

**Searching for Community and Place in the Blues: Getting Back Home in Elmore James's**

**“Dust My Broom” and “I Believe”**

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## ABSTRACT

The blues can be understood as a mixture of the collective and individual “I”: a medium that allows access to the voice of the performer as well as the voices of the African American people of the Southern United States. In this context, the blues can be understood as an avenue to express traumatic experience through various cultural signifiers, which allows for community to develop between those who can recognise the signs. Part of the trauma of the blues is the loss of home and the nostalgia for that lost place. Ultimately, through the use of trauma theory, this paper will argue that the blues can be understood as a testimony of traumatic experience that asks for an attentive audience. To support this assertion, I will discuss two of Elmore James’s songs, “Dust my Broom” and “I Believe,” in his search for a way to “go back home.”

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
1. SEARCHING FOR COMMUNITY AND PLACE IN THE BLUES: GETTING BACK HOME IN ELMORE JAMES'S "DUST MY BROOM" AND "I BELIEVE" .....	1
2. WORKS CITED.....	17
3. APPENDIX.....	19

*The stories of escape from slavery, the redemptive power of suffering, and the triumphs of the weak over the strong that dominated respectable black cultural production during the nineteenth century gave way gradually to a different variety of story altogether . . . The power of the text was qualified and contextualized by the emergence of a more significant counterpower in the medium of black popular culture, what we can call, following Houston A. Baker, Jr., the tactics of sound developed as a form of black metacommunication in a cultural repertoire increasingly dominated by music, dance, and performance.*

--Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*

There is something about the blues that both enchants and mystifies. Sometimes it feels as if, listening closely, you can hear the mud from the Delta caught in the strings of the guitar while the heat of the Mississippi night makes your shirt stick to your back. Beyond its aesthetic and emotional appeal, the blues is a language, vernacular if you will, that speaks for both the performer and a people as a whole. In Allan Lomax's fabulous book, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, he recounts a conversation between Big Bill Broozny, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson, in which they discussed "what the blues are all about" (460). Memphis Slim mutters, "half to himself," that "Blues started from slavery" (460). Big Bill replies to Slim's comment:

we really want to know why, and how come, a man in the South *have* the blues . . .  
. I worked on levee camps, extra gangs, road camps and rock camps and rock quarries and every place, and I hear guys singing *uh-hmmmm* this and *mmmm* that, and I want to get the thing plainly that the blues is something that's from the heart—I know that, and whensoever you hear fellows singing the blues—I always believed it was a really heart thing, from this heart, you know, and it was expressing his feeling about *how* he felt to the people. (460)

Big Bill's use of "*have*" sets the tone for their discussion. The blues are very *present*. The black people of the South *have* the blues. They hold a history of slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, imposed serfdom, lynching, and numerous other traumatic personal and collective experiences. The blues is part of who the black people of the South are; it is from their hearts; it is how they feel. John Lee Hooker emphasizes this same idea when he states, "It's not only what happened to you—it's what happened to your foreparents and other people. And that's what makes it the blues" (qtd. in Middleton 51). Perhaps, then, the blues can be understood as a mixture of the collective and individual "I": a medium that allows access to the

voice of the performer as well as the voices of the African American people of the Southern United States. In this context, the blues can be understood as an avenue to express traumatic experience through various cultural signifiers, which allows for community to develop between those who can recognise the signs. Part of the trauma of the blues is the loss of home and the nostalgia for that lost place. Ultimately, through the use of trauma theory, the blues can be understood as a testimony of traumatic experience that asks for an attentive audience. To support this assertion, I will discuss two of Elmore James's songs, "Dust my Broom" and "I Believe," in his search for a way to "go back home."

