

“Preachin’ the Blues”:  
The Intersection of Christian and Blues Exegesis  
and Hermeneutics in the Life and Lyrics of Son House  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the intersection of Christian and Blues exegesis and hermeneutics in the life and lyrics of Eddie "Son" House, a Baptist and Methodist preacher and Blues singer who was born in Lyon, Mississippi. It is intended as a biographical case study that highlights and explores the complex and multi-faceted relationship between Black Protestant Preaching and Blues Singing-Preaching. In doing so, it critically appropriates Religious Studies theoretical and methodological considerations, orientations, and insights—particularly those from Charles Long and Paul Ricoeur—to examine the life, artistry, ministry, and lyrics of House in light of his expressed religious orientations and dual, often-conflicting roles as a Christian Minister and Blues Preacher.

DEDICATION

For Carmella Scialabba (1912-2012), my great-great-aunt and “kindred spirit.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the nineteen months I spent researching and writing this thesis, I experienced medical problems that, at times, caused me to doubt my ability to push forward. I am deeply indebted to the health professionals who, along with ensuring my wellness, also encouraged me to not give up.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the relationship between Protestant preaching and Blues singing as reflected in the life and lyrics of Eddie “Son” House, a preacher turned Blues singer originally from North Mississippi. Although focused on Son House, it also provides critical insight into this dynamic as reflected more broadly among twentieth-century African descendants in the Southern United States.

Analysis of the intersection of House’s life and lyrics begins with attention to his birth in Lyon, a small Mississippi Delta town in present-day Clarksdale, next to the Sunflower River. Although House would sometimes contradict his year of birth (Beaumont 27), legal documents state that he was born on March 21, 1902. He died eight-six years later in Detroit’s Harper Hospital from larynx cancer after more than two decades of mental and physical health problems<sup>1</sup> (178), much of which resulted from his predilection towards alcohol and tobacco consumption.<sup>2</sup> The intervening years reveal a life that can provide a more critical and perceptive awareness and understanding of African American, and especially Southern, religious expression during the early to mid-twentieth century.

Daniel Beaumont’s biography, *Preaching the Blues: The Life and Times of Son House*, intricately captures House’s varied and convoluted life path. During his 86 years, House engaged in a myriad of professions—preacher, Blues singer, riverboat

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<sup>1</sup> His date of death is October 19, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Film footage from *Devil Got My Woman: Blues at Newport 1966* shows House’s friend, Blues singer Chester “Howlin’ Wolf” Burnett, publicly admonishing House for his heavy alcohol use. The footage was shot by Alan Lomax.

deckhand, levee worker, horse rancher, cotton and potato sharecropper, railroad worker—and lived in at least five states: Mississippi, Louisiana, Missouri, New York, and Michigan. Beaumont also tracks House’s romantic relationships, children and stepchildren, musical successes, and hardships during a life characterized mostly by manual labor, repeated migration, Blues music, an often-conflicting relationship with the Black Christian Churches, and a consistent struggle for spiritual solace and religious identity.

Part of House’s quest for a spiritual/religious identity was shaped by his childhood attendance in both Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) and Black Baptist churches around Mississippi and Louisiana. By his teenage years, House was apparently committed to and familiar enough with the particular language, symbols, rituals, etc. of Southern Black rural Protestantism to begin preaching. His apparent success led to his employment as a pastor in both Baptist and CME churches in the 1920s. Consistent with the general reception afforded Blues music, performers, and culture by the majority of black clergy as *evil* or from *the Devil*, House expressed a disdain for the Blues throughout most of his Christian preaching years. However, House’s view of the Blues changed in 1927 when, while walking by a house party, the sound of a glass bottleneck on an acoustic guitar “transfixed him” (Beaumont 39)<sup>3</sup>. In interviews, House states that he began playing guitar and transitioning to a full-time Blues singer the following year in 1928, at the age of 26<sup>4</sup>. By the mid-1930s, House had left the church and the preaching profession to become a Blues

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<sup>3</sup> House recounted two musicians who influenced him early on: Willie Wilson and Ruben Lacy.

<sup>4</sup> On separate occasions, House would claim this date to be 1926 (Lomax).

singer and guitarist. Neither official documents nor House's written or recorded correspondence indicates that House ever preached in a church again, with only one indication that House briefly re-joined a congregation after the death of a friend<sup>5</sup>. House's lyrics in "Preachin' Blues" hint at possible reasons for House's decision to leave the church. House sings, "You know, I'm going to preach these Blues/ and I'm going to choose my seat and sit down."<sup>6</sup> Certainly, House's reasons for leaving the church are complex and multi-faceted, but these lyrics indicate that, for House, his decision or calling to *preach the Blues* negated the possibility of him thereafter participating in "traditional" Christian worship. In other words, between the two "seats" available—Christianity and the Blues—House chose the Blues<sup>7</sup>. And like many of his predecessors, his new lifestyle led to a profession of playing music at house parties, juke joints, and Blues halls, in addition to busking. Likewise, House's immersion into Blues culture accompanied much more prominent access to alcohol and other vices.

Consequently, House spent a year or two in Mississippi's Parchman Prison Farm in the late 1920s for allegedly killing a man named Leroy Lee at a house party.<sup>8</sup> By most accounts, House shot Lee after a stray bullet hit House's uncle during a fight between Lee and House's friend Sam Allen (46). House was convicted

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<sup>5</sup> Beaumont writes that House is most likely referring to the death of Willie Brown in 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Both House's two-part 1930 recording titled "Preachin' the Blues" and 1965 recordings titled "Preachin' Blues" contain this line.

<sup>7</sup> The meanings behind the term *seat*, along with its theological implications, are discussed in more depth in chapter four.

<sup>8</sup> The dates of the Lee's death and length of House's incarceration are vague and inexact.



of charges that remain undocumented<sup>9</sup>. House sings about his incarceration for killing Lee in “Mississippi County Farm Blues”: “They put me in jail/ wouldn’t let me be/ They said I killed old Leroy Lee.” House’s decision to describe his conviction in terms of others’ claims about the incident implies House’s potential innocence—an innocence that signifies that, if it is true that Lee died from House’s shot, House’s actions were taken either in self-defense or reasonable concern for others’ safety. Nonetheless, his lyrics, suggesting that he unjustly suffered at the hands of a vicious and often vague legal system, were consistent with the common Blues critique of political and legal authority.

Over twenty-five years later, House was again accused of murder. Reportedly, he killed a man named Willie Junior Patterson on October 8, 1955, while Patterson tried to rob the shack where House lived in Long Island, New York while working on a Long Island potato farm named Cutchogue Labor Camp. This time, House’s case was dismissed on grounds of self-defense (Beaumont 123-124). House’s 1955 encounter with the US legal system in the American North sharply contrasts his previous experience in Mississippi. These incidents are separated by two factors: time and geography. Perhaps House’s dismissal indicates an improvement in the judicial system between the 1920s and 1950s. Additionally, this could be an indicator of the difference in the degree of institutionalized racism or legal injustice exhibited by the American South and the North. Nonetheless, it is telling that, even as House toured the South in the 1960s, he never gave up his

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<sup>9</sup> Beaumont states that the conviction was “probably manslaughter” (46).

residence in the North, meaning that, for a myriad of reasons, House appears to have preferred to make his home in the North<sup>10</sup>.

House's life both reflects and illuminates the complex and often convoluted historical, social, and economic context in which he lived. House's several migrations encapsulate the archetype that almost stereotypically came to be associated with the solitary, traveling, and individualist Bluesman, as sung about in numerous Blues songs. Nonetheless, House's movement between jobs and geographic locations highlights a common reality for the descendants of African slaves in the United States—one in which racism, economics, and the legal system often simultaneously necessitated and restricted geographic mobility. Angela Davis describes the situation as follows: "Even as women were compelled to remain at home to care for the children they had borne...men often had no alternative to traveling in search of work" (69). The necessity behind House's incessant travel was facilitated by two aspects of Delta reality: (1) the cotton industry was the main economic force along the Mississippi River and its tributaries and; (2) African Americans were the main demographic of workers on the cotton plantations, as detailed in Gene Dattel's *Cotton and Race in the Making of America*. Hence, House's economic options were intricately tied with his social status as an African American in an explicitly racist and racial society. Dattel illuminates this tie by explaining the

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<sup>10</sup> House's lyrics about the Mississippi Delta in particular create an aura of wanting to move beyond the restrictions and tribulations of black Delta life. In 1941's "Delta Blues," House sings, "I ain't going to be sad no more" and "I ain't going to be back no more." Although these lyrics, on the surface, reference a romantic relationship, they could also be interpreted as allegories for House's broader existential situation in the Delta.

post-bellum and modern plantation system as “(requiring) black labor” (222)—labor that was both voluntary, within the spectrum of available economic options, and coerced in the form of prison work and chain gangs. He uses novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe as an archetypical example of a white southerner who “identified the free black’s destiny with cotton and manual labor and hoped to keep blacks in their place in the Southern cotton fields” (132). Therefore, the commonality between House’s three main employment options—manual labor, preaching, and Blues singing—is that they all, to some degree, required the migration his life and lyrics exhibit.

House’s early years as a Christian preacher and Blues singer in and around the Mississippi Delta occurred in the wake of the “Great Migration” of African Americans from the American South to the North and Midwest between 1914 and 1918, as detailed in Milton C. Sernett’s *Bound for the Promised Land*. After the Great Migration, large numbers of African Americans continued to migrate northward throughout the 1960s. House, having most likely migrated in the 1940s, was one of them. The exact reason for House’s migration is unclear although one can assume that economics and southern racism played a major role in House’s decision<sup>11</sup>.

The reality of racism leads to a discussion regarding the context of southern white violence surrounding House during his formative years as a child, preacher, and Blues singer. Both of House’s violent episodes discussed earlier did not

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to imply that the American North was not a racist society. Both Sernett’s work and James Baldwin’s novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* show that, although northern whites were generally less violent than southern whites, it was by a matter of degrees, not absolutes. Likewise, racism still determined the extent of African American opportunities in employment, living spaces, social stature, etc.

explicitly deal with white supremacists; nonetheless, they point towards a wider dynamic of violence that circumscribed aspects of black life and were vividly reflected directly and indirectly in numerous blues lyrics<sup>12</sup>. The most prominent form of this circumscribed violence was the extreme and constant threat of white violence against African descendants, including the powerful Ku Klux Klan presence in Mississippi. Consequently, these factors sometimes encouraged inter-racial violence. House's incident with Lee implies a lack of police protection that subsequently led people to feel the need to protect themselves, however possible, and a judicial system that refused to acknowledge this. Dattel intricately highlights the powerful presence of the Ku Klux Klan within this time period. By 1925, the Klan had 8.9 million members (277). Alan Lomax and William Ferris describe the high probability of incarceration among southern African American males—a situation brought on by racism, injustice, lack of police protection, lack of access to quality legal representation, and economic exploitation that resembled institutionalized slavery<sup>13</sup>, among other factors. Using hard data, David Oshinsky describes the racial

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<sup>12</sup> House's protégé, Robert Johnson, was one of the foremost Blues singers who dealt with the problem of violence. With lyrics such as "Me and the Devil walking side-by-side/I'm going to beat my woman until I get satisfied" ("Me and the Devil Blues") and "And the day keeps on running/With a hellhound on my trail," ("Hellhound on my Trail"), Johnson's lyrics often directly confront the problem of both personal and societal violence and evil, or theodicy.

<sup>13</sup> The film *Slavery by Another Name*, based on the book by author and producer Douglas A. Blackmon, recounts how, in the years following the Civil War, forced labor or "neoslavery" emerged in the form of prison labor in the American South, persisting until the onset of World War II. "The Thirteenth Amendment states that slavery was abolished, except as a punishment for crime," says Douglas Blackmon. "So across the South, laws were passed to criminalize everyday African American life. It was a crime for a black man to walk beside a railroad, to speak loudly in the company of white women, to do someone's laundry without a license, to sell cotton

statistics of Parchman Penitentiary in *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*: “According to the state penitentiary report of 1917, blacks comprised about 90 percent of the prison population. Most were illiterate farm workers or laborers serving long sentences for violent crimes<sup>14</sup>” (137). Oshinsky’s prison data and Dattel’s discussion of the Mississippi cotton industry together indicate a legal system that was institutionally stacked against African American men—an injustice at least partially forged out of a need for cheap labor and a culture of anti-black violence. Additionally, Dattel quotes a study that documents “3,437 lynchings of blacks...between 1882 and 1951<sup>15</sup>” (277). This is the existential reality and context which shaped and nurtured House’s emergence as both a preacher and a Blues singer—a society in which, because of racism, people of African descent were limited vocationally and in constant fear of pervasive white violence.

Although brutal societal conditions provide the broader context of black life around the Mississippi Delta, these conditions were not the only thing that defined

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after dark. But the most damaging statutes were around vagrancy. If you couldn’t prove your employment at any moment, you were a criminal.” Once convicted, African Americans were leased to coal mines, brickyards, plantations, and turpentine farms and forced to work without pay. They were shackled, imprisoned, and often tortured. Thousands of people died.

<sup>14</sup> House’s relatively short prison sentence perhaps reflects a gradual change in the incarceration system between 1917 and the late 1920s. Additionally, House was literate and participated in other careers along with laboring. It is possible that House’s education, literacy, and professional experience gave him an advantage when dealing with legal matters.

<sup>15</sup> Dattel contrasts the number of African Americans lynched during this time period with the significantly smaller number of whites lynched: 1,293 (277). According to the study, 2,144 more African Americans were lynched than non-African Americans over this 69-year period.

life within the African American community. Most people spent their time working and raising a family—many even owning local businesses while simultaneously dealing as best as they could with the exigencies of black life and existence in the Delta and beyond<sup>16</sup>. House, likewise, spent most of his life as a laborer, father and stepfather, and husband to his wife Evie, who, despite numerous separations and House's infidelities, was married to House from 1934 until his death in 1988 (Beaumont). As was the case with many ministers and Blues singers, House's time as a worker and family man were immensely important, providing much of the substance for his Christian and Blues exegesis of black life. In both *Christian and Blues Preaching*, House grapples with making sense of what appeared to be the "nonsense" of life, and the absurdity of racism and black life in particular. Consequently, what emerges from books and articles about House, House's written personal correspondence, video footage, and lyrics is a portrait of a man who is profoundly intelligent, witty, sensitive, hospitable, and soft-spoken yet intensely engaged and concerned with the mysteries, intricacies, and contradictions of life, existence, and spirituality. It is likely that his sermons, like his subsequent Blues performances, evoked a seemingly unmatched intensity and boisterous emotional yearning, in contrast to his apparent quiet and shy nature when talking—a change in *aura* that indicates that the activities of Christian Preaching and Blues Singing require another level of "religious consciousness" distinct from one's *consciousness* during normal, everyday interactions.

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<sup>16</sup> Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* provides a poignant and beautiful portrait of both northern and southern African American family life during this time period, ripe with discussions of the individual-communal-societal dialectic I am describing.

Hence, House's sermons and songs reflect both his personal expression and the cultural context in which he lived. That is, they were complementary efforts to derive meaning from life experiences while simultaneously grappling with the paradoxes inherent within racism, black suffering, and the communal and personal trauma of the legacy of slavery. Consistent with the dynamics and dialectics of black life within the context of racism and segregation, but not exclusively defined by them, the references and metaphors within House's lyrics were developed within a particularly African American context that fused the sacred and secular<sup>17</sup>. It was also a context that was separate from yet intrinsically intertwined with the broader religious, social, political, gender, racial, class, and caste paradigms enforced by members of the dominant white power structure. By consequence, House's life and lyrics provide entrée to a broader exploration and analysis of the intersection and dialectic of race, religion, culture, and music. This dialectic is explored and analyzed within the context of the highly specialized Christian and Blues exegesis and hermeneutics of Son House. Among the methodological and theoretical tools used in exploring this dialectic are those provided by an interdisciplinary array of ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, folklorists, philosophers, linguists, theologians, journalists, psychologists, economists, sociologists, scholars of literature, and historians. Of special significance and consistent with my thesis that House's life, ministry, and artistry are ultimately an exploration of "how (he came) to terms with

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<sup>17</sup> The word *developed* is essential here. In the 1960s, House found himself largely playing for white audiences. Nonetheless, his performances during this time still reflect the tradition of Blues *developed* mainly for African American audiences decades earlier. The ultimate acceptance of blues among white Americans will be later discussed in more detail.

the ultimate significance” of his life and the lives of others members of his community, is my critical appropriation of Charles Long’s definition of religion as “orientation in the ultimate sense, that is how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world” (7)—a concept I discuss in more depth in the chapter titled “Theoretical and Methodological Considerations.” Therefore, exploration of House’s life, ministry, and Blues artistry is ultimately an exploration of “how (he came) to terms with the ultimate significance” of his life and the lives of other members of his community.

This analysis of the life and work of House is envisioned as the first stage of a broader exploration of a number of related questions over the coming decade—that is, explorations of a wider range of Blues artists, both men and women, and their own related but unique engagement with the broader dialectic of religion, race, culture, gender, philosophy, and music. The larger themes to which I hope to contribute are the relationship between the Blues and its varying religious influences, including West African traditions, multiple Protestant denominations, and even Catholicism and Islam. Thus, this study of the life, artistry, ministry, and lyrics of House provides preliminary insight into the relationship between the Blues and Protestant cultures and the concerns, modes of expression, experiences, and public discourses within the African American community during a critical era in African American history. My operative hypothesis is that one of the functions of the Blues singer in the multiple roles of entertainer, philosopher, preacher, and community leader is to provide deeper and more profound insight into the complexities and often contradictions of not only black life but also the wider



human condition. Among the tools and resources readily appropriated by House and numerous Blues artists were their own personal and communal experiences as well as established oral texts found in “folk” materials<sup>18</sup> and the Biblical canon. Selective appropriation of the latter by Blues artists such as House reveal existential commentary on recognizable narratives analogous to the common hermeneutical processes performed by preachers while interpreting Biblical text and black life in their sermons. Consequently, House’s lyrics, which exhibit his own unique exegetical and hermeneutical method in existential interpretations of established Blues tropes and Biblical literature, provide valuable resources for this exploration.

### Thesis Structure

In chapter two, the “Literature Review,” I discuss the literature that led me to focus on religion and American Blues music as a topic of this thesis and, subsequently, the literature that further informed my exploration of House’s life and lyrics. In doing so, I argue that Blues emerged as a form of *religious consciousness* that calls for the critical appropriation of both classical and more contemporary religious studies theories in exploring Blues as such. Chapter three delves further into the theoretical and methodological considerations that helped form my own approach to House and his work.

The fourth chapter of this thesis provides a broader biographical narrative of House to emphasize those aspects of his life upon which I expound. Additionally,

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<sup>18</sup> Folk materials include songs, jokes, and “folk” stories.

this chapter further places my analysis of House's life and lyrics within its historical, cultural, social, and religious context.

Chapter five contains my main argument by using House's interviews, public sermonic monologues, and recordings to extrapolate upon the hermeneutic function of the Blues Singer-Preacher as it relates to African American Methodist and Baptist sermons. This includes discussions regarding the role of the Christian and Blues Preacher as an interpreter of text, black experiences, and existential themes. At this point, I establish the phrase *Blues exegesis* to describe House's hermeneutic process.

