ABSTRACT

RUTTER, EMILY R. Blues-Inspired Poetry: Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown and the BLKARTSOUTH Collective. (Under the direction of Professor Thomas Lisk).

Adopting the blues to lyric poetry marks an implicit rejection of the conventions of the Anglo-American literary establishment, and asserts that African American folk traditions are an equally valuable source of poetic inspiration. During the Harlem Renaissance, Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) exemplified the incorporation of African American folk forms such as the blues with conventional English poetics. His contemporary Sterling Brown similarly created hybrid forms in *Southern Road* (1932) that combined African American oral and aural traditions with Anglo-American ones. These texts suggest that blues music represents a complex and sophisticated lyrical form, and its thematic tropes poignantly express the history and contemporary realities of black Americans.

In the late 1960s, members of New Orleans’s BLKARTSOUTH were influenced by African American musical traditions as a reflection of historical experience and lyrical expression, and their poetry emphasizes the importance of the blues. Led by Kalamu Ya Salaam and Tom Dent, these poets were part of the Black Arts Movement whose political objectives emphasized a separation from the conventions of the Anglo-American literary establishment, and their work suggests a rejection of traditional English poetics. Although they did not openly acknowledge their literary debt to Toomer and Brown, *Cane* and *Southern Road* laid the lyrical foundation for the blues-inspired poetry of Salaam, Dent and their colleagues.

What unites these generations of poets is their adoption of the blues theme of resilience in response to the social, political and cultural issues of their eras. The
relationship between form and content is critical to a contemporary understanding of the inspiration that African American poets received from their musical predecessors. By examining the formal and thematic characteristics of blues-inspired poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, distinctive literary voices emerge that reflect the relationship between the history of African American oral expression and twentieth-century poetics.
Blues-Inspired Poetry: Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown and the BLKARTSOUTH Collective

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Introduction

 Unlike conventional Anglo-American poetry, blues songs are structured by a lyrical form that is both derivative of Western traditions and divergent from literary precedents. Sound devices such as repetition, rhyme and alliteration are borrowed, but blues songs have distinctive stylistic characteristics: dissonant sounds, a twelve-bar musical structure and the use of regional dialects. Often blues songs are framed by three line stanzas with an aab pattern in which the first line is repeated and third line is a response to them (Sotto 1). These characteristics typify many blues lyrics, but the genre is not limited to a prototypical form. What all blues songs share, however, is their underlying themes and their origin as a distinctively African American musical style. While the lyrics often express despair, a dominant theme is the will to persevere. The lyrics emphasize the universal themes of alienation, heartbreak and injustice, but these emotions are tempered by messages of hope: “That imposition of form and granting of freedom may well find its most meaningful expression in the ability of the blues to express the harsh limitations of this world while helping to transcend them” (Tracy 71). The dual themes in the blues at once lament and offer solace. Taken together, the music emphasizes endurance and unifies the singer with his or her audience through commiseration.

 Many poets recognized the juxtaposition of oppression and hope as descriptive of the duality of African American life, and they adopted the lyricism and spirit of the blues in order to express this reality. Invoking the blues marks an implicit rejection of the conventions of the Anglo-American literary establishment, and asserts that African American folk traditions are an equally valuable source of poetic inspiration. Thus, Jean Toomer’s incorporation of folk traditions into lyric poetry introduced an African American poetic voice that distinguished itself
from the Anglo-American literary establishment. The blues poetry in Toomer’s *Cane*, Sterling Brown’s *Southern Road* and the publications of the BLKARTSOUTH collective exemplify various and often dissimilar adaptations of the music to lyric poetry. Their distinctive visions of both poetics and issues surrounding African American life demonstrate the evolution of blues poetry. Through the analysis of this continuum, one observes how changes in blues-inspired lyric poetry reflect the historical and stylistic shifts in the development of African American literature.

Adopting the stylistic conventions of the blues to verse reflects a tradition of African American expression that is distinct in origin from Anglo-American poetry. Gabbin summarizes the innovative style that emerged when poets such as Toomer and Brown incorporated folk music into their work:

> As these poets reflected African American concerns in the context of a larger American culture, they created a body of poetry that grew out of folk roots; legitimized poetry as a performative, participatory activity, and succeeded in creating an aesthetic tradition defined by communal values, the primacy of musicality and improvisation, and inventive style. (“Furious Flower” 2)

During the 1920s and 1930s, Toomer and Brown adopted many of the lyrical and rhythmic structures of the blues as well as the music’s characteristic themes. Decades later, the poetic vision of the BLKARTSOUTH collective was influenced by experimental forms that were unlike conventional Western poetry or classic blues music. In contrast to their Harlem Renaissance predecessors, they did not adopt conventions of the blues lyrical form. As part of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s, their artistic aims were overtly political and artistically radical. Yet, the BLKARTSOUTH collective also looked to nonliterary sources such as blues musicians to
inform their artistic vision. Thus, their poetry integrates typical blues themes as well as allusions to the genre’s importance as a form of African American expression.

Defining the blues formally can be problematic because it varies widely depending on the source(s). For example, W.C. Handy’s (the so-called “father of the blues”) song structure dictated that the blues was twelve bars with three lines of four beats each. Handy’s form required the repetition of the first line followed by a third end-rhymed line (McKay 49): “Feelin’ tomorrow lak ah feel today, / Feelin’ tomorrow lak ah feel today, / I’ll pak my trunk, make ma gitaway” (“St. Louis Blues,” Young 63). This widely known form is exemplified in myriad blues songs, yet there remain enough deviations from this structure to diminish its authority. Because improvisation is a critical element of blues performances, transcribing the music and defining a structural prototype is not always useful to the scholar or the musician. This essay refers to the standard blues riff as Handy’s version, but incorporates examples that derivate from this form as well.

Although many blues songs express universal themes of hardship and triumph, African American history and culture is lyrically embedded in the music. Poetic adoption of the blues implies an appeal to a sympathetic audience who identifies with the concerns that the poet addresses. As a folk tradition, the blues is part of a long tradition of musical styles that developed to express the concerns of a community and the individuals within it:

They [the blues] are a transformation of black life through the sheer power of song. They symbolize the solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the black community and thus create the emotional forms of reference for endurance and esthetic appreciation. (Cone ll7)
Just as blues lyrics convey community solidarity, African American poets who adopted the blues do something similar. They reach out to the black community with messages of commiseration and hope: “You sang:/ Walk togedder, chillen,/ Dontcha git weary” (Brown “Strong Men,” 17-19). Brown alludes to a slave spiritual using call-and-response with two speakers: a contemporary African American and his ancestor. This framework highlights the importance of song throughout a history of oppression. Adopting the lyricism of the antebellum past, Brown calls out to a sympathetic audience who will identify with the inspiration he derives from African American opposition to oppression through song. Similarly, Toomer and the BLKARTSOUTH poets expressed community solidarity lyrically by integrating the spirit of African American music into their verse.

With the urbanization of the African American community that coincided with the artistic movements within the Harlem Renaissance, Toomer and Brown along with many of their contemporaries identified the importance of preserving the folk art of their ancestors through their work. The blues was a popular musical genre that reflected historical modes of lyrical expression while its lyrics conveyed twentieth-century concerns of alienation, loneliness and disenfranchisement:

The Blues, then, represented an adaptation of older instrumental and vocal techniques (which responded to one kind of oppressive system) to a new kind of music, one that responded to the unique problems posed by the new oppressive system and provided an appropriate way of expressing these problems. (Tracy 75) Blues grew out of the folk traditions of the antebellum and postbellum periods when African Americans were responding vocally to the injustices inflicted upon them by a nation that denied
them equal rights. It responded to these transitions and new obstacles by offering a mode of self-expression that was independent of the communal aspect of earlier forms such as slave spirituals and work songs (Jones 67).

The pervasive racism and dehumanization that inspired the collective artistic expression of the spirituals is similarly evident in the blues. The lyrics inherently express political messages of African American strength and defiance that stems from the music’s development in the Jim Crow South (Oakley 49-50). The spirit of the music expresses the pain of living in a society that does not value African Americans equally:

The blues are a state of mind that affirms the essential worth of black humanity, even though white people attempted to define blacks as animals. The blues tell us about a people who refused to accept the absurdity of white society. Black people rebelled artistically, and affirmed through ritual, pattern and form that they were human beings. (Cone 117)

While blues artists’ rejection of Anglo-American society was couched in metaphorical language, their lyrical expressions of discontent are evident to the sympathetic listener: “It was early this mornin’ that I had my trial, / It was early this mornin’ that I had my trial, / Ninety days on the country road, and the judge didn’t even smile” (Ma Rainey “Chain Gang Blues,” Oakley 101). The assumption is that the personal experience of oppression that Rainey describes will be understood by her audience. Her allusion to the “country road” and the humor she adds to the judge’s dismissive attitude are addressed to a community who can relate to the Jim Crow laws that allowed white authorities to routinely imprison African Americans for minor offenses (Oakley 66-67). “Chain Gang Blues” is not a protest song, but it illuminates one of the many
injustices that Southern African Americans faced during the early twentieth century. Even songs about love and heartbreak implicitly deconstruct myths of African American inferiority through the emotional depth and lyrical sophistication of the blues. As a result of the political undertones of the music, blues poetry inherits a similarly defiant stance.

Within Cane, Toomer does not overtly address political issues, yet his prose and poetry express socio-economic concerns about African American life. He renders alienation in figurative terms, but his implication of the blues spirit of commiseration and hope is evident: “Pour O pour that parting soul in song,/ O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,/ Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night” (“Song of the Son” 1-3). His apostrophe to African Americans to continue the tradition of folk songs suggests the poetic inspiration he receives from them. Throughout Cane, Toomer alludes to a continuum of African American expression from the spirituals of the antebellum period to the blues of the early twentieth century to emphasize the historical importance of folk music in the lives of African Americans. He suggests that these traditions are fading, and Cane encourages their preservation in modern literature by exemplifying the integration between past and current lyrical traditions: “An everlasting song, a singing tree,/ Caroling softly souls of slavery,/ What they were, and what they are to me (“Song of the Son” 20-23). His use of a standard rhyme scheme (abab), assonance and alliteration represent Western poetic conventions; yet, Toomer’s subject and theme are distinctively African American. Like many of the poems and much of the prose in Cane, “Song of the Son” expresses the influence of the history of African American song traditions on Toomer’s vision of poetics.

In Southern Road, Sterling Brown addresses social concerns both metaphorically and directly in many blues-inspired poems. His work is not protest poetry, but carefully crafted
renditions of the lives of poverty-stricken blacks living in the south. Often Brown employs Southern African American personas to capture the spirit and the language of the culture he celebrates. By employing the standard lyrical structure as well as the typical themes, he adopts the blues style more self-consciously than Toomer. In “New St. Louis Blues,” Brown uses blues conventions such as repetition, the three line, aab stanza structure and regional vernacular: “Let her hang out de window and watch de busy worl’ go pas’/ Hang her head out de window and watch de careless worl’ go pas’/ Maybe some good luck will come down Market Street at las’” (4-6). In contrast to Toomer, Brown replicates the blues song structure in his poetry, and shows its viability as a lyrical form.

Additionally, many poems in Southern Road express the characteristically blues theme of resilience in the face of despair. In “Memphis Blues,” the speaker surveys stereotypical African American community members about what they will do when Memphis is destroyed like its historical antecedent. The poem’s characters all respond with affirmations of their will to persevere in spite of the impending destruction:

Watcha gonna do when Memphis falls down,
Memphis fall down, Mistah Music Man?
Gonna pluck on dat box as long as it sou’n’,
Gonna pluck dat box fo’ to beat de ban’. (II.11-14)

Brown’s use of repetition and vernacular represent his adoption of the blues form while his theme of perseverance suggests his incorporation of the music’s spirit.

Approaching the blues from a distinctively different vantage point, BLKARTSOUTH poets paid lyrical tribute to the blues with references to the music’s historical and artistic legacy,
often in political terms. Their collective was established in 1968 as a Southern Black Arts organization that published a literary journal entitled *NKOMBO*. Kalamu Ya Salaam and Tom Dent co-edited the journal and they established the vision of the organization to express a distinctively Southern African American voice. As part of the Black Arts Movement, Salaam, who directed BLKARTSOUTH, envisioned his and his colleagues’ poetry as addressing issues concerned with African American life to a black audience (Chapman 371). The blues influenced their work by providing a historical precedent for African American lyricism that incorporated regional dialects and lyrical conventions that were distinct from Anglo-American poetry.

Moreover, the BLKARTSOUTH poets identified with the blues spirit of community solidarity and resilience, and expressed these sentiments in their work: “Then Rev. Charles comes on, rocking from side to side like/ a black mechanical music machine and sings: “calm down/ noise, it’s all gon end too soon. Listen to the Blues.”/ Those who could did” (Dent *New Black Voices* 374). Tom Dent’s conversational style and use of allusion to refer to African American historical experience and popular culture, rather than to literary sources, exemplifies the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement and the BLKARTSOUTH poets (Smith 101). He employs alliteration (“mechanical music machine”) and repetition (“side to side”), but he does not use a conventional lyrical structure. Neither is Dent’s verse based on a typical blues song. Rather, he selects and employs various aural sound and linguistic elements from Western lyrical traditions while deriving regional vernacular (“gon end”) and his poetic subject(s) from the blues. His theme of the commiseration and emotional uplift coupled with the poem’s allusion to the blues shows the influence of the music on the poet’s artistic vision.