With this collective and individual "I" in mind, how, then, do we approach the blues as cultural artifact, as vehicle of emotive response, and as traumatic testimony? The blues can be understood in myriad ways, but one particular explanation has come to resonate with how I see them. Rowan Ricardo Phillips tells us that he sees the blues built upon three foundations:

that it began as an oral art, that it veers almost compulsively toward repetition, and that it seeks an empathetic though not sympathetic audience—in other words, the blues functions best with a (silent) implicit audience because no matter the problem the blues is not a call for help but rather an itemization of the problem itself. (88)

Phillips' understanding of the blues allows us to see it as a manifestation of a cultural form of communication. The oral nature of the blues resonates with the understanding of orality as a form of sharing stories or experience; repetition reflects the oral nature as well. The emotive qualities of the blues are in its ability to allow the audience to empathize with the performer and the music; the blues become a shared experience. Also, although not directly addressing trauma, Phillips begins to unpack some of the markers of trauma that are inherent in the blues. In his elucidation of the blues as an "itemization of the problem itself" to an "implicit audience," we see the importance of having an impromptu conversation with the audience. In terms of trauma, the "problem" can be considered to be the traumatic experience; an experience "in which the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them" (Caruth 151). Further, "the phenomenon of trauma . . . both urgently demands historical awareness and yet denies our usual modes of access to it" (151). It

is for this reason that Phillips is able to claim that “it is a desire embedded within the blues to articulate a problem without servicing it” (Phillips 88). By not servicing the trauma we are denied our usual desire to “fix” the problem, we are denied an expected mode of access. The only response left to the audience is to simply *listen* to the performer’s pain.

By listening to the blues performer, a blues dialogue develops. This blues dialogue becomes the communication between the testifier and witness. In his essay “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” Dori Laub explains that, “[a]s an interviewer, I am present as someone who actually participates in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event” (62)<sup>1</sup>. It seems, then, that, through this dialogue, the witness is present to a narrating (or simply-telling) of the trauma that is, for the narrator, essentially a re-engagement with the event. There is a certain responsibility that develops in this covenant, so to speak, between the narrator and the listener (62). Through his own experience, Laub tells us, “I observe how the narrator and myself as listener alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience—with the sense that there is a truth that we are both trying to reach, and this sense serves as a beacon we both try to follow” (62). So, now a bond develops between the testifier and the witness, and also between the audience and the musician, and the musician and his/her music. This relationship is dependent on a certain amount of “give and take,” so to speak. The listener has to add what he/she can to the narrative as well as absorb what the narrator or singer is saying. It is a mutually dependent relationship that helps the narrator repossess his/her pain as well as search for the truth of the event. It is a repossession of a personal history that has been denied. Laub explains that the “testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal ‘thou,’ and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (70). In this repossession of the position of witness, the testifier is capable of finding his/her subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Laub discusses the trauma of Holocaust survivors in this essay, his theory and practice of engaging with human trauma is able to transcend event specific trauma and allows for a comprehensive engagement with human experience due to the individual nature of experiencing trauma. The importance of his article is to understand that trauma—through a Western perspective—is eased by the “give-and-take” relationship between the testifier (the traumatized) and the listener.

In terms of the blues, then, this dialogue is one that develops between music and text, and can be seen in the “call-and-response” form that “occurs when one person sings a part, and multiple voices answer,” or “when a guitar answers a vocal phrase in a blues song” (Weissman 9). The blues is built both to engage with an audience as well as to engage internally with itself. The marriage between text and music, as realized in the call and response form, is one that is distinctly different than that in most other types of music. The singer sings and the music responds to his/her words.

Perhaps it is appropriate to consider the renarrativization of the trauma and the ensuing repossession of the experience as a sort of healing process. Much of the healing develops in the repossession of the story, which can only take place within the retelling and repeating of the experience. After all, “[t]he traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth 5). The necessity to share one’s experience derives from the notion that “[n]one find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent. Moreover, survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory, that is, of a forcibly imposed ‘external evil,’ which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion. The ‘not telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny” (Laub 64). If the memory becomes distorted and this “imposed ‘external evil’” deludes the traumatized, then they are possessed by the experience instead of being in possession of it. Therefore, the (re)telling of the experience allows for a certain amount of (re)possession; that is, the weight of the experience is relieved through expressing the root cause of the trauma to a witness. To be traumatized is to withdraw “into a kind of protective envelope, a place of mute, aching loneliness, in which the traumatic experience is treated as a solitary burden that needs to be expunged by acts of denial and resistance” (Erikson 186). In terms of the blues, this “solitary burden that needs to be expunged by acts of denial and resistance” is the subject of the song. The performer seeks to gain control of the traumatic experience through the dialogue between him/herself and the music, and between him/herself and the audience. The resilience against this “place of mute, aching loneliness” is found “often in repetition . . . The idea behind repetition is that it is a mnemonic device: it aids in remembering something. Why would someone want to remember the blues? Because the blues

is an anodyne for a troubled soul” (Phillips 101-102). The blues, then, repossesses the traumatic experience; it offers the performer agency and control of the trauma.