Chapter six uses Ricoeur's<sup>19</sup> discussion of phenomenological hermeneutics to further specify how I am using the term *hermeneutics* and how it appropriately applies to *Blues exegesis*. It discusses how exploring House's ministry, artistry, and lyrics vis-à-vis Ricoeur's theory of hermeneutics provides a theoretical "springboard" for continuing to develop hermeneutical theories and methodologies within the study of African American religions, therefore further situating my thesis within the multidisciplinary framework of religious study. This chapter explains both the usefulness and dangers of the category *hermeneutics*, cautioning the reader against using the term as a *signifying category*.

Lastly, in my "Conclusion," I restate my argument and its broader theoretical implications while discussing potential future research regarding House, the Blues Tradition, and African American religions.

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<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. "The Model of a Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text."

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

My initial research into the study of religion and Blues music was informed by my previous ten-year career as a pianist, which was my main profession between the ages of thirteen and twenty-three. Much of my life was spent playing music on Friday and Saturday nights in jazz, blues, and rock clubs and cafes and spending Sunday playing several church services—mostly Catholic, but Protestant also. As I grew up, I began to notice the way in which musicians in both settings would discuss their music-making in religious terms, with several “nightclub” musicians even comparing themselves to priests and preachers. At the time, I had difficulty understanding what they meant by such a comparison. In my search to find this out, I, now into my late teens, read several autobiographies and biographies of jazz musicians such as trumpeter Miles Davis<sup>20</sup>, electric bassist Jaco Pastorius<sup>21</sup>, and upright bassist/composer Charles Mingus<sup>22</sup>. Mingus’s autobiography *Beneath the Underdog*—with its lively tone, experimental mixture of first person/third person/stream of conscious writing style, exaggerated sexual and violent anecdotes, and overtly “religious” language—had a particularly strong effect on me. Eventually, I posed the questions: “*What were the connections between Mingus’s life, spirituality, and music? How does his spirituality inform his “nightclub” musicianship?*”

Most of my academic work since reading *Beneath the Underdog* has reflected my early interest in the relationship between popular music and African American

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<sup>20</sup> Davis, Miles and Quincy Troupe. *Miles: The Autobiography*.

<sup>21</sup> Milkowski, Bill. *Jaco: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius*.

<sup>22</sup> Mingus, Charles. *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*.

religious expression. My honor's thesis, "Islam and Rap Music in the United States," discussed the expression of Sunni, Nation of Islam, and Nation of Gods and Earths<sup>23</sup> theologies and cosmologies in the work of the popular rap artists I first embraced as a teenager: Ice Cube, Mos Def, and, my favorite, the Wu-Tang Clan<sup>24</sup>. Upon entering the Master's program in Religious Studies, I knew I wanted to go further back in history and focus on African American music and religious expression during the Great Depression.

My interest in specifically researching the relationship between religion and the Blues was heightened after reading the work of William Ferris. In *Give My Poor Heart Ease*, Ferris writes, "Blues are the key to the cultural and intellectual history of the black, the southern, and the American experience. They affirm our spirit through love, protest, spirituality, humor, pathos, and celebration" (258). Ferris's contention is similar to that of composer Leo Smith, who describes Blues as "a literary and musical form and also a basic philosophy" (Palmer 276). In addition to containing intellectual and philosophical expression, Blues also communicates what could be called *religious concerns*—or, existential discussions regarding life experiences, cosmology, sexuality, morality, theology, social justice, human relationships, etc.—that often were unable to be expressed in the church setting. Consequently, Blues can be examined as a religious movement—a distinct manifestation of a myriad of

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<sup>23</sup> All of these are "sects" of Islam, with Sunni, of course, being the largest.

<sup>24</sup> Producer, rapper, composer, and Wu-Tang Clan founding member Robert "RZA" Diggs provides an extensive introduction to Wu-Tang spirituality and philosophy in his book, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, written with Chris Norris.

religious and cultural confluences from West Africa and Europe<sup>25</sup>. More than three decades before the publication of *Give My Poor Heart Ease*, Ferris's *Blues from the Delta* highlighted Blues religiosity as he describes the "secular service" of Blues performances within the ostensibly "secular" context of private homes, Blues halls, and juke joints: "...Blues singers call on the Lord for support in their verses, and the audiences encourage the performer to 'preach the Blues'...Consecrated with wine and dance, their performance is a secular service which embraces not only the Sabbath but the complete week" (28). Ferris's description challenges common notions that separate *religious/sacred* and *secular/profane* space. One could argue that Blues performance style and lyrics can often readily transform secular space into sacred space. However, this presumed dichotomy between sacred and profane space warrants additional attention since the Blues dynamic might also reflect the intersection of European Christian ideas about the separation of the sacred and profane with West African Traditions that make no such spatial distinction.

Lawrence Levine also dedicates a significant portion of his monograph *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* to a discussion of the Blues as a religious movement. In grappling with the documented divide and tension between early twentieth-century Blues culture and African American Christian culture, Levine offers an insightful explanation: "Blues was threatening (to the churches) not primarily because it was secular...Blues was threatening because its spokesman and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of

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<sup>25</sup> I go into further detail regarding these confluences later.

religion<sup>26</sup> in the past” (237). Subsequently, Levine suggests that the religiosity afforded by the Blues and the Blues Singer-Preacher provides a substitute for more “traditional” Christian notions of religion and religious expression—even to the point of providing a Blues cosmology that readily “(blends) the sacred and the secular” (237). Levine does not, however, call the Blues a *religious tradition* in itself.

In *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music*, Teresa Reed posits a thesis in substantial agreement with that of Levine, stating, “...(Blues) shows how turn-of-the century blacks integrated secular thought with sacred” (39). But Reed takes her contention further than Levine, writing, “...the references to religion in Blues lyrics show a gradual yet significant occurrence in African American history—the postbellum shift in black-American religious consciousness. In this transformation, black religious thought becomes less focused upon the afterlife and the intangible world, and more concerned with the concrete realities of day-to-day living” (39-40). However, it can be argued that Blues becomes more than a movement that merely *replaces* “traditional” religion but is itself an expression of *religious consciousness and thought* that is intricately tied to the realities of everyday living.

It is as *religious consciousness and thought* that Blues receives theological treatment from Jon Michael Spencer. In *Re-Searching Black Music*, Spencer first describes his methodology, *theomusicology*, by quoting N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear: “Theomusicology, for us, becomes a discipline that encourages the investigation of the process of socialization as a fundamentally religious or

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<sup>26</sup> Here, Levine is referring to Christianity.

theological one. Theomusicology treats black life in a holistic manner and secularity as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of sacred<sup>27</sup> (73). Employing a *theomusicology* approach, Spencer reaches two significant conclusions in *Blues and Evil: The Theologies of the Blues*: (1) “preaching the Blues” is “the main aesthetic standard of the Blues performance” (37); and (2) the “ ‘Blues god’ approached monism, the integration of good and evil” in that God and “the devil of African-American depictions were, in personality, the African trickster-god bifurcated” (72). Spencer characterizes *preaching the Blues* as a public performance that “was indistinguishable from the ethic of telling the truth” (37)—that is, Blues music and performance provided a forum for African Americans to express, discuss, and interpret the realities of their lives as a socially marginal community dealing with the horrors of racism, violence, and economic depravity<sup>28</sup>. Spencer’s second contention reflects two of the major confluences that have been identified with Blues tradition—West African Traditions such as the Yoruba and the Fon and Protestantism, as exemplified by the subsequent transition and bi-furcation in the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora of members and elements of the African pantheon. Especially notable is the identification of the *trickster god* Legba with Satan<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Spencer takes this quote from: Westfield, N. Lynne and Harold Dean Trulear. “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and the Ethics of Control in the Rap of Hammer.”

<sup>28</sup> In *Re-Searching Black Music*, Spencer theologically connects this idea to Psalm 139:8 (KJV): “If I ascend into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, thou art there.” He states that the condition in which many African Americans were forced to live was *hell*, and therefore *hell* was where they found contact with the Divine, as evident in the Blues.

<sup>29</sup> For cinematic treatment of this, see the film *Crossroads*, directed by Walter Hill.

Spencer's *theomusicology* approach is an extension of James Cone's theological discussion of the Blues and its relationship to black culture, and especially Black Christian culture, in *The Spirituals and the Blues*. Cone contends, "The Blues are about black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression" (97). In this way, Blues, rooted in the expression of the *truth* of "the experience of being black in a white racist society" (103), becomes an existential interpretation of those experiences—or, what Cone describes as a "secular spiritual" (97-130). Cone's theology of the Blues is theoretically and methodologically limited by his own religious and theological orientation as reflected in his assessment of the Blues and Blues culture through a Christian theological lens and indicated by his assertion that "Blues people, however, sing as if God is irrelevant, and their task is to deal with trouble without special reference to Jesus Christ. This...is believing that *transcendence* will only be meaningful when it is made real in and through the limits of historical experience" (113).

Both Spencer and Reed expand upon Cone by highlighting the West African tendency to ground theological/existential discourse in lived experiences, the formation of Blues cosmology, and the function of interactive musical performance in contributing to this discourse. Levine likewise illuminates a third epistemology that must be considered when discussing Blues—that of modernism, as associated with the Enlightenment and the African encounter with modernity. Levine writes, "...Blues was the most typically American music Afro-Americans had yet created and represented a major degree of acculturation to the individualized ethos of the larger society" (221)—an ethos which was influenced by and paralleled the wider Atlantic



community's encounter with modernity in the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. Levine argues that this *individualized ethos* was encapsulated in the "persona of the individual performer (that) entirely dominated the song" (222) and contrasts this *ethos* with the more community-centered paradigm that continued to be nurtured in the Afro-Christian tradition.

My thesis critically appropriates the theoretical and methodological insights of Levine, Reed, Cone, Spencer, Long, and a wider cast of interdisciplinary scholars to illuminate my contention that the Blues tradition is a distinct manifestation of the confluences of West African, Christian, and modern worldviews and modes of expression<sup>30</sup> in that it comprehensively critiques, continues, interweaves, links, and transcends the modes of *religious consciousness* associated with those traditions. My perception and description of the Blues reflects Thomas Tweed's discussion of religions as "confluences of organic-cultural flows" (54), an idea that I again discuss further in the chapter titled "Theoretical and Methodological Considerations." Nonetheless, my research begins with the contention that the Blues itself can be interpreted as a *distinct type of religio-musical tradition* originally forged and nurtured in the historical and cultural matrix of the Post-Bellum American South. Consistent with this thesis, I refer to the Blues as a capitalized proper noun.

In this way, I presume that the Blues Tradition can be discussed and analyzed in terms and concepts established by both classical and more contemporary religious studies literature. Religious studies theories, of course, must be

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<sup>30</sup> Here, I want to leave open the possibility that other yet-to-be-highlighted confluences are present within the Blues tradition.

appropriated with critical caution, largely because many of them exhibit Euro-centric and racialized presuppositions. Despite this, when critically appropriated, they offer a variety of useful theoretical and methodological lenses through which the Blues Tradition can be explored. For example, the modes of expression and emotions evoked by Blues performance can potentially be described in terms of what Friedrich Schleiermacher calls an “intuition of the universe” (24). Likewise, one can explore the potential religious experiences and consciousness that Blues performances encourage—experiences that can at once be cathartic and uplifting yet frenzied and terrifying—by reference to what Rudolph Otto calls the “*mysterium tremendum*”<sup>31</sup> (13). The Blues phenomenon also invites application and critique of theoretical conceptualizations of sacred and profane time and space<sup>32</sup>. Notable in this regard is Ferris’s description of a Blues performance as a “secular service which embraces not only the Sabbath but the complete week” (*Blues* 28); this description encapsulates the Blues contention that all time is, in some ways, *sacred*. It also points to the possibility of exploring Blues performances in terms of ritualized behavior that, in Emile Durkheim’s terms, forge a “single moral community” (62) or indicate a myriad of internal conceptual understandings: symbols, moral philosophies, ancestral relationships, cosmologies, theologies, etc<sup>33</sup>.

Complementarily, one can critically appropriate the methodologies and concepts

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<sup>31</sup> Long already provides an extensive conversation regarding Otto’s theories in relation to the study of religion in the United States, which I discuss further in chapter four.

<sup>32</sup> The terms *sacred* and *profane* are appropriated from Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*.

<sup>33</sup> This idea borrows conceptual understandings expressed in Fritz Staal’s exploration of Nambudiri brahmin ritual in “The Meaninglessness of Ritual.”

associated with Karl Marx<sup>34</sup> and Max Weber<sup>35</sup> in exploration of the dynamics and dialectics of economics, class, caste, gender, and race and their connection with religious expression and consciousness as exhibited within Blues artistry. My thesis largely appropriates theories of textual and ontological interpretation—most prominently the discussions of hermeneutics provided by Charles Long and Paul Ricoeur—to critically examine House’s life, ministry, Blues artistry, and lyrics. In doing so, I am continuing a tradition forged by Spencer, who discusses Blues cosmology, theology, and morality in light of Ricoeur’s theological works<sup>36</sup>.

These possibilities suggest that it is as a *distinct religion*, with its own cosmologies and “expressive communal channels of relief” (Levine 237), that the Blues emerged as one of a number of contesting and contested ontologies among traditions associated with Christianity as well as African derived *religions* such as Voodoo, Hoodoo, and other “conjuring” traditions<sup>37</sup>. Presumably, House, growing up in the Mississippi Delta’s African American communities, was familiar with these contested and contesting ontologies prior to embracing the Blues Tradition; he served as a pastor within both Baptist and Methodist churches. Although not identical, there are many similarities between these expressions of Evangelical

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<sup>34</sup> Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *On Religion*.

<sup>35</sup> Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion*.

<sup>36</sup> There are three arguments that Spencer appropriates Ricoeur to explain: (1) Blues representations of “human pity” are intended as an opening to soteriological searching; (2) vocal interjection of the phrase “oh Lord” in Blues music is a religious incantation rather than a “theologically meaningless apostrophe”; (3) Blues contentions that humans are the “ultimate arbiters” of *good* and *evil* “roughly coincides with Paul Ricoeur’s notion of ‘man the measure’” (Spencer *Blues* 3, 54, 91)

<sup>37</sup> For further reading on conjuring traditions, I recommend Yvonne P. Chireau’s *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*.

Protestant Christianity, particularly as embraced and nurtured within the African American community.

Both Traditions emerged in the extended wake of the European Reformation and gained stronghold among white and both free and enslaved black Americans during the Great Awakenings. Likewise, as Mechal Sobel explains in *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, “both the Baptist and Methodist faiths emphasized personal experience and required its recounting” (129). But Sobel’s description of their differences may provide an important key to understanding House’s preoccupation with the Baptist faith in his Blues lyrics amidst the notable absence of explicit discussion regarding Methodism: “With the depravity of man as its primary message and its call for Christian perfection as the major goal, Methodism was more alien to the African understanding of man’s mixed nature than was the Baptist faith. Baptists generally believed that the saved man can fall and be saved again and again” (129). The theological, ontological, ecclesiastical, and even personal complexities associated with House’s apparent preference for and fixation with the Baptist Tradition, rather than Methodism, may never be fully understood. Nevertheless, his life and lyrics reflect a providential paradigm of continual restoration, or an idea that where one is today is not necessarily where one will be tomorrow and that embracing the ups and downs of a continual life journey is both necessary and preferred. It is a paradigm that, in doctrine and theology, seems more compatible and consistent with the Baptist Tradition’s roots in Calvinism.

Viewing and analyzing the Blues through the multi-disciplinary lens of religious studies and as a *distinct religion*, simultaneously intertwining with and

contesting other religious traditions, also allows religious studies scholars such as myself to explore its rich cosmology, confluences, and modes of expression. My research starts with a mode of expression acknowledged as common to both Protestant and Blues Traditions: *preaching*. In general, Black Protestant preaching emphasizes an oral tradition that seeks to interpret the Bible so that, as Henry H. Mitchell writes in *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*, the gospel “(speaks) to a person’s current needs” via the vocal and exegetical skills of Christian Preachers (20). Additionally, for Mitchell, “The intelligent preacher knows that true comprehension is holistic,” therefore allowing “time for the essence to sink into all sectors in the psyche” (97). In other words, Mitchell expresses the need for preachers to engage people cognitively, intuitively, and emotionally (97) in a way that “leads people to feel literally that they are being addressed personally” (106)—a preaching attribute he traces throughout the history of the black churches from the Great Awakenings to the contemporary era. While music and musical expression is an important complement of the Black Christian Preaching Tradition, the Blues Tradition’s prominent form of *preaching* is that of musical performance. Consistent with this tradition, it is through musical performance that House, as a Blues Singer-Preacher, engages his audiences’ *complete psyche*, providing existential interpretations of black life and Blues texts that are at once powerfully communal and intensely personal. Exploration of this mode of expression and its hermeneutic qualities will eventually open up discussion regarding theological and existential components of Blues discourse, but I must first establish the complex relationship between the Christian confluence of *preaching* and this manifestation in the Blues

Tradition—*preaching the Blues*, that is. Additionally, this will open the door for further extensive examination into the other varied components of *preaching* that coincide with the preacher’s function as a hermeneut: performance style, rhetoric, congregational validation, oration, sermon preparation, and community leadership. House’s dual career as both a Christian Preacher and a Blues Preacher, and especially his Blues lyrics, are examined to highlight the interpretive functions embodied in the Blues Singer-Preacher’s performance—an interpretive function and performance style that was traditionally claimed by and delegated to the Christian Preacher within the “traditional” Protestant ecclesiastical arena.

The most extensive work focused on House is Daniel Beaumont’s *Preachin’ the Blues: The Life and Times of Son House*—the book from which I cull House’s biographical information. Beaumont also provides concise information regarding the three major periods of House’s recording career: (1) House’s recordings for Paramount and Grafton studios, released in 1930 (63-74); (2) House’s 1941-1942 recordings for the Fisk University-Library of Congress Study under the direction of anthropologist Alan Lomax (94-109); and (3) House’s 1960s recordings under the management of Dick Waterman, who sought out House and convinced him to tour the folk music circuit (138-154). The extensive nature of House’s catalog provides both a blessing and a danger for the researcher. For one, as expected, House’s music from the 1960s is different from his music from the 1930s—including a noticeable change in the timbre and pitch of his voice<sup>38</sup>. Nonetheless, many themes are

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<sup>38</sup> House was known for his deep baritone voice. The 1960s recordings, though, show House reaching a higher register than his earlier work.

consistent within all three of House's career, *religious themes* being one of them, albeit with a more mature intellectuality and complexity in his older years. Another difficulty is dealing with the important implication of change in House's demographic appeal. In the 1930s and 1940s, House's audience consisted mostly of African Americans; in the 1960s, after Waterman's so-called "rediscovery", House's audiences were mainly young white people attending folk concerts<sup>39</sup>. This change in audience has profound implications for how House was received by his prospective "congregations", including club owners' displeasure with House's often spoken *religious* monologues (152), but House's recordings maintain enough cohesion in theme and form between 1930 and 1965 that the later recordings still emerge as a continuation of the early twentieth-century Blues Tradition<sup>40</sup>.

