Country Blues – A Canonically Marginalized Center and the Formation of African-American Aesthetics in Albert Murray's *The Magic Keys*

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Abstract: Up until the 1960s, the American literary establishment was dominated by white western-oriented critical perspectives. Upon entering this white establishment, a number of erudite black intellectuals sought to augment a literary canon with a specific African-American discourse. In contrast to white mainstream concentration on high-culture, focus was redirected towards one of the most salient manifestations of black folk culture, southern country blues. In his novel, *The Magic Keys*, Albert Murray portrays the endeavors of an established black intellectual and artist to present the blues idiom with philosophical sophistry and to delineate the specificity of African-American aesthetics.

Key words: country blues, folk culture, high-culture, the blues idiom, African-American aesthetics

Introduction – country blues, the mainstream canon and African-American aesthetics

In the twentieth century, musicologists and cultural critics theorized regional blues variations. The major reason calling for this effort at differentiation was the observed variances between the meaning and the function of the blues genre in the rural south and the urban north, notwithstanding its overall continuity. "African American blues culture […] evolved in southern jooks during the post-Reconstruction years, spread to the urban north with the help of a race-records boom and several Great Migrations, and remained relatively intact into the 1960s" (Neal 195). Generally, the art form can be classified into four main subgenres – Country Blues, Classic Blues, and Urban Blues (Hatch and Watson 167), the latter two emerging in the northern cities. As far as form is concerned, musicologists note the prevalence of certain instruments in performing of the given blues subgenres. For instance, a guitar is mainly associated with Country Blues (Hatch and Watson 167), and the guitar and piano with Urban Blues (Hatch and Watson 172). Apart from instrumentation, musicologists cite discrepancies in chordal shapes. Moreover, country blues and urban blues are considered to be predominantly an expression of black men, whereas classic blues are more likely to be associated with the performances of black men and black women. Finally, country blues and urban blues are regarded as cultural creations, which evolved as a result of the oppressive

experience of black people in America. The blue genre is an expression of "the *feeling* and *thinking* of an African people, and the kinds of mental adjustments they had to make in order to survive in an alien land" (Cone 98). In other words, although the blues contain mostly first-person lyrics, they are a musical record of the black collective experience of oppression. Classic blues, on the other hand, are sometimes perceived as a more commercial genre, "as being 'hybrid' in the sense that it was tailored to fit White record-company executives' and Urban Black musicians' perception of blues" (Hatch and Watson 170).

Such classification of the blues into regional varieties is also attended by polemical discussions regarding levels of authenticity, artistry, and cultural significance. For example, one of the most significant debates took place between the renown black American writers Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) and Ralph Ellison. In his work *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Baraka implied superiority of country blues over what he considered the commercialized and commodified city, classic blues. He saw the former as a music "that arose from the needs of a group, although it was assumed that each man had his *own* private blues and that he would sing them" (82). In contradistinction, "classic blues took a certain degree of professionalism. It was no longer strictly the group singing to ease their labors or the casual expressions of personal deliberations on the world. […] it could now become a way of making a living" (82). Ralph Ellison poignantly responded to Baraka's approach to classic and country blues, stating,

> Jones makes a distinction between classic and country blues, the one being entertainment and the other folklore. But the distinction is false. Classic blues were both entertainment *and* a form of folklore. When they were sung professionally in theaters, they were entertainment; when danced to in the form of recordings or used as a means of transmitting the traditional verses and their wisdom, they were folklore. There are levels of time and function involved here, and the blues which might be used in one place as entertainment (as gospel music is now being used in night clubs and on theater stages) might be put to a ritual use in another. ("Blues" 286)

Despite existing contrary views relative to the essence and authenticity of given blues genres, in particular that of the northern Urban and Classic Blues, most musicologists maintain that southern Country Blues is the fount from which the others flow. As in the south, northern blues also express the tribulations of oppressed and marginalized black people, as Sterling A. Brown notes, "Northern cities get their names into the blues along with Dallas, Memphis, and Chattanooga, and Northern streets like Market, Vine, Dear-born, Hastings, and Lenox

Avenue take their places alongside Beale and Rampart and Decatur. It is still a tough world and life that are sung about" (209).