The blues does more than allow for individual possession of trauma; it also “manages somehow to make a collective out of individual suffering, and through the formation of this collective finds resolution by means of coping as opposed to resolving. The blues does not suggest cures; the blues is its own cure” (Phillips 101). The blues creates this “collective out of individual suffering” through the very fact that it is conveying trauma. In the elucidation of the trauma through blues texts, both healing and a community develops. Cathy Caruth tells us that “[i]n a catastrophic age . . . trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (11). A commonality/ community develops in shared traumatic experience—not necessarily the same experience shared but the same experience of experiencing trauma. Therefore, “trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can. There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of identity, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed” (Erikson 186). It is in the safety of shared experience or a shared space to empathize that one can find community in trauma. It is in this same community that one finds identity. Recall that identity is found in the repossession of the traumatic experience.

Identity is sought because a split has developed in the traumatized. This split develops through the (re)engagement with the trauma. The testimony:

is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds—the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is—that are different and will always remain so. The testimony is inherently a process of facing loss—of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing—which entail yet another repetition of the experience of separation and loss. It reenacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it. (Laub 74)

The traumatized are divided by their experience. They are left to live between two worlds: the world before the trauma—the world that was “brutally destroyed”—and the world *now*. The continuing presence of this split recalls Big Bill Broozny’s comment on how the people of the South “*have the blues.*” The trauma does not simply disappear; it is simply coped with. Phillips reminds us that the blues is its own cure, which is perhaps close to what the blues does. It does not take away the trauma but it does lessen the wound and allows for easier navigation between the two split worlds. The blues acts as a vehicle to convey the traumatized between the two worlds. It is in remembering and reiterating the traumatic narrative that one can find a wholeness of self; it is in engaging in a dialogue that one allows for this healing to occur.

If we are to consider the blues as traditionally African American, it is best to elucidate the black perspective. One could argue that the average African American lives within two worlds as well. W.E.B. Dubois elucidates this binary: “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (3). Dubois further claims:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (4)

So, what develops through Dubois’ argument is a view of a people split between two forms of culture: both African and American. They desire to retain both cultures while attempting to find a unity of self. Further, in this pursuit of a sufficient selfhood, there is a larger drive to create a subjective African- American identity. The dream is not only to remember the rich cultural heritage of being both American and black but also to expunge the objectified identity of the African-American people and to emerge knocking at the “doors of Opportunity” as an empowered and whole self.

Dubois argues that a major goal of this pursuit of subjectivity is freedom. He argues that the African American people are still searching for freedom, “the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire” (11). Dubois is simply arguing for the freedom to be an agent. He feels that “[w]ork, culture, liberty” (11) are what the African American people need, “not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race” (11). Essentially, Dubois is arguing for the opportunity for “Negros” to become Americans. That, under this cultural moniker—American—there will be a unification of people in their “work, culture and libert[ies].” He further argues for “the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack” (11). What is important about his line of argument here is not only that he is arguing for the unification of peoples, but that he is highlighting that the African American people have something that white America is missing, and that they can supplement that gap in American culture.

Part of this offered culture is music: “[B]y fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (251). Although Dubois is discussing the traditional African folksong, his words offer a better understanding of the rich cultural heritage that we engage through the blues tradition. Dubois further argues that the “true Negro folk-song still lives in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung and in the hearts of the Negro people” (253), and he continues: “I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world . . . They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (253). The music of an “unhappy people, of the children of disappointment” develops from the folksong to the blues tradition. It sings the pain and the suffering of a people that want to return home, return to a “truer world.” To recall Big Bill Broozny, it is a music of “heart.” And, for those who perform these songs, “their hearts [are]

human and their singing stir[s] men with a mighty power” (Dubois 252). These strong hearts “stir” people because they sing of their lost home and their inability to return.