Beaumont also provides an important description of Blues songs that encouraged my exploration of House's work in particular. He writes, "...Blues is a secular homily—commentary on a scripture of mundane stories already known to its audience because they have all lived them" (68). Beaumont then describes Blues lyrics as containing "thematic coherence" rather than "narrative coherence" (68)—that is, Blues lyrics are an interpretation of a referenced narrative rather than an

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<sup>39</sup> Note that this phenomenon also included the performing of other traditionally African American musical art forms such as gospel in front of mainly white audiences. A prominent example of this is gospel singer Mahalia Jackson's 1958 performance at the Newport Jazz Festival, captured on the album *Live at Newport 1958*.

<sup>40</sup> In fact, House has versions of "Preaching the Blues" on both his 1930 and 1965 recordings.

explication of the narrative itself<sup>41</sup>. Beaumont's contention that Blues lyrics are "commentary on a scripture of mundane stories" opens the door for exploring the connection between House's interpretation of *referenced oral texts* and Biblical stories, both of which seem to have operated as a type of known and acknowledged canon whose respective reference did not require explication. Thus, my work discusses the twin foci of House's hermeneutical processes while interpreting both the Blues and Christian canon; likewise, it explains how these resulting exegetical and hermeneutical efforts point to and explicate existential themes while referencing canonical tropes that were immediately recognizable to African American audiences<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> A song following a chronological narrative form is generally referred to as a *ballad*.

<sup>42</sup> From the end of World War II on, these tropes increasingly became recognizable to non-African American audiences worldwide. Alan Lomax notes this in his "Preface" to *The Land Where Blues Began*: "The Delta scene was, perhaps, more savage than that in some other parts of the South because it was a sort of industrial frontier...Now that people everywhere begin to taste the bitterness of the postindustrial period, the Delta Blues have found a world audience" (xv). This dynamic and dialectic speaks to the "universality" of the thematic, charismatic, cathartic, and *truth-telling* characteristics of the Blues. The footage I have viewed of House's performances in the 1960s, though, show marked differences in white and black audience reactions to House. In front of white audiences, House was often situated on a stage while the mostly young, "college student" audiences sat silently and looked on in enjoyment, clapping after each song. In front of black "audiences" House was often co-mingled in the crowd and engaging them in "call-and-response" and other participatory actions. Lomax's film *Devil Got My Woman: Blues at Newport 1966* also shows House, as an "audience" member, responding to the performer, House's friend Howlin' Wolf, in a similar fashion. My characterizing of the white audience dynamic seen in 1960's footage of House starkly contrasts footage I have seen of other black and white Blues performers such as Muddy Waters and the Allman Brothers in the 1970s, perhaps reflecting, I speculate, a broader acceptance of the *religious consciousness* and spiritual-physiological-psychological responses to this *consciousness* traditionally associated with African American musical and religious traditions. I have likewise noticed a similar contrast among the varying



In *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Alan Lomax recounts his experiences recording House, who he claims provided him with the “best” recording session he ever facilitated (17). Lomax’s work provides significant context for House’s 1940s recordings, including discussion regarding House’s relationship with other Blues musicians such as predecessor and mentor Charlie Patton (16) and protégé Robert Johnson (16-17). Lomax also provides insight into House’s economic and social situation while explaining why future research into Blues is important. After House expresses puzzlement over Fisk University’s interest in his music—especially because Fisk’s project was under the direction of a white professor—Lomax responds, “History wasn’t just made by kings and presidents and people like that; we’ve found out that the people who plow the corn and pick the cotton have had a lot to do with it. My job is to help you get down the history of your own people” (17).

Although Lomax’s work is often considered a classic of anthropological and Blues literature, it is also a sensationalized and romantic recounting of his time in the Mississippi Delta. In fact, Beaumont warns of Lomax’s well-known looseness with facts (93-94). Nonetheless, Lomax’s book highlights an essential theoretical concept—that Blues in the first part of the twentieth century was a Tradition intended specifically for the communities of African descendants as existential commentary, explanation, and therapy rather than as the subject of academic attention, as evident by House’s surprised reaction to Lomax’s inquiries. This sense, also contrasted with later white interest in the Blues, reveals the importance of

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generations of my Italian-American and Chicano family and their reception of and response to “African American,” “Afro-Latino,” and “Afro-Caribbean” music and spirituality, among other musical and spiritual *forms*.

studying the development of the Blues Tradition in connection to the social, cultural, religious, and racial context in which it first took hold.

On a more microscopic scale, Reed performs a textual interpretation of House's 1930 recordings "Preachin' the Blues Part 1" and "Preachin' the Blues Part 2". Reed uses her interpretation of these recordings to ultimately support her contention that Blues successfully "integrated secular and sacred thought" (39). In "Preachin' the Blues: A Textual Linguistic Analysis of Son House's 'Dry Spell Blues'" (222), linguist Luigi Monge attempts to reconcile House's "combining (of the) two opposing activities of preaching and Blues singing into a single unified expression" (229). He describes this "psychological background" of combining these activities as having been manifested in "strange acts, such as preaching in juke joints...and... alternating Blues and spirituals in his concerts" (229). Monge applies a textual linguistic analysis to House's 1930 recording of "Dry Spell Blues" to show how this song's symmetrical structure and thematic concepts situate it as a Blues prayer. Monge concludes: "Such an aesthetic 'duplicity' is the result of African American artists' greater confidence in, and higher awareness of, their own autonomous and innovative position in American society as spokespersons of a different culture" (251).

Monge's article implies and helps explain the increasing acceptance of the Blues among the black Christian churches dating from about the 1940s onward. Roger Stolle touches upon the more contemporary manifestation of this dynamic in his 2011 book *Hidden History of the Mississippi Blues*. Stolle transcribes an interview he conducted with a man known as The Mississippi Marvel, who recorded Blues

music pseudonymously so the congregants in the church where he preaches and plays gospel music do not discover his participation in this activity<sup>43</sup>. The Mississippi Marvel provides a theological justification for his Blues singing. He states, “...the Bible tells you to make a ‘joyful noise’ with your instrument<sup>44</sup>. Now, that’s just really coming down to the point. What is the Blues? When God said make a loud noise with your instrument, he didn’t tell you [not] to sing, ‘Baby, please don’t go’ or nothing like that. He just said, ‘Make a loud noise with your instrument<sup>45</sup>” (104). For the purposes of my thesis, Stolle and The Mississippi Marvel indicate that the historical dynamic I am exploring through House has had long-lasting effects—effects that still show up in contemporary Southern Blues and Christian discourse and performance. Additionally, The Mississippi Marvel implies that the Blues itself fulfills a religious function with a legitimacy that is still contested within Christian churches as he refutes his congregation by asserting that the Blues, in fact, achieves one of God’s commands<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> You can also view The Mississippi Marvel’s interview in Stolle and Jeff Konkel’s film *M is for Mississippi: A Road Trip through the Birthplace of the Blues*. Consistent with The Mississippi Marvel’s request, his identity is concealed in the film, with his voice obscured and his face never shown on camera.

<sup>44</sup> “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.” (Ps. 100:1 KJV)

<sup>45</sup> Note that The Mississippi Marvel is also discussing his church’s disallowance of the guitar to be played in church and contention that the piano is a more appropriate instrument for gospel music.

<sup>46</sup> Also, as we moved further into the contemporary era, the worship styles and musical traditions of the Holiness movement, which gave birth to Pentecostalism and the Church of God, would make its way into mainstream Baptist, Methodist, and even Catholic churches in the forms of “neo-Pentecostal” or “Charismatic” movements. Holiness influences can also be found in *Blues religiosity*, although I have yet to discover any in House’s music.

Monge's article also reflects the need for a closer analysis of House's role as a Blues Preacher, for none of the preceding works explore the Blues Singer-Preacher's hermeneutic function with the detail and precision it deserves. This thesis aims to contribute to this reassessment by exploring in depth House's hermeneutic process through close examination and analysis of the content of his Blues lyrics. Hence, my exploration of House's lyrics as exhibitions of existential exegesis and hermeneutic performances both illuminates House's own understandings of his interpretive role as a Blues Singer-Preacher and provides a complementary, though by no means definite, exploration of the complexity of House's paradigm through critical appropriation of the methodological and theoretical tools provided by the religious studies field.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

My discussion of the Blues Tradition is framed by two definitions—or, as I view them, descriptions—of *religion*: (1) Thomas Tweed’s definition in *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*; and, more prominently, (2) Charles Long’s definition in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Tweed writes, “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (54). The part of Tweed’s definition that is most relevant for my purposes is the idea of *religions* being, on some level, a manifestation of *confluences of cultural flows*. Earlier, I pinpointed at least four *cultural confluences* of critical importance to the analysis of the Blues Tradition: Blues culture itself, of course, and West African, Christian, and modern confluences. This project particularly focuses on an aspect of the relationship between two of those confluences: Christianity and the Blues. I seek to explore these confluences in a way that provides a foundation for new and continuing research. Hence, my focus particularly on the relationship between Blues and Christianity, with an emphasis on the Blues perspective, is not intended to exclude the other confluences; rather, I hope it inspires further research into those varying *cultural flows*.

This discussion of confluences, in turn, leads to a definition of *religion* that most prominently factors into my theoretical considerations: Charles Long’s. Long writes, “For my purposes, religion will mean orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of

one's place in the world" (7). Long describes his purposes further: "Some tensions have existed between (some) forms of orientation and those of the Christian churches, but some of these extra-church orientations have had great and critical power. They have often touched deeper religious issues regarding the true situation of black communities than those of the church leaders of their time" (7). Long's definition of religion proves especially important for my thesis because I, too, am positing and exploring the Blues as an *extra-church orientation* initially formulated among and performed by African descendants in the United States.

It would be a mistake to assume that any person only expresses one *orientation*—a reality that is largely reflected in House's life and lyrics. Because of this, I am particularly focusing on two of House's expressed and embraced *orientations*: Christian Preacher and Blues Singer-Preacher. Even more specifically, I am focusing on one function House performs within both of those *orientations*—the function of textual and existential interpretation, or textual and phenomenological hermeneutics.

Viewing *religions* as *orientations* intricately relates to Long's contention that "the cultures of non-Western peoples were created as products of a complex signification" (5). In Long's contention, *signification* connotes a form of deception that does not involve direct lying, or a conniving *slight of hand*. Long expands on the idea of *signification* in detail:

While the reformist structure of the Enlightenment had mounted a polemic against the divisive meaning of religion in Western culture and set forth alternate meanings for the understanding of the human,

the same ideological structures through various intellectual strategies paved the ground for historical evolutionary thinking, racial theories, and forms of color symbolism that made the economic and military conquest of various cultures and peoples justifiable and defensible. In this movement both religion and cultures and peoples throughout the world were created anew through academic disciplinary orientations—*they were signified*. (4)

That is, the categories created by Enlightenment discourse—religion, race, culture, etc.—served to reinforce and justify European power structures and the use of economic and military might to capture and maintain this power. Almost twenty years after Long published *Significations*, Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* reflects Long's contentions by describing the category *world religions* as a Euro-American academic creation with roots in an Aryan (Greek, Persian, and Indian) "propensity for universality" (205)<sup>47</sup>. This category, *world religions*, then becomes "an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions elsewhere in the world"<sup>48</sup> (20). Long's idea of *signification* extends beyond merely "inhabitants of regions elsewhere" and includes, in Benjamin Rolsky's words, "communities" everywhere who are "related to but outside the European Enlightenment and its various civilizing processes" (765).<sup>49</sup> Viewing *religions as orientations* therefore creates

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<sup>47</sup> Ironically, Masuzawa's work, as enlightening as it is, makes no reference to Long's work.

<sup>48</sup> Meaning, anywhere other than Europe and North America.

<sup>49</sup> Here, Rolsky is paraphrasing Long's 2005 contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Religion* titled "Popular Religion." In this entry, Long relies on Vico and Herder's idea of "the *popolari*" and "the *volk*" to describe these traditions as "Popular Religions"

disjuncture between the overriding *signifying* categories used to describe people *related to but outside the European Enlightenment*, including the progenies of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>50</sup>

The biographical approach I undertake in this case study is intended to stand as a corrective, however small, in that it illuminates and acknowledges the theoretical and methodological fissures within these *signifying* categories. In doing so, I build a body of discourse that draws upon the work and insight of House to more accurately reflect the multi-layered religious consciousness of African Americans as evident in both the Christian and Blues Traditions.

Long's discussion of William James and James's student, W.E.B. Du Bois, further illuminates the importance and potential contributions of biographical methodology. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James writes, "Religion...shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine" (36). James is nuanced enough to specify that this definition has limits, as indicated in the phrase *shall mean for us*. Long praises James for asserting that the "differentiation of consciousness is a reality," (184) as implied by the term *variety*. Long uses Du Bois's work to expand upon James's contention and express a need for "(understanding) the grotesque and bizarre convolutions of human

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(Rolsky 765). In this sense, Blues could be describes as a *popular religion*, although my current ignorance of other traditions that might be described similarly bars me from applying this term abjectly.

<sup>50</sup> Long's creation of disjuncture reflects Michel Foucault's creation of fissure within broad categories regarding European history in 1972's *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*.



consciousness which emerge when the constitution of the religious faces historical memory” (184). Here, Long is alluding, at least in part, to Du Bois’s idea of *double consciousness*, which Du Bois describes as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the others” (45). With particular regard to African Americans in the early twentieth century, Du Bois states in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “One ever feels his twoness—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” (45).

Long’s perceptive reconciliation of the theoretical insights of James and Du Bois illuminates the connection between the individual and the community as well as the complex intersection of religion, culture, and history in that a person’s public personal expression provides insight into the recognizable collective understandings of that person’s audience. This dynamic and dialectic is graphically reflected in the life and lyrics of House, whose formative influences came from his initial audience as a preacher and Blues artist—communities of people still reeling from the trauma of slavery and subjected daily to the terrors described in Cone, Dattel, Levine, and Spencer’s books.

In “The Personal and Beyond: Simone Weil and the Necessity/Limits of Biography,” Mark Freeman uses the life and work of French philosopher, academic, and mystic Simone Weil to discuss the theoretical and methodological benefits and complications of biographical work in religious studies. On one hand, he “(underscores) the idea that biographies and autobiographies...represent a privileged inroad into the study of religious experience and religious lives more

generally” (188). Relying on the idea of religion as *orientation*, this means that the most apparent and useful sources for exploring House’s *religious experiences and life* would be the sources originally generated by House himself in relation to his community—his songs, sermons, interviews, and written correspondence.

But interpreting House’s own understanding presents a plethora of methodological difficulties. One aspect of this problematic is alluded to by Freeman, who writes, “...the commitment to religious life can bring forth a mode of being-in-the-world that runs positively *counter* to biographical, or more specifically autobiographical, knowing” (188). In other words, *religiosity* implies roles, functions, and modes of being that inform yet *transcend* biographical knowing. Hence, House’s role as a Blues Singer-Preacher, and the documents he formed while enacting that role, are steeped in personal experience yet not strictly autobiographical. Rather, they are referential and interpretive with the intention of inspiring emotions, thoughts, movements, and participation within his audience. Therefore, exploration of House’s life, ministry, and artistry provides a necessary biographical *inroad* into his orientation while simultaneously demanding critical attention to and awareness of a counter-biographical *transcending* of biographical reductionism<sup>51</sup>. In this role, House inherits and appropriates communal notions of leadership and various functions, including the interpretive function, that accompany the assignment of *preacher, pastor, and Blues performer*—interrelated and interconnecting assignments which concurrently *inform* and *transcend* his

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<sup>51</sup> Freeman describes this *transcendence* as that which is “*impersonal, i.e., what transcends the human personality*” (188).

biography by revealing aspects of House's personal *orientations* while also exposing what those *roles* meant to his community.

Long's theoretical insights in particular help to forge a biographically rooted methodology that situates my work firmly within contemporary discourse regarding the development of African American religion. My research also implicitly relates to Rolsky's contemporizing of Long's work. Here, it is necessary to quote Rolsky at length:

I argue that Long provides scholars of American religious history with a much needed conceptual layering that locates 'America' within the contexts of the Atlantic world, modernity, and cultural contact through exchange. As such, Long defines his investigations of religion as hermeneutical projects that question the unreflective and unaffected position of the colonizer in the creating and disciplining of knowledge through a discursive stylistic of scientific objectivity and ontological purity (750-751)

Despite the current absence of explicit discussion of House as a cultural inheritor of the many confluences associated with the *cultural contact* of the *Atlantic world*, a discussion of his *orientation* immediately alludes to this context by describing a religious formation that, as stated earlier, is "related to but outside the European Enlightenment" (Rolsky 765). Also, by highlighting House's exegetical and hermeneutical process and contention that he is *preaching the Blues*, discussing the interpretive function of House's Blues preaching, and exploring House's life and lyrics to do so, this thesis in effect challenges "the unreflective and unaffected position of the colonizer" by providing a religious studies case study that seeks to

accurately reflect and explore the life and work of a person who embraces an “extra-church orientation” (Long 7).

Moreover, all of the works in my literature review take for granted, at least implicitly, Levine’s assertion that “Blues...represented a major degree of (African American) acculturation to the individualized ethos of the larger society” (221)—an acculturation also reflected in other “traditional” expressions of African American religion<sup>52</sup>. The focus on the formative influence of community and society also provides insights into the related dynamic of performance style and audience. Consequently, many of these authors—Cone, Spencer, and Reed in particular—additionally emphasize that the *performer-audience dynamic* relevant to both the Christian and Blues Preacher is not merely individual but also explicitly communal. Both embrace a participatory dynamic, with the Blues Singer-Preacher generally seeming to express a more individualized ethos in relation to the larger community.

Cone, Levine, Reed, and Spencer’s work stands in stark contrast to many earlier pieces of scholarly literature on the Blues. Early scholars such as Paul Oliver, Giles Oakley, and novelist Richard Wright often labeled the Blues as evil, the “devil’s music,” sexually immoral, or atheistic (Spencer *Blues* xii-xiii). In Spencer’s critique of Blues scholarship, he contends that these pejorative views of the Blues arose because scholars who are “outsiders to the culture that produced the Blues, have

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<sup>52</sup> Note that, while African American Traditions acculturated to the larger society’s *ethos*, they simultaneously developed expressions that confront, counter, and critique the oppressive realities and significations of the *larger society*.

failed to capture the music's pervading ethos—its religious nature!" (xii)<sup>53</sup>. In line with Cone, Levine, Reed, and Spencer, my thesis seeks to stand as a corrective to the idea that the Blues is *the devil's music* or *non-religious*. My analysis, firmly rooted in religious studies methodological and theoretical considerations, also seeks to expand and contribute to the academic and cultural discourse that attempts to describe, understand, and appreciate the Blues as an implicit product of a broader and perhaps more critical religious, cultural, and racial consciousness. Hence, I am arguing that the Blues should be situated within the framework, category, and critical study of African American *religious consciousness* and *expression*.