Nevertheless, although Country Blues have been, by now, categorized as a unique black American southern expression and a developmental incubator of the African-American idiom, some authoritative circles, who format and maintain the mainstream musical canon, have marginalized this blues genre. Country Blues, specifically, and the blues generally, have faced the disapproval of elitist institutions that considered the blues genre to be a low cultural expression. Most striking is the fact that not only were the blues disregarded by the authors of the white-dominated musical canon, but they were also denigrated by the black bourgeoisie. According to Sterling A. Brown, "Most middle class Negroes, of course, have a distaste for the blues. A few who are interested generally become so because of the inter-relationships of blues with jazz. Some Negroes get no closer to the blues than Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue'" (291). This statement by Brown asserts that the black middle-class adheres closer to white canonical appropriations of the blues than to the authentic black folk cultural expression. As previously mentioned, one of the major factors that led to the marginalization of the blues by institutional elites is the perception of the blues genre as a product of lowbrow peasant culture, because the blues harbor expressions of displaced anger, violence, themes of drunkenness, direct language, and vulgarity (Charters, *The Legacy* 27-28). The black church went so far as to condemn the blues as "devil songs" (Jones 92). Both members of white and black establishments were of one accord that such music was undeserving of integration into the mainstream canon. "For several generations of musicians trained to the standards of academy, the blues seemed a childish exercise, unworthy of serious notice" (Russell 33).

In the 1960s, the blues were elevated by the Black Aesthetic Movement, which emanated from the Black Power Movement. Within the black American intellectual and artistic circles, two major approaches to black art emerged regarding its authenticity and role. One view was nationalistic, emphasizing black cultural uniqueness. The other viewpoint underlined the hybridity of black American culture in terms of reaffirming black America's African past and the reality of present-day black experience. One of the most distinguished proponents of the latter perspective was Ralph Ellison, who articulated the origins of black American culture thusly,

> First, we came from Africa. We had to learn English. We had, in other words, to create ourselves as a people – and this I take right down to the racial, the bloodlines, the mingling of African blood with bloodlines indigenous to the New World. A few people can trace their connections back to a given African tribe, but most of us can't.

> We can't even trace our blood back only to Africa because most of us are part Indian, Spanish, Irish, part any and every damn thing. But *culturally* we represent a synthesis of any number of these elements, and that's a problem of abstraction in itself; it's abstraction and recombining. (Callahan 372)

According to Cornel West, Ralph Ellison's perspective ranks as the most authentic and essential theoretical construct with regard to African-American aesthetics, reflecting the "Afro-American humanist tradition [which] extolls the distinctiveness of Afro-American culture and personality" (*Prophesy* 71). He further maintains that Ellison is an outstanding artist particularly "because he takes the Afro-American art forms of the past with more *intellectual seriousness* than do other Afro-American artists. He understands the spirituals, blues, jazz, and folklore of the Afro-American masses to be […] aesthetic modes of expression that represent distinctive perception of reality" (*Prophesy* 88). At the same time, as West maintains, Ellison, underscores the uniqueness of African-American experience and expression but he does not adhere to the Afro-American 'exceptionalist' tradition, which "posits Afro-American superiority, not over all others, but specifically over white Americans" (*Prophesy* 72). The latter tradition is likely to be expressive of African-American nationalist, separatist praxis, which Ellison opposed, choosing instead to view black American cultural expressions as ineradicable defining elements of mainstream American culture. He went so far to state, "I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly-line processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro" (Callahan 360).

Cultural critics and theoreticians sought to explicate the dimensions and essences of African-American aesthetics. As a result of their inquiry, the status of the blues shifted from the margins to the center. **One of the most poignant ontological augmentations of the blues is Houston A. Baker's definition of the blues as a matrix. Baker asserts,**

> **Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix. A matrix is a womb, a network, a fossil-bearing rock, a rocky trace of a gemstone's removal, a principal metal in an alloy, a mat or plate for reproducing print or phonograph records. The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network. (*Blues* 3-4)**

Baker's conception of the blues presents the blues as a complex cultural construct that encompasses a concrete, multidimensional background out of which certain cultural expressions emerged. In other words, the blues is a particular response to a given sociological, political, ontological, and axiological condition.

West's and Baker's influential academic theorizations of the blues result from the endeavors of black intellectuals and artists to inject within serious canonical debates regarding mainstream American cultural processes **the sophisticated nature** of so-called low, folk culture. Analogously, in his last novel, *The Magic Keys* (2005), Albert Murray offers an interesting literary portrayal of the complex speculations as to the location of the blues with folk-culture and African-American aesthetic formation. One of the characters, Ted Edison, seeks to elevate southern blues culture by way of composing a novel, which, he hopes, would be a combination of the black vernacular idiom and western philosophy. In the process he would pay tribute to both cultural contributions. Moreover, a striking correspondence between views of the main character Ted Edison and Ralph Ellison's perspective on African-American and American aesthetics is observable. Therefore, Ellison's non-fictional writing in which he theorized the etiology and essence of African-American art is a crucial reference point in comprehending Albert Murray's fictitious aesthetic contemplations. Actually, the novel itself does not have a developed and sophisticated episodic plot structure. Most of it presents an exchange of philosophical, sociological, and artistic perspectives between the two main characters, Ted Edison and Scooter, to whom Edison reads fragments of his novel in progress. Several sections within the book portray the characters' musings as they attempt to elevate and promote southern blues aesthetics in the canonical discourse, particularly since within this discourse they both have stature as educated artists and thinkers of genius minds.

