...wishing I were a Negro.
—Jack Kerouac to himself

The American mainstream still owes its unpaid debt to fifties black culture for showing paths through their mutual thicket of troubles. To those who would listen, the blues ethic discovered how to mine and kindle the deeply buried lodes of energy in its history. That Ellison wanted to lever this energy up for all is clear from his novel's last line: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" It was the postwar period and he would show everyone — blacks, novelists, Americans — how to come out of the hole.

For Ellison the idea was to return to the sustaining lore and traditions that preceded and — he demonstrated against the grain of his time — were succeeding modern despair. When he discovered literature at Tuskegee Institute in the middle of studying trumpet, Ellison later reported, "The Waste Land' seized my mind" (Shadow 161). He found ritual the organizing basis for modernism. He also saw how the longing in modern writers for the putative completion they attributed to ancient culture led them awry of their own time. Nevertheless, Eliot's poem staggered Ellison, by his own account driving him back through American literature seeking answers to the poet's riddles and paralysis, searching for the sources of the poem's greatness, which he has always saluted in print. But Ellison is a particularly cagey man and Invisible Man is no simple extension of Eliot's poetry — as deliberately speeding culture does not simply extend modernism.

"I learned a few things from Eliot, Joyce and Hemingway," Ellison has told interviewers, "but not how to adapt them" (Shadow 174). He learned about lore's importance to art from these modern mentors, but he came to
reject their despairing relationship to it. He pioneered instead the untold and living lore of his own lifetime and people: "When I started writing I knew that in both The Waste Land and Ulysses ancient myth and ritual were used to give significance to the material, but it took me a few years to realize that the myths and rites which we find functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same way" (174–75, my emphasis).

This daily lore was not the stuff of debauched Sweeney, from Eliot’s poems, nor Eliot’s lament for an impotent Fisher King casting the polluted Thames for a catch that will never bite. Instead, Ellison gave vivid instances of this daily lore in Trueblood’s blues (Chapter 2), Peter Wheatstraw’s jive energy and the laughter of Robin’s pluckers (Chapter 9), and the sneaky duplicity of Sambo’s smile (Chapter 20). Those were instances of lore alive and present. They eventually taught the invisible youth he was whole, so could grow into manhood. They made him engage his world, put his lands in order, so to speak, by elaborating his story.

Ralph Ellison’s complex relationship to the modern writers was like the poet Charles Olson’s, himself an important shaper of contemporary attitudes in his own genre. Both admired the formal achievements of the previous generation’s best writers. But both eschewed the content and tone of that achievement. Olson’s early poem “The Kingfisher” (1949) rejects the modern axiom of one declining lineage from the classical past. “The Kingfisher” reflects Eliot’s Fisher King becoming impotent. But Olson quite differently notices that, although the kingfisher (around which the ancient Fisher King myth developed) does indeed raise its young in a nest that grows “fetid” with repeated use, its fledglings actually fly away to build new nests and begin afresh. Olson identifies with the fledglings.

At poem’s end, Olson adapts from Rimbaud his own new conditions for culture: “if I have any taste it is only because I have interested myself in what was slain in the sun.” He addresses these lines indirectly to Ezra Pound, whose cantos’ form he was emulating. But the lines reject Pound’s modern content in favor of ideas which the moderns overlooked, even “killed,” in pressing their imperial modes. Less discreetly than Ellison, Olson challenged his forebears with their own—specifically, Pound’s own—words: “I pose you your question: shall you uncover honey / where maggots are? / I hunt among stones.” Olson’s stones were the Mayan hieroglyphs that he traveled to Yucatan to study.

Olson was leaving the fetid nest of his modern mentors to prove the living existence of lores that he insisted had a present bearing on contemporary life. And twenty years later, continuing the contemporary epoch, Thomas Pynchon was to have one of his more sympathetic characters, a black Southwest African living in Germany just after World War II, similarly insist, “Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom” (Gravity’s Rainbow 525). Olson, Ellison, Pynchon, all these contemporary voices, insisted that the resources that would carry culture forward reside outside the narrow purviews of the late modern aegis. The point was to know how to use tradition, how to choose pertinent strands, and then to reconstitute their weaving.

Ellison pursued the point most noticeably with his mentor, Richard Wright. Ellison wanted to leap the black community’s hedges which the attention of Wright’s stories had paradoxically made the more impassable even while protesting them. Ellison’s title and his novel’s action emphasized the capacity to grow into manhood, while the last word in Wright’s titles always reinforced stunted immaturity: Uncle Tom’s Children (1938), Native Son (1940), and Black Boy (1945). By 1956 and his account of the Bandung Conference in The Color Curtain, Wright, too, was noticing and trying to account for the emergent full personalities of people of color. The mid-fifties was when that all came out of its hole, in fact and fiction.

Allen Ginsberg read Ellison’s Invisible Man in July, 1954 (Journals 87), fourteen months before he recited the first part of “Howl!” in San Francisco, 7 October 1955. “Howl!” gauged its era in many ways, and perhaps most closely in showing how the “best minds” in Ginsberg’s generation depended on black culture to fix their needs. The oscillations between withdrawal and engagement that mark most of Ginsberg’s mid-fifties poems, their struggle against the affectlessness and victimization common in the previous generation, their allusions to jazz—all these were lessons garnered from black culture. Just as Ellison’s invisible man returns to society from his hole on the novel’s last page, so Ginsberg usually closed his poems reengaging the wheel of his society. The blues ethic fomented and confirmed both Ellison’s and Ginsberg’s already existing concerns.