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<sup>53</sup> Written in 1993, I am unsure what Spencer would say regarding Blues scholarship since then.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONGREGANT, PREACHER, PASTOR, BLUESMAN

Daniel Beaumont provides an extensive, detailed, and engaging biography of House in *Preachin' the Blues: The Life and Times of Son House*. In this book, Beaumont teases out a general outline of House's life despite the inconsistencies within House's accounts. In fact, writer John Cowley, in his obituary of House, admitted that "anomalies plague House's biography" (Beaumont 27). Cowley's description is fitting; House tended to focus much more on the existential, emotional, and intellectual impact of events rather than their chronological accuracy.

In this chapter, I seek to apply religious studies critical theory to explore House's journey from congregant to preacher, preacher to pastor, and pastor to Bluesman, using Beaumont's biography as the main source of information regarding House's life. In doing so, I discuss House's religious experiences as entrée into his subsequent religious expression through Blues Singing-Preaching.

#### House's Childhood

House was introduced to both the Christian and Blues cultures early in life by his father, Eddie James House, Sr., a musician and deacon who himself experienced tension between the church and "secular" musician lifestyle. His father was a member of Allen Chapel Church in Marks, Mississippi (Beaumont 28), which is currently listed as an African Methodist Episcopal Church. House recalled his father

experiencing a conflict between his secular life and church involvement similar to what House would later experience. Eventually, his father underwent a profound change of heart that led to a lifelong commitment to the church. House states, “...(my father) laid it all down, quit drinking, and became a deacon. He went pretty straight from then on<sup>54</sup>” (Beaumont 28). Perhaps reflecting the early influence of his father’s tension between secular and church living, this dichotomy became a recurring theme in House’s life and lyrics and is directly addressed in his 1965 recording of “Preachin’ Blues,” where House sings, “You know, I’m going to preach these Blues/ And I’m going to choose my seat and sit down.” Here, *seat* emerges as a metaphor for the more abstract concept of how one chooses to live one’s life; House consistently struggled to choose which community and identity—Baptist, Methodist, or Blues—he wanted to embrace. It seems that his father’s struggle laid the foundation for House’s subsequent conflicting attitude towards the Black Churches and the Blues.

This dichotomy was exacerbated by his father’s musical life, where, notably, House Sr. carefully avoided mixing *secular* and *sacred* music. House’s own introduction to music was through the brass band formed by his father and uncles. House would accompany his father to community dances, where his father played popular brass music such as “Tear the Rag” while his aunt sold whiskey, sandwiches, and fried fish (Beaumont 29).

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<sup>54</sup> House originally said this in a recorded interview conducted by Harry Oster on April 24, 1965. This recording is now part of the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress (Beaumont 28).

Although House's father played brass music in public, he played Blues guitar also, but only in the privacy of his home. House states, "When (my father) wasn't with his brothers, and they wasn't together and he was at home and they was some other place, he'd sit down and play the guitar<sup>55</sup>" (Beaumont 29). As the young House began to participate in church events, his father's actions ostensibly indicated to him that Blues was antithetical to what was consider socially acceptable, couth, spiritually righteous, and moral.

House's most prolific childhood religious influence, though, was his mother Maggie House (Beaumont 27), who, after separating from his father, took Son and his brothers<sup>56</sup> from Mississippi to Louisiana where they frequently moved between Tallulah, Algiers, and New Orleans (32). In Louisiana, House and his family fully embraced church culture, attending services, Sunday school, and revivals. House recounts, "...[Church was] mostly all I could see into. 'Cause they had us go—we'd had to go to the Sabbath School. Every Sunday we didn't miss going to no Sabbath School<sup>57</sup>" (31). As House became a teenager, he, apparently showing a talent for public speaking and community leadership, started being groomed as a preacher. Here, both Beaumont and House are unspecific regarding which church

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<sup>55</sup> This was told to interviewer John Fahey on May 7, 1965, and is part of the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Beaumont 29).

<sup>56</sup> Although, like many aspects of House's life, the exact number of brothers House had is unknown, House mentioned at one point there being three boys in the household and at another point four, possibly indicating an unofficial "adoption" of another family member. There is no mention of any sisters.

<sup>57</sup> House said this in an interview with Jeff Titon titled "Son House" in *Living Blues* (March-April 1977).



denomination his family joined, perhaps proffering that, even in childhood, his family experienced movement between denominations.

Religious revivals—communal, often week-long, semi-annual religious meetings that were led by a pastor and included praying, singing, and preaching—also were profound and formative experiences for House. House particularly remembered the common revival practice of being prayed over by “the old folks” while sitting on what was called *the mourners’ bench*, a bench where “the newly repentant lodged themselves in what was tantamount to public confession and a request that others pray for them” (Beaumont 31). House’s description of the *mourners’ bench* reflects a theology that emphasizes a continual fall and redemption, where that redemption is reached through public acknowledgment and expression of *the truth* regarding one’s actions and spiritual state. House’s Blues Singing-Preaching can be seen as also a kind of “public confession” with one major difference: Blues confession, rather than being confined to a specific ceremonial practice, was a common and expected part of Blues performance<sup>58</sup>.

Although the *mourners’ bench* ritual was performed by various Protestant denominations<sup>59</sup>, House’s characterization of *religious revivals* in general echoes a Baptist belief that, as Sobel states, “the saved man can fall and be saved again and again” as opposed to the Methodist emphasis on *salvation* as an immediate, one-time experience that liberates one from “depravity” (129). House’s own theological

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<sup>58</sup> Note that both the *mourners’ bench* ritual, like the *Blues confession*, required immediate and vocal audience validation. I discuss this further in this chapter.

<sup>59</sup> Baptist and Methodist denominations included.

leanings, which emphasized a continual *fall* and *rise* and a complex tension between God and humans, more so, but not exclusively, point towards a Baptist soteriology<sup>60</sup>.

House's description of Baptist ceremonies in "Preachin' Blues" connotes intense emotional and physical experiences among practitioners. "Preachin' Blues" is ripe with descriptions of congregants "jumping up," "shouting," and "hollering." Perhaps the most invigorating description House provides of Baptist services is captured in the line, "But when the spirit comes/I'm going to shout and jump straight up and down." In this case, *the spirit* most likely refers to the Holy Spirit, the third Being of the Christian God and a common interactive entity in religious traditions connected historically with the Great Awakenings<sup>61</sup>. House's lyrics portray an intensely personal yet communally nurtured experience with the Divine—one that is expressed in physical acts such as *jumping up, shouting, and hollering*.

This theme of fervent, personal, and mystical spiritual experiences becomes a prominent one in both House and Beaumont's descriptions of House's religious orientations—and one in which I go into more detail later. Additionally, House's childhood reflects a complex intersection of Baptist, Methodist, and Blues influences. Despite his biographical anomalies, one thing is for sure: by the time

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<sup>60</sup> Lyrics such as "I'm going to choose my seat and sit down" from 1965's "Preachin' Blues," with its emphasis on personal choice, also show the incorporation of Arminian-influenced Methodist theology, albeit in less obvious form than House's Baptist influence. This may indicate that the Blues allowed House a more ecumenical form of preaching than the denominational churches.

<sup>61</sup> House's description of *the spirit* is also connected to the Pentecost story from the Acts of the Apostles, where Jesus's apostles, following his death, are filled with the *Holy Spirit*. Acts 2:4 (KJV) states, "And (the apostles) were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak in tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

House started preaching, the theologies, rituals, and experiences of the African American Protestant Churches, and especially the Baptist Church, had already laid the foundation for House's lifelong spiritual explorations—explorations that grapple with soteriological questions, existential quandaries, and a multi-faceted and often tense relationship with God. In addition, through his father, House had already observed the tension between the secular and church lifestyle, in which Blues expression emerges as, if not shameful, always a *necessarily hidden* or *extra-church* endeavor.

#### Reverend House

House's transition from a young church attendee to a full-time pastor is, again, filled with vague time periods and anomalies. Here's what is known: House began preaching at the age of fifteen and most likely achieved the status of pastor in his early twenties. This transition is, as expected, ripe with inconsistencies, whereas, at different points during this time period, House also pursued many employment opportunities other than preaching; he was also a shoe shiner, sharecropper, levee deckhand, horse rancher, and railroad laborer. By the time House was nineteen, he moved back to Clarksdale with his then-wife Carrie Martin, a New Orleans churchgoer who was thirteen years his elder. House's frequent migrations, along with his marriage to and divorce from Carrie Martin, had a strong effect on him during his emergence into adulthood.

In an interview for the magazine *Sing Out!*, House describes his frequent migration as often a result of youthful restlessness: “I wasn’t contented anywhere long. I was young and just loved to ramble. I was just ramblified, you know” (Beaumont 35)<sup>62</sup>. House’s description, though, is only part of the story. House precedes this description of his young self with a anecdote detailing how he took a job on a St. Louis steel plant because he heard they paid well (34), indicating that employment opportunities guided his migration decisions as much as a youthful, carefree attitude.

The southern economic situation during the 1920s and the limited opportunities afforded young African American males formed an important and effecting influence upon House’s decision to become a pastor. House frequently and continually alternated between manual labor and pastor positions in the 1920s, excluding the year or two House spent in Parchman Penitentiary. House himself often described his decision to preach in economic terms, stating, “Pastor the people, yeah. *And the people paid—yeah*” (Beaumont 36)<sup>63</sup>.

House’s view of *pastoring* as a viable employment option is unsurprising given both the harsh conditions under which manual laborers worked and House’s ambitious propensity to improve his situation. Beaumont describes the sharecropping system as “little more than legalized slavery” (35) in that sharecroppers were expected to split their profits, if any, with the landowner. On

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<sup>62</sup> Originally found in: Lester, Julius. “I Can Make My Own Songs: An Interview with Son House.” *Sing Out!* 15:3. July 1965: 38-47.

<sup>63</sup> Calt, Stephen and Gayle Wardlow. *The King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*. Rock Chapel Press: Newton, 1988.

top of this, sharecroppers often borrowed money from landowners at high 33-40 percent interest rates in order to survive the low-crop producing winter (35). For House, pastoring provided a higher-paid and less arduous option than sharecropping or other manual labor.

In this way, both pastoring and Blues singing competed and intersected as viable alternative employment opportunities. This is evident in House's description of his Blues mentor, Charley Patton, who he describes as follows: "Charley hated work like God hates sin. He just natural-born hated it. It didn't look right to him" (Beaumont 35)<sup>64</sup>. House's choice to cloak his description of Patton's disdain for manual labor in religious language is important. His equating of hating work with *God hating sin* suggests that House understood the conditions manual laborers endured as at most *evil* and at least an outcrop of an undesirable and unjust social situation, embedded with all the travails described in Dattel's *Cotton and Race in the Making of America*.

In 1965's "Preachin' Blues," House's first stanza expresses an intricate tie between economics and preaching in which House presents his decision to preach as, at least in part, financially motivated. He sings, "Yes, I'm going to get me religion/ I'm going to join the Baptist Church/ You know, I'm going to be a Baptist Preacher/ so I won't have to work." House probably meant this line as both an explanation of the truth of the economic motivation for preaching and a reference to a common joke that, in a ironic twist of expectation, portrays preachers as lazy, greedy, deceitful, and lustful. Ferris documents this *bad preacher* trope in a poignant and

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<sup>64</sup> Calt, *The King of the Delta Blues*.

illuminating 1978 ethnographic interview with Mary Gordon, an elderly long-term attendee of Rose Hill Baptist Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi (*Give* 15-23). For the majority of Gordon's interview, she elaborates upon her church involvement, detailing her adoration of hymns, her mystical experiences in which she interacted with Jesus and Jesus's mother Mary<sup>65</sup>, Baptist baptism rituals, and the particular theology to which she adheres.<sup>66</sup> Then, the interview takes a surprising turn, in which Gordon sings a song that, humorously and explicitly, employs the common trope of the dishonest preacher. She sings, "Our Father, who art in Heaven/  
Preacher owed me ten dollars, he paid me seven/ Kingdom come, your will be done/If I hadn't took the seven, I wouldn't got none<sup>67</sup>" (22).

In what appears to be a humorous attempt to "save-face" with her pastor, Gordon, while laughing, kindly requests that Ferris does not tell her pastor that she sang this particular song. Gordon's account helps us understand the broader context in which House employed this trope. For one, she exhibited an approach to her religious beliefs that garnered both ardent dedication and ironic humor—that is, that these two qualities are not mutually exclusive. Second, that a respect for preachers was often mixed with an acknowledgement of their *humanity*, flaws and all. Third, that the economic motivation to preach provides the opportunity to use humor to openly discuss this reality—the reality that preaching, on some level, was

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<sup>65</sup> As Baptists were not especially known for an adoration of Jesus's mother, this is perhaps an example of a Catholic influence throughout the South.

<sup>66</sup> "Before you join the church, you got to believe Jesus died for you" (Ferris *Give* 21).

<sup>67</sup> Gordon likewise highlights this dynamic through sexuality, singing, "I invite the preacher over to my house/ Washed his face, combed his head/ Next thing he wanted to do was slip in my bed" (22-23).

a financially lucrative response to exploitative working conditions. Hence, House's statement, "I'm going to be a Baptist preacher/ so I won't have to work" functions on at least two levels: (1) It humorously expresses a disdain for manual labor and, implicitly, the harsh and unjust conditions that accompanied it and; (2) refers to the potential hypocrisy of using preaching as a financially lucrative endeavor.

This does not mean that House's preaching was disingenuous; in fact, House's own account shows the opposite, whereas, although preaching brought in income, his pursuit of pastoring followed a deeply intense and emotional spiritual encounter—an experience House refers to as *getting religion*. House says he *got religion* in his early twenties<sup>68</sup>, when he was working on an alfalfa farm: "Dew was falling. And man I prayed and I prayed and I prayed and—for wait a while, I hollered out. Found out then: I said, 'Yes, it is something to be got, too, 'cause I got it now'" (Beaumont 37). By Beaumont's account, "It was probably shortly after that experience in the vicinity of Clarksdale that House took his first position as a pastor" (37), with Beaumont listing this experience of *getting religion* as a necessary credential for pastorship.

In "Preachin' Blues," House relates this experience explicitly with the Baptist faith, singing, "Yes, I'm going to get me religion/ I'm going to join the Baptist Church." This is consistent with Sobel's description of soteriological theology and salvation experiences in Baptist churches. She writes,

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<sup>68</sup> House recounts this as happening in his early twenties in Titon's article, "Son House." As Beaumont explains, House, later in the same interview, connects this experience with revival meetings in his teens (37), therefore leaving the time frame of this occurrence, again, vague.

Salvation, or rebirth in Christ, was the central focus of Baptist belief. Man's faith and repentance were in no way sufficient. The direct operation of the Holy Spirit, which should come to the individual in an overwhelming experience that would immediately change his basic nature, was essential...One could not be a member of a Baptist congregation—a saint—without having died and having been reborn. Once reborn, it was expected that one's whole character would be different—godly, sober, rejecting the worldly or profane, embracing the holy and sacred (90)

Sobel also astutely point out that “Baptists were not alone in emphasizing the conversion experience” (95) and that this sort of experience was common in Methodism as well. Still, unlike many other traditions in which conversion experiences are emphasized but not required, Baptists viewed it as essential for full membership, reflecting their roots in the Calvinist theological emphasis of *being chosen*. House likewise proposes that *getting religion* is an essential credential for becoming a Baptist, for, as he sings in “Preachin’ Blues,” it is only after this experience that House fully “(joins) the Baptist Church.”

House's conversion has strong historical connections to the conversions experienced by slaves during the Great Awakenings, as recounted in *God Struck Me Dead*, a collection of slave conversion stories gathered by anthropologist Andrew Polk Watson between 1927 and 1929 and compiled by Clifton Johnson in 1969. While all the conversion stories in *God Struck Me Dead* speak of rebirth and renewal, one in particular—“I Am Blessed but You Are Damned,” as told to Watson by a former slave named Morte—bears striking resemblance to House's story. Both experienced this spiritual encounter while working alone in a field, recounted how



this experience fundamentally changed their lives, and immediately informed their white overseer of their conversion—in Morte’s case, his owner, and in House’s case, his boss<sup>69</sup>. Again, Sobel helps explain Morte and House’s urge to recount their experiences to another person, stating, “...the ability to recount the (conversion) occurrence was crucial, for an essential part of God’s message was to tell of the Good News” (90). Almost as if it is the opposite of the *mourners’ bench* ceremony, where the faithful publicly recount their sins, this testimony of conversion provided Baptists with the opportunity to recount their salvation.

Hence, House’s story is part of a long tradition of Afro-Christian conversion experiences; Ferris’s informer, Mary Gordon, likewise recounts her own conversion occurrence from 1920, right around the same time as House’s (15-23). Being that this experience was necessary for House’s pathway into pastorship, we must explore in more depth what *getting religion* means. What does House mean by, “Yes, it is something to be got, too, ‘cause I got it now” (37)? What are the broader historical contexts for his experience?

Long’s discussion of Rudolph Otto’s concept of the *mysterious tremendum* provides useful insight into African American religious experiences in general and House’s experience in particular. Otto describes a *mysterious tremendum* as a profound, sometimes frightening, yet overpowering experience “of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures” (13). Long relates *mysterious tremendum* to American religious consciousness as follows: “Religiously speaking, America must be afforded the religious possibility for the experience of the

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<sup>69</sup> House also immediately informed his cousin, Robert.

*mysterious tremendum*, that experience which establishes *otherness* and mystery of the holy. It is this element of holiness which is so familiar in my (southern, African American) background” (151). Here, Long describes a marked historical distinction between African American religions and their European American counterparts. For him, African American religions, in general, display a more open attitude towards the *mysterious tremendum* experience. The term *getting religion*, therefore, may connote, on one level, a sense of experiencing a *holy otherness*.<sup>70</sup>

House, Morte, and Gordon’s openness to what Long describes as a *holy otherness* also has historical connections to practices rooted in West Africa. Sobel states that, in many slave conversion stories, “God shows the penitent mourner His infinite mercy, and it comes in a revelation of the individual’s true self” (112). She relates this *revelation of the individual’s true self* to a common African idea of a person having a “little me inside me” (113), or an internal *true self* that one must realize. She writes, “For the first time, the black in America formally understands himself as Africans had understood themselves; he sees that ‘there is a man in a man’” (112). *Getting religion*, then, also can be thought of as a powerful *Divine-human* experience that reveals one’s *true self* as a member of a community of people saved by God’s grace<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> This term *otherness* suggests that those recounting the experience of *getting religion* often demarcate the time and space in which the experience took place as *separate from* what they would view as *normal* or *ordinary* time and space. This is certainly true for Morte, Gordon, and House; tellingly, they all remember the specific location and general time of day in which they *got religion*.