The racial dynamics in America had changed dramatically from the Harlem Renaissance
era of Toomer and Brown to the Black Arts Movement period of BLKARTSOUTH. The political and socio-economic issues such as the poverty of the Great Depression and Jim Crow oppression that preoccupied their predecessors were no longer in the forefront of the BLKARTSOUTH poets’ vision for change. Thus, Salaam’s concern to be artistically separate from Anglo-American traditions was not the underlying thrust of Brown’s blues poetry. Both his and Toomer’s poetics were rooted in the literary questions of their time. They confronted questions regarding dialect poetry and the use of folk material in their work that paved the way for the poetry of Salaam and Dent. As subscribers to the aims of the Black Arts Movement, the BLKARTSOUTH poets were concerned with addressing contemporary issues of black life such as Civil Rights and developing an African American aesthetic separate from white America.

Compared with Brown and Toomer, Salaam and his colleagues wrote radically different types of blues poetry. The BLKARTSOUTH poets were similarly inspired by the tenor of the lyrics, but they chose to express them in experimental styles that do not closely resemble either conventional lyric poetry or standard blues songs. What unifies these generations of poets from the Harlem Renaissance era through the Black Arts Movement is their vision of incorporating the spirit and lyrical nuances of the blues into their work. Thus, Toomer, Brown and the BLKARTSOUTH poets identified with the ethos of the blues spirit but rendered its influence in distinctive ways. Examining this literary continuum sheds light on the stylistic and thematic impact of blues poetry on the development of an African American poetic voice.
Chapter 1: *Cane*

One of Jean Toomer’s many achievements in *Cane* is his integration of African American musical traditions with experimental, modernist techniques. Throughout the prose and poetry that comprise the text, Toomer emphasizes the importance of the folk spirit in black life, and he suggests that the music of it be preserved in the consciousness of modern African American literature. *Cane* alludes to the songs produced from the antebellum period through the early twentieth century, including slave spirituals, work songs through blues music and jazz, as a means to show the significance of musical expression throughout the history of black life in America. While his emphasis is not explicitly on the blues, Toomer implies the lyrical and thematic influence of the music’s spirit in *Cane*’s interwoven song verses. Moreover, his incorporation of folk music into stories and poems of black life suggests that this rich musical heritage is an integral part of the African American literary identity.

Toomer emphasizes the importance of this legacy of musical innovations in establishing his own authorial voice. In a letter to Sherwood Anderson, Toomer wrote, “I feel that in time, in its social phase, my art will aid in giving the Negro to himself” (Turner 132). *Cane* reflects Toomer’s recognition of the folk spirit as artistically relevant to the emerging tradition of black literature that became the Harlem Renaissance. His adoption of slave spirituals and blues as poetry suggests that the spirit of these traditions will be lost unless twentieth-century writers recognize its artistic value. Allusions to African American musical traditions combined with *Cane*’s various narratives of disconnection and loss imply the fading of the cultural traditions that unified black life during the nineteenth century.

In a letter to Waldo Frank in 1923, Toomer describes his view of the disappearance of the
folk traditions from black life:

The Negro of the folk-song has all but passed away: the Negro of the emotional church is fading. A hundred years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all, will live in art. And I believe a vague sense of this fact is the driving force behind the art movements directed toward them today...America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time. (Rusch 24)

Toomer’s anxiety over their disappearance suggests that the innovative musical styles developed by the slave community should be celebrated for their artistic and historic significance. His is not a nostalgic perspective on the history of the antebellum and postbellum eras, and Toomer is not suggesting a preservation of the social and economic conditions that engendered the spirituals and the blues. Rather, his interest is rooted in the culture that was disappearing, and he suggests that they should be preserved through the work of modern artists: “The total significance of Cane, however, can be understood only when it is perceived both as a harbinger of that Renaissance and as an illumination of significant psychological and moral concerns of the early 1920s” (Turner 129).

Darwin Turner’s assertion is helpful in situating Toomer’s concerns about the disappearance of folk traditions in light of the emergence of Harlem’s literary milieu. Through his integration of musical traditions in Cane, he implies that the spirituals, work songs and blues of Southern blacks remain a part of the literary voices of contemporary African Americans. Thus, he suggests through his own integration of folk inspired lyrics into an experimental, modernist work that African American folk traditions remain lyrically and thematically viable in the twentieth century. Furthermore, Cane emphasizes the significance of these traditions both as
a testament to a rich cultural past and as an inspiration for the emerging literary voices of twentieth-century African Americans.

The integral role of music in *Cane* demonstrates Toomer’s awareness of the cultural value of music as a representation of the African American experience. Thus, the blues songs he adopts represent the transitions that the African American community underwent during the era preceding *Cane*’s publication. As blacks migrated North and Jim Crow restrictions were legally ratified and adopted throughout the South, African Americans entered into a new social and economic position that engendered individual, rather than collective, forms of musical expression (Cone 112-113). For example, the blues exemplifies a transition from the collective voice of the spirituals to the individual singer who calls and responds to him or herself. *Cane* represents the trajectory of musical developments from the slave spirituals through the blues and even includes the popularization of jazz in “Bona and Paul.” Allusions to the historical progression of musical expression reflect the value of folk art as a representation of the past and as an important link to the future of African American literature.

With the explosion of black art during the Harlem Renaissance, Toomer witnessed the dismissal of folk art forms such as “primitive” blues in favor of forms that were considered more respectable to middle class blacks and whites (Tracy 21). Concerned with artistic representation of African Americans, leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson raised aesthetic questions about how to consider black folk traditions. Because they wanted to distinguish themselves from the derogatory caricatures that accompanied portraits of black life in the South, they were understandably wary of the use of dialect and folk material (Gates, Jr. 179). *Cane* exemplifies an integration of authentic folk forms into modernist literature absent the
pejorative representations that concerned Dubois and Johnson. In fact, Toomer draws on musical traditions to elucidate aspects of African American life, and shows the viability of these forms as artistic expressions in both Southern and Northern settings. As a result, Toomer challenges his contemporaries to consider the lyrical and thematic sophistication of African American folk music such as spirituals and blues.

Given the attitude of many of the Harlem Renaissance leaders towards traditional forms, the incorporation of these traditions in Cane was artistically bold: “To the ‘New Negro’ and most of all to the black recently arrived from the South who was earnestly seeking to acquire the worldly Northerner’s veneer of sophistication, there were overtones of the ‘Uncle Tom’ element in the blues” (Paul Oliver Spirituals and the Blues 75). Not only leading figures such as W.E.B. Dubois criticized the artistic value of the blues and other folk forms, many middle class, Southern African Americans did as well (Tracy 21). Against this denigration of folk art traditions, Toomer’s integration of folk forms into modernist poetry and prose emphasizes the artistic value of their traditions.

Toomer considered Cane a “swan song” for the fading culture of the Southern African American culture during the twentieth century. His experience as a teacher in Sparta, Georgia offered Toomer his first exposure to the rural South, and the experience transformed his views on the folk traditions he observed:

They sang. And this was the first time I’d ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them “shouting.” They had victrolas and player-pianos. So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals,
meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was
towards the small town and then towards the city—and industry and commerce
and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die in the modern desert. That
spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me.
And this was the feeling I put into Cane. Cane was a swan-song. It was a song of
an end. (Jean Toomer 142)

Toomer’s lament for the fading of the folk spirit is reflected in Cane’s numerous tragedies from
the social alienation in “Becky” to the emptiness and frustration experienced by “Kabnis.”

While Toomer viewed Cane as testimony to a dying era, it is also crucial to recognize
that he (perhaps inadvertently) demonstrates that the folk spirit is important in understanding the
past and future of black life in America. For example, “Seventh Street” and “Bona and Paul”
show how black music in the Northern urban centers combines the nuances of the spirituals and
work songs with the rhythms and themes of early twentieth-century life. While Toomer mourns
the loss of shared traditions that characterized Southern African American culture, Cane
recognizes the artistic innovations of new forms of expression in the blues and jazz music.

For example, Toomer suggests a communal voice in “Cotton Song,” a poem that features
the collective call-and-response characteristic of slave spirituals: “Cant blame God if we don’t
roll/ Come, brother, roll, roll!” (Toomer 7-8). Toomer evokes the voice of his slave heritage, an
era of innovative musical expressions born out of oppression and dehumanization. “Cotton
Song” celebrates the resiliency and artistry of slaves who sang as a means of affirming their
humanity and their community solidarity: “Eoho, eoho, roll away!/ We aint agwine wait until th
Judgment Day!” (15-16). The collective “we” represents a form of communal expression that
was characteristic during slavery. After Emancipation, however, the collective oral voice transformed into individual musical expressions as African Americans began dealing with “the burden of freedom” (Cone 112).

In *Cane*, Toomer shows musical expressions as a form of catharsis for African Americans from slavery through the Harlem Renaissance. As a result of the cultural transformations that occurred from the antebellum period to the twentieth century, the forms of musical expression changed too from the spiritual’s collective voice to the individual blues singer (Wormser 96-97). Toomer reflects this musical evolution in the verses that weave in and out of the Southern and Northern settings of *Cane*. While many of the early poems in the Southern sections reflect collective voices, the movement is towards the individual. The blues-like lyrics he employs become a representation of the social transitions within the black community that gave rise to the solitary singer. For example, the call-and-response camaraderie of the aforementioned “Cotton Song” becomes the plea of the modern descendent of slaves in “Song of the Son” who yearns for the communal comfort of song:

   An everlasting song, a singing tree,
   Caroling softly souls of slavery,
   What they were, and what they are to me,
   Caroling softly souls of slavery. (20-23)

In this stanza, the speaker emphasizes the importance of song as a means of emotionally grappling with his history and the present. Toomer’s insistence on preservation conveys the value of lyrical expression as a historically unifying force in the African American community all across the postbellum South.
Cane highlights the relationship between African American musical traditions and literature that inspired many Harlem Renaissance writers, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown among them. Drawing on the formal and thematic tropes of African American blues, Toomer’s lyrics identify the symbolic change in the singer-audience relationship. Blues singers are solitary figures but they usually call out to an audience of sympathetic listeners who participate in the call-and-response pattern established in the spiritual. Whether one is listening to a recording at home or as an audience member at a live performance, a relationship between singer and audience is established. By listening to the personal expression in blues lyrics, the audience affirms the value of the singer’s concerns. Thus, when a blues singer says “I,” the audience interprets it as a “we” (Bowen 16-17). Toomer’s references to the blues suggest that twentieth-century African Americans may sing about their troubles as individuals but the performance implies a compassionate community.

At the heart of the contrast between secular slave spirituals and blues songs, is the transition from a collective call-and-response format to the solo blues singer who addresses an audience but must vocally respond to him/herself. The shift in call-and-response developed out of the transition from antebellum plantation life to postbellum sharecropping and work camps in which individual experiences varied. Freedom meant that many men and women didn’t have economic security and were often forced to break away from a communal experience in search of employment (Oakley 27-28).

Through a progression of lyrical styles, Toomer reflects the geographical and cultural shifts from rural to urban life taking place in the African American community during the first decades of the twentieth century. In “Georgia Dusk,” for instance, Toomer suggests the
collective traditions of the past while alluding to the evolution of new, individual musical styles: “Their voices rise…the pine trees are guitars, / Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain” (21-22). The pine needles symbolize the history of African American agrarian life in the South from which the culture of communal work songs and spirituals sprung. In contrast, the guitar is the modern instrument that has replaced the collective voices in the call-and-response pattern, just as the Northern migration has transformed the landscape of African American life. Toomer’s metaphor illuminates these transformations to suggest the connection between social and artistic change.

Through Cane’s illumination of the challenge of hope amidst the fragmentation of community, Toomer suggests the blues theme of perseverance. Houston A. Baker Jr. describes the “dualistic significance” of the blues: “Even as they [blues singers] speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire, their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibility” (8). The duality of blues music that Baker describes is evident in Cane’s paradoxical themes of commiseration and hope.

For example, the blues-like verse Toomer employs in “Rhobert” mourns a man’s demise but also affirms the community’s support:

Let’s open our throats, brother, and sing “Deep River” when he goes down.

Brother, Rhobert is sinking

Let’s open our throats, brother,

Let’s sing Deep River when he goes down. (43)

The inevitable loss will occur, but the verse emphasizes that the community will commiserate through song. Also, the allusion to the well-known spiritual “Deep River” evokes a sense of
Christian hope of heaven reminiscent of the spirituals. In effect, Toomer models the delivery of a blues singer who lyrically relates his troubles but emphasizes his ability to continue on.

“Blood-Burning Moon” offers another example of the thematic trope of resilience typified in blues lyrics (Springer 286). The blues in “Blood-Burning Moon” is used as a vehicle to communicate the story’s emotional tenor. The three-line verse interwoven into the story reflects the spirit of the blues: “Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact’ry door” (Cane 37). These lines foreshadow and emphasize the climactic lynching and burning of the story’s African American male character, Tom Burwell. While the lines represent the tragedy of a murder, they also encourage the victim to face his death. This emotionally distant attitude is reminiscent of the blues tendency to record personal statements of facts and experiences but not to openly protest them (Springer 285). Therefore, like Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues,” the stanza imbues the story of “Blood-Burning Moon” with a sense of impending doom but offers only commiseration as succor: “Mmmmm, I can’t move no more,/ Mmmmm, I can’t move no more,/ They ain’t no place for a poor old girl to go” (Sackheim 50).

Similarly, in “Carma,” Toomer integrates a blues riff into the text to establish an ominous tone that appropriately represents the story’s tragic events (“the cruelest melodrama”). The stanza’s omniscient narrator interprets the emotions of the characters and renders them in song. “Carma” describes in bitter irony the tale of a husband and wife who are both victims of racism and violence. Carma’s husband Bane’s hopeless position on a chain gang shows the poverty and despair that Jim Crow repression perpetuated. Bane’s repeated imprisonment coupled with the sharecropping life that Carma leads typify the circumstances of many African Americans during the early twentieth century when the blues emerged.
Springer describes the circumstances of African Americans at the time of *Cane’s* publication:

During the period when the blues seems to have emerged, that is, during the period of reconstruction and into the twentieth century—the lot of the Southern Black man had not improved dramatically compared to what it had been before the Civil War, and there is reason to think that is some ways it had worsened. It was from this economic background that the blues evolved, and it is not surprising that attitudes similar to those which prevailed during slavery should be in evidence in the very existence of a genre called “blues” and in the philosophy of the bluesmen. (279)

Toomer’s allusion to the blues in “Carma” suggests the music’s association with the hardships of life in the Jim Crow South. His inclusion of blues suggests the cathartic quality of the lyrics to express discontent, albeit often figuratively, while affirming through the expression the strength to overcome. He uses the metaphorical language and repetition characteristic of the genre:

Wind is in the cane. Come along.

Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk,

Scratching choruses above the guinea’s squack,

Wind is in the cane. Come along. (*Cane* 13)

Toomer’s image of the wind blowing through the cane field represents the ominous mood of terror that permeates the story. His blues-like metaphor creates an atmosphere without explicitly stating the event that engenders it using similar imagery. Robert Johnson creates an eerie mood
in “Hellhound On My Trail”: “I can tell the wind is rising/ the leaves trembling on/ the trees” (Young 89).

The image of wind blowing through the cane fields conveys a sense of foreboding while the context suggests disdain for “scratching choruses.” The second and third lines personify the cane stalks to tacitly condemn the community for their gossip that has led to Carma’s accidental suicide and Bane’s return to the chain gang. The images of the cane stalks “rusty with talk” and the guinea “squacking” indirectly admonish Carma’s community for her demise. Toomer’s figurative language echoes the blues’ style of avoiding overt criticism for fear of repercussions, and achieves catharsis, not direct political protest. The assumption is that the African American audience, who is also experiencing the oppression under Jim Crow, will relate to the sentiment regardless of the specific event. As the fourth line echoes the first, Toomer, like the blues musicians he emulates, emphasizes perseverance as the only response to such a tragedy. His repetition of “come along” suggests that Bane must move on from despair in spite of the community’s insensitivity and the trauma of his wife’s death. Adopting the bluesman persona, Toomer laments the heartbreak in the lives of poverty-stricken African Americans living in the Jim Crow era but offers a message of resilience.

While Cane suggests a reverence for slaves’ strength and emphasizes that their fading song traditions should be preserved, the text also underlines that the institutional racism that necessitated a communal outlet for the slaves’ agony is still a part of Southern life (Oakley 26-27). Toomer’s blues allusions imply that the conditions of black life in the South of the 1920s haven’t improved significantly since the time of slavery. The themes of disenfranchisement and hardship are remarkably similar to the lyrical expressions of the slaves but differ in the implicit
solitude of the singer and the absence of Christian faith as the beacon of hope.

As LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) observes, “The blues is formed out of the same social and musical fabric that the spiritual issued from, but with blues the social emphasis becomes more personal, the ‘Jordan’ of the song much more intensely a human accomplishment” (Blues People 63). Cane exemplifies Baraka’s assertions by juxtaposing spirituals and the blues to reflect the socio-cultural changes occurring within the African American community in the early twentieth century. He perceives the blues’s sense of independence and solitude that Baraka identifies as well the distinction between the spirituals’ expression of faith in God and the blues sense of self-determination. Although Toomer recognizes that the injustices of the Southern African American experience in 1920 remained mostly unchanged since the antebellum period, his work highlights that his generation was witnessing the increased alienation and disappearance of cultural solidarity (Turner 135).

Cane suggests the transition from communal to individual expression through Toomer’s shift from allusions to slave spirituals to allusions to the blues. The verse in “Seventh Street,” for instance, lacks the collective encouragement and reassurance of “Cotton Song.” In “Seventh Street,” Toomer uses a typical blues structure in which the speaker responds to himself: “Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts.” This repetition in the initial line is characteristic of blues lyrics and represents a departure from the call-and-response feature of both spirituals and work songs (Springer 278). “Cotton Song” suggests multiple voices expressing a similar sentiment (“Come, brother, roll, roll!”), while the speaker in “Seventh Street” sings a solitary song about the surrounding community. The singer’s expression is personal, although the reflections may represent a communal feeling.
Through the blues-inspired verse of “Seventh Street,” Toomer elucidates the experience of a burgeoning African American urban culture consumed by materialism:

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,
Bootleggers in silken shirts,
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks. (Cane 41)

Toomer laments a spendthrift attitude that lacks the emphasis on communal support that he identifies in the spirit of slave spirituals. He suggests the replacement of a sense of community with a desire for financial gain. In the Southern spirituals, Toomer celebrates African American solidarity; he rejects the materialistic society he describes in this blues stanza (“pocket hurts”). He implies that migrating North offers African Americans financial gain, but the consequences are the fragmentation of communities and the comfort of the collective experience. Toomer’s verse suggests isolation in the burgeoning black communities in Northern cities such as Washington D.C., the setting of “Seventh Street.”

Yet, the blues of “Seventh Street” emphasizes that, in spite of the transitions from the rural South to industrialized urban centers, at least self-expression through music remains an integral part of black life. When Toomer employs a blues riff, he implies the paradox of opportunity combined with loss that “Seventh Street” expresses. Blues lyrics often suggest a collective experience while similarly expressing an individual’s alienation (Jones 67). The verse that opens “Seventh Street” reflects a similar sense of emptiness while illustrating the experiences of the community that surrounds the speaker. While he is uncomfortable with and probably unaccustomed to the money he has to spend on luxuries, the materialism of his
community awes the speaker: “Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts” (*Cane* 41).

Like a typical blues song, the singer responds to himself rather than receiving the affirmations of a collective voice. Rather than the chorus that characterizes spirituals and work songs, the blues musician is accompanied by his or her instrument and this interplay replaces the vocal call-and-response common in earlier African American musical traditions (McKay 48). The blues implies the audience’s encouragement and, in a performance, listeners provide vocal responses; yet, their responses are not an essential element in the musical structure. Thus, the blues represents a shift from the collective expression of the spirituals to a focus on the individual’s experience. This musical distinction suggests the social transformation from the immobility of the antebellum era to the migration and displacement of the early twentieth century. Toomer’s blues stanza in “Seventh Street” reflects the connection between the transformation of African American music and social and cultural change.

Emancipation made freedom of movement possible, and the blues grew out of the experiences of blacks seeking better opportunities and more freedom. Moreover, blues lyrics express the homesickness and responses to poverty that African American endured (Oakley 28). Because all that is necessary for the performance is the individual and an instrument, the blues musician can travel anywhere and sing his or her troubles. This spirit of individualism and self-reliance distinguishes the blues from its musical antecedents and is a persuasive form for Toomer’s expressions of the cultural transitions of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, Toomer’s adoption of the blues in “Seventh Street” accurately represents the new emotional landscape for the transient African American population that migrated North in search of economic opportunity and freedom (Wormser 123): “For the first time Black
emigrants were earning more money and enjoying a greater freedom than they had known in the agrarian South” (Turner 131). This era marked new opportunities for social, economic and geographic mobility for African Americans. “Seventh Street” suggests some of the negative consequences of these changes in the fragmentation of community and culture:

Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythm, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. (Cane 41)

The community that Toomer describes is full of contradictions. While he suggests that African Americans are shaping a new culture and identity, he evokes images of blood streaking the landscape. Similarly, he expresses contempt for the artificial origin of the neighborhood (“a bastard”), but he emphasizes its vitality as well: “breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love” (ibid). Thus, the blues-like stanza that introduces and concludes “Seventh Street” suggests lament for the artificiality of a community founded on monetary hopes, but tempers it by illustrating the freedom offered within it. Toomer emphasizes that the economic gains are positive but the folk spirit he celebrates in his Southern poems has been replaced by the artificiality of the urban setting of “Seventh Street.” Drawing on the music’s spirit, Toomer emphasizes a sense of resolve that characterizes typical blues lyrics.

While blues songs grieve over personal misfortune, the lyrics suggest a sense of optimism either through humor or hopefulness. For example, Richard Jones’s “Trouble in Mind” exemplifies a blues spirit of sorrow allayed by the promise of a brighter future: “Trouble in mind, I’m blue, / But I won’t be blue always, / For the sun will shine in my backdoor someday”
(Young 77). By expressing the contradictions of “Seventh Street” in a blues stanza, Toomer conveys the development of a money-oriented African American population as regrettable, although he lacks a practical solution to the cultural loss he identifies: “Seventh Street is the song of crude new life. Of a new people. Negro? Only in the boldness of its expression. In its healthy freedom” (A Jean Toomer Reader 25). Toomer’s assessment of the emerging black urban community is that it lacks the spiritual and cultural unity he perceives in the rural areas from which it sprung. Yet, Toomer suggests possibility in this new way of life through the forms of self-expression that generations past employed in times of change and discomfort.

Thus, Toomer’s grief for the loss of the folk spirit is allayed by the acknowledgment that African Americans are evolving and expressing a new-found liberation in the opportunities offered in Northern cities. The blues stanza of “Seventh Street” hints at the potential cultural sacrifices that Northern migration entails. Toomer channels a bluesman’s lyrical style to represent the community which is undergoing a spiritual loss yet gaining new freedom in the process. By using this blues theme of lamentation and perseverance, Toomer implies that the realities of the emerging African American urban culture may be vapid but irreversible. His employment of the lyricism and spirit of the blues suggests that the musical expression he reveres is still an important part of black life. Moreover, his integration of African American folk traditions such as the blues into the modernist poetry and prose of “Seventh Street” asserts their viability in the artistic innovations of Harlem Renaissance writers.

Toomer adopts the blues in “Karintha,” a story with a Southern setting, to reflect lyrically the disappearance of the antebellum cultural traditions that he perceived. Thus, he uses the blues to suggest the transition from the rural Southern experience to a Northern, urban one that caused
the dissipation of community and the transformation of folk traditions. Again, Toomer employs a bluesman’s voice to echo the themes of “Karintha”:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,

O cant you see it, O cant you see it,

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon

…When the sun goes down. (Cane 3)

The repetition of the first and third line coupled with the second line’s call-and-response style typifies a blues stanza, and its theme is characteristic of the genre. The image of Karintha’s skin is a metaphor for the loss of community, culture and heritage that Toomer suggests: “In my own stuff, in those pieces that come nearest to the old Negro, to the spirit saturate with folk-song: Karintha and Fern, the dominant emotion is a sadness derived from a sense of fading” (Rusch 24). Toomer mourns the loss of the antebellum and postbellum traditions of communal songs, but he honors their artistic importance through his adoption in Cane. Also, his work shows the emergence of the blues as an innovative lyrical medium for expressing the contemporary experiences of African Americans struggling against poverty and alienation:

I’m down

on old Parchman Farm, I sure wanna

go back home

But I hope some day

I will

overcome. (Booker White “Parchman Farm Blues,” Sackheim 236)

White’s loneliness coupled with his spirit of endurance typifies the blues while it also exposes
the social conditions of many African Americans living with Jim Crow oppression (Cone 140). Toomer expresses a similar sentiment of loneliness and loss in “Karintha.” He implies the transitions occurring in the African American community through his employment of a blues stanza to echo musically what was happening socially.

Throughout *Cane*, music is interwoven with prose and poetry to reflect the history and contemporary realities of black culture. In the urban settings of Washington D.C. and Chicago, blues-like stanzas become Toomer’s means of conveying the dilemmas facing urban African Americans during the 1920s. The spirituals influence many of the lyrical interludes in *Cane*’s Southern sections, and they reflect the fading of the collective experience that unified slave culture. On the other hand, allusions to blues music suggest the emergence of a new form of black expression that emphasizes the individual’s experience. Toomer recognizes that this twentieth-century tradition reflects the tragedy and hope that characterized modern life for African Americans who were becoming increasingly separated from Southern folk culture. His adoption of the blues stanza lyrically conveys the cultural shift concurrent with *Cane*’s publication. Furthermore, Toomer’s work is a testament to the viability of the blues and its precursors as lyrical forms for literary expression.
Chapter 2: *Southern Road*

The pervasive influence of the blues formally, lyrically and thematically in *Southern Road* suggests its central role in shaping Sterling Brown’s poetic vision. Moreover, abandoning traditional English forms in favor of the blues suggests that Brown viewed this African American music as the most appropriate format for exposing the social realities of black life in the twentieth century. *Southern Road* is a testament to the transformation of Brown’s poetic vision from the “Vestiges” of conventional verse to the blues poetry he developed and mastered. Brown’s lyrical transformation occurred because he discovered the artistry of the blues and similar folk traditions, and his exposure to these musical forms influenced his vision of what African American poetry could become (Gabbin 99). His themes of disappointment and confusion are similar but the tone and mood (not to mention the form) shift from mournful in his Anglo-American poetry to defiant and uplifting in his blues-inspired work. Brown’s blues poems in *Southern Road* convey the spirit of perseverance that characterizes the songs that influenced his vision of lyrical verse.

This spirit is absent in the conventional poetry of the “Vestiges” section of *Southern Road*. For example, “Salutamus,” a sonnet written in iambic pentameter, lacks the tone evident in his blues-inspired verse:

> The bitterness of days like these we know;  
> Much, much we know, yet cannot understand  
> What was our crime that such a searing brand  
> Not of our choosing keeps us hated so. (ll.1-4)

Compared to “Tin Roof Blues,” the first poem in the section bearing its name, the difference in
style and theme is remarkable: “I’m goin’ where de Southern crosses top de C. & O./ I’m goin’ where de Southern crosses top de C. & O./ I’m goin’ down de country cause I cain’t stay here no mo’” (1-3). In contrast to “Salutamus,” the direct statements in Brown’s blues poetry are representative of the songs on which “Tin Roof Blues” is modeled. The comparison demonstrates a poet’s search for his voice, and Brown’s identification of the blues as a more authentic medium for expressing the frustration and bitterness of the black experience in America.

