in the last stanza. It is almost as if he does not care about whether he will be delivered from his current state of immobility. Thus, the triad forms not really a triangle but a line ("I"–"you"–"my friend"), which is also unidirectional (from "I" to "you" to "my friend"). This reformulation of Johnson's social world, however, does not harm but enhance the political possibility of the blues. For the speaker's paramount concern is not the result of mobilizing others, that is, the mobilization of himself, but the very *act* of mobilizing others. This is clear in the transition between the last two stanzas. After dispatching the audience "you" by his repeated and rather authoritative affirmation ("you can run"), the speaker "I" restates his immobile condition ("I'm sinkin' down"). He then begins to repeat the opening phrase of the song ("I went to the crossroad"), adding this time that he "looked east and west." This transition verifies that the speaker does not concern himself with finally reclaiming mobility and the ensuing status of a social being at the end of the song, but returns to the moment when he was once mobile ("went"), preparing himself to immobilize himself again ("fell down

on my knees").

This loop, as it were, is for continuously mobilizing others across the whole continent of America ("east and west"). If social death is the ongoing state of African Americans since slavery, the bluesman at the juncture should stay *immobile* at the spot to help them. The gesture of reaching back to Brown via the audience is itself important precisely because in so doing Johnson can also do his task and do it even better. He mobilizes African American experiences by "never arrest[ing] [their] transience." Johnson does not ask "you" to stay with him in the face of urgency but sends "you" away to Brown. The speaker's statement at the beginning now seems almost strategic: immobility is "encoded" as a preliminary condition to stating one's own problem, which is in turn presumed to be solved by mobility. After all, that the speaker "went" to the crossroad *and then* "fell down on [his] knees" is telling. If Johnson was "in [his] distress" all along—there is no other sign of any cause of immobility between "I went" and "fell down"—how did he get to the crossroad in the first place? And why the crossroad? It seems plausible, more or less, that the singer *chose* to be immobile *precisely* at the juncture, to be a hub of the matrix, "Standin'" at the spot and sounding the story of mobility among "arrivals and departures." The speaker's toil is seemingly to restore social existence by mobilizing himself, but in fact he is toil*ing* to vacillate between mobility ("went") and immobility ("fell down"), since mobility makes him leave the juncture and utter immobility causes him to lose touch even with "you," the only social connection at hand that he can resort to. Thus, the speaker "I" is forever "sink*in'* down" but never *sunk* down. The present participle intensifies, not expunge, and proclaims the import of mobility in African American history and its politics.

Conclusion

Social actions hinge upon a series of motions, and above all it is the blues that knows and showcases this politics of mobility that runs (through) African American experiences. If the blues performers at the junctures throughout the "phylogenetic" matrix that traverses the whole continent are indeed "translators" of black experiences who "produce vibrantly polyvalent interpretations encoded as blues" (Baker 7), the very blues code "codifying" those experiences is mobility, no matter how myriad, "polyvalent," and "*atopic*" the experiences and their interpretations may be. In other words, the blues understands that every sort of African American experience and existence can be transposed into a coherent story of mobility that offers an easily accessible but politically charged narrative with which individuals can powerfully utter their incoherent histories. In this sense, the blues is thrice political: the blues is itself a social action; the blues shows that motions are essential in its operation; the blues further reveals that motions are not just for itself but relevant to all other social actions across African American history. The centrality of the blues in sustaining the politics of mobility throughout slavery and the following eras becomes prominent once more in the collaboration between Brown and Johnson. "Me and the Devil Blues" encodes Brown's idiom—mourning—with its own code—mobility. It summons the ritual of the women on the *Hudibras* who *moved* "out of the hold" to "ma[k]e a social world out of death itself" (Brown 1233) and translates it into the voice of the bluesman who desires to keep on moving after death: "You may bury my body, ooh, down by the highway side, / So my old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride."

Works Cited

Baker, Houston A., Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.

Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

Brown, Vincent. "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery." *American Historical Review* 114.5 (2009): 1231-49.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.

Johnson, Robert. "Music." *Robert Johnson Blues Foundation*, 26 April 2011, www.robertjohnsonblues
foundation.org/music/robert-johnson-centennial-collection.

______. "Robert Johnson - The Complete Recordings - Essential Classics Evergreen." *Youtube*, uploaded by The Unforgettables Tv, 20 August 2015, www.youtu.be/RRY4fla4ZcI.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press, 1996.

Lewis, Andrew. "Martin Dockray and the *Zong*: A Tribute in the Form of a Chronology." *The Journal of Legal History* 28.3 (2007): 357-70.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1998.

Murray, Albert. *Stomping the Blues*. New York: Da Capo, 2000.

Oliver, Paul. *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Omry, Keren. *Cross-Rhythms: Jazz Aesthetics in African-American Literature*. New York: Continuum, 2008.

Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Viking, 2007.

ReMastered: Devil at the Crossroads. Written by Jeff Zimbalist and Michael Zimbalist, directed by Brian Oakes, 2019. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/

watch/80191049?.

Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81.

“*Zong* massacre.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 13 Aug. 2020. Web. 16 Aug. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zong_massacre.

ABSTRACT

Motions in Captivity:
Theorizing the Politics of Mobility in Slavery and the Blues

Jae Hoon Lee

This paper attempts to (re)politicize the blues as a social action that captures and endorses the politics of mobility in African American history. It has been widely accepted that, as Paul Oliver among many others has noted, the blues voices "the major catastrophes" of African Americans on both individual and collective levels, thus giving the marginalized the opportunity to vent out their feelings. Yet, the blues concerns itself with the politics of African American lives in a more fundamental and complex way. To illustrate this, I first reread Vincent Brown's study on slaves' political struggles against social death and argue that, since the very first moments of slavery, mobility has been crucial in the social survival of the enslaved and their descendants. Then, juxtaposing my reading of Brown's "political life" with Houston A. Baker Jr.'s theory of the blues "matrix," I claim that the blues is itself a political action that secures social connection among the African American community by *mobilizing* the experiences of its members. This mobilization is universally visible in the blues tradition at lyrical and literal levels as best exemplified in "Cross Road Blues," one of Robert Johnson's greatest hits. It is my conclusion that the blues can become more political than ever, once we recognize that it not only archives and gives voice to a myriad of often incoherent African American experiences, but also translates

those experiences into coherent stories of motions. In so doing, the blues makes us understand the politics of mobility and its power to offer a fuller picture of the history of the enslaved and the possibility of their political lives.

Key Words Houston A. Baker Jr., Vincent Brown, Robert Johnson, Cross Road Blues, blues, slavery, mobility, African American