<sup>71</sup> Although House’s *conversion experience* is significantly similar to Gordon and Morte’s, House’s recounting of this experience starkly contrasts the others’ testimonies in one important manner: it is absent of any description of visions that

Furthermore, House's portrayal of *getting religion* in the first stanza of "Preachin' Blues" provides another complication. Again, House sings "Yes, I'm going to get me religion/I'm going to join the Baptist Church/You know, I'm going to be a Baptist Preacher/So I won't have to work." Notably, this stanza is included, almost word for word, in every studio version of "Preachin' Blues" from 1930 to 1965<sup>72</sup>. "Preachin' Blues" hints at the possibility that House's spiritual devotion was intricately tied to economics. Here, the experience of *getting religion* is a means for becoming a preacher and, subsequently, enjoying the financial benefits of the profession as a key motivation.

Yet, these motivations—the spiritual and the temporal—are not mutually exclusive. House seems to have felt a complex mixture of motivations to preach and pastor, many of which arose in response to his immediate temporal situation. Nonetheless, this mix of motivations seems to have conjured a plethora of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and existential problems for House, leading him to continually struggle with the reconciliation his temporal and spiritual yearnings.

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accompany this experience. Gordon and Morte's recollections, among others, are ripe with detailed descriptions of visions in which they interact directly with Christian entities. House does not include this in his description. Although "visions" were a common yet not "required" aspect of the *getting religion* experience, this does not necessarily mean that House did not experience visions. House may have chosen to withhold this information from the interviewee, Titon, for a myriad of possible reasons. Maybe he did not want to describe his visions to a white non-Baptist. Or, perhaps House felt uncomfortable going into too much detail since he had subsequently chosen to leave the church. Nonetheless, the absence of visions in House's recounting of his conversion complicates our understanding of House's experience; his description to Titon is brief, straightforward, and non-descript.

<sup>72</sup> House's 1930 recording is titled "Preachin' the Blues" and, although it is split into two parts, is meant to be heard as a complete rendition.

House addresses both material and spiritual concerns by indelibly connecting them in another lyric from “Preachin’ Blues”: “Then, I said, ‘I wish I had me a heaven of my own’/ You know, I’d give all my women a long long happy home<sup>73</sup>.” Reed, using House’s 1930 recording, offers an interpretation of this line which suggest that House tries to reconcile his *Blues lifestyle* with his spiritual yearnings, consequently deciding “neither to repent nor backslide but to have a heaven of his own” (56). In this, Reed highlights the recurring theme of being pulled in different spiritual directions—a misdirection that embodies the feeling of being *spiritually lost or disconnected*.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, this lyric addresses material concerns in that it speaks to a spirituality that is simultaneously abstract and concrete, as connoted by the terms *heaven* and *home*. It contains a inherit critique of the church for not addressing, to the extent that House wanted, the very real and important immediate concerns of the congregants; for House, a *heaven of his own* is one in which practical well-being and spiritual contentment go hand-in-hand<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> This lyric shows up in House’s 1930 version “Preachin’ the Blues” and the originally released 1965 recording “Preachin’ Blues,” but is not part of the 1965 alternate take.

<sup>74</sup> This theme is addressed more fully in chapter five.

<sup>75</sup> Note that the lyrics “Then, I said, ‘I wish I had me a heaven of my own’/ You know, I’d give all my women a long long happy home” also exhibit an expressed intersection of female objectification and materiality, in which the ability to take care of multiple women emerges as a symbol of *male material success*. Later in this chapter, I will discuss House’s overall animosity towards and objectification of women as connected to his broader (American, Southern, African-American, worldwide) cultural influences, experiences, sexuality, and infidelities and expressed in his lyrics and interviews. Also see footnotes 80 and 81.

House's attempts to reconcile the temporal and spiritual led him to explore a topic to which he devotes a lot of attention: hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is one of the major themes of "Preachin' Blues" (1965), especially in stanzas two through four:

II.  
You know, one deacon jumped up  
And he began to grin  
You know, he said, "One thing, Elder,  
I believe I'll go back to barrelhousing again."

III.  
You know, one sister jumped up  
And she began to shout  
She said, "I'm so glad  
That this corn liquor's going out."

IV.  
Another deacon  
He said, "Sister, why don't you hush  
You know you drinks corn liquor..."<sup>76</sup>

Here, House grapples with the tension between temporal and spiritual concerns, as symbolized by *barrelhousing*, the illegal selling of alcohol or running a juke joint. The deacon in stanza two is unsatisfied with what he views as the church's—in this case, specifically the Baptist Church's—inability to address his financial concerns, therefore leading him back to the alcohol trade. This deacon is immediately chastised by another church member, who is subsequently revealed to be a hypocrite and alcohol consumer.

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<sup>76</sup> The fourth line of stanza four is mostly inaudible but sounds like the deacon continues to address the woman's hypocrisy directly.

“Preachin’ Blues” is imbedded with personal experiences familiar to House. Here, House is directly referring to the tensions he felt with the church from the age of nineteen onward. Although “Preachin’ Blues” portrays House’s decision to leave the church as instantaneous,<sup>77</sup> this is most likely a metaphor for House’s more gradual emergence out of the church world.

The first time House left the church was when, while he was preaching in Clarksdale, he married Martin (Beaumont 33, 175)<sup>78</sup>. House’s marriage to Martin was so controversial that “his family refused to attend their wedding and for a time would have nothing to do with them” (33). There was a myriad of potential reasons their marriage caused such a stir. For one, Martin was an older woman “seducing” the nineteen-year-old preacher, a sentiment captured in House’s 1930 “Preachin’ the Blues” lyric “the women...would not let me pray.” House himself later spoke of Martin in unbecoming terms, stating, “(Carrie Martin) wasn’t nothin’ but one of them New Orleans whores” (33)<sup>79</sup>. Beaumont speculates that “Martin may have been a one-time prostitute” before joining the church (33-34). Regardless, the marriage left House with a decades-long “antipathy” (34) towards Martin that he continually expressed in interviews. Perhaps this antipathy was connected with House’s “suspicion that (Martin’s) real motive for being with him was to furnish her aging father with a farmhand” in Centerville, Louisiana (33). Either way, House

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<sup>77</sup> “You know, I grabbed up my suitcase/and I took off down the road/I said,  
‘Farewell, farewell Church/ May the good Lord bless your soul’”

<sup>78</sup> Beaumont describes this as only being a religious marriage, meaning they were married in a church but did not obtain a legal certificate.

<sup>79</sup> Beaumont cites Stephen Calt’s liner notes for *Son House: 14 Songs From the Man Who Taught Robert Johnson*.

eventually left Martin, most likely around the time of his mother's death in 1922, and returned to a single life of manual labor and preaching around Clarksdale, eventually becoming a pastor.

House's antipathy towards Martin marks the apparent beginning of a consistently expressed animosity towards women in general<sup>80</sup>. In his lyrics, women are often either portrayed as evil seductresses, vindictive heartbreakers, or childlike dependants upon men for financial and emotional stability. This animosity arose, of course, within a broader gender dynamic held by the larger Southern, American, and Christian cultures, including a general expectation that men fulfilled traditional "leadership roles" such as preaching. Yet, for House, this *antipathy* was often expressed in ways immediately relevant and/or referential to his life and

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<sup>80</sup> The complex themes of gender, sexuality, and sexism, with the intersection of all three of these themes evident in House's music, warrants further and significantly more extensive treatment than this thesis regretfully allows. Angela Davis's book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* is this most extensive work on this subject that I have found. Davis argues that the Blues gave women a public forum to create a discourse on themes especially, but not exclusively, relevant to women during this time period; these themes include rape, domestic violence, prostitution, etc. The female Blues discourse on male violence toward women provides a poignant example of this. Davis writes, "The performance of the classic blues women...were one of the few cultural spaces in which a tradition of public discourse on male violence had been previously established" (25). In this way, I would add, female Blues singers more broadly asserted their right and ability to *preach the Blues* in the face of large-scale misogyny that often delegated "leadership" roles such as Preacher or Blues Singer to males. Female Blues Singer-Preachers often simultaneously affirmed, continued, contested, and critiqued the *truths* expressed by male Blues singers, along with expressing *truths* that stood firmly on their own. In addition, male Blues singers often found themselves providing similar commentary on the *truths* expressed by female Blues singers. I have yet to find a work that deals with the issue of the misogynistic attitude commonly expressed by male Blues singers as much as it deserves. It is my hope that this thesis contributes to a discourse that opens itself to additional treatment of these subjects —treatment that allows for a more comprehensive discussion than I am able to provide here.

experiences in particular. House's characterization of Martin exhibits an intersection of all three of these *female archetypes*, whereas, for House, Martin seduced him away from the church, relied on him for manual labor, and, because of her perceived *ulterior motives*, caused him immense pain and loneliness<sup>81</sup>.

This marriage proved to be a formative experience for House. During the twelve years after their divorce, House found himself moving in and out of the pulpit. House had not yet embraced the Blues as a viable career or vocational option, but the Martin experience set off years of pre-Blues tension with the church. It was upon moving back to Clarksdale and re-uniting with the church that House achieved the experience of *getting religion*. Additionally, it was not long after becoming a pastor that House encountered another obstacle to keeping the "straight and narrow path" (Beaumont 37) expected from a preacher: alcohol.

In the Titon interview, House describes how he started drinking:

Well, I got in a little bad company one time and they said, "Aw, c'mon, take a little nip with us." I says, "Naw." "Aw, c'mon!" So I took a little nip. None of the (church) members were around, so I took a little nip. And that one little nip called for another big nip. So there got to be a rumor around among my members, you know. And I began to wonder, now how can I stand up in the pulpit and preach to them, tell them how to live, and quick as I dismiss the congregation and I see ain't nobody looking I'm doing the same thing. I says, that's not right. But I

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<sup>81</sup> Davis's work also challenges the Blues archetypes of the *submissive* and *evil females*. Again, she discusses how female Blues singers Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday embraced a form of honesty and individuality that defied male domination. For me, Davis's contention is best exemplified by the striking performance styles and entrepreneurial spirits of Blues guitarist/singer Memphis Minnie and Gospel guitarist/singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Nonetheless, in this thesis, I refer to these *Blues female archetypes* as male conventions employed by House as a reflection of his general disdain for women.



kept nipping around there and it got to be a public thing. I says, well, I got to do something, 'cause I can't hold God in one hand and the Devil in the other one. Them two guys don't get along together too well. I got to turn one of 'em loose. So I got out of the pulpit. (Monge 228-229)<sup>82</sup>.

Notice that, rather than the drinking itself, House's primary concern was continuing to drink *while* telling his congregation not to. Here, House contends that his main reason for *leaving the pulpit* was his rejection of hypocrisy and his inability to live up to the *truths* and *ideals* he was affirming—that is, he would rather be an apostate drinker than a hypocritical Christian Preacher. This must have been a tragic conclusion for House, who, up to 1934, had spent almost half his life preaching in some capacity. It also brings a profound experiential gravity to the line “I had religion/ Lord this very day/ But the women and whiskey/ Well they would not let me pray” (1930, “Preachin’ the Blues”). Both *women* and *whiskey* played major roles in House's spiritual struggles and conflicts with the Black Churches and, apparently, his perception of the authenticity of his religious experiences and the rituals that fostered and supported those experiences.

While leaving the church is one matter, leaving the church *to become a Blues Singer-Preacher*, as House gradually came to do by the mid-1930s, is another. If House *left the pulpit* in order to further avoid being a hypocrite, why did he then choose to pursue Blues Singing-Preaching? What was the appeal of Blues Singing-Preaching that connected his decision to pursue this path with his decision to stop

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<sup>82</sup> The statement “I can't hold God in one hand and the Devil in the other” is also found in House's public monologues during his 1960s performance. I discuss the theological implications of this line in chapter five.

being a Christian Preacher? It turns out that this decision, too, was imbedded with the intersection of the themes of *hypocrisy* and *religious experience*—themes that represent a transformation that would indelibly, albeit slowly, alter and subsequently characterize House’s life and religious orientation from his late twenties to his death.

### House the Bluesman

From 1934 onward, House was never to enter the church pulpit again, with only one vague indication that he briefly returned to church after the death of a friend<sup>83</sup>. With this change from Christian to Blues Preacher, House’s spiritual explorations, existential questions, and religious expression garnered a different quality—a quality that allowed House to continue *preaching* with a renewed honesty.

House has stated that the problem of hypocrisy led to his decision to leave the pulpit. In contrast to House’s previous apostasies, this time he did not leave the pulpit to merely return to a life of manual labor; he specifically left to become a Blues Singer and, consequently, more consistently and authentically preach and practice another *truth*. What are the reasons for this? How did House come to

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<sup>83</sup> Beaumont and House’s timeline here contradict each other. In a 1969 *Rolling Stone* interview conducted by Michael Goodwin, House recounts that this happened “six, seven years ago” (Beaumont 30). Beaumont writes that House is most likely referring to Willie Brown’s death seventeen years prior. As Beaumont notes, House’s timeline conflicts with when he started touring with Waterman. Because of this, Beaumont’s account seems to be the more accurate one.

embrace this transition? Regarding House's transition to Blues Singer, Beaumont writes, "Quitting the pulpit—or being driven from it—left a void that House attempted to fill with blues. But his attempt to fill it was never entirely successful, and precisely because it failed, it guaranteed the never-ending anguish that gave his music power" (82). Beaumont is keen on describing how House's Blues expression exhibits catharsis, spiritual yearning, and a troubling and complex Divine-human relationship—tensions with God that House rarely indicates are resolved<sup>84</sup>. As an expansion of Beaumont's contention, though, we must explore what it was about Blues Singing that attracted House to it as another form of preaching. Ironically, further exploration of House's lyrical discourse on hypocrisy reveals that avoiding hypocrisy had just as much to do with House starting Blues Singing as it did with him leaving the church.

As expected, most of House's commentary regarding hypocrisy, in both his lyrics and interviews, focuses on alcohol use and the controversy drinking caused within the church communities. Although there is no indication that House was officially diagnosed as an alcoholic, he exhibited many of the signs of addiction: hand tremors, abdominal pains and other health problems connected to his lifelong habit, and his frequent physical inability to play guitar without first having a drink. From the 1970s onward, as House increasingly showed signs of dementia and gradually stopped performing publicly, he was often visited by young, mostly white Blues fans

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<sup>84</sup> Although House rarely seems to indicate a resolution to this tension, when he does it usually appears within his arrangements of traditional Protestant hymns. Most powerful is his arrangement of "Yonder Comes My Mother," in which House, singing about Judgment Day, places himself as one of the chosen. He sings, "When that roll is calling yonder/ tell them I'll be there."

asking for a short performance or guitar lesson. He was almost always willing to comply in exchange for either liquor or money and a ride to the liquor store.

House's propensity for heavy alcohol use proved to be his most hard-hitting obstacle to remaining an honest Christian Preacher. This was not the only obstacle, though. Sexuality, or more broadly romantic relationships and infidelities, were another problem.

During House's transition to Blues Singer-Preacher and his marriage to Evie Goff, whom he wed in 1934, House engaged in numerous extra-marital relationships. Most of these took place in the 1930s, although House also had one important relationship in the 1950s<sup>85</sup>. According to Beaumont, House was largely silent about his sexuality until the 1970s. One of House's young white followers and friends, Brian Williams, recalled House's personal commentary on sexuality during the 1970s: "(House) would talk about the devil, and when he would say that, he would point down, he would point down at his genitals. And he would say, 'There's the devil'" (175). House's directness here seems odd considering that House's lyrics are nowhere near as sexually explicit as many of his contemporaries, both male and female<sup>86</sup>. Yet, by Williams's own admission, House still withheld specific information regarding his extra-marital relationships.

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<sup>85</sup> House engaged in an extra-marital relationship with a woman named Louise McGhee during the 1950s. I discuss the significance of this relationship and House's subsequent song, "Louise McGhee," later.

<sup>86</sup> Note that House's discussion of male-female relationships and sexuality, in terms of explicitness, roughly aligns with other Blues artists whose lyrics convey a clear and direct Christian background, such as Skip James and "Blind" Willie Johnson

Williams's recollection may contain a clue as to why House's lyrics are not sexually explicit. Williams stated that this sort of interaction with House happened on several occasions,<sup>87</sup> and each time "he would point to his penis" (175). Williams gives no indication that House said this in jest; instead, House's statement was presumably earnest. Sexuality and infidelity was, for House, a major downfall for which he expressed great regret. He also saw his infidelities as inherently evil, as indicated by his conflation of the Devil with his phallus. Being that House saw his Blues Singing as an extension of his Preaching, House may have felt that sexual explicitness would be an obstacle to his intent to Preach and dishonest to the way he apparently viewed his sexual history: with regret, loneliness, animosity, and heartbreak<sup>88</sup>.

In House's 1941-1942 recordings for Alan Lomax, House's lyrical references to sexuality present a complex view of romantic relationships in general and almost always portray said relationships as ending tragically. "Levee Camp Blues" portrays a woman who merely uses her man, a levee worker, for money. In the end, the man ends up forlorn and remorseful after she finds another source of income, seemingly

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<sup>87</sup> Given that House was also exhibiting the early stages of dementia at this time, it was typical that House would often repeat himself, sometimes changing the story as he did.

<sup>88</sup> This view of *sexuality* contradicts the general impression that the Blues reproached the "traditional, Victorian" views of sexuality. As noted in footnote 86, House's commentary on *sexuality* more closely aligns itself with other Blues artists who expressed an explicit association with Christianity. Likewise, House's music seems to be absent of Queer themes expressed in numerous Blues songs by both male and female artists such as Lucille Bogan and Kokomo Arnold. The relationship between Queer themes and spirituality in these records—a dynamic that appears to have been readily acknowledged by pre-WWII and largely ignored by post-WWII performers and audiences—also warrants more attention.

in the form of a government subsidy, and leaves him. The song ends with a bitter yet defiant protagonist singing, "I ain't going to be your dog no more/ Honey, when I leave this town, Baby/ I'm going to hang crepe on your door." *Hanging crepe* refers to the common practice of hanging a wreath on the door of the deceased. In saying this, the protagonist asserts that his lover is now *dead to him* and it is time to move on with his life. In "Am I Right or Wrong," the protagonist enters into a myriad of morally questionable situations in which he always ends up asking, "Was I right or wrong?" The most sexual of these situations was expressed as follows: "I'm going into spring/ I got a miss from shaking that thing/ Now, Baby, was I right or wrong?" These songs suggest that House used sexuality in his lyrics in order to explore broader moral, philosophical, and emotional themes.

House's posing of moral and existential questions through sexuality and sensuality became more fully realized in 1965's "Louise McGhee." Louise McGhee was an actual woman who House had an extra-marital relationship with in the 1950s, and House's decision to reference her directly starkly contrasts the absence of other women's names, including his wife's, in his lyrics<sup>89</sup>. Regarding Louise McGhee, House recalled to Stephen Calt that he "couldn't afford to drop a bomb on her, so I made up a song instead<sup>90</sup>" (Beaumont 118). Out of all of House's relationships since Martin, McGhee left the biggest impression on him; he was heartbroken for more than a decade.

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<sup>89</sup> This excludes his 1965 piece "Pearline," which only consists of repetition of the name "Pearline." I was unable to find any context for this song.

<sup>90</sup> This quote is found in the liner notes of a 1974 reissue of House's work.