Moreover, his adoption of the blues represents his efforts to create a uniquely African American literary voice that stemmed from folk traditions. In “Ma Rainey,” for example, he draws on blues tropes to contextualize the significance of the famous singer in the lives of her rural audiences. He uses her medium to demonstrate that the profundity of Rainey’s performance through the musical form she helped popularize. Dialect and the structural and rhythmic features of the blues challenge both the Anglo-American and African American literary establishment to consider the blues in Southern Road as poetry.

The blues derived many of its features from a long tradition of African American music in work songs, field hollers and spirituals (Tracy 64-65). Yet, unlike these genres, the blues reflected the modern era in which it emerged and Brown recognized it as an effective medium for expressing the range of emotions evoked by the experiences of African Americans living under Jim Crow. In her examination of Brown’s blues poetry, Joanne Gabbin argues that he “considered the interpretation of folk experience and character as one of the important tasks of Black poetry, and by extension, all Black writing” (103). Her assessment explains the social, political and artistic impetus behind Southern Road. Brown’s work suggests the necessity, not
only to preserve, but to adapt the original art forms of Southern African Americans to create a literary voice rooted in the black experience.

What makes Brown’s poetry distinct from the blues songs that influenced the poems of *Southern Road* is his awareness of the choices for poetic expression. For Sterling Brown, the blues represented an artistic expression that grew out of the social oppression Southern African Americans experienced. Thus, the music lent itself appropriately to Brown’s artistic vision of exposing the social inequality of the Jim Crow era through the vernacular and rhythm of those who were directly experiencing it (Gabbin 88-89). In *Southern Road*, blues poems such as “Old King Cotton” address socio-economic conditions by admonishing society’s perpetrators of prejudice and oppression. Although he adopts the blues as a vehicle for social criticism, his evocative poetry does not lose itself in political indictments. While he addresses contemporary issues of disenfranchisement, Brown similarly captures the mood and character of the subjects he represents.

His poetics differs in its political directness from the covert, metaphorical language employed by legendary blues singers such as Ma Rainey and Robert Johnson. Like their songs, Brown’s poems are about black life, and they express a similar sense of discontent and despair that is tempered by resilience: “It [the blues] is not social protest, or even complaint, but in its implications there is reflected some of the difficulty of the continual adjustment to the insult and the injustice of the color line” (Charters 156). Charters’s observations reveal the difficulties faced by African American blues musicians who could not freely protest their second-class citizenship without fear of retribution. Moreover, Charters asserts that the themes and messages imbedded in blues music are not typically social or political but emotional responses to the
human condition. Brown’s recognition of this fact complexifies his work.

Although I agree that the blues lyrics exemplify various responses to the human condition, Charter neglects to point out that blues artists were protesting in subversive ways that were not obvious to white producers or audiences. As in slave spirituals, much of the metaphorical language conveys a message intended for black listeners. In his refutation of Charters’ position, James Cone points out that whatever messages of protest blues singers were communicating, they were likely to couch them in language that whites would find difficult to interpret (133). Along with Cone, I agree that Charters’ assessment is limited because it suggests that white producers and audiences could interpret the carefully cloaked meaning behind the intricate metaphors blues singers communicate. For example, White’s “Parchman Farm Blues” laments the economic conditions African Americans faced during the Great Depression when many reluctantly traveled from one work camp to the next to survive poverty: “Judge gimme life this morning/ down on Parchman Farm/ I wouldn’t hate it so bad, but I left my wife and my home” (Sackheim 236). White’s protest against the socially destructive causes of his woe is imbedded in the lyrics without directly blaming the government or white landowners for their role. Lyrical protests such as White’s were not intended to persuade whites to end Jim Crow but to express solidarity with their communities against the oppression that surrounded them (Springer 283).

On the other hand, Southern Road adopts rhythms and lyrics from the blues but is liberated from the socially oppressive constraints Southern blacks faced in their musical expressions. As a well-educated, Northern writer and scholar, Brown was less vulnerable to white society’s wrath in his open protest against institutional racism. Assuming a voice that was
representative of the downtrodden, he could express his disdain for the economic depravity that white Southerners imposed on their African American counterparts. For example, the ironic bitterness he conveys in the collection’s title poem “Southern Road” exemplifies his protest against social and political circumstances through the vehicle of blues poetry:

    White man tells me-hunh—
    Damn yo’ soul;
    White man tells me-hunh—
    Damn yo’ soul;
    Got no need, bebby,
    To be tole. (31-36)

Rather than disguising his protest of white racism in metaphor, Brown directly implicates whites for their wholesale condemnation of African American life. When he writes of the “white man,” he refers to American society’s dismissal of racial equality (“Damn yo’ soul”). The speaker’s ironic reply recognizes the oppression while suggesting his refusal to submit to it. Thus, “Southern Road” expresses the defiance of blues lyrics while exposing the cruelty of Southern whites.

    Similarly, blues singer Texas Alexander expresses his anger at whites ironically: “Oh they accused me of forgery and I/ I can’t write my name” (“Levee Camp Moan,” Sackheim 124). The “they” of the song is clearly the white owners of the levee camp, but Alexander hides their identity. Whereas blues artists living in the Jim Crow South feared the repercussions of direct protest in their lyrics, Brown accuses more whites directly of the injustices he perceived (Springer 279). Thus, his blues poetry addresses similar themes to those of the musicians he
imitates, but with a more liberated voice.

Although Brown was not a victim of the devastation caused by the boll weevil cotton infestation during the 1920s or the flood of 1927, both of which are referred to in the poem, he recognizes that these events wreaked havoc on the lives of African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. Through “Old King Cotton,” he demonstrates that disaster (natural or man-made) was a recurring feature of African American life to emphasize the unjust political and social circumstances that are the root cause of their poverty and hopelessness:

Ole King Cotton,
Ole Man Cotton,
Keeps us slavin’
Till we’s dead an’ rotten. (1-4)

Using the word “slavin” to describe the relationship between African Americans and the traditional Southern cash crop suggests that little has changed from Emancipation to the 1930s. Brown’s lyrical comparison between legal slavery and the oppression endured under Jim Crow reflects the role of African American music in showing a historical continuum of suffering. Through his poetry, Brown continues a legacy of lyrical opposition to social conditions.

He employs a rural African American dialect to show that the eloquent lyricism traditionally identified with conventional English poetry can be created using the folk idioms of the blues. Additionally, Brown’s messages of protest in “Old King Cotton” are more convincing in the authentic voice of those enduring the oppressive conditions he opposes. The accuracy of the speaker’s colloquial language is a result not of Brown’s background but of his meticulous research and conscientious efforts to ensure that the people he wished to celebrate were
represented respectfully. As a result, his use of a regional vernacular elevates the tradition of
dialect poetry from condescension to homage. Reflecting on his initial interest in African
American folklore in 1946, Brown said,

I became interested in folklore because of my desire to write poetry and prose
fiction. I was attracted by certain qualities that I thought the speech of the people
had, and I wanted to get for my own writing a flavor, a color, a pungency of
speech. Then later I came to something more important—I wanted to get an
understanding of people, to acquire an accuracy in the portrayal of their lives.

(Gabbin 90)

As Brown describes, he was not only interested in the nuances of the vernacular for the purposes
of his own poetics but as a means of faithfully conveying the social conditions of Southern
African Americans through their language. His social and economic separation from them is
evident in his description of “the people”; yet, his explanation of their artistic influence
emphasizes respect not degradation.

Employing dialect that typified blues lyrics, Brown could address the social inequalities
he perceived in the words of those who endured them the most severely: “Ever since ham been
dollar a pound, / Ever since ham been dollar a pound, / Been eatin’ so many rabbits I’m hoppin’
around” (Springer 284). As Blind Boy Fuller’s humorous but revealing lyrics convey, the blues
typically represented the regional vernacular of those singing them. Because they emerged as
personal expressions of working-class African Americans, dialectical features of those
communities are evident in the lyrics (Cone ll2-ll3). In spite of the clear distinction between the
Standard English of his first published poems and the Southern African American dialect he
employs in much of *Southern Road*, Brown adopts it faithfully. For example, he employs a poetic persona (or personae) who speak in the language of a Southern blues musician. This duality raises the question of whether or not his dialect usage is appropriate if it does not represent his background or his current milieu.

James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the introduction to the first edition of *Southern Road*, maintained reservations about dialect usage due to its history in the minstrel tradition, yet he applauded Brown’s poetic employment: “He [Brown] infused his poetry with genuine characteristic flavor by adopting as his medium the common, racy, living speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life.” Johnson lauds Brown’s ability to transform the language and folk traditions into something “Sterling-Brownian,” as he calls it, without losing the authentic flavor of the speech he appropriates (*Southern Road* xxxvi-xxxvii).

As Johnson’s praise implies, in spite of the potential for condescension, the regional dialect Brown employs authentically represents the Southern African American voices distilled in his poetry. Without their voices, the poems of *Southern Road* would lack the character and flavor of the community in which the blues emerged. Brown does not confuse his own voice with the bluesman persona. The blues poems maintain a consistent voice that represents a regional dialect but does not appropriate that language to express something personal about the poet. This distinction in objective is essential to assessing Brown’s use of dialect. The speaker in “Sister Lou,” for example, maintains a regional vernacular to realistically convey the voice(s) of Southern African Americans:

Gather up yo’ basket

An’ yo’ knittin’ an’ yo’ things,
An’ go on up an’ visit

Wid frien’ Jesus fo’ a spell. (4-8)

Dialect features (i.e., “yo,” “an,” and “Wid”) suggest Brown’s conviction that the realities of black life must be spoken through the language of those experiencing them. The personas he adopts communicate the life experiences of rural African Americans using their idioms and colloquialisms. Brown’s efforts to produce authentic dialect poetry point to both the literary and political dimensions of his work in *Southern Road*. His emphasis on realism reflects Brown’s efforts to demonstrate that folk traditions such as the blues deserve to be considered as artistic equivalents (or superior) to Anglo-American lyrical traditions. Thus, adopting an African American vernacular along with other blues characteristics to lyric poetry exemplifies the music’s viability as a literary resource for African American verse.

On the other hand, many poems in *Southern Road* use Standard English and suggest a poetic persona that assumes a distant vantage point from the intimacy of the voice in “Sister Lou.” This voice is perhaps closer to Brown’s Northern, intellectual perspective on the trials and tribulations of black life in the South. For example, “Virginia Portrait” is in free verse Standard English, but the poem suggests a blues connection through its theme and through a second speaker: “The circle of the seasons brings no fear/ “Folks all gits used to what dey sees so often”/ And she has help that throngs her glowing fire” (ll. 24-26). Brown’s speaker is an outsider who observes the heartiness and the endurance the old woman exhibits but he does not speak her dialect. Her voice stands in stark contrast to the speaker’s who is clearly in awe of her strength, but he is separated by culture and class from her community: “Now she looks out, and forecasts unperturbed/ Her following slowly over the lonesome hill,/ Her ‘layin down her
burdens, bye and bye” (19-21).

Dialect is one of many characteristics of the blues form that Brown adopts in Southern Road. His use of metaphor as a vehicle for social protest, for example, echoes the blues musicians whom he champions. “Old King Cotton” exemplifies Brown’s use of figurative language to condemn white Southerners for their oppressive maneuvers to ensure that blacks remained subjugated and indebted to their white counterparts. The poem’s villain, “cotton,” represents white landowners who enforced a system of racial discrimination that prevented African Americans from escaping virtual slavery in the South:

Starves us wid bumper crops,
Starves us wid po’,
Chains de lean wolf
At our do’. (Brown 9-12)

Many Southern African Americans were forced into the same type of agricultural work that their parents and grandparents had endured during slavery (Oakley 26-27). This stanza implicates white society for starving the African American sharecropping population so that they will not be able to liberate themselves from their indebted state. Rather than admonishing whites directly for their oppressive tactics, “Old King Cotton” only suggests white society’s disenfranchisement. Blues singers living under Jim Crow often expressed similar messages of social and economic disenfranchisement but they cloaked their discontent in language that would secure their safety from white reprisals (Cone 134-135).

In fact, Brown’s figurative language reflects the spirit of the blues’ clandestine metaphors. For example, Robert Johnson’s seminal song “Hellhound on My Trail” evokes the
racial terror endemic to the South under Jim Crow. Using the vivid image of a hellhound, Johnson represents the violent repercussions African Americans endured under the discriminatory laws that limited their freedom of movement: “And the days keeps on ‘minding me/ there’s a hellhound on my trail/ hellhound on my trail” (Young 88-89). The song’s hellhound suggests the perpetual harassment African Americans endured under Jim Crow laws. Yet, for Johnson and other Delta bluesmen, the legal and physical repercussions of directly protesting white society’s use of terrorism and violence were life-threatening and the use of metaphorical language to express social discontent was necessary. Johnson’s lyrics evoke a mood of fear permeating the Southern landscape: “I can tell the wind is rising/ the leaves trembling on/ the trees” (Young 89).

Brown probably didn’t fear retribution for his social criticism, so he captures the threatening atmosphere of Johnson’s lyrics in more direct and bitter accusations:

Ole King Cotton,

Ole Man Cotton,

Keeps us slavin’

Till we’re dead an’ rotten (1-4).

Brown avoids writing polemical poetry in Southern Road because his primary objective remains literary and not political. Yet, adopting the blues formally and thematically implies an underlying political dimension to his work. For example, Southern Road poses a challenge to the American literary establishment to consider African American folk forms artistically sophisticated. Additionally, the fact that Brown used this folk medium to advance socio-political messages is no accident. In his expansion of the imbedded political messages of traditional blues
lyrics, he emphasizes the music’s importance in representing African American life.

In his examination of Brown’s poetic transition from conventional English verse to the blues, Lorenzo Thomas writes, “Rainey’s art and its powerful effect on her audience, her ability to ‘jes catch hold of us, somekindaway’ through song, is precisely the ambition of every poet, and may explain one source of Brown’s attraction to the blues” (410). In the blues, Brown identified an emotional, almost spiritual resonance capable of accurately conveying the heartbreak and disillusion of African American life under Jim Crow. His poetry demonstrates that the rhythms and language of the blues can be adopted to create original, provocative verse.