Kerouac had written On the Road, in April 1951, partly about the need to connect with a literally derelict American lore. He represented this dereliction in crazed wanderers from the ghost of the Susquehanna, at the end of Part I of On the Road, to “Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found,” in the novel’s last sentence. A year later, April 1952, Allen Ginsberg wrote a significant early poem, “Wild Orphan,” about this same felt lovelessness, similarly shown as separation from the mentor. The orphan tries to construct a mythology too wild to inherit about forebears too derelict to create it themselves. He is consciously investing a usable, romantic past. Meanwhile, across the country, the mentor grieves for the lost son,
unaware of the youths “bumming toward his door” (Collected Poems 78–79). In this poem orphans forgive fathers who in turn need and want the sons.

Clearly, Beats and blacks were both on the same track in the fifties, both reaching to connect with an only apparently lost culture. Thus when Beats could not connect with white fathers—symbolically, when orthodox mentors proved inadequate—they adopted black jazzlore. Kerouac wrote in On the Road:

I looked everywhere for the sad and fabled tinsmith of my mind. Either you find someone who looks like your father in places like Montana or you look for a friend’s father where he is no more. . . . I walked. . . . wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. (148)¹

His mind’s tinsmith is a fantasy of derelict and black culture compacted into a blues ethic.

Kerouac learned from this ethic to send down his bucket where he was, much as Booker T. Washington had urged, and as Ellison’s narrator had repeated. However, Kerouac was in the apparently barren desert of lower-middle class popular culture, a seipa world of baseball cards and the stations of the cross, Joan Crawford and the Three Stooges.² He transformed it into Visions of Cody and Dr. Sax.

The connection between the blues ethic and its sympathetic outsiders passes directly and consciously through Jack Kerouac. When interviewers in 1968 asked Ginsberg about William Shakespeare and Christopher Smart as sources for “Howl,” he told them, “Lester Young, actually, is what I was thinking about,” referring to the great jazz tenor saxophonist who came out of Kansas City with Count Basie and went on to name Billie Holiday “Lady Day,” as she named him “The Pres.” “Howl” is all ‘Lester Leaps In” Ginsberg continued to claim. “And I got that,” he said, “from Kerouac . . . he made me listen to it” (Compressed 43). In fact, with the enthusiasm for black music in his novels, Kerouac made a lot of people listen to it. More significant than their enthusiasms, though, were Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s reenactments of the blues ethic. Kerouac’s improvisations, repetitions, stuttering starts and stops, insistence on coexisting with the world as it is, and love of late-night performance all came directly from the jazz worlds he entered on both coasts and both banks of the Mississippi River.

The first inkling of the blues ethic as it would crop up in On the Road and, much later, Visions of Cody appeared in 1955 under Kerouac’s pseudonym “Jean-Louis,” as “Jazz of the Beat Generation”:

You can hear Lester blow and he is the greatness of America in a single Negro musician—he is just like the river, the river starts in near Butte, Montana, in frozen snow caps (Three Forks) and meanders on down across states and entire territorial areas of dim bleak land with hawthorn cracking in the sleet, picks up rivers in Bismarck, Omaha, and St. Louis just north, another at Kay-ro, another in Arkansas, Tennessee, comes deluging on New Orleans with muddy news from the land and a roar of subterranean excitement that is like the vibration of the entire land sucked of its gut in mad midnight, fevered, hot, the big mudhole rank clawpole old frogular pawed-soul titanic Mississippi from the North, full of wires, cold wood and horn—Lester, so, holding his horn high in Doctor Pepper chicken-shacks, backstreet, Basic Yat Pete wearing greasy smeared corduroy bignaps and in torn flap smoking jacket without straw, scuffle-up shoes all slopsey Mother Hubbard, soft, pudding, and key ring, early handkerchiefs, hands up, arms up, horn horizontal, shining dull, in wood-brown whiskey house with amoniac urine from broken gut bottles around fecal pukey bowl and a gal sprawled in it legs spread in brown cotton stockings, bleeding at belted mouth, moaning “yes” as Lester, horn placed, has started blowing, “blow for me mother blow for me,” 1938, later, earlier, Miles is still on his daddy’s checkered knee, Louis’ only got twenty years behind him, and Lester blows all Kansas City to ecstasy and now Americans from coast to coast go mad, and fall by, and everybody’s picking up. (“Jazz” 14–15)

From such long sentences derived the long-lined ecstasies of “Howl,” some of the impetus for Thomas Pynchon’s catalogues in V. and Gravity’s Rainbow, and verification for many readers that there remained untapped resources in the energy of jazz. That is why he can end with “everybody’s picking up.” Indeed, everyone was cuing on the “muddy news from the land” that was the blues ethic.

Kerouac’s extended simile links jazz to the tumble of muddy news that the Mississippi bears to New Orleans. His words imitated both that tumble and the synced beat of a Lester Young solo. This passage is striking first for its volubility gushing from Kerouac’s typewriter as from the river’s springs at Three Forks and from Young’s horizontal horn. But also important is its precision—he says “Kay-ro” as the natives do; he says it as Huck and Jim did when they passed it in the night. Abetting this precise gush is Kerouac’s concision. Dropping articles and pronouns emphasizes his allit-
He was a clown under double surveillance, from his group and his audience, this great pretender, who would make himself whatever "you" in his audiences saw him to be. His American audiences made him number one, twice over. The great pretender lived up to his boast.