Like “Levee Camp Moan” and “Am I Right or Wrong,” House uses his experience with Louise McGhee to explore broader existential, moral, and philosophical issues. The elder House, though, exhibits a more mature intellectuality that portrays the human condition as convoluted, complex, and contradictory. This is captured in stanzas five, six, and seven of “Louise McGhee”:

V

You know, when I leave here, Honey  
I don't want you to cry no more  
I said, but when I leave this time, Honey  
I'm going to hang crepe on your door

VI

I gets up in the morning with the blues  
Three different ways  
I have two minds to leave here  
I didn't have but one says stay

VII

If I don't ever no more see you  
You'll forever be on my mind  
You know, every time I think about you, girl  
I just can't keep from crying

Again, House uses the term *hanging crepe* to indicate that he is progressing forward to other, more hopeful avenues<sup>91</sup>. In a surprising twist, the succeeding two stanzas capture the contradictory and complex emotions this conjures in House. He wants to simultaneously stay and leave. He wants to move on but will *forever have Louise*

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<sup>91</sup> Here, *hanging crepe* also exhibits an objectification of women consistent with House's continuously expressed animosity towards females. The idea that Louise McGhee is “dead to him,” as implied by this phrase, contrasts the seeming reality that McGhee continued to have a profound influence on House for years after their relationship ended. Given this reality, House suggests that women can metaphorically or psychologically be “killed off,” a sentiment that House does not express towards his male counterparts.

*McGhee on his mind.* “Louise McGhee” exemplifies House’s honesty about his convoluted emotions—a mixture of contradictory feelings that he was struggling to interpret, understand, and eventually overcome.

By exhibiting such honesty, “Louise McGhee” also hints at the reason Blues Singing-Preaching became preferable to traditional Christian Preaching for House: Blues Singing-Preaching gave House the opportunity to *preach* in a way that reveals, rather than hides, his own personal truth. House left the church in order to avoid lying about his actions. House seems to have been attracted to the Blues for the opposite reason; it allowed him to grapple with, discuss, and express his truth, no matter how heartbreaking, contradictory, morally repugnant, or awful it seemed. It was a lifelong combination of pulpit, pew, testimony, and *mourners’ bench*.

This is certainly consistent with Spencer’s description of *preaching the Blues* as “indistinguishable from the ethic of telling the truth” (37). This *truth-telling ethic* extended to all of House’s music, especially from the 1940s onward. Blues Singing-Preaching allowed House to preach about harsh working conditions, his time in jail, his troubled romances, family conflicts, the betrayal of friends—anything that House found relevant, interesting, perplexing, emotionally impacting, or necessary to interpret.

House’s embracing of the *Blues Preaching ethic* was not just an intellectual conversion. House also underwent a deeply emotional spiritual conversion during his transition, which he describes in *Sing Out!* magazine. One day, while walking around Mattson, Mississippi, House heard a sound that would forever captivate and fascinate him:



Well, I stopped, because the people were all crowded around. This boy, Willie Wilson, had a thing on his finger like a small medicine bottle, and he was zinging it, you know. I said, "Jesus! Wonder what's that he's playing?" I knew that guitars hadn't usually been sounding like that. So I eases up close enough to look and I see what he has on his finger. "Sounds good!" I said. "Jesus! I like that!" And from there, I got the idea and said, "I believe I want to play one of them strings" (Beaumont 40)

This was, by House's recollection, the second time he had heard slide guitar playing—a guitar technique in which the musician slides a glass finger-case across the neck of a guitar—but that the one brief time he heard it before was when he was too "churchy" (39) to appreciate it. His second experience with the slide guitar, though, was a momentous occasion for him, indicating that House had finally rid himself of his disdain for the Blues. By Beaumont's account, House began playing Blues guitar publicly two weeks later and, for at least the next six years, would alternate between Blues playing and Christian preaching—a dynamic that continued the tension House was already experiencing with the Black Churches. It is telling, though, that House chose the slide guitar as his main mode of playing; House's experience with it was one of wonder and awe, or, as Beaumont describes it, the slide guitar "transfixed" and "captivated" him (39).

Beaumont describes House's experience in explicitly Christian terms. He compares House's *Blues conversion* to the Biblical story of Paul's road to Damascus in that both were profound spiritual encounters that forever changed the lives of their respective subjects (39). Beaumont also describes this experience as akin, yet

contrary, to House's *getting religion experience*. He writes, "House's startling change is remarkably similar to a religious conversion—except that in this case it is closer to losing one's religion: apostasy" (43-44). House's own description of this event, though, indicates that, in addition to *losing Christianity*, House also gained a Blues spirituality—a type of *religious orientation* that resembled the catharsis and relief of *traditional religion*<sup>92</sup> yet, to House's delight, added the dimension of a hard-headed *truth-telling ethic*.

House's *Blues conversion*, then, brings together Long's discussion of the *holy otherness* (145-170) and Westfield and Trulear's method of *theomusicology* (Spencer *Re-Searching* 73). This *conversion* displays the West African, Great Awakening, and Calvinist confluences of his *getting religion* experience yet takes place in connection to a type of music that House had previously considered as purely *secular*. Rather than viewing *Blues secularity* as the antithesis of the sacred, House, at the moment of *conversion*, begins seeing it as, in Westfield and Trulear's words, a "context for the sacred and profane" (73)—that is, a *context* for the fusion of *sacred and profane* into the *truth-telling ethic* of Blues Preaching and the experience of *otherness*.

Now that we have explored House's journey from churchgoer to Christian Preacher, Christian Preacher to Pastor, and Pastor to Blues Preacher, our next step is to explore what Blues Preaching entails. What characteristics did House's Blues Singing exhibit that supported this *truth-telling ethic*? What hermeneutic qualities

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<sup>92</sup> By *traditional religion*, I am specifically referring to Protestantism as that is the religion House would view as *traditional*.

did House employ so his audiences could recognize his performances as Blues Preaching? These are the questions I explore in the next chapter.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Note that this section is missing a discussion of what could be called *Blues sacred sound*, a potential future research topic I discuss in my “Conclusion.”

CHAPTER 5  
BLUES EXEGESIS

The continual interplay and tension between Christian and Blues Preaching, as exhibited in House’s life, ministry, and artistry, leads us to a discussion regarding the duality of his interpretive roles as minister and Blues singer—that is, how House displays a conflation of these conflicting and intersecting roles in his lyrics, interviews, and sermons. What were House’s conceptions, perceptions, and understandings of preaching in both the Blues and Christian context? What can we, as scholars, derive and learn from his understandings upon exploring his application and intertwining of hermeneutical processes within these roles?

In this chapter, I seek to explore House’s understandings, as reflected in his lyrics, speeches, and interviews, of the interpretive processes inherent in Christian and Blues Preaching—a process that I argue simultaneously reflects a tension between and fusion of Christian and Blues hermeneutics in that both, often simultaneously, offer applicable interpretations of text and the black existential condition<sup>94</sup>. Additionally, I provide a critical analysis of the lyrics of House’s two recordings of “Death Letter Blues,” both of which were recorded between April 12 and 15, 1965, and offer different, yet complementary, interpretations of the same referenced story and the phenomenon of grief. These two recordings, when examined concurrently, exemplify how this parallel Christian-Blues exegetical process can unfold in Blues performances.

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<sup>94</sup> These interpretations are often both complementary and contesting.

## The Sermon

Before moving onto House's own commentary and understandings of Christian and Blues preaching, and the interpretive processes therein, it is helpful to reiterate and further explore Henry H. Mitchell's description of black preaching and audience reception/participation in *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*. First, Mitchell establishes a general description of the relationship between preachers and the Bible in African American Protestant Traditions. He states, "The (Biblical) focus is not on scientific-historical truth, but truth for the life of the spirit" (60). Later, he describes in more detail the role of the preacher in the Black Churches:

In the Black preaching enterprise, the preacher's preparation starts with close identity with the congregation...The Black preacher must be ear deep in the condition of the people, and out of this comes the easy dialogue between the preacher and the people, whose lives are intimately close together—so close together that the themes which invade the consciousness of the one also invade the other.

This intimacy leads people to feel literally that they are being addressed personally...(106)

Mitchell characterizes black preaching as a dialogue, led by the preacher, which, of upmost importance, is supposed to speak to the *condition of the people* within the congregation. That is, the sermon emerges as commentary intended for application to the lives of the congregants; therefore, a successful sermon holistically connects

with congregants, engaging what Mitchell calls people's "cognitive, intuitive, and emotive consciousness" (97).

The expectation of preachers to engage, discuss, and interpret the very real life conditions of their congregation often can frame the way the Bible is approached in African American Traditions, as reflected in Mitchell's insistence that "the focus is...on...truth for the life of the spirit"<sup>95</sup> (60). In Mitchell's more extensive discussion of Biblical exegesis and Black preaching, he writes, "The Black preacher is more apt to think of the Bible as an inexhaustible source of good preaching material than as an inert doctrinal and ethical authority. It is full of insights—warm and wise and relevant to the everyday problems of Black people" (58). Here, Mitchell illustrates that the Bible is used as a launching pad for discussing people's temporal conditions and the broader existential considerations those conditions illicit. Rather than occurring at the expense of the Bible's doctrinal and ethical authority, this dialogue functions as a way of connecting congregants to "God's word" in the present. In this way, Biblical stories, commands, poems, epistles, etc. speak to people in that they are applicable and relevant to people's here and now. Protestant Preachers, especially in African American Protestant Traditions, often serve as conduits to extract, discuss, and comment upon the Bible in relation to tangible, immediate applications and broader life-affirming, existential considerations.

This exegetical and preaching approach reflects the historical influences of both traditional West African practices and the preaching and exegetical processes

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<sup>95</sup> Please note that this approach to preaching is not exhibited only African American traditions. Nonetheless, exploring this dynamic in relation to the Black Churches is important to ultimately discussing House's idea of what *preaching* entails.

of slaves, both those converted and “born into” Christianity, developed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For one, although House and many more preachers between the 1910s and 1940s were literate, their preaching style bespeaks a continuation of the Preaching Tradition established by their often-illiterate slave ancestors. In the “Preface” to his 1927 book of poems *God’s Trombones*, James Weldon Johnson provides meaningful commentary on this historical connection: “The earliest of these (slave) preachers must have virtually committed many parts of the Bible to memory through hearing the scriptures read or preached from in the white churches which the slaves attended” (3). Here, Weldon describes the historical roots of twentieth-century Black preaching as commentary upon the Bible as oral tradition—that is, Biblical literature culled from *hearing* rather than *reading*—among African American slaves. He then adds a notable and important complication to this history, writing, “(Preachers) were the first of the slaves to learn to read” (3). This history indicates that preaching in the African American churches developed as both a *literary* and *extra-literary* practice, in which the Bible was understood as a *written* and *oral* text and conveyed to an audience which, presumably, included both literate and illiterate people, with the rate of literacy increasing into and throughout the twentieth century.

This approach to preaching also echoes a historical connection with West African Traditions, such as the Yoruba and the Fon, that generally rely much more on personal experience to discover and discuss *religious truths* than European

Christianity<sup>96</sup>. Teresa Reed describes this as follows: “Unlike the European tradition, in which religion is experienced as rituals performed at appointed times and in designated spaces, West-African religion is much more ubiquitous...Africans get their spiritual revelation and inspiration from neither a book nor their oral tradition but from their lives” (1). Therefore, as African Americans forged an intersection between Euro-American Christianity and West African Traditions, coinciding with a gradual gaining of literacy among African American populations, they also forged an intersection between literary and oral text, both of which garnered the potential for them to gain, in Reed’s words, *revelation and inspiration from their lives*. Through this literary-oral-experiential intersection, the Bible ostensibly emerges as a living, breathing written and oral text intended to be engaged in terms of what it says to a person’s temporal and existential situation—or, from a Christian perspective, *what God is saying to me right now through the Bible*. Through the process of public Biblical exegesis, preachers generally seek to forge this Biblical-oral-experiential dynamic hermeneutically and existentially.

At this point, we must explore House’s own understandings regarding his preaching method and how it might relate to his Blues Preaching-Singing. In a 1971

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<sup>96</sup> This contention, although written with broad and general strokes, deserves further attention regarding the nuances of the varied and diverse West African and European Traditions present within the encounter between Europe and Africa. The process of enslavement forcibly facilitated a continued blending of African, and mostly West African, traditions and cultures while the Great Awakenings added various Christianities into the blending. This historical circumstance forces me to write about those traditions in more general terms than I prefer. For a more in depth study of this process of Afro-Euro encounters, see James A. Noel’s *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* or Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*.



interview, House, recalling his preaching experiences in the 1910s and 1920s, describes his exegetical process as follows:

All during the week and through the nights or things like that I get my Bible and sit down and—turn to such and such a chapters and verses and such and such a books in the Bible, I'd say, "Well, I believe I'll choose this here text for Sunday for the people and I'll start on that," I'll say maybe around about Tuesday or Wednesday night or something like that—come in that night, I'd set up and I'd take my Bible and I'd study, study, read about what it's saying, what it's about, and all I could, get it in my head, and says, "Ah, oh yeah, well I got it." (Monge, 228).<sup>97</sup>

Careful reading of this quote reveals that the process House performs in order to prepare for his weekly sermons exemplifies his intent to extract, propose, discuss, and apply existential considerations immediately relevant, yet broadly impacting, to his congregations. After choosing which Biblical text he wants to discuss, he then, unsurprisingly, continues to read and study that text for a few days. Most important, though, is what House states is the purpose of studying the Bible—that is, what he tries to determine from exegesis: (1) *what the text is saying* and; (2) *what the text is about*.

These two determinations, at the very least, imply both that Biblical text is saying something beyond the literal meanings of the words and that determination of what the text is *really* saying necessitates a public exegetical dialogue that the Preacher must perform. More simply, House appears to be trying to determine the meaning of Biblical text for him and his community, understanding that discussing

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<sup>97</sup> Monge cites this interview as "Titon: 'Living Blues Interview,' 21-22." (254).

*what the text is about* in a relevant and connectable manner is the ultimate purpose of his exegesis and preaching.

So what does House mean when he says, “Ah, oh yeah, I got it”? First, this statement apparently means that he has determined what themes he is going to cull and discuss from that particular Biblical passage. Additionally, House’s process in reaching this point of revelation—that is, in *getting it*—indicates that this goal of *getting it* intricately and necessarily connects with the process he undergoes leading up to this moment. For one, House explicitly states that his ultimate consideration when choosing what Biblical text he was going to discuss was what he thinks would be best *for the people*, or what text was going to be relevant that week for his congregation. House, therefore, expresses an understanding that the ultimate goal of his exegesis was to forge a beneficial connection between him, his congregation, and God. This benefit is multi-faceted and includes a variety of methods House could employ in order to make his sermons beneficial, including providing catharsis, inspiration, or confirmation of his congregants’ self-worth. Nonetheless, House indicates that successful exegesis benefits people by elaborating upon the more existential, or ultimate, meanings and significance of the Bible as it relates to the people to whom he was preaching. Therefore, House’s statement, *I got it*, ostensibly connotes that, through his reading and studying, House determines what the Biblical text was *really* saying to him and his congregation at that particular time during that particular week—or, *what God was saying through Biblical text to this community at that moment*.

House exhibits his comfortableness performing public Biblical exegesis in apparently *secular* settings when he would, almost unfalteringly, precede his 1960s performances of “Preachin’ Blues” with monologues discussing his preaching history and religious orientations. In the 1960 video *Bukka White & Son House: Masters of the Country Blues*<sup>98</sup>, House begins his monologue by discussing his religious upbringing and how he “didn’t believe in no blues or none of it—I was too churchy” (Beaumont 152). After stating that he was “called to preach the gospel” (152), House then establishes his knowledge about the King James Bible: “I knowed everything about the King James version of the Bible. Thirty-nine books in the Old Testament, twenty-seven in the New, which makes sixty-six books. And four hundred and fifty thousand words. And I know ‘em...” (152-153). He then elaborates on a distinction between God and the Devil, stating, “...them two fellas, they don’t—they don’t, uh, communicate together so well” (153). Therefore, according to House, “You can’t hold God in one hand and the Devil in the other” (153). House then recalls his own salvation: “...I was regenerated and borned again. I was born in sin, now I got to regenerate myself to realize what a great creator is” (153).

It is in the last part of his monologue, which I quote at length, that House concretely establishes the religious context of his performances by referencing and interpreting Genesis 1:26.<sup>99</sup> He states,

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<sup>98</sup> Although I have seen this video, I am using Beaumont’s transcription (152-153).

<sup>99</sup> Genesis 1:26 (KJV): “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”

Then He (God) said, “Let us make man in Our image and likeness and give them dominion...” All right, ‘let’s make him like us...’ Now who is ‘us’? One person can’t be ‘us.’ So, not one. It take another one. Well, anyway, I don’t wanna go along too much here with time. Wrong ain’t right. You gotta be one or the other. Your friend or enemy—it’s God and the Devil. So you can’t sit straddlin’ the fence. You can’t hold two—you got to give up one side or the other. To make it plain. So, well, I went to doin’ a little wrong, but I didn’t give up God. So I says, ‘Well since I give up and goin’ back to playin’ I’ll make a piece about, oh, “The Preachin’ Blues,” ‘cause I preached for a long time...I said, “Well, I’ll make a piece about ‘Preachin’ the Blues.”’ ( Beaumont 153).

Here, House lays out a Biblical interpretation that he wants to impart on his audience—an interpretation in which the phrase “let us make man in Our image and likeness” indicates a duality of potential ways of living, as encapsulated in God and the Devil. House also seemingly operates under the assumption that his audience will immediately recognize his Biblical references, an assumption that might not have been true of his 1960s audiences but was almost certainly true of his congregations and audiences between the 1910s and 1940s. Through exegesis, House points to an interpretation of God’s use of the word *Our* as meaning that humans are made in the image of both God and the Devil, as shown in the phrase, “Your friend or enemy—it’s God and the Devil.” It is important for my subsequent exploration of “Death Letter Blues” to discuss the relationship House makes between his interpretation of Biblical text and his performance of “Preachin’ Blues.” In the monologue, House exemplifies a conflation of his Christian Preaching and Blues Singing roles, along with an intersection of Christian and Blues theologies and ethos, in which House reconciles his decision to continue to play the Blues despite

the objections of the Black Churches by, in turn, becoming a Blues Preacher. Hence, House uses his monologue to explain that his performance of “Preachin’ Blues” is, itself, a form a preaching—that is, a performance of interpretation regarding his own story of being a Blues Singer-Preacher who, despite his chosen profession as a musician in a *secular* setting, “didn’t give up on God<sup>100</sup>.”

Additionally, House’s monologue provides a cogent example of the Blues propensity to turn secular settings into sacred ones—reflecting Westfield and Trulear’s contention that, for many African Americans, secularity served “as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of sacred” (Spencer *Re-searching* 73). Lastly, House begins his monologue by referring to his time preaching in churches during the 1910s and 1920s, establishing a connection between his call to “preach the gospel” (152) and his subsequent decision to *preach the Blues*. In doing so, House’s monologue suggests that House understands his Blues Singing-Preaching as an extension of his *call to preach*. In both his Christian and Blues Preaching, House interprets text while simultaneously elaborating upon and extracting meaning from everyday life and African American life in particular. Ultimately, House uses text and experience as templates to engage audiences in relevant dialogues regarding broader universal themes such as cosmology, theology, love, brokenness, loneliness, etc.