This idea of something “lost,” and the desire to find this lost object, is a major focus of the blues narrative. Richard Middleton, in his discussion of the blues, argues that this “structure—the lost object forever fleeing through the psycho-cultural strata—maps precisely to the structure of nostalgia” (57). Nostalgia is “[d]ensely layered, without clear origin, or else with an origin repressed from view” (57). Nostalgia is also the “acute longing for familiar surroundings . . . homesickness” (*OED* n.1). In the blues, perhaps it is best to think of the loss caused by trauma as synonymous with this nostalgic structure. The desire to find this lost home, to be able to return, balances with Laub’s explanation of the split between two worlds—one that was previously destroyed and the other that now is. Nostalgia is, according to Middleton, “emblematic of modernity, for it is the fracturing of tradition that brings forth this particular figuring of loss—even though, as we have seen, the effect when it emerges . . . is to reveal what was always already there: a structure built around a lost object, which is in one form or another a human constant” (57). This human constant, then, is the desire to narrativize and thereby understand the loss. It is an attempt to recover something that is missing in order to attain identity: “Blues nostalgia seems to speak not just of loss but also, famously, of *resilience* – a particular inscription of absence in a present that will, at all costs, be survived” (61). Middleton’s “*resilience*” is reminiscent of Dubois’ “dogged strength” in that they both attest to the unyielding desire to pursue a place for the self through the music. A notion of identity that acknowledges the traumatic past in this new “modern” world that is increasingly fractured and demythologized is a powerful personal understanding. By singing the blues, one anchors the African-American heritage within the fluctuating American identity, one that connects personal loss with that of an entire culture.

In terms of music, it is best to understand how this notion of loss and its creation of community can be conveyed. Music’s action as an emotive medium is part of how it helps to connect. The “stirring” quality of blues music is deeply attached to the relationship between music and the “expression and evocation of feelings” (Sparshott 24). According to Francis Sparshott, in his essay “Music and Feeling,” “since musical qualities are derived from formal properties that are generated by artificially constituted entities in constructed relationships, it is

to be expected that the affective character we experience in a piece of music should be *sui generis*, not to be described in terms derived from other areas of experience and hence not to be effectively described at all” (25). The emotive qualities of music, then, are generated through its form. Because music “is a world that is itself a symbol system,” we are capable of applying “our general-purpose repertory of feeling-words” to “this or that musical work with more or less appropriateness . . . But music remains music and its affectiveness is distinctive of it” (25). Although Sparshott is concerned with the lack of an immediate language to describe the emotive response to music, the listener can still apply emotional words of meaning in the attempt to elucidate the affect produced by the musical structures. In the case of the blues, the music, mixed with text, allows the listener to engage and then respond through the music’s emotive qualities. The searing guitar riff or the wailing harmonica adds its own voice and engages emotively with the listener.

Sparshott adds another quality to his theory of music: communication. He discusses song as a type of utterance that must be heard, which “is the use of voice as part of our social communication” (30). This musical utterance “in song” is a “merging of verbal communication (voice as conceptually loaded and articulated) with voice communication as culturally developed” (30). Thus music, through voice, offers communication to the audience; however, Sparshott qualifies this, rightly so, with the necessary cultural elements that offer contextually specific recognition of meaning(s) from the voice in the song. Voice in music, then, is a source of both language and non-verbal communication that is, perhaps, more easily accessible through a cultural awareness. It is necessary to understand the cultural context in the attempt to interpret meaning in the song. However, there is still an “abstract musical utterance” (30), a non-verbal music, that has an emotive function. The wail of a guitar or voice has the capacity to move emotionally, which recalls the *sui generis* quality of music—that music as its own language still communicates to the audience; it is still emotive. Sparshott reminds us, however, that “insofar as music as such is primarily language and not communication, music will be primarily articulating feeling for the musicians . . . rather than for others” (30). The musical language that develops is, so to speak, the creation of the artist. Simply put, the musician uses the music to articulate feeling and meaning through voice and sound, and the audience receives it through their cultural and contextual filters.