Black southern culture as the cradle of African-American aesthetics

In *The Magic Keys*, the characters' comments regarding what they consider to be authentic black American expressions reference the South. Black southern migrants to the North, who attained success, reference the South with the prefix "down." Remembering their nostalgic past, they talk about "down-home people" (9), being "from down they way" (42), "down-home idiom" (68), "old down-home lying and signifying" (72), "down-home cats" (110), and "down-home music" (56). Ted Edison, critic, scholar, musician, writer, and member of the academic establishment, feels called upon by his status to write a literary statement that would become a master narrative on the subject African-American aesthetics,

whereby he would convey the down-home idiom together with mainstream American thought. In other words, he would combine black southern blues folk culture and American high culture. Scooter perceptively observes, "My impression of Taft Edison from the very outset was that his ambition was to create compositions based on down-home sacred and secular music, including workaday chants and hollers, that would be performed in concert halls by concert hall-type instrumental and vocal groups and philharmonic orchestras" (107). In order to accomplish his objective of defining and elevating the country blues idiom, Edison reaches back, at multiple levels, to his southern roots and black folk wisdom. **At this instance, the black fictitious intellectual and writer seeks connectedness with the aforementioned Afro-American humanist tradition (West, *Prophesy* 71) by engaging in explorations of the cultural and ontological individuality of black folks. Moreover, concentrating his focus upon, and identifying himself with, the experiences and expressions of this specific group, Edison is representative of what Houston A. Baker calls with his own category race people, a concept synonymous, according to Baker, with Amiri Baraka's notion of "blues people" (*Betrayal* 9). Race people intellectuals are deemed to be at variance with opportunists and elitists within the black intelligentsia who "have just said 'no' to race. […] A number of [whom] have bought into a white neoconservative genealogy (rather than a true history) of America, and feel deeply proud of their anti-black majority bona fides" (Baker, *Betrayal* 73).**

At the outset, Edison appoints Scooter as the only reliable reviewer of his work-in-progress. Scooter's origins in the black south augment his qualifications to Edison. He tells Scooter, "you might just be the one I suddenly realized that I should have been looking for. Somebody from down the way who's also interested in what books are really about. Man, most of the grad students I run into up here seem to think of poetry and fiction mainly as raw material for research projects that will enhance their academic status" (42). The foregoing sentences critique the academic establishment's canonical approach to literature, which inculcates in readers a limited selection of texts and perspectives that fit the mainstream mindset. Instead of broadening individual minds, researchers are forced to direct themselves towards satisfying the delimiting and elitist audience in order to assure their institutional status. While doing so, Edison contends that northern, western-oriented canonical paradigms are insufficient towards true understanding of black southern experience and expression. He states,

> I know quite a few literary experts up here who think they know where I'm trying to go. But I'm counting on you to spot where I'm coming from. After all, since you and I

> took going to college as seriously as the best of them did we don't need them to tell us what we're trying to do. We just want them to be un-condescending enough to acknowledge what we are doing when we do it. (145)

At this point, he undertakes the challenge to define his identity and role as an African-American writer in struggle to attain recognition of his own artistic particularity over against the determiners of the canon. His attempt to include black folk culture in American academic discourse reveals the double-faceted foundation of his cultural and ontological identity. He seeks to enhance his relationship with southern black folk culture and, at the same time, to maintain his high culture achievement level. Cognizant of establishment's elitist nature, he opts to complement its discourse with a central southern black American aesthetic country blues. Having acquired sophisticated musicological, literary, and philosophical knowledge, he believes that he possesses the tools which can enable him to fathom and employ the profundity within southern folk culture. He perceives the same qualities and capabilities in the behavior and thinking of Scooter, whom he judges to be the only person qualified enough to assist him in realizing his project. Scooter, in turn, reciprocates by showing affinity with Edison. Scooter says,

> … he had decided that being two book-loving down-home boys he and I had a lot to talk about, especially about the literary possibilities of the down-home idiom. Something beyond the same old overworked sociopolitical clichés about race and injustice that had long since become so usual that they were also the expected and tolerated and indulged. Neither one of us said anything at all about the down-home music of the blues and jazz at that time, but when I got around to saying what I said about it sometime later on, he said I was on to something basic and that I should consider some sort of graduate school paper on it just for a start. (56)