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<sup>100</sup> The criticisms of House take place in a larger context of public objection to the Blues hurled against numerous musicians—many of whom were, in the first part of the century, more popular than Son House. Allen Reisner’s *St. Louis Blues* offers an in-depth cinematic treatment of this dynamic through the story of composer/musician W.C. Handy, played by Nat “King” Cole.

The rest of House's 1971 interview signifies that House agreed with this connection, or intersection, of a creative hermeneutical-exegetical process that, for him, linked Christian and Blues Preaching. Before asking House about his preaching process, Titon asks, "Do you make up your sermons the way you used to make up your songs?" (228). House responds, "Mm-hm, yeah, the same way" (228). House's insistence that he approaches the exegetical and hermeneutical process of his Blues Singing in *the same way* he approaches his Christian Preaching indicates that the referenced oral texts in his Blues songs serve similar purposes that Biblical texts serve for the Christian Preacher—as a template for determining *what they are saying* or *what they are about*, or their immediate relevance and existential significance.

### A History of "Death Letter Blues"

House's two 1965 recordings of "Death Letter Blues" provide a poignant example of the hermeneutic process of interpreting text, the black existential condition, and life experiences inherent in his Blues Singing-Preaching. Attention to these two recordings, though, starts with an exploration of the song's history. The song "Death Letter Blues" employs a story common to several Blues songs. The story is as follows: a person receives a letter announcing the death of someone they love. That person then travels to the deceased's funeral. The structure of both recordings is such that House first establishes this narrative—which I will refer to as the *established text*—then interprets it.

Beaumont lists several Blues songs that reference this particular story<sup>101</sup>. The first is Ida Cox's "Death Letter Blues," recorded in 1924 (66). The four other recordings are Pap Harvey Hull's "Hey Lawdy Mama—The France Blues" (1927), John D. Fox's "The Moanin' Blues" (1927), Lottie Kimbrough's "Wayward Girl Blues" (1928), and Romeo Nelson's "Dyin' Rider Blues" (1929). This narrative theme first shows up in House's music in his 1930 recording of "My Black Mama,"<sup>102</sup> a song House learned from an older musician names James McCoy (Beaumont 41).<sup>103</sup> "My Black Mama" differs extensively from what eventually became known as "Death Letter Blues." In "My Black Mama," House sings about a troubled romantic relationship that ends when his lover, or his "Black Mama," dies. "Death Letter Blues" was then recorded by anthropologist Alan Lomax in 1940 but was mislabeled "Walking Blues"<sup>104</sup> (105). By 1940, as Beaumont explains, "All the Black Mama lyrics extraneous to the Death Letter theme had been taken out. The song now was solely about the singer receiving news in a letter of the death of a lover" (105-106).

Recorded 35 years after "My Black Mama," the two "Death Letter Blues" versions I analyze, one released in 1965 and the other in 1992, were performed over a three-day recording session (House)<sup>105</sup> and have identical lyrics during the first

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<sup>101</sup> Of course, this story likely resonated strongly with the African American communities because of its common occurrence.

<sup>102</sup> House, Son. "My Black Mama Part 1" and "Part 2" 1930 Paramount.

<sup>103</sup> To my knowledge, no known recording of this song exists from McCoy.

<sup>104</sup> Recording Citation: House, Son. *The Complete Library of Congress Sessions 1941-1942*. Rec. 1941-1942. Interstate Music, 1990. CD. There are two tracks labeled "Walking Blues" on this recording. One is the actual "Walking Blues" and the other is the mislabeled version of "Death Letter."

<sup>105</sup> 12-14 April 1965.

four stanzas, in which the *death letter* theme is established.<sup>106</sup> After the fourth stanza, though, the lyrics differ greatly as House employs an interpretive process to the *death letter* theme. That two varying versions of “Death Letter Blues” that emerge from the same recording session provide us with the opportunity to explore how this hermeneutical process takes place and how it relates to the same process House employed while performing Biblical exegesis during his sermons.

#### “Death Letter Blues” – Recorded and Released in 1965

As mentioned previously, the first four stanzas of the originally released 1965 recording of “Death Letter Blues” are identical to the alternate recording released in 1992 with a reissue of *Son House: Father of the Delta Blues*. The first four stanzas are:

##### I.

I got a letter this morning  
How do you reckon it read?  
It said, “Hurry, the gal you love is dead.”

##### II.

I grabbed up my suitcase  
Took off down the road  
When I got there, she’s laying  
On a cooling board

##### III.

Well, I walked over right close  
Looked down in her face  
Said, “Good old gal, you’ll lay there

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<sup>106</sup> I reprint the whole text later.



Until Judgment Day”

IV.

Looked like there was ten thousand people  
Standing around the barren ground  
I didn't know I loved her  
Until they let her down

These first four stanzas explain the story, or create the *established text*, upon which House performs his hermeneutic. The first stanza establishes the *death letter* theme, in which the protagonist receives a letter announcing the death of a woman he loves. The second stanza reveals that the protagonist was geographically distant from his lover at the time of her death, for he has to travel to her funeral site. The reason for this distance is not fully disclosed; perhaps this geographic distance symbolizes a more abstract emotional distance between the protagonist and his lover. Regardless, stanza two provides the protagonist and the listener with confirmation of the woman's death (“When I got there, she's laying/ On a cooling board”). Stanza three continues this confirmation as the protagonist views the deceased body from up close. This stanza also alludes to the theme of “Judgment Day,” suggesting that House is cloaking this narrative in terms of what it says about the *idea of death*—an idea which, because House explicitly references a Christian form of *judgment*, at the very least implies that House is ultimately discussing the concept of soteriology. The fourth stanza finds the protagonist in an apparently large crowd watching the deceased body be descended into the ground. The imagery of “ten thousand people” frames the story in Biblical terms, as the number “ten thousand” appears frequently

in the Bible,<sup>107</sup> and therefore highlights the narrative's profundity and gives it the aura of scripture. The last two lines of the fourth stanza, where the protagonist admits that he did not know he loved the woman until he had to deal with her unfortunate death, launches House into his interpretations of the emotions and thoughts related to this event. That is, it is the protagonist's realization that he is manifesting his love too late that allows House to elaborate on this condition of grief as a commentary on the *established text*.

Here are the remaining stanzas of this version of "Death Letter Blues":

V

Well, I folded up my arms  
And slowly walked away  
I said, "Farewell, Honey.  
I'll see you Judgment Day."

VI

You know, I didn't feel so bad  
until the good old sun went down  
I didn't have a soul to  
throw my arms around

VII

You know, it's so hard to love  
Someone who don't love you  
Ain't satisfaction,  
don't care what you do

VIII

Well, I got up this morning  
at the break of day  
Just hugging the pillows  
(where) she used to lay

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<sup>107</sup> 2 Chronicles 25: 12, Psalm 91:7, Deuteronomy 32:30, Revelation 5:11, Luke 14:31.

VIII

I got up this morning  
feeling around for my shoes  
You know, I must have had  
the walking blues

X

Oh Hush!  
Thought I heard her call my name  
If it wasn't so loud  
and so nice and plain

Before exploring these stanzas, it is important to note two things. First, although the *established text* provides a chronological narrative, the Blues structure is generally not dictated by such chronology. Instead, it appears that the remaining stanzas are connected thematically rather than chronologically. Beaumont refers to this process as “thematic coherence” (68)—a term I will use from here on out. Second, many of the lyrics found in these versions of “Death Letter Blues” also show up in other songs, both by House and by others. This relates to Levine’s description of a shared “large reservoir of phrases and expressions” (229) used by blues singers and also is similar to Weldon’s idea of common “stereotyped sermons” (1) used by Protestant Preachers, especially in African American Traditions. This being said, I will explore House’s use of these “phrases and expressions” in relation to the *thematic cohesion* House employs as an interpretation of the *established text*.

The *interpretive* stanzas of this version of “Death Letter Blues” expand upon the condition of grief in intricate detail, perhaps making this song therapeutic or cathartic for both House and his audiences. Stanza six comments on an extreme sense of loneliness, for when House sings, “I didn’t have a soul to throw my arms

around,” he evokes an image of solitude as connected with the protagonist’s emotional realization that he will never see his deceased lover again. Stanza eight elicits the same sense, as the protagonist, in his action of “hugging the pillows (where) she used to lay,” unsuccessfully attempts to regain a lost connection with his lover. Stanza nine, with its reference to the “walking blues,” continues this theme of sadness and loneliness consistent with the grieving process.

Note that House explores this sense of loneliness and loss connected with grief after describing a scene of farewell in stanza five. House’s reference to Judgment Day re-establishes the funeral rite’s Christian context and the belief that the protagonist will see the deceased again, but this *farewell* scene seems to launch the protagonist head-on into having to grapple with the grieving process—that is, with the consistent realization of his loneliness in the face of the death of someone he loved. Stanza seven and ten portray the protagonist’s grieving process as connected to the memories of a troubled past between the protagonist and the deceased. House’s assertion that “it’s so hard to love someone who don’t love you” portrays the protagonist as both dealing with the loneliness of loss and the tension of a memory of unrequited affection—that is, it evokes a truth that human relationships are complex, and that one can mourn the loss of someone who one remembers with a mixture of both tender and painful emotions. This version of “Death Letter Blues” ends with a possibility of remaining in contact with the deceased, although it is unclear whether or not the protagonist is actually communicating with his dead lover or if this an invocation of a wish to be able to communicate with her.

Overall, in this version of “Death Letter Blues,” House uses the *established text* to explore the multi-faceted and often contrary emotions and memories associated with the common lived experience of grief. House also presents a composite view of mourning as experienced by the protagonist as he navigates his way through the loneliness of loss and the terror of his memories. In other words, House’s *exegesis* uses a “reservoir of phrases and expressions” (Levine 229) to explore and interpret grieving in a process of *thematic cohesion* that becomes both relatable to the listener and referential to the *established text*.

Additionally, while appropriating Christian text, language, cosmology, and soteriology, “Death Letter Blues” also transcends these appropriations by speaking to a wider human condition that is not limited to Christian adherents and Blues audiences. In this way, House accomplishes two goals through his Blues Preaching: (1) providing language, references, metaphors, etc. that connect experientially and readily to his immediate audience while; (2) simultaneously discussing and interpreting broader, more expansive existential themes common cross-culturally and cross-contextually.

“Death Letter Blues” – Recorded in 1965, Released in 1992

This alternate version of “Death Letter Blues” portrays a vastly different, yet complementary, interpretation of the *established text* and the experience the text connotes. First, I must quote and explore the remaining stanzas in this version:

V

Lord have mercy  
on my wicked soul  
I wouldn't mistreat you, Baby  
for my weight in gold

VI

You know, I didn't feel so bad  
until the good old sun went down  
I didn't have nobody  
to throw my arms around

VII

You know, I went in my room  
I bowed down to pray  
The Blues came along  
and drove my spirit away

VIII

I love you, Baby  
like I love myself  
If you don't have me  
you won't have nobody else

VIII

Well, listen  
whatever you do  
This is one thing, Honey  
I tried to get along with you

X

Well, the minutes seem like hours  
Hours seem like days  
It seems like my baby  
ought to been stopped her low-down ways

XI

You know, it's hard to love  
Someone who don't love you  
Don't look like satisfaction  
don't care what you do

XII

You know love's a hard old fall  
Make you do things you don't want to do

You know, sometimes  
(it will) leave you feeling sad and blue

First, I will elaborate on the similarities between these two interpretations. This version, like the first one, still touches upon the loneliness associated with the grieving process (stanza six). Likewise, in stanza eleven, the protagonist's memory of unrequited affection adds to the pain of grief. With these similarities in tact, this version of "Death Letter Blues" shows House elaborating much more extensively on two themes that are minimal in the first version: (1) The protagonist's own guilt in the way he treated his lover while she was alive and; (2) how this guilt is connected with his incomplete soteriological struggle.

This version of "Death Letter Blues" presents a more complicated portrait of the protagonist and his lover's troubled relationship. As mentioned earlier, House decides to again include a stanza about unrequited affection (stanza eleven). In addition to this, House indicates in stanza ten that this grieving process causes the protagonist to wish that he would have been able to convince his now-deceased lover to change certain unmentioned destructive behavior. When House sings, "It seems like my baby ought to been stopped her low-down ways," House again presents a complex protagonist trying to come to terms with his apparent affection for someone who has inflicted pain upon him. Likewise, this woman's death forces the protagonist to contend with his inability to provide the stability or support needed for his lover to change her life beneficially. This is related to stanza nine, in

which House indicates that, on some level, the protagonist tried to make their relationship work; he sings, “I tried to get along with you.”

But this version of “Death Letter Blues” portrays the protagonist as both a victim and a perpetrator of faulty behaviors and attitudes. When House sings in stanza eight, “If you don’t have me you won’t have nobody else,” he illuminates the feelings of jealousy and passiveness the protagonist felt when his unrequited lover was still alive. This line also indicates the protagonist’s intention to control this woman, for because this woman refused to love him, he wishes to make it so that she cannot love anybody else. Earlier in the song, House establishes the behavioral manifestation of the protagonist’s wish to control this woman by stating, “I wouldn’t mistreat you, Baby, for my weight in gold.” This statement, in reference to the *established text*, seems to be a post-death rumination; this means that, upon realizing that he truly loves the deceased woman, the protagonist, in a state of mourning, is imploring that he would *no longer* mistreat her. These unfortunate circumstances suggest that the protagonist’s pleas come too late, for reconciliation is practically impossible with the deceased.

Hence, the protagonist’s grief sends him into a spiral of guilt and a search for spiritual redemption, analogous with the idea of Christian salvation. Before imploring that, hypothetically, he would no longer mistreat his lover, House’s protagonist addresses God: “Lord have mercy on my wicked soul.” This prayer indicates the protagonist’s acknowledgement of his own faulty behavior. It appears that although reconciliation with the deceased is now impossible, the protagonist is still open to the opportunity to be reconciled with the Divine.



Ultimately, this search for redemption is unfulfilled, as House sings in stanza seven: “You know, I went in my room/ I bowed down to pray/ the Blues came along/ and drove my spirit away.” This invocation indicates that the Blues—in this case, a state of being that encapsulates the loss, sadness, loneliness, confusion, and guilt the protagonist is experiencing—can itself be a spiritual state, one in which difficult experiences provide a foundation for a complex, often troubled, relationship with the Divine. In other words, House is illuminating the experience of disconnect from God; this is an experience that, despite being broadly felt yet often sharply hidden in a Church context, is readily admitted in a Blues context<sup>108 109</sup>. Therefore, as an interpretation of the *established text*, House concludes in stanza twelve, “You know love’s a hard old fall/ make you do things you don’t want to do/ You know sometimes (it will)/ leave you feeling sad and blue.” Hence, the protagonist does not come to terms with his faulty behavior and unrequited affection; simultaneously, his soteriological struggle, at least for the moment, is incomplete and he finds no solace in God. The listener is then left to conclude that the protagonist remains in a state of loneliness, loss, and regret—alienated from God, family, friends, lovers, and, I argue, the “world” at large.

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<sup>108</sup> This relates to Spencer’s assertion that *preaching the Blues* was ““was indistinguishable from the ethic of telling the truth” ( *Blues* 37).

<sup>109</sup> Evidence shows that this feeling of *disconnect* was, at times, addressed in a “church” setting during practices such as the *mourners’ bench* ceremonies and other *testimonial* occasions. This theme also has Scriptural roots in the description of Jesus’s feelings of *disconnect* in the Garden of Gethsemane as described in Luke 22:43-44 and his asking of God, “...why hast thou forsaken me,” while on the Cross in Matthew 27:46. Still, House evidently felt unable to express this *disconnect* while inhabiting the role of Christian Preacher.

These two versions of “Death Letter Blues,” when explored concurrently, portray a Blues exploration and interpretation of the grieving process. Both versions hint at the complexity of human relationships, take a hard-headed look at Divine-human dynamics, implore a broader discussion regarding the experience of *existential disconnect*, and reflect upon how these complexities manifest themselves in a mixture of painful and joyful memories. The first version uses the *established text* to predominately explore the layers of emotions one experiences while undergoing the grieving process. The second version uses the *established text* to expand upon the themes of guilt and redemption—notably, a redemption that the protagonist does not attain. These versions of “Death Letter Blues” are not contradictory but, rather, show the way in which House uses Blues Preaching-Singing as an exegetical and hermeneutical process to explore different themes as connected to *established texts* and life experiences—that is, whatever themes House feels is relevant to relay in that particular performance. Now that we have explored the interpretive process as connected with Blues Preaching-Singing in “Death Letter Blues,” I will now turn to how the process illuminated by this comparison relates to the exegetical process Reverend House performed during the public sermon.

### House’s Hermeneutic in the “Death Letter Blues” Recordings and His Preaching Background

To illuminate the similarities between the hermeneutical *process of interpretation and application* in Blues and Christian Preaching, I must first reprint,

at length, House's answer to the question "Do you make up your sermons the way you used to make up your songs?" (228)

Mm-hm, yeah, the same way. All during the week and through the nights or things like that I get my Bible and sit down and—turn to such and such a chapters and verses and such and such a books in the Bible, I'd say, "Well, I believe I'll choose this here text for Sunday for the people and I'll start on that," I'll say maybe around about Tuesday or Wednesday night or something like that—come in that night, I'd set up and I'd take my Bible and I'd study, study, read about what it's saying, what it's about, and all I could, get it in my head, and says, "Ah, oh yeah, well I got it." (Monge, 228).<sup>110</sup>

Again, the process of interpretation House applies to the *death letter* theme is a distinct but interconnected continuation of the exegetical process he employed in the African American Protestant churches. That is, in both processes, House chooses his text (the Bible, the *death letter* narrative, the experience of loss, etc.), considers "what it's saying, what it's about," then proceeds to give an oral public interpretation of this text that illuminates and expands upon the human condition in a variety of ways<sup>111</sup>. Therefore, much like House uses the Genesis story of the creation of humans by God<sup>112</sup> to elaborate upon the duality of the human conscience, House uses the *established text* of the "Death Letter" theme to explore—in two separate

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<sup>110</sup> Monge cites this interview as "Titon: 'Living Blues Interview,' 21-22." (254).

<sup>111</sup> When asked if he would ever "would write (his sermon) down," House responds, "No, I wouldn't even write it down" (Monge 228).

<sup>112</sup> Genesis 1:26 (KJV): "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."

performances—the phenomenon of grief. To accomplish these ends, House ultimately performs hermeneutics of both Biblical and non-Biblical text and life experiences to create a public, common, and shared dialogue of *meaning*.

Here, House's "Death Letter Blues" shows House, as a Blues Singer-Preacher, performing a hermeneutical function—*exegesis*—that is traditionally associated with the Christian Preacher. Levine's assertion that "blues was threatening (to church culture) because its spokesmen and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of religion in the past" (237) becomes prominently exhibited. House's Christian and Blues Preaching are, therefore, intimately connected in that both roles fulfill the expected and established tradition of public textual, experiential, and existential interpretation—a process that, in the Blues context, can be described as *Blues exegesis*.