His efforts to preserve folk musical traditions reflect concern about the African American population’s alienation from their cultural heritage. Yet Brown’s reverence for the artistic achievements of the past does not represent a nostalgic look back. Southern Road embraces the potential of folk traditions to shape a uniquely African American literary voice. The first three sections of poems in Southern Road exemplify the incorporation of blues style and themes into lyric poetry. This innovative combination of Anglo-American poetic conventions with African American folk forms illustrates Brown’s artistic vision. The influence of folk music represents Brown’s efforts to maintain the link between the past and the emergence of a contemporary African American literary voice:

Also present in Brown’s poetry is a pervasive racial consciousness, an awareness of the historical and social circumstances that have kept Black people in America sensitive to oppression. His race consciousness, far from being “isolating and limiting” as one reviewer of Southern Road feared, has the effect of revealing in realistic terms the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of people whose image and
voice have been corrupted again and again on the minstrel stage, in Southern
“plantation” literature, and in the mindless imitations of Black writers seeking a
receptive market. (Gabbin 170)

Brown’s accomplishment in *Southern Road* was the lyrical integration of what was considered
unrefined folk music with English poetic conventions to create formally sophisticated and
racially conscious poetry.

Brown’s typical blues stanzas, themes and dialect suggest a desire to elevate the
appreciation of blues music to the level enjoyed by conventional lyrical verse: “In fact, Brown
approaches the African American folk forms of spiritual, shout, work song, and blues exactly as
he had used ‘the formal measures of the English poets’ in his earliest attempts at writing poetry”
(Thomas 4ll). In Brown’s turn away from conventional poetics and embrace of the blues, he
suggests that the blues is both as rhythmically rich and lyrically masterful as conventional lyric
poetry. Most importantly, however, his adoption of the blues form asserts the superior strength of
folk traditions in conveying the plight of African Americans in the Jim Crow era:

*They gave you the jobs that they were too good for,*

*They tried to guarantee happiness to themselves*

*By shunting dirt and misery to you.*

*You sang:*

>`Me an’ muh baby gonna shine, shine`

>`Me an’ muh baby gonna shine.* (“Strong Men” 33-38)

Juxtaposing Standard English with the emotionally charged dialect of the blues lyrics, Brown
emphasizes the music’s ability to uplift the oppressed and disenfranchised. The detached but
angry tone of one speaker highlights the emotional and affirmative voice of the other. Two
generations are represented in the voices of “Strong Men”: One man is the educated twentieth-
century African American (the descendant of the “strong” men) and the other is the slave, the
sharecropper, the factory worker who faced the racial oppression and violence perpetrated
against him with renewed vigor and strength. The grim and bitter primary speaker is inspired and
awed by the determination of his ancestors and his working-class counterparts whom he admires
but doesn’t quite identify with. The dialogue between the two speakers represents what Brown
hopes to achieve poetically: to emphasize African American resistance to oppression in music as
an inspiration for contemporary black poetry. Thus, the primary speaker gains strength from the
lyrics of endurance that his ancestors sang:

*They put hammers in your hands*

*And said—Drive so much before sundown.*

*You sang:*

*Ain’t no hammah*

*In dis lan’,*

* Strikes lak mine, bebby,*

* Strikes lak mine.* (24-30)

The defiant response of his ancestors to oppression and bondage inspires the speaker’s resolve as

Rather than assuming the voice of poor African Americans as he does in other poems, in
“Strong Men,” Brown pays homage. He is careful to show that there are two speakers:

“*Reserved for whites only*”
You laugh.

One thing they cannot prohibit—

The strong men…coming on

The strong men gittin’ stronger.

Strong men…

Stronger…. (60-66)

The voice of the descendent concludes the poem with a powerful spirit of resilience and hope in spite of the oppressive forces in white society that have denied him and other African Americans entry into their communities and institutions. The affirmative tone Brown conveys emphasizes the blues attitude of perseverance and implies that the speaker’s will to overcome prejudice is strengthened by the tradition of this spirit.

Moreover, Brown uses a traditional call-and-response to echo the slave spiritual that laid the foundation for the blues to reflect its characteristic expressions of internal resolve (Jones 62). Through this poetic dialogue between ancestor and descendent, he recalls the role of African American history in the development of the blues and its musical predecessors. “Strong Men” emphasizes that the history of black survival in an oppressive white society is a source of strength, and musical expression provides an artistic medium to encourage oneself and one’s community to endure:

The blues recognize that black people have been hurt and scared by the brutalities of white society. But there is hope in what Richard Wright calls the “endemic capacity to live.” This hope provided the strength to survive, and also an openness to the intensity of life’s pains without being destroyed by them. (Cone 140)
In “Strong Men,” Brown suggests this historical strength of the blues to commiserate about the second-class citizenship blacks endured. Yet, like the songs he celebrates, Brown’s concluding message of strength offers the promise of a brighter future.

By incorporating the blues spirit, “Strong Men” emphasizes the dichotomy of despair and hope that epitomizes the poem’s illumination of the African American struggle against oppression:

“Strong Men” gives us a better sense of what the long haul has meant, of how a people has not merely survived but projected its sense of what is meaningful than any other poem in Afro-American literature. The vision which informs this poem is essentially the same which course through a volume offering no easy optimism and no quick victories but all the determination in the world. And so there is a promise of eventual relief. The poet’s vision is, in the end, tragic—triumphant.

(Stuckey *Southern Road* xxix-xxx)

Sterling Stuckey’s assessment emphasizes that “Strong Men” not only alludes to the blues (i.e., “Me an’ muh baby gonna shine”), but the poem more importantly expresses the blues ethos in the form of lyric poetry.

A predominant referent in *Southern Road* is blues music’s significance as an expression of African American life. “Ma Rainey” exemplifies what Brown perceives as the shared suffering and emotional bond that this music forges and the resonance it carries within African American culture. Using dialect that reflects the rural blues to which he alludes, “Ma Rainey” honors the legend of the singer through her language and her audience’s. It highlights the magnetism of itinerant singer Ma Rainey and her ability to console her African American
audiences through her lyrics. Although the lyrics often reflected pain and suffering, she conveyed a spirit of strength and endurance that inspired her audience in spite of the circumstances she described. Moreover, while the blues she sang lamented the poverty and despair her audience members felt, Brown suggests that their spirits were uplifted by the commiseration she offered.

He emphasizes the powerful sway she held over her audiences by acknowledging the heartbreak they felt: “Dere wasn’t much more de fellow say: She jes’ gits hold of us dataway” (IV.13-14). Ma Rainey’s popularity was rooted in the emotional response she evoked: “Although ‘Ma Rainey’ is not technically a blues poem, Brown suffuses it with various blues elements. For example, the poem presents a reflection on the dynamic relationship between performer and audience” (Furlonge 977). The emphasis on the blues performer-audience relationship represents the cultural importance of blues music for Southern African Americans in the early twentieth century.

Although the vocal call-and-response characteristic of spirituals was absent, the blues still expressed a bond between the singer and the silent but sympathetic listeners: “It is important to remember that the songs of the bluesmen reflected not only their own concerns but also those of the whole black culture and awareness of the time, otherwise there would have been no audiences” (Springer 279). Brown’s emphasis on this community dynamic reflects his own efforts to reach out to an audience who appreciates the sentiment of his verse. Furthermore, Brown’s poetic tribute to Ma Rainey suggests that he was similarly inspired by her music. Thus, “Ma Rainey” not only conveys the impact the blues singer had on her audience but similarly expresses the profound influence that her style had on Sterling Brown’s poetics.
Brown suggests that Ma Rainey’s fans admired her because they saw her as one of them. Thus, her mostly Southern African American audiences could trust her because they felt she had been through similar hardships. Brown emphasizes the sense of allegiance she inspired that made her performance poignant and motivational:

O Ma Rainey,
Sing yo’ song;
Now you’s back
Whah you belong
Git way inside us,
Keep us strong… (III.1-2)

Through her example as a successful performer, her audience was inspired to be “strong” and have hope that better times were possible. Similarly, they trusted her to penetrate their deepest feelings (“Git way inside us”) and fortify their resolve. In reinforcing Rainey’s rural, Southern origin (“back/Whah you belong”), Brown conveys that her ability to captivate her audience stemmed from their identification with her as one of them:

The pronouns progress from “you” to “us” to “we,” suggesting that Ma Rainey and her listeners are a community. Rainey is not an outsider, she is singing from within. The lines act as a response to Rainey’s musical call in the preceding verse. They also act to prompt Rainey along, and to inform her that her listeners are aware of (and in need of hearing) her musical message. (Furlonge 979)

Brown demonstrates the singer’s unity with the audience that Nicole Furlonge describes, and this exchange becomes a tacit call-and-response in which Ma Rainey leads and the audience affirms
her expression. Also, her observation of the pronoun transition highlights the role of commiseration in blues music generally and in “Ma Rainey” specifically. Brown emphasizes the singer’s ability to relieve the burdens of her audience by allowing them to grieve collectively.

Although her music inspired tears, Brown demonstrates that the experience was cathartic and allowed people to overcome their grief: “An’ den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an’ cried,/ Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an’ cried,/ An’ Ma lef’ de stage, an’ followed some de folks outside” (III.10-12). The audience’s emotional response reveals the transformative experience from heartbreak to resolve that Ma Rainey’s blues rendered.

Brown’s homage demonstrates that he hoped his blues poetry could accomplish a similar social and artistic feat. He identifies with the sentiments of Ma Rainey’s audience while he aspires for the singer’s inspirational position through his verse. As poet Kevin Young writes, “By finding out that the powerful voice onstage, or on the jukebox, or coming from the radio, has been there too. The blues are loyal to a fault” (Blues Poems 13). Brown too recognized the significance of identification and camaraderie in blues that Young highlights. Moreover, Brown’s emphasis on the emotional impact of Rainey’s performance suggests that Brown envisions his poetry as expressing a similar combination of commiseration and inspiration.

In an oppressive environment, Ma Rainey uplifted her audience members by bringing them together as a community so that the pain of isolation and alienation was at least temporarily relieved. Thus, “Ma Rainey” shows how effectively blues conveyed the often desperate economic conditions Southern African Americans faced under Jim Crow: “Thundered an’ lightened an’ the storm begin to roll/ Thousan’s of people ain’t got no place to go” (6-7). While the lyrics fail to offer tangible relief from poverty or personal tragedy, the blues inspire
camaraderie and a sense of unified suffering that offers hope to both the singer and the audience. Similarly, Brown’s “Ma Rainey” achieves a powerful emotional resonance by expressing suffering through the vernacular and spirit of the blues.

Although Brown’s efforts to demonstrate the significance of the blues and African American folk music were ostensibly rooted in an artistic vision, his adoption of traditional forms to express socio-economic struggles highlights the political aspect of his work: “What Brown certainly did accomplish, however, was to identify the authentic poetic voice of Black America, making it heard above the din of racist parody and well-intentioned, sympathetic misinterpretation” (Thomas 414). In the Jim Crow era, Brown’s departure from conventional Anglo-American poetry to the blues of Southern Road makes an implicitly political statement about the art and humanity of African Americans. Entitling his poems written in conventional verse “Vestiges,” he implies that his poetic vision has transformed and these poems represent his past, not his future. Brown envisions his poetics as incorporating folk traditions in order to demonstrate their artistic value and their poignancy in describing the current conditions of African American life.

His departure from Anglo-American poetic conventions in Southern Road suggests his appreciation of the freedom that the blues offered in its myriad subjects. He could address the poverty and despair he witnessed in the South through a medium that represented a response to those experiences. By adopting the blues and transforming it into lyric poetry, Brown posits the artistic sophistication of the form. Moreover, his blues poetry in Southern Road suggests his view that the lives of Southern African Americans are most accurately represented through the language and rhythms of the region. Originally, the blues were sung by individuals seeking a
medium of self-expression and the language they used reflected the vernacular of their community. Thus, Brown uses dialect and standard blues forms and themes to authentically characterize the voices of black life in the Jim Crow South. Most significantly, *Southern Road* represents Brown’s efforts to establish a distinctly African American literary voice that was rooted in the traditional lyrical forms of self-expression. In contrast to many of his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, he sought to demonstrate the relevance and the artistry of the blues and its antecedents to create African American poetry.
The Black Arts Movement’s emphasis on African American history as a source of inspiration proved to be critical in the foundation of a black voice that was not only distinctive from the Anglo-American literary establishment but explicitly advocated for a separate literature derived, written and read exclusively by African Americans. In 1962, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) suggested that establishing a distinct literature required the rejection of Anglo-American literary models: “And the literary and artistic models were always those that could be socially acceptable to the white middle class, which automatically limited them to the most spiritually debilitating imitations of literature available” (Bolden 16). Baraka perceived the necessity of developing a black aesthetic that stemmed from the historical precedents of African American writers and musicians. Within this socially and politically oriented movement, many poets looked to the innovative styles of African American music to inform their culturally conscious poetics.

Many cultural organizations composed of writers and artists, inspired by the agenda and the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, developed in America’s inner-cities during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In New Orleans, for example, the BLKARTSOUTH collective, which began in 1968 as an outgrowth of the Free Southern Theatre, was established to promote the work of writers and poets who subscribed to the principles of the Black Arts Movement but whose work was rooted in Southern culture. The primary contributors and artistic visionaries of BLKARTSOUTH and their literary publication NKOMBO were Kalamu Ya Salaam (Val Ferdinand) and Tom Dent. Other poets who were part of the BLKARTSOUTH collective were NAYO (Barbara Malcolm), Renaldo Fernandez, Raymond Washington and John O’Neal.
(Chapman 371). In this chapter, I will look more extensively at Salaam’s poetry than at his colleagues’ because he shaped the collective’s vision of a Southern African American literary voice. Also, I contend that his work in particular reflects the influence of African American music as well as the tenets of the Black Arts Movement, and his verse demonstrates the continuum in blues poetry that this essay examines.