The communication between Edison and Scooter represents a particular type of black American cultural, literary discourse. The characters begin to theorize and research African-American aesthetics, a task that has as its prerequisite a background of black southern experience. In doing so, they hope to contribute to the systematic establishment of a defined African-American literary tradition. Discourse about this tradition, according to them, would call for intellectual exchange between black writers and black readers who hold southern black sensibilities. However, their choice to refrain from advocacy of a purely black nationalist, separatist praxis, replete with "old overworked sociopolitical clichés about race and injustice" (56) makes the nature of their task more controversial and complex. Interestingly, Ralph Ellison faced an analogous dilemma, having "difficulty reconciling some

of the ideas of black nationalists, who would view black culture as separate from broader American culture. To these people he says, 'I don't recognize any black culture the way many people use this expression'" (qtd. in Callahan 360). **Again, the attempts of Murray's characters, like Ellison's, to put forward the particularity of black American cultural experience are contemporarily reflected in Cornel Wests' conception of an Afro-American humanist theoretical tradition, over against an Afro-American exceptionalist tradition, (*Prophesy* 72), in that the characters do not seek racial or ethnic superiority but instead to delineate the singular quality of black American experience and expression.**

Country Blues as an authentic Black Aesthetic foundation

In *The Magic Keys*, the writer-character Edison presents southern country black music as a central black American cultural expression and a crucial reference point in African-American aesthetic formation. He holds that blues culture has set forth various formal and ideological conventions, which should be an integral part of not only black musical performances but also of other black American artistic productions. He notes that his initial exploration and effort to delineate the southern blues idiom were essential steps that rendered his writing uniquely and authentically black, acknowledging,

> The territory bands […] Those guys. That music. […] That's something I always have to keep in touch with. Hearing and seeing those guys riffling that stuff like that reinforces my connection with a lot of idiomatic fundamentals that I am not only trying to work in terms of as a writer, but also that I don't ever want to get too far away from as a person. […] that stuff plus all of that old church stuff was my raw material even when the music I was trying to learn to compose was concert hall music. Which is why I was all the way down there in Alabama and not at Juilliard or the Boston Conservatory or even Oberlin in the first place. (144)

Edison seeks to transfer his musical talent and knowledge from stage to paper. He is widely recognized as an extraordinarily gifted musician and he has performed in the most prestigious concert halls, where he included black folk music within his own individual interpretations of western classic music. Having succeeded there, he hopes for a similar success in the literary sphere, in which he would persuade those persons deemed to be authorities of the literary canon of black folk culture's import to the evolution of American culture in its broader sense, whereby he would cite black literature as a particular manifestation within American culture.

Throughout their dialogue, Edison and Scooter re-envision southern black country life. Out of its presumed simplicity they excavate complex philosophical and aesthetic nuances that authenticate the role black experience has in black cultural formation. In contradistinction to the literatures of Black Power and black political commitment, the two black artists-intellectuals do not explicitly depict scenes of bestial KKK terrorism inflicted upon black people, neither do they focus on black exploitation and disfranchisement. They do not find the foregoing insignificant but are more concerned with depicting the creative ways and means by which black people have responded to white southern oppression. Probably, such an approach stands for an attempt to put the black suffering at another level. In a way, focusing on the creative response to oppression is an attempt to emphasize certain progress and transcendental spirituality and ability of the black folk, who did not submerge in the collective despair but empowered themselves and one another creatively. Edison and Scooter see the country blues music and culture as the most impressive and profound creative response to oppression. As mentioned earlier, **this blues perspective is contemporaneously incorporated within Houston A. Baker's conception of the blues as matrix (*Blues* 3-4), perpetuating certain inputs and outputs. When Murray's characters' emphasize black experience of oppression, they recognize them as input and their creative response to this experience as output.**

In their reflections, Edison and Scooter point out implicitly the role and the meaning the blues had for black people in the midst of oppression. One of the outgrowths of blues culture was the southern juke joint (black bar). Edison remembers that he and his friend "liked the same joints […] something that [they] should stay in touch with in spite of the fact that most of [their] teachers seem to regard it as something beneath the taste of the kind of respectable people college-educated people [they] were supposed to be" (61). Scooter also recalls the juke joint as a part of his southern musical experience:

> Which I could have said was essentially a matter of idiomatic sensibility. But I didn't, because I didn't want to sound that much like a graduate school academic. So what I actually said was that I knew exactly what he meant. And even as I said it I was remembering those old long-ago summer twilight times on the steps of the swing porch, with the antimosquito smoke wafting and curling across the chinabbery yard, when old Luzana Cholly used to come sporty limping up along Dodge Mill Road from the L&N Raiload bottom, strumming his twelve-string guitar on his way whichever honky-tonk or jook joint he was going to play in that night. (98)

Both characters observed that the black middle-class shunned juke joints because the clubs were associated with blues folk culture. Paradoxically, the blues that their former teachers and professors considered to be detrimental to the moral and intellectual development of black youth, the educated black artists and thinkers in adulthood regard the genre elemental towards the understanding of black American "idiomatic sensibility" (98). **Analogously, Cornel West puts forward what he regards as a distinctive sensibility of blues people,**

> **black people could have chosen counterterroristic tactics when they were lynched over and over and over again. They said no, we're not going to go out and lynch white folk. We would rather be defeated for the moment, with integrity, than win and be a gangster like them. That's a blues sensibility […] So you let that love inside of you be expressed even though it's hard for it to be translated into love or justice on the ground. ("Cornel West's Catastrophic Love")**

The culture of jook joints also reflects a particular sensibility. Jook joints were informal nightclub-type establishments within southern black American communities, within which black people felt free and emboldened to express themselves. Although violence was a frequent juke joint occurrence, as the blues released emotions, the overall atmosphere, however, was one of love, joy, pleasure, and Saturday night relief, as the bluesman Julio Finn asserts,

> The jook scene was wild with excitement, as hustlers, steelmill hands, loafers, field workers, drifters and gamblers ogled and danced with the babes – young ones, old ones, tight ones, innocent ones, tough ones; with man-eaters bedecked in sequins and holy-rollers in their Sunday-go-to-meetin's. The whole place reeled to the beat – the rhythm of the music, of money, of booze, and sex. (206)

Because juke joint nightlife was a secular way of venting rage of those besieged by a world of trouble, it was often juxtaposed with a sacred Sunday morning prayers. The black theologian, James Cone, reflects on the correspondence between the two musical genres, the spirituals and the blues:

> The men and women gathered around the juke box had worked long hours during the week in saw mills and factories; by Saturday night they were tired and weary. They needed to express their moods and feelings, their joys and sorrows […] And they did, sometimes peaceably and sometimes violently, often doing to each other what they wished they could do to white people. But chiefly they enjoyed themselves […] But not every black in Bearden responded spontaneously to […] the blues. These latter

> preferred the other musical expression of black people, called "church music" or the spirituals, and Sunday was their time to unleash the pent-up emotions of their being. (1)

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the black middle-class establishments generally denounced blues as an inferior manifestation of black low culture. Therefore, in Murray's novel, the middle-class black intellectual Ted Edison's focus on marginalized black folk culture instead represents a milestone at variance with the mainstream mindset. The character exhibits disjuncture with dominant narrative when he refers to opportunistic conformity, remarking that "as soon as they hear that you're from somewhere down home they're subject to come on like the fact that they're from somewhere up here automatically gives them some kind of status over you […] Boy, but as soon as they find out that there's a bunch of jaspers carrying on about you, man, that's another tune" (26). This statement by Edison reveals his disapprobation with northern intellectualism. When a recognized member of the elite, like Edison, breaks ranks and promotes black folk culture, the majority of the northern elite think that their self-interest can be served by supporting this popular person, and are thereby willing to change their attitude. At this juncture, Ted Edison becomes skeptical about the fame that he obtained up North. On the other hand, he can use his authority to exalt the long-rejected blues genre to the central location of American culture.

In noting the form and content of canonical resources, he observes that the contribution of southern black folk is unacknowledged: "if it's supposed to be American art and it doesn't have enough of our idiomatic stuff, by which I mean mostly down-home idiom, in there it may be some kind of artistic exercise or enterprise but it ain't really American" (68). He pays a particular attention to the widespread influence of black music, saying, "what our old down-home stuff had done for church music not to mention pop tunes and ballroom music" (69). He intends to overcome this prejudicial omission within literary discourse by presenting the black folk idiom in a new light with regard to its place in African-American cultural formation.

Secondly, Edison discerns certain elements of the blues idiom, which can be transposed to other cultural expressions. He considers signifying to be an aspect of black culture conducive to application in literary terms. Edison wonders, "The problem as I see it with this stuff is how to get our old down-home kind of lying and signifying to function as literature" (72). The answer to this question is meaningful for him because he believes that "the very act of writing a story is always a matter of a certain amount of lying and signifying. […] You don't just describe the people, the places, the weather, and least of all the actions

exactly as they were. You reshape whatever has to be reshaped to make the point you try to get across to the reader" (72).