The limits of that boast, however, tied the Platters to their moment. Ellison and O'Connor could stick their Sambo figures into contexts that peeled away their minstrel masks, uncovering the strings behind the smiles. But the three-minute limit of the pop single held the Platters to elaborating the commonplace, indicating its tensions and complexities. They could not subvert the Sambo figure’s racist associations so simply, in the fifties, because the inherited cultural images were too common. As you listened to Tony Williams sing how his smiling was make-believe, for instance, you might have been browsing in a Newsweek from that spring, and noticed the full-page advertisement for Chicago’s Ambassador Hotel Pump Room. It pictured a black man, well into his thirties, wearing a brocade coat, white gloves, a turban, and a plume. With him ran the hotel’s caption: “In Chicago He Pours Your Coffee . . . Say ‘Pump Room’ to anyone who knows Chicago’s top restaurants and this turbanned coffee boy comes instantly to mind” (7 March 1955, 93). Such conventional cultural associations were the context that limited early rock uses of the Sambo convention.

As it turned out, the trick was less to transcend the common ground of American racism than to speed the Sambo figure across it, showing him in alternative contexts, indicating to each audience how the others viewed him. By putting the figure in the many lights of many audiences, his many facets would become apparent. This was essentially the strategy toward which Martin Luther King, Jr.’s tactics gravitated. King learned to make vivid dramas in public that projected passive victims bearing their condition through hostile crowds toward banal goals—a front seat on a bus, a registrar at a county courthouse, a bungalow in a white neighborhood, use of “white only” laveratories. He directed and starred in these dramas before curious national audiences in the print and visual media, before local audiences passionately for and against his principles, before the close scrutiny of the press, police, and FBI. These dramas shared much with the minstrel show, the passive figures with the Sambo figure, and King’s nonviolent protest with the Sambo strategy. They shared the passive aggression, the doubleness, the covert mockery of the dominant position. They shared the largest audiences of their respective eras. They shared, too, the prime attribute of the Sambo figure—both protesters and performers carried the mask into new contexts, revealing its surprising dimensions. Thus the Sambo figure could participate in the same dignity that the
had noticed a man, coffee-colored, well-dressed, and majestically stoned, but missed the only characteristic Mr. Head disgustedly insisted on: "That was a nigger." After they walk in the city, pass the sewer, and admit they are lost in a Negro section, Mr. Head is too chagrined, horrified, and scared to ask for help. So Nelson approaches a lolling black woman, asks directions, and senses in her power exactly the charisma white youths were beginning to feel all across America at just this fifties moment in the history of race relations:

He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before. He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel. (262)

The grandfather pulled him away. And they walked ever deeper into what Mr. Head was by now calling "nigger heaven" (261).

Under the pressure to convey to his kin their race's regional wisdom, Mr. Head further compounds his mistakes. He leaves their lunch on the train, loses their bearing down urban streets, allows blacks to fascinate the boy, and, crowningly, when angry women threaten to call police against Nelson, even denies he knows him. Thus, instead of cementing the boy's commitment to the mores of his own kind, as he had anticipated, Mr. Head discovers blacks separating his kin from him. He is living out the fifties nightmare of the racists who called the Monday of Earl Warren's desegregation ruling "Black Monday." He is encountering the altered conditions that necessitated the era's deliberate speed. Like so many others, of every political and aesthetic tendency, Mr. Head is discovering that the old ways of coping do not suffice.

O'Connor musters her considerable religious rhetoric to manifest the unglued empire these two novitiates now inhabit, at least for the nonce. She shows them so lost that home, even, is nothing to them. They have grown so bereft of bonds in the world that they grasp what "man would be like without salvation" (Complete 268). Just then they arrive before the plaster statue. It seems to them "some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat." Mr. Head sums up the meaning of this black minstrel image in precisely the wrong way that will make everything right for the two of them as whites. "They ain't got enough real ones here," he tells the boy, "They got to have an artificial one" (269).

Such grandfatherly misinterpretation is neither more true nor more convenient, however, than the lie about its topic that the Sambo statue itself indicates for its owners. One of O'Connor's most interesting implications concerns the inevitable uses of totems and art. Mr. Head's interpretation of the statue is a lie about the lie that the statue represents. The demeaning statue presides over that lawn because of its owners' anxieties about the many threatening Negroes looming large in Atlantan, American, life in the fifties. The owners' inoculation of their greenswards against black menace differs mainly from Mr. Head's dose of the city to Nelson in that the Atlantans consider their dose successful. Unlike Mr. Head, who began his enterprise knowing what he was about, their effect depends on repressing their intents especially from themselves. The artifice of the statue carves Negroes down to manageable miniature, proposes their happy smile, and insists that watermelon sugar will appease them. Mr. Head imagines just the opposite. The interpretation he makes—his impromptu artifice in rejoinder—is that white Atlantans so believe the black populace that they multiply them in statuary.

Their interpretation serves O'Connor's pilgrims because it brings them together and allows their return to their moonlighted garden in the woods, where Nelson announces "I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again!" (270). Blacks and their urban home have shocked the boy out of further experience, which is what the old man had wanted, but clearly not what O'Connor advises, and perhaps not what Mr. Head would now wish, for the Sambo figure has also affected him. But in what way, and how lastingly, is not certain. He now recognizes the size of his sin, but that he judges himself "with the thoroughness of God" is surely a tall-tale pretense. He also feels God's mercy so completely that he suddenly "felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise" (279). Some readers consider O'Connor earnest with her ending, arguing that Mr. Head has had full and satisfying conversion in this one event. Others suspect his second static understanding as is fatuous as his first, so merely the haunting beginning of many such moments in a late life of agony. That the story arouses such arguments indicates why Flannery O'Connor judged it the best she ever wrote, having more in it than she knew (Habit xvi).