Part of the responsibility for the artist who adds text (lyrics) to his/her music is being aware of the superimposition of meaning as the lyrics and musical form meet: “Song-writing, in a musically developed culture, involves uniting a linguistic text that has its own complete set of meanings, which can be considered and reflected on, to a musical structure that likewise has a full set of meanings” (Sparshott 31). This marriage of meanings is not a convergence, necessarily; in fact, for Sparshott, “the qualities of the two may more or less conspicuously diverge” (31). Therefore:

the meaningful relations between the two may be various. For instance, the affective quality of the music as composed may as it were contradict or comment on the implications of the text in any number of ways. This is a familiar resource of vocal music. And the singing performer’s variation on or departure from the affective quality that is, so to speak, composed into the music . . . is matched by an ability to depart from, reinforce, or variously comment on the meaning of the words being sung. (31)

Essentially, the music and the text engage, or at least have the possibility to engage, in a dialogue. It is within the “departure” of text and music that we see how music works emotively and how it can become an anodyne to trauma. The story (text) is given context through how it relates to the music. A sad story with upbeat music delivers an ironic narrative; however, in the case of the blues, the text and the music engage one another to create the traumatic testimony. The music acts as witness to the text and together, through this dialogue, they create the narrative that allows for healing.

It is through this understanding that dialogue is necessary for both the blues and the repossession of trauma, and that the blues holds the trauma of the loss of home, that I approach two of Elmore James’ songs as a small case study of what I have elucidated thus far. James’ first song that we will study is his appropriation of Robert Johnson’s song “Dust my Broom,” which James recorded in 1951 as his first single. The next song seems, at first, almost identical, because it uses the same textual structure and guitar riffs, but it is distinctly different. Elmore James’ “I Believe” (1952) departs from the rural Delta sound of “Dust my Broom” and joins the new, urban Chicago scene. James’ additions to his band and the sound as a whole effect how the

music is heard; I do not mean in the obvious sense of “hearing,” but I argue that the addition of these new sounds and the shifts in the text of the song is James’ attempt to renarrativize both his story and the communal trauma that the blues holds. James develops a relationship with his music and with his audience that enacts what Laub describes as the covenant between testifier and witness. Ultimately, James is telling both his story and the story of the African American people; by doing so, he develops a rich cultural narrative that allows for community to develop through his music. James’ retelling of the same story is his return to the larger cultural trauma as well as his own.

Barry Pearson’s 1972 article, “The Late Great Elmore James,” offers us an image of Elmore James as a performer and a man of the blues: “Elmore’s strength lay in his ability to ‘move’ or ‘touch’ his audience” (162). Pearson tells us that much of this ability to engage and “move” the audience was due to how James’ “performance style, rooted in the traditions of rural Mississippi, was geared to this group activity in which the audience’s experiences were drawn out and projected back to them within the framework of his own personal experience, intensified and made more dramatic. Elmore was a master of this process of personalizing group expression” (162). On top of this, the audience was “impressed by the effort Elmore put into his work and accepted the sincerity he projected. Listeners were convinced he knew what he was talking about and the depth of feeling with which his performances were imbued left little room for doubt that this man understood the blues from personal experience” (163). James’ blues, then, conveys both his own personal story that he uses to connect with his audience as well as the story of the audience. From Pearson’s account, we see how James’ blues is both a language of his audience—one that connects and returns “the audience’s experiences” “back to them”—as well as a personal narrativization of his own experience. It is through the emotive quality of music that this kind of engagement can occur. James’ audience impose their own meaning to his music as well as engage with the lyrics. Both how James engages with the music and how the audience receives it allows for them to connect.

Pearson further explains how James approached his music: James’ “texts were composed to suit him as vehicles for moving people emotionally; they were his own words, a few stock images and verses that he would rearrange to suit the mood of the song he wanted. Perhaps he felt at home with these images and could sing them with conviction” (166). Or perhaps James

was attempting to repossess his own narrative in an attempt to gain a sense of self through the emotive qualities of his music. What does transpire in his 1951 single “Dust My Broom” is a formally traditional blues piece as well as a connection with a culturally specific audience:

I’m goin’ get up in the morning,  
I believe I’ll dust my broom.  
I’m going get up in the morning,  
I believe I’ll dust my broom.  
I quit the best girl I’m lovin’  
Now my friends can get my room.

A blazing guitar riff that is repeated throughout the song supports this first verse. The repetition of the first two lines is both a blues technique—an example of the AAB blues form—and an opportunity for James to speak to his guitar between each AA pair. The guitar answers back and supports him through its own repetitive reply and its sorrowful wail.