Out of the various small collectives and artistic alliances that sprung from the Black Arts Movement, the BLKARTSOUTH collective stands out in its publications of blues poetry and its emphasis on African American music as a foundation of their poetics (Salaam “Enriching” 335). Allusions to the artistic significance of blues similarly reflect the influence of the poetry of Harlem Renaissance poets such as Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown who established the poetic value of black folk music. Although Salaam and his colleagues did not acknowledge these literary influences, their work reflects the achievements of blues poets during the 1920s and 1930s (Smith 98). BLKARTSOUTH’s political agenda was integral to its poetics and the group’s embrace of the blues as a lyrical inspiration suggests the legacy of their predecessors.

Kalamu Ya Salaam, the collective’s director, and his colleagues recognized the value in African American musical traditions as a source of inspiration both poetically and socially: “We [BLKARTSOUTH] must grow to know this heritage and do as it advises us: ‘Sing about what we are in a good strong voice and not get caught up in trying to imitate others or denying the worth of what we are. Sing our own songs’” (469). What Salaam and his fellow BLKARTSOUTH poets discovered in the history of African American music was an artistic heritage which they could proudly continue in their poetry. This heritage represented a distinctly
African American voice and audience, which appealed to sympathizers with the Black Arts Movement who aimed to separate themselves from the Anglo-American literary tradition and its readership (Brooks 3). The BLKARTSOUTH poets’ envisioned the establishment of a Southern African American poetic voice as an outgrowth of the work of Baraka and other Black Arts poets to distinguish themselves from Anglo-Americans in their literary precedent, their audience and their subject matter.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s explanation of the agenda of the Black Arts Movement poets expresses the convictions of poets Salaam and Dent: “The prevailing understanding: black literature is literature BY blacks, ABOUT blacks, directed TO blacks. ESSENTIAL black literature is the distillation of black life. Black life is different from white life” (3). Her unequivocal statement demonstrates the political thrust of the work of Black Arts poets, including the members of the BLKARTSOUTH collective, who subscribed to these principles. As a result of their efforts to separate themselves from Anglo-Americans, Salaam and his contemporaries created original poetic forms that were inspired but not constrained by conventional metrical, rhythmic or lyrical structures. In spite of the potential pitfalls of imbuing poetry with a political agenda, I argue that the political dimension of their work strengthens the value of their poetics.

BLKARTSOUTH poets traced their poetic lineage to New Orleans blues and jazz musicians who they saw as forefathers of the Southern African American poetic voice (Salaam “BLKARTSOUTH/get on up!” 469). As he aspired to the aims of the Black Arts Movement’s vision, Salaam embraced the lyrical poignancy and authenticity in blues lyrics: “images/ most good images come from blues/ blues singers were our 1st heavy poets” (“Food for Thought” 35-
36). His statements about the profundity (“heavy”) of the blues, for example, suggests that he views poetry as a means of conveying social truths through lyrical portraits of black life. Additionally, Salaam and his contemporaries were inspired by the rhythms of black music that offered potential for new metrical patterns but eschewed traditional forms. In “Food for Thought,” he describes the characteristics that define the BLKARTSOUTH vision of poetry:

rhythm/blk dancing, poems got to dance too, leastwise
move & pat your foot, but you can’t read the rhythms, them
is something you got to ride/ be/ hear/ feel; our poetic
rhythms are breakaways from iambics & are moving into
boogaloos, funky butts & popcorns. (30-34)

This emphasis on song as a poetic inspiration reflects Salaam’s view of poetry as an oral art that is not exclusive to the printed page. His poetry exemplifies an experimental style that adopts the cadences of spoken language rather than conventional poetic techniques such as rhyme and meter.

Like their Black Arts colleagues, BLKARTSOUTH poets acknowledged the racially oppressive environment that surrounded them, and looked to the lyrics of self-expression in bondage as an inspiration in their work. In “BLKARTSOUTH/ get on up!,” an essay that explains the objectives and ethos of the collective, Salaam traces the roots of their artistic vision to famous African American musicians:

He [Louis Armstrong] got it all from a culture that accepted, emphasized and respected an African inspired, African-American heritage or music making. We as writers have a similar heritage we must tap, a spoken, verbal art that runs deep
and long all the way back to the homeland. Slave narratives, field hollers, shouts, hardluck stories, animal tales, everything. A real heritage which has been systematically crushed, a heritage we have been taught to ignore and belittle, a heritage we must get next to or be like a tree without roots. (*New Black Voices* 469)

BLKARTSOUTH positioned itself within the larger Black Arts Movement and, as a result, embraced African American literary and musical traditions as the foundation for their art. As their predecessors Toomer and Brown challenged the literary establishment’s expectations of English poetic conventions in their work, the BLKARTSOUTH poets more fervently rejected Anglo-American society’s standards altogether and openly denied the superiority of conventional poetic features. Thus, their interest in the blues sprung from a desire to create art that reflected a contemporary black reality separated from European traditions and rooted in African American music (Smith 98).

Moreover, these poets saw their publications as literally important efforts to unify and promote the Southern black community by recognizing and continuing the rich artistic legacy of African Americans. Salaam summarizes the social objectives of the BLKARTSOUTH poetry journal, “We at NKOMBO say that our goal is not to put out a magazine full of ‘little poetic masterpieces,’ but rather to publish a journal that will serve as an adequate medium of expression for Black artists of the south” (470). Salaam and his colleagues championed a socially conscious aesthetic that emphasized race and region as much as craft. This approach is problematic because it suggests a devaluation of artistic quality and a possible overemphasis on socio-political objectives. In spite of these potential pitfalls, the collective members produced skillful and
evocative poetry that simultaneously achieved Salaam’s vision of a Southern African American poetry journal.

The BLKARTSOUTH poets celebrated the black musicians, writers and poets in American history who were innovators without capitulating to pressure to conform to the dominant society’s aesthetic conventions. Thus, the blues inspired these poets because of the inherently defiant artistic stance imbedded in the songs. In spite of its popularity among many white audiences, for example, the musical and social origins of the blues remain distinctive from European musical traditions (Jones 62-63). It is a distinctly African American form which provided stylistic and thematic inspiration to the BLKARTSOUTH poets. As Salaam notes, “no other people, except african americans created the blues, not even other africans enslaved other places in the western hemisphere” (Salaam What is Life 8). As a Southern African American artist seeking to separate himself from Anglo-American artistic traditions, Salaam was encouraged that the blues originated as a unique and original form that was not rooted in Anglo-American culture.

In fact, Salaam validated his artistic vision with the history of the African American struggle against white oppression: “Our art /organization is invalid if it’s not about Black people, their lives, the history of their survival in this white water” (New Black Voices 471). It is no surprise that with this mindset the BLKARTSOUTH poets were encouraged by the personal strength and will of blues musicians who confronted racial prejudices to express themselves through their music. Moreover, in their lyrical expressions, they conveyed the hardships of black life, often making allusions to the oppression of Jim Crow and second-class citizenship (Wormser 98). Salaam and his colleagues identified with blues musicians’ artistic resistance to
European aesthetic conventions, and the work of BLKARTSOUTH poets represents a similar defiance.

Even after commercial success with white audiences, the blues continues to promote African American solidarity through its origins and through its thematic tenets. Rather than revering the popular appeal some blues artists achieved, Salaam and his contemporaries were inspired by the blues spirit that tempers realism and brutal honesty with hope and humor:

> We laugh out loud and heartily when every rational expectation suggests we should be crying in despair. The combination of exaggeration and conscious recognition of the brutal facts of life is the basis for the humor of blue people.
>
> (Salaam *What is Life?* 16)

Jones’s “Trouble in Mind” exemplifies the blues spirit Salaam articulates: “When you see me laughin’, / I’m laughin’ just to keep from cryin’” (Young 78). Salaam’s “The blues in two parts” emphasizes the catharsis blues provided for overcoming the tragedy of economic and social discrimination:

> it [the blues] is feeling
> it is not death
> it is being
> it is not submission
> it is existing. (9-13)

Salaam’s verse suggests the theme of endurance that he identifies in blues music. His incorporation of this theme highlights the lyrical significance of the music in rendering his poetic vision.
Like his BLKARTSOUTH colleagues’ work, the form of John O’Neal’s “Shades of Pharoah Sanders Blues for My Baby (subtitle: Saphire—a poem in knegro dialect, or Simple Revisited)” is only tangentially related to a classic blues structure but the music plays an integral role in shaping the thematic and tonal thrust of the poem. O’Neal renders the typical blues theme of the brokenhearted lover in a style that reflects the bitterness combined with optimism that characterizes many songs. Also, the title indicates that O’Neal’s verse seeks to express the blues spirit of perseverance as a means of overcoming heartbreak:

So I grins
and when you turns away
takes my aching head in one hand
and my aching heart in the other
and goes way to sing some blues
to keep from crying. (14-19)

Lyrically, therefore, O’Neal achieves a similarly cathartic effect for both the poet and the audience similar to the blues he alludes to. The poem’s speaker bemoans the continuous frustrations of love and loss but maintains a resilient attitude that keeps him from spiraling into despair. The theme is common in blues songs and O’Neal clearly shows how the spirit can be conveyed without using a standard form. Robert Johnson, for instance, reflects the same sort of begrudging optimism to love and betrayal in “Come On in My Kitchen”: “The woman I love/took from my best friend/Some joker got lucky/stoled her back again” (Sackheim 215). This classic blues song demonstrates the bitter humor and begrudging optimism that characterize the spirit of the music. O’Neal successfully captures the tone and mood of Johnson’s work but
develops a style that reflects the experimental work of his Black Arts contemporaries.

Thus, O’Neal’s blues poem differs from a classic twelve-bar blues form, but he employs lyrical features such as alliteration, internal rhyme and regional vernacular common in blues songs. For example, the poem does not contain the abcb structure of Johnson’s song, but O’Neal does employ a refrain-like, rhymed stanza whose mood and tone is reminiscent of blues lyrics:

Baby,
I just want you to
Tell me this one thing
How I’m gon be true to you
When you so busy
Being true to someone else? (1-6)

The poem’s words of bitter heartbreak combined with O’Neal’s irony (“Tell me this one thing”) characterize many blues lyrics such as those in “Come On in My Kitchen.”

Additionally, O’Neal uses a regional vernacular such as “gon,” “wisht” and “caint” just as blues lyrics reflect the dialect of the social environment from which the singers emerge (Wormser 96). His parenthetical title, for example, says it is written in “knegro” dialect, not Standard English. This use of vernacular both references the blues and suggests that his poem is addressed to an audience of African Americans who speak his language. While O’Neal couches his blues in new terms that defy the typical twelve-bar blues rhythm, his poem possesses some of the typical lyrical conventions (Sotto 1). Ultimately, his work is derivative of both avant-garde poetics and the thematic and stylistic elements in blues. He uses poetic devices like internal rhyme, assonance (“true to you”) and alliteration (“this one thing”) often found in blues, but he
avoids repeated lines and standardized meter. Instead, O’Neal employs the oral cadences previously illustrated in Salaam’s work: “Boom! You got a attitude/ How patient is I’m supposed to be?” (28-29).

The blues outlook resonated with the artistic objectives of the BLKARTSOUTH poets who hoped to establish a new perspective on an African American cultural past and a distinctive poetic style that would represent it accurately. For example, Salaam’s poetry features blues most prominently as a subject matter rather than a lyrical or rhythmic foundation. In contrast to his predecessors such as Toomer and Brown, he emphasizes the historical and cultural legacy of blues music rather than adopting the structure of a blues song. His free verse is liberated from a song’s formal constraints, but his themes express the blues spirit:

blk poems is sung when
sung if really sung poems
are/ become song
& song is what we (blk people)
do best. (14-18)

Salaam accentuates African American music as an essential element in the history of the black experience. He suggests that African American poetry should represent the musicality of African American song traditions in their verse.

Yet, it is clear from this stanza’s unconventional form that Salaam does not envision musicality as adoption of a formally arranged blues song. His use of enjambment and anaphora (“song”) create an oral, conversational rhythm that differs from the repeated lines of a blues refrain. In spite of the distinction, the poem’s musical rhythm is evident. Thus, Salaam adopts an
oral rhythm that is derived from African American musical traditions like the blues, but he offers a different aesthetic to achieve it. His vision reflects his artistic alliance with Black Arts Movement poets who rejected conventional poetics in favor of those that reflected both the African American past and present:

With their iconoclastic attacks on all aspects of white middle class values, it is not surprising that the poets who shaped the Black Arts movement, the Black Power Movement’s cultural wing, rejected unequivocally Western poetic conventions. Their poetic technique emphasized free verse; typographical stylistics; irreverent, often scatological, diction; and linguistic experimentation. (Gabbin “Furious Flower” 8-9)

The work of the BLKARTSOUTH poets reflects the stylistic and political influence of the Black Arts Movement in conjunction with their thematic incorporation of the blues. Thus, Salaam and his colleagues contribute their voices to the creation of a contemporary black literature that honors the past while developing new forms:

We must consider ameer baraka (leroi jones) the “bird” of blk poetics, it was he who helped us break those old milk wagon rhythms down & helped us to get into brown trances of cascading rhythms. (Salaam “Food for Thought” 44-47)

Salaam’s objective is to craft poetry that captures the powerful rhythms of African American musical traditions while allowing for experimental forms in language and style. For example, “Food for Thought,” represents a conversational rhythmic style that eschews conventional meter and offers a nuanced view of what poetry sounds like. Using enjambment, Salaam unifies the
lines into a string of thoughts and images that create the rhythm of speech and suggest the oral quality to his work: “we the young birds of blk poetics throw our songs brilliant/ against the beautiful black sky of an emerging peoplehood” (50-51). “Food for Thought” is not structured using conventional poetic characteristics such as rhyme scheme or repetition. Rather, Salaam’s alliteration (“birds, blk, brilliant”; “beautiful black”) bolsters both the oral and musical qualities in his verse.