Beyond its private associations and its early contemporary instance of embedded deconstructions, what's important in "The Artificial Nigger" is its intuitive scrutiny of that Sambo figure, smiling miserably, in the center of mid-fifties life. Well beyond O'Connor's story, the Sambo figure is the agent of change making for deliberate speed in both black and white communities. He is part of the black wedge into the white community which initially divides but ultimately connects the cultures, however frag-
eration and speeds his logic. These conceits couple with the surprising rhythms to create a density that hinders the horizontal flow of the passage and also its linear time, until Kerouac even confounds 1938 in ‘later, earlier.’

Although he sanitized it for New World Writing (‘fæcal’ and ‘urine’ were otherwise), the editorial alterations hardly disturbed its spirit. Kerouac improvised his news the way Young had his, out of innumerable previous rundowns of the same material. For example, he sliced the part quoted here not from the famous roll manuscript to be published two years later as On the Road. It came, rather, from the manuscript for Visions of Cody (92–93), which by 1952 was Kerouac’s fifth obsessive attempt to account for his friend Neal Cassady, though it would not be published in its entirety until 1972 (Hunt, “Composition” 334). The spoors of Kerouac’s improvisation are everywhere in the passage—in its offhand allusions (Miles, Louis, Basie) and unfollowed ideas, as in its ambition to exhaust its topic and self. The passage tries, for example, to amplify into audibility “the vibration of the entire land.” This prose lives up to the blues ethic in its reflexive image of the performer returning to his audience their moans, the matter of their porcelain bowls. That’s one way to understand such writing.

Another way to understand it is to notice Kerouac offloading so many of his own needs and fears onto jazz and its black soloists that he created what Flannery O’Connor termed, in the same year, an “artificial nigger.” Like so many other writers-performers of the fifties, even those who were sympathetic, even those who were black, Kerouac used the Negro as a metaphor of his needs. Ellison’s invisible youth, Kerouac’s Lester Young, the Emmett Till that James Baldwin and Newsweek made, Richard Penniman’s and Bumps Blackwell’s Little Richard, Chuck Berry’s brown-eyed handsome man, and Norman Mailer’s host of notions about black sexuality conveniently clustered in his famous essay The White Negro—all these shared, at least in some measure, with O’Connor’s statue, with the minstrel Interlocutor and Tambo and Bones, the uses of artifice and the abuses of artificiality. They were all Sambos. Use and abuse was what each in its way was about. They were all figures accustomed to slipping successive yokes of perception and becoming whatever their viewers needed to see in them. Sambos survived their surveillance no other way. The Sambo strategy was particularly active in the fifties, and of course still operates.

Flannery O’Connor’s “The Artificial Nigger” is the brilliant centerpiece of her first collection of stories, A Good Man Is Hard to Find (1955). Her volume’s title refers to the 1927 same-name recording by Bessie Smith (Columbia 14250-D), which was a staple in the singer’s repertoire (though hardly a blues, for all its inflections). Important to “The Artificial Nigger” is one of those cast plaster statues of a miniaturized black man that sometimes light suburban driveways. In this story the statue perches on a yellow brick fence around an Atlanta lawn to eat a piece of brown watermelon: “He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead” (Complete 268). Nothing, she wrote to one correspondent, “screams out the tragedy of the South like what my uncle calls ‘nigger statuary’” (Habit 101). But another more common vernacular euphemism for such a statue was “Sambo.”

A frequent strategy of O’Connor’s stories was to move tractable characters on pilgrimages through alien country where a shock propels them out of their complacency, through an epiphany, into a different consciousness. Her best stories often derive their deepest irony from the way a trigg grandmother, hefty matron, or huffy philosophy student ricochets from a first to a second false consciousness without being able to sustain the painful clarity passed en route. Some inadequacy in the redneck way of knowledge is less to blame here than the general insufficiency that makes most people prefer comfortable conclusions to difficult truths. In “The Artificial Nigger,” the Sambo statue incites both the characters’ skid and their readers’ realizations about the paths of human understanding.

The story of their skid begins when Mr. Head and his grandson, Nelson, leave their rural shack, where the moon “cast a dignifying light on everything,” to visit Atlanta, where everything “looked like exactly what it was.” Mr. Head has wanted to inoculate Nelson against the evils of the city. To that end, he has Nelson peer into a sewer entrance. The mentor describes the system so that the boy “connected the sewer passages with the entrance to hell and understood for the first time how the world was put together in its lower parts” (Complete 259). But Mr. Head’s pièce de résistance, he is sure, will be the city’s Negroes, whom the grandson has never seen.

The two pilgrims encounter several. On the train to the city, Nelson
protesters kept, for it was neither the performer nor the protester that was obscene, but the operating conditions. Their contexts lacked dignity: that was the clarification both rites proclaimed.

Taking the Sambo figure through multiple contexts, then, expanded its message. Whether or not performers, entertainers, and activists consciously learned the principle is difficult to say, but many of them came to apply it. Songs like “Speedo,” toward the end of the year, caught some of the regular guy’s engulfment in speeding past barriers—”They often call me Speedo,” sang the Cadillacs’ Earl Carroll, “but my real name is Mr. Earl.” It was Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene,” however, during the Summer of 1955, that really illustrated the principle.