Signifying is a concept of major import within African-American literary theory and narration. Due attention must be given to the meaning and function of signifying in black folk culture. For instance, in blues lyrics, signifying is a form of verbal jousting, for example, 'playing the dozens' that "involve parents – especially mother – siblings, personal inadequacies; feelings of hostility, aggression, catharsis, and camaraderie" (Keil 174). Such speech can be an expression of internal violence, whereby the speakers seek to project their repressed rage towards external oppression onto other people. The blues often expressed black people's "doing to each other what they wished they could do to white people" (Cone 1). The metaphoric characteristic of blues verse, in turn, contains vivid imagery. All these convey the poetic nature of the blues. Samuel Charters, a blues theorist, points out that seemingly simple language of the blues, "had often a marked sophistication. The directness and immediacy of the experience is heightened with an imagery and a symbolism that is itself drawn from the reality of the life. It is a poetic idiom that finds its images in the cabins and the tenements, in the fields, the empty roads, and the crowded streets of American Negro life" (*The Poetry* 27). It is exactly this poetic sophistication that the character in Murray's *The Magic Keys* seeks to explore and employ.

Furthermore, Edison juxtaposes signifying with lying, both of which go back to the black American historical utilization of the mask as survival strategy. For instance, during slavery, the enslaved black people "had to pretend that they were 'good' slaves. They had to act as if they were stupid. And as if they were incapable of seeing the gross discrepancy between the whites' supposed belief in the words of Christ and their actions. In short, slaves had to deceive their owners in order to stay alive" (Finn 190). Hence, when Murray's character, Edison, mentions lying as an element of black folk culture, he underscores the poetic quality of the black oral tradition, which evidences the insightful and creative employment of imagery in black folk ironic and metaphoric expressions, all analogous to masking. The psychologist, Arthur C. Jones maintains that black people's employment of the mask in their folk songs was a reflection of the African mask tradition in the face of American hostility, which protected one's secret self. "This […] produced a body of music that could readily be utilized when needed as a basis for secret communication, and it is clear that Africans in America exploited this ready resource at every available opportunity" (49). The loneliness, despair, aggression, and rage that the blues verses relate express black existence in the world of trouble. Along with the tradition of secrecy, "The blues do not

openly condemn white society, and there is little *direct* complaint *to* white people about the injustice of segregation" (Cone 118). The poetic indirectness of the blues is also observable in the original African-American literary genre of slave narratives. Toni Morrison explains that the reason for the indirect representation of black people's emotions towards slavery was the endeavor of the narratives' authors to produce works that were "as objective as possible […] not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names" (67), particularly since the majority of the readers were unopposed to slavery and at best indifferent to the black condition. In general, Edison, the African-American fictional writer in Albert Murray's *The Magic Keys*, unlocks the poetic richness of the southern blues idiom, which, in turn, enhances the literary quality of his work. Ted Edison synthesizes his objective, stating, "what your are really working for is not just precise or realistic documentation but implication" (72).

Apart from delving into formal aspects of blues verse, Murray's character also has the desire to implement blues content, something that would equip his character-narrator with special features. Scooter notes Edison's deep concern with this writing aspect, "he wanted first of all […] my response to a narrator's voice on a page, his angle of observation and context of recollection. Then he would want my immediate opinion of the literary quality and orientation that the verbal texture suggested" (66-67). Edison goes on to reveal the effect that he would like his art to have upon readers when he says,

> if I can get enough of this stuff to come off the way I think it should I just might be able to cause a few people to reconsider a few things they take too much for granted. It's not just a matter of saying this is my way of coming to terms with this stuff, it's more like saying Hey, this is another way that might be even better or at least a pretty good alternative. It really is a matter of trying to test the validity of one's own sense of things (41-42).

These ideas put forward his intention to produce a narrative that would celebrate and promote African-American particularity. He thinks he can possibly achieve his goal by projecting an individualistic character who develops his own view of his surrounding reality rather than submit to blind conformity.