As the BLKARTSOUTH poets searched for their poetic voice(s), they recognized the blues medium as a viable form for shaping the themes and lyric structures of their verse. For example, Salaam’s poem “The Blues (in two parts)” honors the evocative effect of the music and demonstrates the broader significance of its impact. The section entitled “Part II” expresses the cultural solidarity and commiseration with the African American struggle that the blues offers:

The blues
is not song
it is singing
no voice
is needed
only the knowledge. (1-6)

Also, this stanza reflects the emotional resonance and unifying potential that Salaam identifies in blues music. For Salaam, the music transcends the performance per se and represents the history and legacy of African American artists and the “knowledge” of a shared past of oppression and triumph.

Furthermore, “The Blues (in two parts)” is characteristic of the blues’s thematic emphasis
on endurance: “Trouble in mind, I’m blue, / But I won’t be blue always, / For the sun will shine in my backdoor someday” (“Trouble in Mind” Young 77). Jones’s opening lines exemplify the cathartic combination of commiseration and uplift that blues lyrics convey. Similarly, Salaam suggests the blues ethos of confirming the value of one’s humanity through lyrical expression:

the blues is not
not notes
it is feeling
it is not death
it is being
it is not submission
it is existing. (7-13)

As Salaam demonstrates through his affirmations of the origins of the blues, the music is rooted in emotional responses but the emphasis rests on perseverance. In fact, Salaam pays homage to the spirit of the blues rather than any typical formal structure. Stylistically, for instance, BLKARTSOUTH poets exemplify a wholly different form that is neither an outgrowth of the folk song structure nor traditional poetic conventions. In this sense, Salaam and his contemporaries differ from their Harlem Renaissance predecessors who adopted the blues thematically and formally in their efforts to establish a distinctively African American literary voice.

Thematically, the distinction between the two literary periods becomes less obvious. For example, Salaam recognizes the blues as a vehicle for poetic protest and resistance to oppression: “it [the blues] is not submission/ it is existing” (ll-12). By alluding to the blues thematically but
not formally, Salaam creates a new type of blues poetry. As a result, “The Blues (in two parts)” becomes a self-reflexive continuation of an artistic legacy of Southern African American opposition to white oppression and the conventions of the literary establishment.

Many African Americans involved in the struggle for equal rights during the 1950s and 1960s viewed the blues as expressing a complacent attitude towards racism and they sought new, more overtly political musical forms such as free jazz or hard bop (Springer 279). In contrast, Salaam and his colleagues revered the creative significance of the blues tradition and sought to reclaim this aspect of the African American past. Thus, BLKARTSOUTH poets honored the catharsis the blues rendered for African Americans confronting the injustices of racism:

Folklore, no matter what its origin may be, reveals man’s attempts to “escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon him by society”…It can readily be seen why this essentially passive and escapist attitude has not gone over well with contemporary militant blacks. (Springer 279)

Considering the contrast in rhetorical responses to white oppression, Springer’s position is plausible. Yet, the BLKARTSOUTH poets’ esteem for the blues as a source of poetic inspiration contradicts Springer’s assertion. Salaam, for example, invokes the resistance to Anglo-American society that the blues reflects. The music appealed to Salaam and his contemporaries because it represents an African American cultural and artistic tradition that branched away from the Anglo-American traditions of the dominant culture.

Additionally, Salaam embraces the complex, emotional language of the blues as an inspiration for crafting evocative poetry. While many blues lyrics do contain socio-political statements, at their root is a raw expression of the outpouring of human emotion (Charters 156).
The aims of the BLKARTSOUTH poets were to produce work that was both consciously political and emotionally evocative. Blues lyrics offered an historical precedent for these objectives. Salaam’s emphasis on the moving quality (“it is feeling”, “it is being”) of the blues, for example, highlights the lyrical responses of African Americans to the oppressive circumstances that have shaped their history. He affirms the power of poetry to have a similarly inspirational effect as a means of conveying solidarity and cultural unity within the African American community: “We are a product of the collective history/experiences of Black people…It is vitally necessary to be aware of this life giving relationship” (New Black Voices 472).

In “The Blues (in two parts),” Salaam alludes to the blues to implicitly challenge the historical oppression of African Americans and assert the poignancy of blues lyrics:

whether it be

laugh-ing or dy-ing

swing-ing or hang-ing

from a tree

sometimes it be

hurt so bad

when you is singing

or feeling the blues. (15-22)

Salaam’s rhythmic breaks (“laugh-ing or dy-ing”) indicate the formal characteristics of blues lyrics in the improvisational mode. This stanza’s sound devices such as assonance (repetition of “e” and “i”) and consonance (repetition of “ing”) reflect the oral rather than written nature of the
music. Salaam refrains from employing aab lyrical structure typified in many blues songs, but he suggests its influence by drawing his audience to the repetition of the oral sounds. Also, he separates the syllables (“laugh-ing”) to echo a blues artist’s intonations as well as his or her repeated phrases: “When you see me laughin’, I’m laughin’ just to keep from cryin’” (“Trouble in Mind” Young 78). Salaam’s verse does not follow a typical blues song structure, but the musical quality of the language pays homage to the tradition.

Similarly, the stanza conveys the emotional impetus for blues music: The painful awareness that there is no immediate refuge from the misfortunes of one’s reality besides cathartic expression through song (Wormser 101). These sentiments, Salaam implies, are still relevant to the experiences of the black community of the 1960s. The stanza’s allusion to lynching, for instance, highlights the physical and emotional trauma that African Americans have endured from the inception of the spirituals, work songs and the blues through the Civil Rights era. Thus, Salaam models a blues musician’s objectives in his poetry to commiserate, express cultural solidarity against oppression and to gain the strength to continue to resist injustice.

Also, his use of black vernacular (“hurt so bad,”, “you is”) signifies the distinctive literary voice that BLKARTSOUTH poets and their Black Arts Movement colleagues developed. This poetic mode reflects the colloquial speech of working-class African Americans and challenges the hegemony of Standard English: “Salaam’s poetry reflects an oppositional politics and a radical challenge to literary conventions. Some critics would term his poetry pamphleteering, but insofar as the word implies that Salaam has no idea of craft is quite incorrect” (Bolden 70). While Bolden endorses Salaam’s poetics, his assertions reveal the myriad challenges and aesthetic questions raised about creating art that has overtly political aims.
Like Bolden, I contend that Salaam and many of his BLKARTSOUTH colleagues achieve the successful integration of their political agenda into stylistically innovative and poignant verse. “Food for Thought,” for instance, exemplifies a distinctive poetic voice while emphasizing themes of cultural inspiration and racial solidarity. Thus, Salaam’s craft is not subsumed by a political message. In contrast, the marriage of his poetics to his politics realizes the Black Arts Movement’s goals for creating an aesthetic that represents black life. Through his poetry, Salaam contributes his voice to the creation of an African American aesthetic that casts off the authority of the Anglo-American literary establishment.

Like Salaam, Tom Dent’s poetic vision was informed by blues musicians and their aptitude for rendering aspects of African American life. His experimental style references the blues’ characteristic repetition but is similarly informed by contemporary linguistic and structural nuances that distinguish it from a specific musical form or conventional poetic type. Additionally, Dent’s language reflects the black neighborhoods and streets of New Orleans, home to BLKARTSOUTH, where he was influenced by the music and the artistic precedents of generations of African Americans. In the spirit of BLKARTSOUTH and the Black Arts Movement, he envisions a distinctly black voice that defiantly rejects the Anglo-American literary establishment and invests in the artistic achievements of African Americans to inform his work. In the tradition of Toomer and Brown, Dent subverts the self-identified superiority of poetic and Standard English conventions to show that lyrically compelling poetry can be realized in the language of working-class African Americans.

Dent, and the BLKARTSOUTH collective, perceived the cultural value of incorporating the traditions of the blues and jazz music of New Orleans into his vision of poetics. In an
interview with Salaam, Dent emphasizes the cultural importance of New Orleans musicians to BLKARTSOUTH:

We [BLKARTSOUTH] were ahead of our time because the national perception was that the music had left New Orleans…There was a power in the music as it relates to community and ritual functions that doesn’t exist in New York. But nobody was talking about it. At that time, White New Orleans critics were not especially interested in our music, and they gave it no play. (“Enriching” 335)

The importance of cultural traditions for the BLKARTSOUTH poets is critical to understanding their esteem for the blues as a viable form for twentieth-century poetry.

Dent’s interest in establishing a Southern African American voice untainted by Anglo-American literary models led him to the lyrical precedents of blues artists who consciously revised and defied Anglo-European musical conventions. His tribute in verse “For Walter Washington” reflects his reverence for the music that he suggests speaks to all African Americans: “we blk blues singers/ we are you pleadin/ I gave you all my love/ please don’t abuse it” (4-7). Although the allusion is to heartbreak, the theme of solidarity emerges from Dent’s pronoun usage (“we are you”) to suggest the poem’s socio-political dimension. The lines suggest the emotional bond that Dent implies all African Americans share as he laments the tragedy of dishonoring one’s heritage (“please don’t abuse it”). Moreover, Dent’s metaphor of the hurt lover to the neglected blues musician suggests a plea for African American solidarity and the consequences of a fragmented community.

Walter Washington is a popular New Orleans bluesman and Dent celebrates his virtuosity by emphasizing the importance of his performances to the African American community. He
suggests Washington’s omniscience in his description of the blues artist as both a browbeaten outsider and a healer:

we are you watchin
all the half-empty
half-caught
days of yr life
pass before yr face. (15-19)

Dent suggests camaraderie and separation in his use of “we” as the black community addressing Washington as “you.” The tone is sympathetic and the “we” is not judging but mourning the hopelessness that Washington and other African American blues musicians endured.

Also, he suggests that all African Americans understand the messages in the blues because of their experiences as a disenfranchised minority in a white dominated society. Thus, “For Walter Washington” addresses a community of sympathetic listeners as he invokes the implied call-and-response of the blues: “we are you/ listenin to the field slide of my voice/ the wolf wail of my guitar” (20-22). In this affirmation of community, Dent emphasizes the blues spirit that the BLKARTSOUTH poets recognized as essential to the Southern African American poetic voice: “Earlier writers explored blues forms as well as blues themes. Poets of the 1960s and 1970s go beneath blues forms and overt blues themes to what can be called the blues spirit” (Henderson “The Blues” 29). The spirit that Henderson describes is evident in the poetry of Dent and his BLKARTSOUTH and Black Arts colleagues who used experimental poetic forms but embraced blues music as a thematic influence.

Dent’s attention to solidarity (“we watching you”) implies the Black Arts Movement’s
aims of reaching exclusively black audiences: “black literature is literature BY blacks, ABOUT blacks, directed TO blacks” (Brooks 3). Similarly, Dent reflects the BLKARTSOUTH objective to highlight the local, Southern character of his artistic identity by expressing the inspiration he receives from a New Orleans musician. He suggests that both political objectives combined with the blues spirit of resilience and camaraderie inform his artistic vision.

In “blues zephyr,” Salaam elucidates the role of the bluesman in the black community and the trance-like effect of the music:

When that man finished singing to the newly
Risen moon, all any of the enviously staring
Others of us could do was amen in chorus
When walter admiringly shouted to that
Man
“go on, cool breeze
You know you bad.” (27-33)

The audience responds to the call of “that man” in a traditional call-and-response blues mode of sympathetic participant. Salaam’s chorus emphasizes a collective black spirit. The collective spirit of the black community is emphasized in Salaam’s use of “chorus,” as well as the implication of the music acting as a spiritual succor, a replacement for religion, in the “amen” of the figurative congregation. The poem’s conclusion affirms the uplift that the bluesman brings to the downtrodden members of the community.

Furthermore, Salaam’s allusion to “walter” is most likely to the Walter Washington of Dent’s poem. Salaam and Dent both suggest that Washington plays an important musical role in
the black community by continuing the blues legacy that inspires the poetry of BLKARTSOUTH. Also, Salaam’s contemporary (1970s) colloquialisms (“cool breeze” and “bad” as a compliment) confirm the relevancy of the blues spirit in spite of the historical and cultural transformations that occurred between the popularization of the music and the era of the Black Arts Movement. Thus, “blue zephyr” suggests the importance of the blues spirit in unifying the African American community through its messages of solidarity, commiseration and perseverance.

Structurally, the prototypical blues form is absent from much of Salaam’s work, yet he emphasizes the *spirit* of the music as a primary force. Also, he employs lyrical features that recall the repetition and cadences characteristic of his blues influences. For example, the anaphora “that man” in “blue zephyr” reinforces the poem’s theme and maintains its lyrical consistency. Repetition is a common characteristic in blues lyrics, but Salaam establishes a poetic vision that is experimental and reflective of his musical predecessors:

that man soul serenaded yesterday’s twilight
for no reason other than that’s what he felt
like doing, singing, in a clear, high falsetto,
enthralling our decaying neighborhood with an
arching
improvised shoo-bee-do which momentarily
suspended the march of time, that
man. (20-26)

Rhyme scheme and standard meter are replaced by visual and auditory nuances such as
continuous lower case lettering, one word, enjambed lines and hyphenated syllables that reflect a blues singer’s intonations. Salaam’s poetics convey a blues theme of inspiration without adopting the formal structures of a song. His approach represents a new generation of blues poets whose work alludes to the music both thematically and lyrically but not structurally.