“Maybellene” begins as a song about class in a race: about a poor man’s V-8 Ford dueling a rich man’s Cadillac for a black woman. But it ends being a song about race in a race. Berry’s apparent desire was to ignore race somehow and grab the same American promise of Fords and proms, jukeboxes and guitars offered every adolescent. But his quiet conviction, ever deepening from “Maybellene” on, was that the ways of his people claimed him. And he claimed them, in song after song increasingly more complexly. His career in that way recapitulated the pattern Ellison’s invisible man fixed just three years earlier.

Berry’s singer is nevertheless very different from Ellison’s invisible youth. His reservoir of street smarts and a mind portrayed as uncluttered by nagging introspection place him more happily behind a wheel than podium or desk. “Maybellene” concerns a black trickster’s tactics of speed within a life understood as competition, all dodging through the hillbilly patina that attracted producer Leonard Chess in the first place. So it was an interesting match when Chuck Berry, at age 21, contended America’s sense of itself with his pomaded hair, white bucks, seemingly cute lyrics, and stage moves that would soon become his phallic duck walk—its passive-aggressive contradiction in terms of the minstrel tradition. He was armed with a potently sneaky mix of folk conceits and contemporary insouciance. Surrounding him that summer of Emmett Till’s lynching was the general aura represented in the Pump Room’s advertisement for its turbanned coffee server. He was arriving for the contest just after Earl Warren’s enforcement decree, and a few months before the Montgomery bus boycott.

Victim of a woman who has started in doing the things she used to do just “motorvating” around in his jalopy, Berry glimpses Maybellene in a Coupe de Ville. Whose Cadillac she rides Berry never tells, but he also never admits the fancy car’s superiority to his Ford. Rather, Berry commit-

ted himself to the proposition that he was its equal. Their cars may go bumper to bumper and side to side, may jump the speed past ninety-five to 104 and even 110; the Ford may slip behind in its uphill battle, but Berry has reserves of energy and determination. When his Ford loses ground to the Cadillac’s power, he relies on trickster wiles to pull him out: When it started to rain he tooted for the passing lane; all that water under his hood surely did his motor good. Berry inserts a bridge with the old blues chestnut of the guitar imitating a train whistle, but updates the motif, whistle becoming Ford horn, toot, and wail. He is Mobileman.

Mobileman masters his own technology, but remains in league with sun, cloud, and rain. With the elements on his side, he is soon speeding so fast you might swear he sings he spits Maybellene half a mile ahead settin’ like a toe on a leg but, no, she’s merely sitting like a ton of lead. Whichever, there’s no stopping him now and Mobileman catches Maybellene on the crest of the hill. The open-ended capture of Maybellene is what still holds audiences decades later.

A man who has overcome his victimization by chasing down the fanciest Cadillac on a rainy road, intuitively drawn on the language and riffs of his folk ways, intertwined them with the twang and rhythm of his neighbors’ counter tradition, and snuck his resulting anthem of pride past all the natural and cultural roadblocks—what might such a sly agent do with straying Maybellene at their peak moment? Nobody knows, least of all the singer. Berry exhibited the excitement of competition as well as anyone on the pop scene. At his career’s outset, however, he could not imagine the result as success, which remained for him as undefined as death.

Berry would have to accrue confidence before he could propose victory in his songs, as in the last stanza to “Brown-Eyed Handsome Man.” What was constant and thinkable in 1955 was the sport, the longing to score, the competitions, the reeling and rocking, the women doing all the things they used to do in fancier cars than he had, the fiancées like Nadine who, every time he sees them, “got something else to do.” Berry fused his blues vision with a veneer of pop and “almost grown” optimism. But the blues vision was what was left at the end. Maybellene is caught for now, but he and she being what they are, and their world the same, their proclivities will prevail. There is a maw at the end of “Maybellene,” as at the end of nearly all his other major songs, a maw which the title of a 1964 song minimized as “No Particular Place to Go.”

Berry’s earnest investment in the present and uncertainty about ends was inevitable for fifties performers in his position trying to bridge
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Out of the Hole

man is also a Bandung man: the second stanza glimpses a woman walking across the desert to Bombay to find a brown-eyed handsome man. This brown-eyed Bandung man is also historical: he goes back to when the world began. And he’s mythical: Venus lost both her arms fighting to win him in the penultimate stanza. So by the time the last stanza finds him in the baseball game, that most American pastime, Berry’s brown-eyed trickster is a deepened figure. Berry has pulled tighter the initial tension of a watched witness judging the D.A., of a lover whose jobless freedom will ensure his prosecutor’s further imprisonment in a job. By the end, Berry’s song has yanked him across epochs and continents, dislocating him even beyond the usual trickster detachment. That is why the last stanza is so supremely empty and loaded at the same time, itself a Sambo fragment. At two strikes and three balls, the brown-eyed man hits a home run and rounds the bases, the crowd cheering as he takes third and goes home. But for what home is he heading?

Is he a conventional American sport doffing cap to fans while heading for home plate in a hot dogs and mustard baseball game? Or is he a sly fellow heading home to his briar patch, to the traditional blues code for the sanctuary of one’s culture, as when the invisible youth urged his Harlem crowd to “go home”? He wouldn’t be the brown-eyed handsome man in the mid-fifties were he not running toward both destinations simultaneously. The difference between “Maybellene” and “Brown-eyed Handsome Man” is that the singer’s vagueness in his first song’s ending has become controlled ambiguity in the second. “Brown-eyed Handsome Man” throws doubt about the nature of the game at the audience. He announces that was the game in the last line, as if the song had made game and outcome all clear. But just the opposite—the song has called into question just what sort of game brown-eyed tricksters play.