This novel is rather a self-reflexive construction. Scooter's thoughts about Edison's narrative in Murray's novel reflect the effects that Edison would like the African-American novels to have on the formation of the reader's individual perspective. In other words, the identity, worldview, and life of the character that Ted Edison envisions are not overtly

presented. Scooter's response to the novel-in-progress and to Edison's remarks manifests an intended effect of Edison's work, mainly inducing the reader's awareness that there "is another way that might be even better or at least a pretty good alternative" (42). Consequently, Scooter becomes skeptical of the western-oriented, northern middle-class canonical establishment and returns to the south in order to rediscover his identity and ancestral relationship to black folk culture. In doing so, he discerns, first of all, that the mainstream curriculum at the University of New York does not facilitate individual growth. It was a surprise to him because he had chosen liberal arts, a field that he had expected to welcome individual perspectives. Disappointed, he contends,

> Some courses were about grade-point average, but some were about the nature of things, and I don't mean just geology, physics, and chemistry classes. All of that was obvious. I mean the way some of the liberal arts courses were taught. Man, I used to go to the library to work out academic assignments, but what I really did was get the class work out of the way so I would have more time free to get on with trying to find out what literary books were really all about, *without being concerned about answering test questions about them.* (43)

Scooter becomes aware of the nature of black intellectuals and artists as race people, who "model themselves as sharers of culture, cause, and community" (Betrayal 9). Scooter later becomes alienated from formal education because it thwarted self-development. In pursuance of higher education, Scooter sought knowledge that would broaden his mental, cultural, and personal perspectives. Instead, he was herded into submission to an imposed critical framework. One of his final reflections on education demonstrates an awareness of institutional, educational hierarchy. He recalls, "I had never really concerned myself about the overall educational policies of any given college. Once I realized that Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were out of the question […] the main thing that mattered to me was what range of liberal arts courses would be available" (34). When he first sought higher education, he could only choose from such historically black institutions as Morehouse, Talladega, and Fisk. Later on, however, he was sent up north as an exceptionally promising, brilliant student. Upon observing the conformist, commercialized mass urban culture there, he reconsiders Alabama, his home state, as the essence and a truest point of departure in route towards his own emotional and intellectual development. Although he admits that, in New York, he once had hoped to spend "more and more time doing nonacademic things that made you feel that you were at least beginning to become another inhabitant of Manhattan at large as well as a student at the Washington Square campus" (48),

he questioned whether "Manhattan or anywhere else could ever become another benchmark in the same sense as Gasoline Point on the outskirts of Mobile, Alabama" (48). On the contrary,

> *Because as benchmark, Gasoline Point, Alabama, would always be that original of all fixed geographical spots (and temporal locations as well) from which […] you measure distances, determine directions, and define destinations, all of which are never any less metaphorical than actual. And, of course, there is also the irradicable matter of the benchmarks of your original perception and conceptions of horizons and hence aspirations in terms of which everything else makes whatever sense it makes* (49).

Taking into account the influence of Edison's work-in-progress on Scooter's worldview, Scooter's reconnection with black southern folk culture and rejection of northern high culture's canonical bias fulfilled Edison's objectives. Scooter's reaffirmation of his own black individuality emerges out of a redefinition of the quality and significance of his musical performances, which reflect a focus on the expression of individual feelings according to blues verse. He recalls the rightness of Edison's statement that "we don't just play music in this man's band, we play life. L-I-F-E, as in flesh and blood. […] Metronome time is mathematics, Schoolboy. Pulse is *soul*. Talking about the rhythm and tempo of life as *the folks* came to know it and live it in down-home U.S. of A." (29). This perspective on the essence of southern country blues corroborates with the view that blues are a record of African-American experience of oppression in America. Black folk music became a foundation for a unique African-American idiom. The critic Stelamaris Coser elaborates on a statement by the Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff who said that "Captive people have a need for song" (164). Coser, emphasizing the correspondence between black oppression, black music and African-American literature, says "In a new American narrative, the plural voices and multifocal perspectives of U.S.-born writers […] record and explore that captivity, that need, and the songs that the two have created throughout the making of the *New World*" (164). In Albert Murray's novel, this is exactly the new black American narrative that Edison, the fictitious writer, seeks to produce.

Scooter also remembers that another one of his mentors, Bossman, accentuated also the importance of individual, emotional response to musical performance; "musicians should never become so preoccupied with what they were doing technically and theoretically – and certainly not with how their technique is impressing other musicians – that they forgot that the truth of the matter is that the people in the real audience respond to what you make them