James uses the lyrics as an opportunity to setup cultural signs for a contextually savvy audience. As Debra DeSalvo explains, the term “dust my broom” is an African American cultural marker that signifies the impropriety of “sweeping the house after dark” (64): “This tradition comes from the West African belief that one should be careful not to accidentally sweep out of the house any benevolent gods or ancestral spirits who have come in for the night to watch over a sleeping family and protect it from evil spirits” (64). However, “when you *do* have evil spirits in the house, sweeping them out can be very effective. According to hoodoo riddance rituals, dusting one’s broom first with magic powder will sweep a house free of unwanted supernatural (and embodied!) houseguests” (64). Through the use of this term, James is able to articulate that there is some sort of uncanny presence that needs to be removed from his own life; in doing so, he articulates a cultural signifier, which allows for an engagement from a larger audience with the same cultural understanding. It is for this same reason that he uses the term “doney” when he sings about how he:

don’t want no woman,  
Want every downtown man she meets.

Man, she is a no good doney,  
They shouldn't allow her on the street.

A “no good doney” is a “lazy woman who isn't willing to stoop to hard work. By extension, she's probably working on her back” (DeSalvo 62). Perhaps what James is trying to sweep from his house is the experience of being with an adulterous partner. “Dusting his broom,” then, is his preparation to purge himself and his home of what is paining him. By putting such markers into his lyrics, James shares his pain with his culturally aware audience; he is testifying.

By the end of the song, James comes to a decision on what it is he is to do. Time presses and he is unwilling to sacrifice himself any longer for the sake of this “no good doney.” He sings:

I believe,  
I believe my time ain't long.  
I've got to leave my baby  
And break up my happy home.

It is this reference to departure that becomes important because it does two very different things: First, it shows that James has gained a form of self-sufficiency in his ability to “break up” his “happy home.” Second, it displays a sort of existential awareness that life is worth living, especially if one's “time ain't long.” James becomes painfully aware that his time is precious and that he needs to find something better. He is searching for something more worthwhile. Reminiscent of Dubois' earlier claim that there is a “longing toward a truer world,” James leaves us with his need to destroy and leave his home. This destructive quality fits into Laub's explanation of two worlds: James can no longer stay in this place that has been “brutally destroyed” through his lover's infidelity and must now accept the present situation.

In 1952, James released “I Believe,” and returned “back home.” He sings:

I'll get up in the morning,  
I believe I'll go back home.  
I'm a goin' to get up in the morning,  
I believe I'll go back home.

I got to find my baby,  
Acknowledge her I done her wrong.

The structure and most of the lyrics echo those from “Dust my broom”: however, instead of “dusting his broom” and leaving, he is ready to return home and “acknowledge her I done her wrong.” Further, James sings these final lyrics:

I believe,  
I believe my time ain’t long.  
Dust my broom this morning;  
I know I treated my baby wrong.

James has brought us full circle. He has both echoed the final verse of “Dust my Broom” and returned us to a familiar image. He has come back home and he has returned to the same labours that he once engaged in. The two songs answer each other: James is renarrativizing his experience. However, there is one major musical difference between the two songs. In the 1952 hit James has used a larger band with a wider range of sounds—he added saxophone and piano—playing the same music. He has “combined the harsh, intense vocal style and the slide guitar of the older Delta musicians with the sophisticated urban blues bands which were popular in Chicago” (Pearson 166). For James to be able to return “back home,” he has had to actually leave home.

Perhaps this disconnect between an imagined home and a new realized home is the tension that Pearson is considering when he claims, “A feeling of tension is generated by this combination of his country style and the smoother accompaniment of urban musicians” (166). This tension also develops in the space between the music and the text. The dialogue between the music and text has more “voices” in the 1952 track, but it is still telling the *same* story. It is by no means *identical* but it is attempting to communicate the same story through the *sui generis* language of the blues, which was typical of James: “It is rather as if Elmore James had only one story to tell and that this story was enough” (168). James’ repetitive use of the same riffs and images by no means detracted from his audience’s experience because the songs are inherently different. The form and music can be the same, but, depending on the context, a listener will

receive it differently. This dialogue and type of engagement can be seen as the covenant between the listener and musician. As listeners, it is our responsibility to “alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience—with the sense that there is a truth that we are . . . trying to reach, and this sense serves as a beacon we . . . try to follow” (Laub 62). Individually, the audience members search for what was lost in James’ blues (in the case of the two songs presented, James has lost both love and home).