While he was riding high, Berry hid behind a smile, relying on his distinctive backbeat to propel the songs’ seemingly teenaged sentiments. Nevertheless, the deliberative side lurked in the lay low for some did. For instance, Berry’s best song from the sixties is “Promised Land,” recorded in February 1964, and released that autumn. It is significant that he wrote the song in prison.

“Promised Land” is ostensibly about journeying across the land from Norfolk, Virginia, to Los Angeles, totemically naming many of the hometowns along the way. The travel is quick, but the speed itself starts to become suspect early on. The high energy of the song, its mandolin-style guitar riffs, and its road motif lend it a happy sound, but that is its minstrel mask. The catalogued places soon indicate another America not often the

cultures. They are pronounced in Berry’s classic songs for at least two reasons. First, because of the country spin to some of his early songs, their lyrics were unusually narrational; their inconclusiveness was therefore the more pronounced. Second, his blues tradition consoled Berry more and he relied on it more deeply as his career progressed, as he continued to commit “naughty-naughties...[every fifteen years]” (xv–xvi) for which he spent prison time, and as the doubleness of blues and minstrel imagery came, therefore, to make more conscious sense to use.

As the very first song he recorded, “Maybellene” showed fifties consumer fetishism vying with blues determinism. Mobileman has faith that cars and the energy he shares with them can overtake Maybellene’s waywardness. He catches her at the peak. But reality returns and the song simply fades when all the singer’s V-8 momentum must still cope not with a wet Cadillac but with a woman outrun. How does it turn out? Berry’s Ford chugs on into the night. That steady running, with neither defeat nor transcendence, is the return of the blues when adolescent, consumer, fifties hope fails. Berry was shrewd enough to know his optimism connected him to the larger audiences, canny enough to know his blues told him truths that sustained him between reaches. Certainly both ethics duded in his songs, the first propelling their speed, the second providing their deliberation.

This doubleness personified the Sambo figure from the beginning, but it grew more complex as Berry proceeded, as he became more complex and defensive and distrustful. Over the next few years, Berry developed more levels to the figure than first appeared, showing that the symptoms of “Maybellene” were not aberrant but diagnostic. He sugar-coated cultural threat in “Roll Over Beethoven,” perhaps his most famous song, the next spring. And he returned in the fall with “Brown-Eyed Handsome Man,” an anthem of black power as devious as “Maybellene,” and even more ambiguous because Berry crafted it to create an unreadable opposition at the end.

The brown-eyed handsome man is a trickster in the laylow present. In the song’s wonderful opening line, he is in court, in the witness chair, being grilled because the authorities arrested him for “unemployment.” The sprightly economy of the stanza proceeds to dramatize his powerful hidden allies, fantasizing a whole vernacular sociology: the judge’s wife, the D.A.,, and the lovers of lawyers and doctors, hating clutch pitched into the stands. But the song has its wider context, too, for the brown-eyed
The topic of Billboard “Hot 100” songs. That is, the early lines of “Promised Land” signify about the South of the Freedom Rides as the poor boy traced their tracks across the country in a Greyhound bus in 1964, that year of Mississippi Freedom Summer, when activists Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman were all killed for registering black voters. They toppled off the “sixty-three [black] people killed around the question of the vote before ’64” (Raines 288). Berry rode his Greyhound into Raleigh, across Carolina, stopping in Charlotte to bypass Rock Hill.

Rock Hill! The town famous to locals for its mills where the Klan bought its sheets? Why mention such a small place? Here is James Farmer, national director of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) in 1961, when the Freedom Rides went through Rock Hill, reporting on events at that town’s bus station:

John Lewis [veteran civil rights activist, later U.S. Congressman from Georgia] started into a white waiting room in [Rock Hill] in South Carolina . . . and there were several young white hoodlums, leather jackets, ducktail haircuts, standing there smoking, and they blocked the door and said “Nigger, you can’t come in here.” He said, “I have every right to enter this waiting room according to the Supreme Court of the United States in the Boynton case.”

They said, “Shit on that.” He tried to walk past, and they clubbed him, beat him and knocked him down. One of the white Freedom Riders . . . Albert Bigelow . . . stepped right between the hoodlums and John Lewis . . . They then clubbed Bigelow and finally knocked him down, and that took some knocking because he was a pretty strapping fellow, and he didn’t hit back at all.

(Raines 111)

No wonder Chuck Berry wanted to bypass Rock Hill on his way to the promised land. And, since he knew that about Rock Hill, it is no wonder he was scared crossing Alabama, where the Freedom Riders encountered mobs who shot into and burned their bus, beating them even more. And it is no wonder he fled when the bus developed motor trouble in Birmingham that “turned into a struggle.” This was, after all, the Birmingham of Reverend King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” of Police Chief “Bull” Connor with his dogs and cattle prods; this was the Birmingham of the church bombings.

Like “Brown-eyed Handsome Man” and “Maybellene”—only more so—“Promised Land” smuggled black reality and black anxieties into the smiling heart of America, grafting them there so artfully that most listeners never dreamed Berry’s incubus had visited them. In these early lines of “Promised Land,” the singer is playing Mobileman again, but with the deepened awareness ripened during the civil rights movement, and his prison term, and a decade of dealing with people on both sides of the microphone.