feel" (99). In an analogous manner, Scooter responds to Edison's work. Therefore, black music as well as black literature expresses individual feelings and both call for individual responses to the feelings engendered. This call is also characteristic of the blues idiom. Through music, "black southern blues people articulated their somebodiness, insisted on their indelible individuality" (Neal 5). For this reasons, blues singers, more often than not, sing in the first-person singular. In the blues, "the individual plays the most important part and the singer is most generally the subject or the object of the action concerning which he sings. 'I' and 'my' are the keynotes to the great majority of situations. […] In the secular song the first personal pronoun seems even more prominent than in the spirituals" (Odum and Johnson 279-280). Nevertheless, within the black folk community, feelings that the single musician uttered often reflected the feelings of his audience. In this way, "The trouble of the blues refers to the history of a people, and the kinds of difficulties they encountered in their struggle for existence" (Cone, *The Spirituals* 111). Correspondingly, in *The Magic Keys*, the character Scooter relates his individual feelings towards music, literature, education, and society. At the same time, the evolution of his own mindset by way of exposure to other people's individual perspectives fosters a sense of southern black communal unity. At this point, his musings reflect a paradox of blues culture, in which the individual is also communal. Scooter's thoughts on the special group dynamics that existed among the individual band members with whom he performed are a reflection of particular form of unity to be found within the black community. Their performance is an expression of their own feelings rather than adherence to a strict, fixed framework whereby they adjust themselves towards meeting the expectations of an unresponsive audiences in northern commercial clubs and recording studios. Sometimes they even "hit a very special groove just because they were having such a good time listening to themselves" (13). However, what he yearned for most was the feeling that what they were playing "was home base" (13). The commercial performances even at the most recognized concert halls in Rome, London, Paris, and Los Angeles, were not of a great value to Scooter because "that was not at all the same as choosing the place where you would eventually settle down for good" (14).

Eventually, disgruntled with the conforming limitations imposed upon artists by the education and music industry establishments, Scooter decides to return to the South in order to rediscover the power and profundity of black blues people. He even begins "to question the relevance of the Ph.D. degree to achievement in the arts" (116). Thus, he embarks on a journey to redefine the concept of individual success and to search for effective means, the "magic keys" (113). He hopes that southern black folk will provide guidance for him,

because he knows that “if you could make it down there on the outskirts of Alabama you could make it anywhere else in the world” (229).

Conclusions

In *The Magic Keys*, Albert Murray envisions the endeavors of African-American artists and theorists, epitomized by the two characters Ted Edison and Scooter, to redefine African-American aesthetics in a manner that would center the black southern folk culture within the framework of the mainstream American canon. Edison and Scooter perceive southern country blues culture as the point of departure in their effort to explore and utilize a unique idiom for African-American narration. They ascertain the poetic dimension of blues verse with its emphasis on individuality as a distinctive feature of blues culture. The evolution of these discursive means stems from the actual circumstance of black southern oppression, where masking – “old down-home lying and signifying” (72) – was employed and where one’s individuality was emphasized. The former was a way of secret communication. The latter enabled the manifestations of one’s ‘somebodiness’ and non-conformity to demeaning white racist conceptions of black people.

The manner in which the fictitious characters seek to elevate black folk culture within establishment circles reflects the actual efforts made by the renown black artist and intellectual, Ralph Ellison. Known for his over-forty-year-long friendship with Ralph Ellison (Taylor, 113), Albert Murray, above all, witnessed the significance that black folk culture played in Ellison’s intentions to contribute to African-American aesthetics, “to master the craft of the writer and to understand, and then affirm, the complexities of his own rich cultural experience” (Callahan 361). Murray reconstructs Ellison’s endeavors by projecting the character, Edison, who hopes to embed his “down-home idiom” (68) novel-in-progress within literary establishment. Ellison, like his fictitious counterpart, Edison in Murray’s novel, discerned the creative nature of black folk in contradistinction to emulative behavior of the black middle-class. In “Working Notes For Invisible Man,” he wrote, “only the lower-class Negroes create their own values, the middle class seeks to live up to those of the whites” (343). For this reason, in Murray’s novel, Edison repetitively emphasizes the importance of challenging the northern academic, critical status quo and reaching out for the wisdom to be found in the creative discourse of black southern blues people.

Centering blues culture, and black folk culture in general, within the literary mainstream, have become a focal point of contemporary black artistic and intellectual elites, among them, one of the most recognized African-American theorists, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,

who regards the black vernacular tradition as a crucial ingredient of African-American discourse. “While attempting to develop a black literary theory that is free of Western critical domination, he uses the black linguistic category of “signifyin’ ” as a particularly important means of understanding black narratives” (Matthews 91). Analogously, as has been pointed out, in Murray’s novel, Edison also saw signifying as significant constituent of the blues idiom.

Albert Murray was an advocate of focalizing black southern country blues culture in the conceptualizing of African-American aesthetics. The novel-in-progress that the character, Edison, composes is intended to be a manifestation of the hybrid nature of this aesthetics, embodying what is black and what is American generally. **Such an emphasis on the role the blues perform in formation of African-American aesthetics and in the cultural context of mainstream American cultural resonances contemporarily in Houston A. Baker’s statement regarding the interdependence between the African experience in America and cultural expressions:**

> **Combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much, much more, [the blues] constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America - always becoming, shaping transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World. (“Belief” 5)**

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