A feeling of community and cultural closeness allows the audience to engage with James as well as identify with what is happening in his music. It is here that we see what Paul Gilroy was getting at in the epigraph to this paper when he claims that the “tactics of sound developed as a form of black metacommunication.” James singing about the loss of home and the desire to return attests to the larger African American cultural experience. He is able to connect by using such cultural phrases as “dust my broom” and “no good doney” to alert his contextually/culturally aware audience. Although the songs seem to be about breaking up and then getting back together with a girl, it is about loss of place and sense of self—we see these experiences elucidated in W.E.B. Dubois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*. James’ desire to return home can be seen as the African American desire that Dubois calls a “truer world,” or, in terms of trauma, what Laub calls “the place that was.” Despite the fact that performing and receiving music is an individual experience, it is in the shared experience of performing and receiving that community develops.

In James’ search for a way to “go back home,” we, as listeners, are brought into his experience and are enabled to reflect on ours. The loss that is inherent in the blues is at the same time *remembered* through the music. It is a lamentation for a home to which it is difficult to return. One can think of the blues as the necessity to remember the hardships of life and how that connects us as human beings who share similar experiences. Blues, as we saw previously in the words of Big Bill Broozny, is a way of life for the African American people of the southern United States. Elmore James lived the blues; it was part of him because the hardships of his forefathers were part of him. This heritage is what he expressed between the dialogue of his words and his guitar. The painful cry and the wail of the guitar is an expression of the pain of a people and the pain of a man. Yet it is a rejection of the hard times and a pursuit of the good. Big Bill Hill, upon remembering James after his death, tells us, “I still am a great admirer of

Elmo James. No one touched me no more than this man here. I mean blues wise, because he did it from here [points to his heart]. No imitation originality from here. He played the blues because he felt the blues and lived them . . . he was so far out you had to pull him in a little at a time . . . I can't describe it" (qtd. in Pearson 171). James went so far out because he was searching for that world that "was." He was brought back "a little at a time" as he performed and shared his blues; his music and the passion he infused into it was so emotive that he was able to welcome others into his traumatic space and offer a larger community identity. It is with this idea of community identity that I end with these words:

It is as though the blues themselves, through the medium of music, have transmuted the mixture of fear, despair, fury, heartache, and restlessness that were their founding racial impulse into a powerful urge toward compassionate brotherhood, a brotherhood that yearns, in however partial and compromised a way, to undo the spiritual and material conditions responsible for precipitating those blues-feelings in the first place. (Gussow 38)

The blues are both an anodyne to the pain of traumatic experience as well as a place to find community and togetherness: A place of safety and fraternity develops in a music of sorrow and pain.

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## APPENDIX

“Dust My Broom” (1951)

I'm goin' get up in the morning,  
I believe I'll dust my broom.  
I'm going get up in the morning,  
I believe I'll dust my broom.  
I quit the best girl I'm lovin'  
Now my friends can get my room.  
I'm goin' write a letter,  
Telephone every town I know.  
I'm goin' to write a letter,  
I'll telephone every town I know.  
If I don't find her in West Hills, Lord,  
She's in East Monroe, I know.  
I don't want no woman,  
Want every downtown man she meets.  
I don't want no woman,  
Want every downtown man she meets.  
Man, she is a no good doney,  
They shouldn't allow her on the street.  
I believe,  
I believe my time ain't long.  
I believe,  
I believe my time ain't long.  
I've got to leave my baby  
And break up my happy home.

“I Believe” (1952)

I'll get up in the morning,  
I believe I'll go back home.  
I'm a goin' to get up in the morning,  
I believe I'll go back home.  
I got to find my baby,  
Acknowledge her I done her wrong.  
I don't want no woman,  
Got to stay drunk all the time.  
I don't want no woman,  
Got to stay drunk all the time.  
Well you know she's a mean (green)  
woman,  
Tryin' to drive me out my mind.  
I believe,  
I believe I go back home.  
I believe,  
I believe I go back home.  
I got to lie to my baby,  
I know I treated her wrong.  
I believe,  
I believe my time ain't long.  
I believe,  
I believe my time ain't long.  
Dust my broom this morning,  
I know I treated my baby wrong.