Mobileman is now running the gauntlet of recent American history even while plying his evident optimism about ends. This is quintessential Sambo strategy. Ralph Ellison pegged it correctly in Invisible Man when the youth discovered zoot-suiters in the subway after his friend’s killing, and intuited their way of coping: “they were outside, in the dark with Sambo . . . taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother . . . running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand” (333). In “Promised Land,” Mobileman is dodging from and through America, a zoot-suit’s spokesman, while running toward his goals. The Freedom Riders made their stand and absorbed their abuse; Berry’s way is complementary and only evidently more normal.

There really is nothing normal in “Promised Land.” Even its goals turn inside out and deepen after its initial hearing. They are in fact as apocalyptic as that clock, set at X minutes before midnight, on the cover of The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists: at song’s end the pilot told Mobileman in thirteen minutes he would set them at the terminal gate. “Swing low, chariot,” he responds, “come down easy, taxi to the terminal dome.” The multiple conjunction of ends with gospel imagery validates the sense of surviving doom, of speeding deliberately through a national madhouse, that permeates “Promised Land.”

The song ends with the old blues conceit of calling home that Berry had used successfully in so many of his tunes, and which stems back to the original downhome artists, as in Charley Patton’s “Pony Blues”:

Hello central’s a matter with your line
Hel- lo central matter now with your line
Come a storm last night tore the wires down. (Yazoo L-1020; syncopated transcription by Tilton 67–68)

Patton’s traditional stanza is about the failure of communication. But Berry’s variant surmounts that difficulty. Mobileman believes in technology, can use the tools of his time, has no doubt that he can connect. But his connection is the carrier for all that. He achieves the promised land only after a hell of a trip; everyone the poor boy cares about is still in hell; and now he is “on the line.” The line may be innocent; but if so it would be the only innocent line in the song. Maybe the poor boy is simply happy to be calling home. Maybe also the poor boy is strung out on drugs, “on the
line." And most surely the closing has enacted a nightmare journey, through the forces of history, to relief, miraculously to paradise. Whether that is a real or a phantasmagorical, drugged, promised land is another one of Berry’s open questions.

Whatever the ending means, it refers to a breakthrough that is double, a connection that throws in doubt the whole enterprise and concept of a realizable promised land. Indeed the phrase promised land has multiple connotations for blacks then as now. Its use is ironic because no such place can exist in a racist society. No such place has yet materialized for blacks in white America, not even in California. The term signifies a place necessary but impossible to believe in on earth. Hence the plane has become the chariot swinging low as it lands, the airport has become the terminal gate, both as real and unreal as the signifying term can pump up.

Throwing the apparent event under additional doubt and scrutiny is what all the watched witnesses, all the Sambo performers of the minstrel tradition have always done. Berry is another in their line playing for the same sort of stakes and with the same sort of intensity that made the minstrel shows before and after the Civil War such risky business. Berry deliberated his speed because he recognized the apocalyptic nature of both his text and context.

Beneath his smiling patina, Berry’s song is as apocalyptic as Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last speech improvised in Memphis at the Mason Temple, rain beating the windows and pelting the roof, on 3 April 1968, the night before he was killed. King spoke of death and fear, the movement’s peaks and depths, and his own. But none of that mattered to a man like himself, he said, who had “been to the mountain...looked over, and...seen the promised land...I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land” (Garrow 621).

Reverend King and Chuck Berry shared images and concepts that stem from a root source. Both the strategies and their spoken signs refer to American hope and belief in revival, beginning again common to gospel and blues musics, broadcast on the airwaves and preached from pulpits. But so much incantation of the phrases betrays doubt about their claims. King, Berry, and their followers both believed and disbelieved in America as a promised land, were sure that democracy was real and sure that it was a carrot cruelly eluding its most dogged pursuers.

This pursuing of dreams, sexual and political, was what Berry’s songs were about. From speeding Ford in “Maybelle” to careening jet in “Promised Land,” Berry was a master of pulling his Sambo persona—watched witnesses, all of them—through the fields of American sur-

veillance that were harmless only within the construct of the song. Each song additionally displayed the complexity beneath its witness’s smile, as well as the fractures among his observers. Like the invisible youth’s grandfather, Berry yessed ’em to death, sang about being so glad to be back in the U.S.A. But he also called attention simultaneously to those who saw him flash through his differing modes that it was hardly a straightforward “Promised Land.” No matter how expeditiously he came to perform in his mature career, his was no simply speedy trip, this land not always promising to every poor boy. His presence was intense enough to make audiences ignore the mask he was wearing, but it reappeared in the afterglow. The ends of his speeding journeys were always suspect. They were always more deliberate than his first audiences suspected, less stable than his mass public believed.

Chuck Berry made a particularly accessible brand of pop music out of blues, out of the spots and strategies in black culture that he imagined might excite young Americans, white and black. He was running from the start, trying to make something new in a new form, rock ‘n’ roll. There was about his role always the salesman’s, even the conman’s, pitch. He was making something artificial for the public to buy. He was putting over a line. The line seemed distinctively new, but it drew for protection on cultural strategies and performance roles deeply rooted in black tradition, specifically in minstrel shows. Thus, blacks and whites both knew how to respond to it. Beneath its new patina was a known quantity. Moreover, his musical instincts further rooted him in a substantial culture, aided him to a signature guitar line that remains as distinctive today as when “Maybelle” appeared, and ballasted his essentially pop optimism. Without that blues genius he might have spied Magpieers in five-and-dime kitchenware departments or sold burial plots, or continued to create the hairstyles in East St. Louis that were supporting his young family while he wrote those early songs. Yet the blues genius was always there, in “Maybelle” to sustain his Ford at the end, in the latter songs to ripen his latent understandings.