## CHAPTER 6

### A NOTE ON THE TERM "HERMENEUTICS"

This chapter was born out of the sentiment that my exploration of the hermeneutic processes House employs in his Christian and Blues Preaching calls for some attention to a more precise meaning of the term *hermeneutics* in relation to House's work in particular and African American religions in general. Here, I discuss how my methodologies have reflected philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur's work on phenomenological hermeneutics and argue that my exploration of House's ministry, artistry, and lyrics can provide entrée into the further critical appropriation of Ricoeur's theories within the study of African American religions.

As segue way into Ricoeur's theories in relation to House's *religiosity*, I begin with theologian James A. Noel's stern warning to scholars interpreting African American visual art in *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*:

Many of these texts, like the experience they express, are ephemeral and fragmented; therefore, any attempt to systematize them under an overarching theme risks the danger of superimposing extraneous content upon African American texts. Our hermeneutic must somehow reflect the existential reality of brokenness in the black experience and, simultaneously, the reality of an African American ontology held together, ever tenuously, by faith and hope (138)

This is also a warning that applies to African American *sound text* and is treated as such in this thesis. House's soteriological discussions within the "Death Letter Blues" recordings, like many Blues texts, highlight this theme of *brokenness*. In this way,

House's music can be seen as his interpretation of the *black existential experience*, as has been argued throughout this thesis—an ontology through which *Blues religiosity* emerges as an expression of *faith, hope*, and, I would add, *truth, catharsis and philosophy*.

Any interpretation of House's work, therefore, must account for the simultaneous dynamic of alienation and reconciliation with God, the Black Churches, and other individuals such as Louise McGhee. Likewise, House's theme of a rarely-realized redemption creates a polarizing yet ongoing dialectic between meaninglessness and meaningfulness, whereas, as stated in chapter five, House sought to make sense out of the absurdity of life in general and black life *sui generis*.

My use of the term *hermeneutic* to describe House's interpretive process, therefore, necessitates a discussion of what *hermeneutics* means in the context of House's ministry, artistry, and lyrics, therefore avoiding the risk of *superimposing extraneous content*. Ricoeur's work on phenomenological hermeneutics, because of its simultaneous specificity and adaptability, provided a theoretical and methodological springboard for siphoning a description of *Blues hermeneutics/exegesis* in relation to House. In "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," Ricoeur describes *hermeneutics* as follows: "...the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical (1) inasmuch as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their *methodology* develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text-interpretation" (197). Ricoeur appropriates the German term *Auslegung* from nineteenth-century philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who defines interpretation as an

“orderly and systematic understanding of fixed and relatively permanent expressions of life” (232). Ricoeur specifically argues for hermeneutically approaching “meaningful action” (203), that is actions or events that become so imbedded within a community’s historical consciousness that they operate as *texts-to-be-interpreted*<sup>113</sup>. Additionally, Ricoeur provides a description of text that points toward broader theoretical implications. He states that an *object* becomes a text that allows for hermeneutic approaches when it has undergone a “kind of objectification which is equivalent to the fixation of a discourse by writing” (203)—that is, when it is preserved as an *object*<sup>114</sup>.

Within House’s lyrics, there are at least three objects that have undergone an objectification process and, therefore, function as *texts-to-be-interpreted*: (1) Biblical literature as both written and oral text; (2) referenced narratives, or the *established oral texts*; and (3) life, and black life *sui generis*, as he experienced and conveyed it, most often in relation to the cumulative experiences of his community. These three *objects* are interconnected, with life as the primary *object* House interprets. House and his community’s life experiences inform the interpretation of the other two *objects*; by reciprocation, African American experiences underwent an

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<sup>113</sup> Here, Ricoeur is referring to significant historical occurrences that act as *texts* in that they become commonly shared reference points for communities for generations to come. For example, the Haitian Revolution served as a reference point in artistic works that spoke to the twentieth-century liberation of African peoples in the Americas, as evidenced in Charles Mingus’s famous composition, “Haitian Fight Song.”

<sup>114</sup> Parts of this paragraph share both words and themes of an award-winning paper I presented at the American Academy of Religion Western Conference in March 2013. The title of that paper is “Sound Recording as Text and Expanding Hermeneutics: Learning from the Discourse on Religion and American Blues Music.”

*objectification* process through the development of a rich “archive” of referenced *oral texts* that reflect these experiences and through the preaching and artistry that served to interpret them. Ultimately, House speaks to the universal condition of humankind through his hermeneutic and exegesis of these *objects*.

The adaptability of Ricoeur’s theory of hermeneutics, in that it is both specific and malleable, allows us to realize the hermeneutic process House performs. On the one hand, Ricoeur’s description is unambiguous: an *object* opens itself to a hermeneutic approach when it functions as a *text*, or has undergone a textual objectification process. On the other hand, Ricoeur’s description is broad. By his definition, the manifestation of an *object*, or a *text*, varies depending on social, cultural, and religious context. Hence, his theory allows us to examine *texts* and *hermeneutic approaches* from the inside out, whereas we can discuss the manifested *texts* and *objects* of a particular person or community and yet maintain a clear idea of what *hermeneutics* entails: the *interpretation* of an *object*, whatever that *object* may be.

Ricoeur also offers commentary regarding the problem of hermeneutics that is strikingly similar to Noel’s warning: “...if it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal and may be assimilated to so-called ‘rules of thumb’. The text is a limited field of possible constructions” (213). In this, Ricoeur is speaking to scholars performing hermeneutics of texts, as I have performed upon House’s ministry, artistry, and lyrics. For the construction of my historical hermeneutic of House’s hermeneutics, it was necessary to consider the context in which House’s work emerged without



creating *so-called 'rules of thumb'* regarding Christian and Blues exegesis—or, in Noel's words, without "superimposing extraneous content" (138)—while subsequently speaking to House's commentary on the universal human condition in light of this context.

This discussion of House's ministry, artistry, and lyrics vis-à-vis Ricoeur's theory of phenomenological hermeneutics brings us full circle to Long's commentary on *signifying*: "Signifying is worse than lying because it obscures and obfuscates a discourse without taking responsibility for so doing. This verbal misdirection parallels the real argument but gains its power of meaning from the structure of the discourse itself without the signification being subjected to the rules of the discourse" (1). Here, Long offers a sharp and insightful criticism of the scholarly and cultural language and categorizations developed in modernity that, both intentionally and unintentionally, serve to reinforce Aryan, European, and Euro-American superiority. Therefore, scholars of African American texts must be careful not to formulate a hermeneutic that, through this "verbal misdirection," furthers this Euro-centric paradigm, which has often been done in the study of both African American religions and *Blues religiosity*. Ricoeur's theory of phenomenological hermeneutics, in the wake of which Noel and Long's theories arose, helps to provide the fortitude and theoretical grounding to develop and explore theories of hermeneutics that are opening and enlightening rather than oppressive, or that allow us to reflect, describe, explore, and highlight the *existential reality* of the people and communities we are discussing, as I have sought to do with House's ministry, artistry, and lyrics.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Through House, I have attempted to present a case study of a form of *religiosity* that reflects what Long calls an “extra-church orientation” (7), that is a form of *religiosity* that lies outside of yet in-relation-to, complements, and/or critiques what is commonly thought of as “traditional religion”—in House’s case, Black Protestantism. Scholars of religion still face the problem that Long’s theories have largely been ignored by the academy, with Noel and Rolsky at the forefront of reinserting Long’s work into the study of religions in general and African Diaspora religions in particular. It is my hope that, even in the sections of this thesis that do not directly reference Long, the overriding influence of *Significations* shines through; his description of religion as “orientation” (7) and his insistence that the religious studies field needs to take serious consideration of people’s “extra-church orientations” (7) laid a formidable foundation for my exploration of House’s dual and intermingling *orientations* as a Christian and Blues Preacher. Likewise, these assertions helped provide the theoretical grounding to discuss *Blues* as a form of *religious orientation and consciousness*. In chapter six, I further discussed my theoretical grounding by arguing that Paul Ricoeur’s work on phenomenological hermeneutics also needs to be further engaged in light of African Diaspora histories, religions, and experiences, as I have sought to do in relation to House’s life and work.

In this “Conclusion,” I briefly explore some potential future research projects regarding House in particular and *Blues religiosity* in general, ending with what is

currently emerging as the most promising or interesting focus for myself—an exploration of what might be called the *Blues sacred sound*. My contentions regarding potential further research regarding House's ministry, artistry, and lyrics also point towards broader research topics needed in the field of African Diaspora religions.

Understanding the conflation of House's Christian and Blues Preaching roles lends itself to exploring, in more depth, the intermingling of theologies evident within House's music. House's theologies prominently reflect Baptist and, to a less explicit but still significant extent, Methodist proclivities. It is notable and telling that House's Blues preaching, though, emerged along side the formation of other Protestant denominations, such as the Pentecostal or Sanctified churches, and the continued influences of Catholic, Voodoo, and Hoodoo practices throughout the Mississippi Delta. These multi-religious intersections invite additional scholars to hermeneutically engage the theologies expressed within House's work in light of these various theological, cosmological, and philosophical influences, many of which are no doubt evident in House's work without him realizing it.

This focus on House's theological tendencies could lead to a more extensive exploration of the impact of House's multi-regional migrations, illuminating how these migrations affected House's theological viewpoint. Sernett has already given extensive treatment to theological and cultural differences among the southern and the northern/mid-western Black churches that, among other factors, resulted from

the Great Migration of 1914-1918<sup>115</sup>. Perhaps additional Blues studies could help facilitate a look at African American religious expression and consciousness vis-à-vis the continued migration of many African Americans to the American North, West, and Midwest in the decades following the Great Migration.

This thesis has focused on the 1910s through the 1940s as the *axis mundi* of House's formation as a Christian and Blues Preacher, with House's work in the 1960s emerging as a related yet non-identical continuation of an art form largely developed in the first part of the twentieth century. The pre-WWII time period formed a critical era in black religious and cultural life that saw former slaves and their children and grandchildren continuing to form an African American identity and *discover or create* their "ultimate significance" (Long 7) within a society and global landscape that continuously sought to degrade and dehumanize them. This dynamic was reflected by the large-scale emergence of the various art-forms that served to address these issues: (Blues, Jazz, Gospel, Ragtime, Zydeco) music, the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, writings from African American expatriates like James Baldwin<sup>116</sup>, visual arts such as James "Son" Thomas's sculptures, etc. In turn, the Blues can be explored in relation to the various forms of *religious consciousness* that emerge within those varying other art-forms, with the linkage

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<sup>115</sup> *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration.*

<sup>116</sup> Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is set in Paris, reflecting Baldwin's intimate knowledge of the city he lived in for a significant portion of his life.

between Blues and Gospel prominently displayed in the compositions of Thomas Dorsey and W.C. Handy<sup>117</sup>.

A more theological focus would give scholars the opportunity to research subsequent theologies and practices that developed under the influence of *Blues religiosity*. Is there a connection, for example, between *Blues religiosity* and the development of Black Liberation Theology, as largely cultivated by James Cone in *Black Religion and Black Theology* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*<sup>118</sup>? Likewise, what is the relationship between the Blues and the theologies and cosmologies of other prominent religio-political movements such as the Moorish Science Temple, Garveyism, the Nation of Islam, the Nation of Gods and Earths, etc.? In addition, Blues studies deserves a more comprehensive discussion of the linkage between the Blues and manifestations of Islam both in the United States and, by way of global cultural encounter, Mali, Senegal, and other parts of West Africa<sup>119</sup>. Likewise, how have Blues theologies and cosmologies been connected to the civil rights movements, including the movements led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm

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<sup>117</sup> I also contend that Blues *religiosity* has had a profound impact upon American musical culture and, by way of a globalized market and system of communication, the worldwide religious and musical landscape at large as exhibited by the Jazz compositions of Duke Ellington, the Pop music of Prince, the Country songs of Charlie Daniels, the African American “folk” references in the lyrics of Irish punk band The Pogues, etc.

<sup>118</sup> Given Cone’s book *The Spirituals and the Blues*, I suspect that there is a strong connection.

<sup>119</sup> Martin Scorsese’s documentary, *Feels Like Going Home*, traces Blues music and spirituality to its “roots” in West Africa, with Mali being the main focus of the film. Scorsese subsequently finds that the Blues, in turn, also had a profound influence upon the culture, religiosity, and music of many Malinese people, including the famous Malinese musician Salif Keita.

X<sup>120</sup>? Given the vast influence of the Blues upon southern, northern, mid-western, and even western African American communities, along with an influence on the various and diverse cultures worldwide, I suspect that its influence is embedded, in some way, in the paradigmatic and philosophical proclivities of all of these varied and diverse movements.

One research topic that has largely been untouched in my thesis is the development of what can be called a *Blues canon*, or the myriad of referenced narratives upon which House performed hermeneutics. Levine contends that the development of the Blues was indicative of the simultaneous influence of Biblical literature and nineteenth-century *secular* slave songs and folklore upon post-slavery African American community consciousness<sup>121</sup>. An exploration of the canon of *oral texts* used by House would include an in-depth study of the history of African American folklore about “legendary” figures such as Brer Rabbit, the “signifying monkey<sup>122</sup>,” Stack-o-Lee, Jesse James, Casey Jones, and even Robert Johnson.

As briefly discussed in chapter four, the field of *Blues studies* calls for further and more comprehensive work done regarding the issues of gender and the Blues Preaching of female artists. Like their male counterparts, female Blues Singer-Preachers express the *truths* of “being black in a white racist society” (Cone 103);

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<sup>120</sup> I would be particularly interested in investigations into the relationship between *Blues religiosity* and the theology of Malcolm X’s post-Nation of Islam period, just before his tragic and untimely assassination.

<sup>121</sup> *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* deals with this subject extensively in “Chapter 2: The Meaning of Slave Tales” and “Chapter 4: The Rise of Secular Song.”

<sup>122</sup> The trickster figure of the *signifying monkey* functions as the main metaphor for Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s literary theory in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

additionally, they also address the *truths* of being *female in a male sexist society*. The Blues Preaching, hermeneutics, and *exegesis* of female Singer-Preachers seemingly highlight an intersection of race and gender and the deep, complex, and often painful yet liberating process of interpreting their life experiences amidst the absurdities of racism and sexism. Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* profoundly and extensively discusses these issues vis-à-vis the music of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. In order to continue to formulate comprehensive studies of African American women's *religious orientations* and *consciousness* during this critical era, more time and attention needs to be paid to other "lesser-known" female Blues and Gospel artists such as Memphis Minnie, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Lucille Bogan, Clara Smith, and Maggie Jones<sup>123</sup>.

In addition, future research projects provide the opportunity to more extensively explore Queer themes and Queer spirituality as expressed by many Blues Singer-Preachers, particularly prior to World War II. In this regard, Lucille Bogan<sup>124</sup> and Kokomo Arnold<sup>125</sup> emerge as two of the most prominent artists whose

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<sup>123</sup> As I am in the initial stages of exploring these issues, Maggie Jones's "Suicide Blues" carries both a fascination and academic quandary for me. In this powerful and somber song, Jones provides a first-person account of a woman who commits suicide. With lyrics like, "No, I ain't no coward/and I'll tell you why/I was tired of living/but wasn't scared to die," "Suicide Blues," on the surface, appears to express a nihilistic and despairing view of life. Yet, in light of Noel's commentary regarding the "existential reality of brokenness in the black experience" and the resulting predominant "ephemeral and fragmented" nature of many African American texts (138), "Suicide Blues," in the context of Jones's full catalogue and life, may actually be an expression of the "faith and hope" (138) that keeps her going in the face of life's, and black female life's, tribulations.

<sup>124</sup> In 1935's "B.D. Woman's Blues," Bogan sings, "B.D. women, they all done learned their plan/ They can lay their jive just like a natural man." From my understanding,

Blues Preaching touches upon Queer sexuality, romance, and spirituality. Although Davis's book contains brief discussions of Queer themes, future work that more comprehensively handles the conflation of spirituality, romance, and sexuality within Blues recordings should provide more in-depth treatment of the numerous recordings and artists that touch upon those topics<sup>126</sup>.

Most interesting and promising for me, though, is to explore what could be called *Blues sacred sound*. In chapter four, while discussing House's *Blues conversion*, I include a footnote regarding how further research needs to be done regarding how House recognized the Blues sound as "sacred<sup>127</sup>." Again, given Westfield and Trulear's contention, what was it about the African American collective consciousness that made the *Blues sound* recognizably *sacred* or *religious*? Here, I would need to delve further into religious studies theories regarding *sacred sound* and the lasting cultural elements tied to a West African past. In 2006, journalist Jonathon Curiel wrote a groundbreaking article regarding the Blues sound called "Muslim Roots, U.S. Blues." In this article, Curiel documents the work of historian

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without, as of yet, finding a credible source to confirm this, the term *B.D. Woman* refers to *bulldyke woman*, a term for *lesbian*.

<sup>125</sup> In "Sissy Man Blues," Kokomo Arnold sings, "'Lord, I woke up this mornin' / With my pork grinding business in my hand / Lord, if you can't send me no woman / please send me some sissy man.'" There are two aspects of these lyrics that struck me as particularly fascinating: (1) Arnold expresses an acceptance of sexual relations with another man as a viable *substitute* for sexual relations with a woman; and (2) his request for a "sissy man" is couched in the form of a prayer, perhaps furthering the view that his "Queer" sexuality is deeply and intricately tied to his broader spiritual orientation and relationship with God.

<sup>126</sup> The academic connections I have made through my recent association with the Queer Studies in Religion Caucus will, I hope, nurture my continued interest in this field

<sup>127</sup> Footnote 93.



Sylviane Diouf and ethnomusicologist Gerhard Kubik in connecting the *Blues sound* or *Blues intonation* to the influence of a West-African Islamic past, correlating the *Blues sound* with the Muslim call to prayer<sup>128</sup>. House's *Blues conversion*, along with other historical encounters with the *Blues sound*, need to be explored in light of the work regarding the Islamic influence upon Blues, as carried over by Muslim slaves whose descendants largely converted to Christianity during the Great Awakenings. This begs the question: *What are the social implications regarding an Islamic past in the American South?* Religious studies theories regarding *sacred sound*, when appropriated critically, could have a lot to say regarding the recognition of *sacred sound* in the consciousness of communities affected by a particular historical trajectory. I suspect that *Blues religiosity* shows evidence of Islamic practices and theologies intersecting with a multitude of Christian and other West African Traditions.

In conclusion, House's ministry, artistry, and lyrics—along with House's life, taken as a whole—largely exemplify the intermingling of what religious scholars refer to as the *sacred* and *profane* within an ostensibly *secular* context. Subsequently, my research regarding House brings to the forefront Long and Ricoeur's theories, among others, and their importance to the study of African American religions. I hope that, in doing so, I have made a meaningful contribution to the discourse on *Blues religiosity* and African American religions.

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<sup>128</sup> According to Curiel, Kubrik's book, *Africa and the Blues*, is the most extensive treatment of the subject.

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