Like his Harlem Renaissance predecessor Sterling Brown, Salaam and his colleagues perceived an artistic and cultural value in the blues unavailable in Anglo-American poetic forms. Moreover, as part of the Black Arts aesthetic vision, the BLKARTSOUTH collective strove to separate itself from a literary establishment that had historically excluded them. They continued the tradition of their Harlem Renaissance precursors by adopting the blues spirit with increasing attention to African American traditions as artistic inspiration:

The second culmination [i.e., the creation of a uniquely Black literature] occurred in the poetry of the 1960’s, the “new” Black poetry, an aspect of the Black Arts Movement. Throughout both movements the constant factor is the secular, realistic quality—the blues mood—the entirety of it. As one moves from James Weldon Johnson to Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown to Imamu Baraka and Don L. Lee, there is, in effect a greater appreciation of blues and related forms and materials as Blacks take an increasingly analytical and hardnosed look at their lives in the United States. (Henderson “The Blues” 28-29)

The evolution of blues poetry began with the formal adoption of song structures in the first culmination of the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts poets’ emphasis on the themes and lyricism, not the form, of the blues. The “blues mood” that Henderson writes about is another articulation of the blues spirit that the BLKARTSOUTH poets embraced. They identified this
spirit of perseverance as critical to the African American past as well as to the present struggle for power and independence in a white-dominated society. Salaam summarizes the thematic emphasis of blues lyrics on the African American struggle against oppression: “In the lyrics of traditional blues songs, there is generally a stated desire to rise above the situation at hand, to transform the situation (with violence if necessary), or at the very least a looking forward to better times” (“It Didn’t Jus Grew” 356-357). Perseverance and united struggle are recurring themes in Dent’s and Salaam’s work as well as in the heartbroken blues of John O’Neal.

The experimental styles of these poets eschew English formal conventions such as rhyme and meter and emphasize the oral form of poetry: “WHERE/FROM/HERE/ R WHAT ELSE THEN R WE TLKING BOUT/ 2 B BLK” (Salaam “2 B Blk” 1-3). Salaam’s capital letters and abbreviated words signify a subversion of conventional poetic style. He initiates a dialogue conveyed in the language of black neighborhoods in New Orleans that challenges the community to consider their collective identity. Reflecting the tenets of the Black Arts Movement, Salaam’s poetry consciously alienates white readers by exclusively addressing an African American audience with the collective “we”: “WHERE EVER WE ARE/ 2 B BLK” (Salaam “2 B Blk” 10-11). Both his use of dialect and subversions of poetic conventions represent Salaam’s vision of creating a literary voice separate from Anglo-American influences and rooted in black life and culture. Thus, he integrates his personal style of experimental poetics with the political objectives of both BLKARTSOUTH and the Black Arts Movement to create original and provocative verse.

While they sought a new poetic vision, BLKARTSOUTH poets emphasized their Southern heritage and the Black Arts Movement as the framework of their literary voices.
Salaam and Dent suggest the importance of audience as they appeal to blacks through themes of community solidarity. Both were concerned with exposing the struggles of African Americans in a society dominated by whites, and white audiences were antagonized. Their poetry was written exclusively by Southern blacks and it addressed issues of African American life (“Enriching” 339). Therefore, the goals of BLKARTSOUTH were not only literary but overtly political as they addressed social concerns in lyric form. The blues offered a model of black resistance to Western conventions and it similarly inspired their vision of establishing an African American lyrical voice, freed from the Anglo-American literary establishment. In recognition of the musical and cultural relevancy of the blues, BLKARTSOUTH poets used experimental lyrical forms to express the music’s themes.
Conclusion

From Jean Toomer and Sterling Brown through the BLKARTSOUTH poets, blues-inspired poetry represents an integration of Western poetic conventions with the thematic and lyrical characteristics of the blues. The hybrid styles that emerge incorporate Anglo-American language and formal elements but are distinguished by their representation of African American oral and aural traditions. Adoption of the blues to lyric poetry suggests that the music’s lyricism, rhythmic structure and thematic tenets are as artistically viable and sophisticated as English poetic conventions. The blues-inspired verse in Cane and Southern Road represents the development of an original African American literary voice rooted in a combination of folk song and Anglo-American poetry. Underlying the use of blues in these texts is the relationship between form and content, which raises questions about the cultural and artistic viewpoints of the authors examined in the preceding chapters.

Many of Toomer’s and Brown’s Harlem Renaissance contemporaries chose to adopt traditional English poetic forms while the subject of their work often concerned the social and cultural changes in the African American community (Tracy 17-18). Contrasting views over appropriate forms and the use of dialect reflect underlying questions writers and political leaders were faced with during this period: What would the aesthetic vision be for African American literature? How would writers and artists recognize their history and culture without marginalizing themselves from the American mainstream? Divisions arose about the role of folk traditions and distinct but equally persuasive visions of poetics emerged from this period. Thus, the blues trope cannot be used as a singular lens to examine the authenticity of Harlem Renaissance poets. As Southern Road exemplifies in its “Vestiges” section, Brown vacillated
between adopting conventional English forms and those inspired by the blues. In spite of the literary importance of *Cane* to African American poetry and prose, Jean Toomer stated that he did not want his work to be restricted by his racial identity, which he viewed as American and not “Negro” or white (Rusch 106). While *Cane* and *Southern Road* suggest the potential of folk traditions in shaping a distinct African American literary identity, Brown’s body of work contains many poems that deviate from the blues model, and Toomer later abandoned the vision of blues-inspired poetry entirely. Thus, these texts, more so than their authors, stand as a testament to the viability of the blues as a form and inspiration for lyric poetry.

Later poets like Salaam and Dent who subscribed to the ideals of the Black Arts Movement incorporated the African American character of the blues and the vision of their predecessors into their work. In contrast to Toomer and Brown, the BLKARTSOUTH poets emphasized their African American heritage as the basis of their artistic vision. Unlike Brown who wrote sonnets and used other traditional English forms, these poets rejected their Anglo-American poetic predecessors for both political and cultural reasons. They saw themselves as continuing the legacy of artists who defied their white counterparts by using original African American forms, and blues musicians exemplified this lyrical model. Although Salaam and his colleagues did not identify poets such as Toomer, Brown and Hughes as poetic influences, their blues-inspired work reflects the integration of folk forms with English lyric poetry that these Harlem Renaissance writers established.

While most blues lyrics are not directly political, they express an implicitly defiant stance against white America’s oppression of black expression:

As the Negro community slowly developed a shape and a self-consciousness in
the late years of the 19th century it was the blues that developed with it to express the confusion and the joy and the pain of living in this community, related to the white society economically, but separated from it, and from the conventions that concerned its popular song, by the line of prejudice. (Charters 19)

Charters describes the emergence of the blues as a response to an American life rife with the contradictions of racism and oppression. Toomer, Brown and later the BLKARTSOUTH poets were influenced by the blues partly because of its historical resistance to oppression through lyrical expression. Their blues-inspired verse similarly expresses social concerns, and often in the metaphorical language of the blues musicians they admired. Adopting the blues tradition to lyric poetry demonstrates the flexibility of the music as well as its thematic poignancy.

Moreover, the continued appeal of the blues for contemporary musicians, writers and audiences reflects the perennial relevance of the genre’s underlying theme to remain strong and resist despair. The viability and influence of the music can be seen in the international audiences that blues musicians attract today. Cane, Southern Road and the poems of BLKARTSOUTH emphasize the ethos of the blues as they address the social, political and cultural concerns of their generations, but the spirit of the music is not limited to a specific era. While these texts represent the challenges of African American life, they are testaments to the will to overcome prejudice and express solidarity with a sympathetic audience. Although its listeners (and performers) are no longer predominantly African American, the historical roots of the blues are essential to understanding its influence on poetry inspired by its forms and themes.

During the Harlem Renaissance, Toomer and Brown identified with the content of blues lyrics, and viewed the music as a viable medium for expressing the promise and frustrations of
the social conditions during their era of African American social and economic upheaval (Gabbin 43). They captured the blues lyrics’ articulation of despair and hope by lamenting the socio-economic concerns of the 1920s and 1930s including Northern Migration and the Great Depression. Along with many of their contemporaries, Brown and Toomer celebrated folk musical traditions as valuable literary resources. They saw the oral, lyrical expressions of antebellum and postbellum African Americans as a source of artistic and cultural inspiration.

Both *Southern Road* and *Cane* reflect the influence of Western poetic conventions while integrating lyrical and thematic elements from the folk songs they wished to celebrate. Brown’s poem “Strange Legacies” incorporates conventional lyrical traditions of rhyme scheme and Anglo-American diction with a blues aa repetition pattern and regional dialect:

Now in our time of fear,—
Routed your own deep misery and dread,
Muttering, beneath an unfriendly sky,
“Guess we’ll give it one mo’ try.

*Guess we’ll give it one mo’ try.*” (37-41)

In addition to its lyrical allusions to the blues, this stanza exemplifies the typical blues theme of perseverance in the face of adversity.

Similarly, the three-line verse that Toomer employs in “Blood Burning Moon” emphasizes a blues message of resolve coupled with elements of the music’s typical structure:

“Red-nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact’ry door” (*Cane* 37). The stanza encourages the man in question to face the consequences of his actions, however unjust. The repetition and epistrophe (“Sinner!”) of the first two lines resemble the blues as well
as the regional dialect ("fact’ry") employed in the third line. While these characteristics belong to the blues, most of the lyrical conventions are inherited from English poetics. Like Brown, Toomer’s blues poetry exemplifies the lyrical integration of Anglo and African American oral and literary traditions in a hybrid form that reflects the cultural and historical experiences of black Americans. As forerunners of the genre, *Cane* and *Southern Road* represent the development of African American poetry that is rooted in both folk music characteristics and the conventions of Anglo-American verse.

Led by Salaam and Dent, the Southern Black Arts Movement collective BLKARTSOUTH continued this tradition thematically in their blues-influenced poetry, but their styles were characterized by conversational tone and diction, experimental typology and the use of their own regional African American vernacular (opposed to Brown’s and Toomer’s adoption). Like their Black Arts contemporaries, Salaam and his colleagues often did not claim their literary antecedents and looked to nonliterary sources for poetic inspiration: “The movement’s theorists correctly observed that black musical forms such as the blues and jazz are more profound expressions of black particularity than most black writing has been” (Smith 98). Blues and jazz exemplified musical models that were rooted primarily in the black experience, so they fit the Black Arts vision of separation from Anglo-American traditions. Clearly, these musical genres were influenced by their white counterparts and were supported by patrons from a variety of backgrounds. Yet, the roots of blues and jazz are inextricably bound to the African American experience, and this history of creative expression in oppressive circumstances inspired Black Arts poets.

The BLKARTSOUTH collective embraced blues music as a lyrical precedent for their
work, and they paid homage to it in their verse. They integrated common blues themes of community solidarity and perseverance as a response to adversity with experimental free verse: “we are you/ listenin to the field slide of my voice/ the wolf wail of your guitar” (Dent, “For Walter Washington,” 20-22). Dent evokes a sense of the communal experience of the blues that reflects a lyrical continuum from African American musicians to the verse of the BLKARTSOUTH poets.

While Salaam and his colleagues did not openly acknowledge their debt to their Harlem Renaissance predecessors, works such as *Cane* and *Southern Road* laid the foundation for the incorporation of African American folk songs into lyric poetry. Moreover, Toomer’s and Brown’s adoption of the blues as a lyrical medium through which they expressed African American sociopolitical concerns established a precedent for the overtly political poetry of the BLKARTSOUTH poets. By analyzing adaptations of the blues from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, the continuum of blues poetry emerges along with insights into the development of an African American literary voice rooted in folk traditions. There is not a universally accepted criterion for what constitutes African American poetry; yet, the contributions of these hybrid forms, which combined folk music tropes with conventional lyric poetry, remain relevant in defining what distinguishes this genre from its Anglo-American counterparts.

The blues has undergone many changes in both the racial and generational make-up of its audiences. Today, many blues musicians perform for predominantly middle class white audiences in contrast to the music’s early history when poor, Southern African Americans traveled long distances to hear Ma Rainey. In fact, it has been decades since blues music has held
a popular and socially significant place in the mainstream African American community. Since its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, other musical genres such as rhythm and blues, rock ’n’ roll and hip hop have usurped its place as a central lyrical outlet for social criticism. The resurgence of musical interest in the blues in the 1960s was important in the revival of many of seminal artists, but the audiences who these performers attracted were largely white (Rudinow 127).

While Salaam, Dent and their Black Arts Movement colleagues were heavily influenced by blues music, many African Americans were by this time listening to contemporary popular genres such as rhythm and blues. It is of course arguable that the blues’s influence is evident in all of the musical genres previously cited. Still, questions remain regarding the future of blues music and, by extension, blues poetry. Thus, further scholarship into the relationship between African American oral and aural traditions and authenticity amongst Harlem Renaissance poets would contribute to our contemporary understanding of the continuum of blues poetry.

As the blues and African American poetry evolves in the postmodern literary era, issues surrounding the influence of both poetic and musical precedents arise. Is audience a consideration for twenty-first century blues poets? If the music survives through its legacy rather than its current popularity, is its adoption to lyric poetry still viable for African American poets hoping to appeal to a sympathetic audience? If blues music no longer holds a recognizable social role for the majority of African Americans, is blues poetry an effective medium for continuing the legacy established in *Cane* and *Southern Road*? What social message underlies the poetry of a contemporary African American poet such as Gayle Jones who often adopts traditional blues forms and themes? Perhaps, Jones and others hope to root their poetics in their blues predecessors to highlight the relationship between the African American musical past and the
lyrical present. Absent the political undertones, contemporary blues poets may strive to achieve the vision of the Black Arts Movement writers who were inspired by African American artists and who defied Anglo-American traditions lyrically and rhythmically. Addressing these questions is critical to the analysis of contemporary blues poetry and music because what is being considered is how the role of history shapes our current understanding of these truly American lyric forms.
Bibliography