Berry, then, created an early variety of rock ‘n’ roll by stamping the emerging world of pop culture with Sambo strategies sinister enough to satisfy those seeking menace, smiling enough to please audiences hoping to escape. He was an artist profoundly ambivalent about his cultural roots, always shucking them off to imagine himself in the new vehicles, the new clothing, the new suburban high schools of the glossy magazines and TV culture of his time—but returning to the roots increasingly as bouts with
the record industry and the Internal Revenue Service dampened his enthusiasm for American hope.

Berry represented a man from nowhere entering history. He thought of his roots as nowhere, suburbia as somewhere, and his leap between the two as historic. He tried at first to leap beyond black culture, but in pulling himself into the consciousness of Americans he pulled black culture in, too, like a black Trojan horse—which is a Sambo figure seen from another angle. He is important because his songs reached so many people and because they so publicly live out their relationship to the blues ethic. By example, Berry proved its value. Another sort of relationship to that blues culture is evident in the case of Little Richard Penniman.

You're doin' something no one can.
—Little Richard to Miss Ann

One of the most obscuring claims critics make about the origins of rock music is that individual genius conceived it. Talent was significant, surely, but such theses serve stars rather than understanding. They also deter acknowledgment of how significantly rock 'n' roll is a development of American folklore. For instance, The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll passes on as authoritative Little Richard's account of how, since his family disapproved of rhythm 'n' blues, "Bing Crosby, 'Pennies from Heaven,' and Ella Fitzgerald were all I heard. And I knew there was something that could be louder than that, but I didn't know where to find it. And I found it was me" (Winner 52).

What he does not say, of course, is that before it was in him, the music was in the milieu of after-hours bars, minstrel shows, gay clubs, carnly midways, folk potios, blues lyrics, road bonding, and the postwar leisure of Northern soldiers bored in Southern towns. Little Richard found rock in its social roots, which he cultivated. Rock was not his invention anymore than it was Chuck Berry's or Elvis Presley's. It was a hybridization of pop and folk seeds, for which Richard Penniman was a medium favoring the folk as much as Berry favored the pop gers.

One of the most compelling cases for situating the origins of rock 'n' roll in folk culture rather than in personal genius took place in New Orleans shortly after noon on 13 September 1955, when legend asserts just the opposite, that rock rained out of a blue sky. That day Little Richard went to lunch after a disappointing morning's recording session, and wowed the lounging musicians at the Dew Drop Inn with an obscene ditty he had polished in gay clubs across the South. It was a protoversion of "Tutti Frutti" and it truly sounded like nothing else either on the radio airwaves or in the studio that morning. Its surprising sound was disconnected from the current pop modes. Where then did it come from?

It was deeply entwined with surviving minstrel modes and homosexual closet humor. The sound, the style, the delivery are all audible in the music Esquerita, one of his cronies from that time, was making. Esquerita (puns on "esquire-ita" and "esquire-eater" and "excreter") is Eskew Reeder, Jr., from Greenville, South Carolina. He has vouched that every part of Little Richard's act from pompadour to countertenor final syllables, manic piano triplets to Pancake 31 make-up, was all conventional in the gay clubs of Southeastern cities between 1947 and 1955 (Billy Miller 5). Little Richard confirms that Esquerita taught him piano, especially his characteristic treble phrasing (Charles White 30).

At first hearing, Esquerita's wild album, Esquerita, sounds more like Little Richard than Little Richard does. But then the extremity of his performance emerges as something that was probably there before he met Little Richard (as both have said) rather than parody of the latter's success. Esquerita's "ooohs" sound like sheets of stainless steel tearing in the wind. His bawdy lines remain bawdy ("Hey, Miss Lucy, you're too fat and juicy for me"), unlevened by Little Richard's punning wit. Audiences first hear how important the connections were between Little Richard and his roots. Then they notice how significant were the singer's changes in his sources. The two perceptions are complementary and equally valid.

Another direct source of folklore and repertoire for Little Richard was Louis Jordan. His "Keep A Knockin'" is the model for Little Richard's song of the same title, especially confirmed since Charles White's account of Little Richard's recording sessions notes that Jordan's line, "I'm drinkin' gin and you can't come in," was deleted from Little Richard's final release (229). That line was the single major difference in lyrics between Little Richard's and Jordan's version of this old blues standard associated with Storyville, the New Orleans brothel district. Indeed, David Evans has pointed out that "Keep A Knockin'" was a folk song from a prostitute's point of view; she is with a john in her stall, so cannot let in the knocker, but urges him to try again tomorrow night (Letter 1).

Here then is another pertinent example of the multiple signification in black performance tradition. These songs repeatedly offer opportunity for performers to bootleg taboos into clean, well-lighted places. Delight in such scatting, in such soilng, was older than the minstrel shows which had
conveyed it in America, but in making it new, in perfecting its libidinal excess, Little Richard built out of it both a meteoric career and the supercharged form of rock 'n' roll associated with him and with New Orleans.

The considerably tamer version of “Keep A Knockin’” by Louis Jordan (Charly Records CRB 1048) inadvertently demonstrates yet another feature of the changes such speeds of fifties forms made in their folk lodes. Cliff White's liner notes to this album claim that there was an earlier recording of the song by James Wiggins in the late 1920s, and David Evans reports that Clarence Williams first copyrighted it, preceding many subsequent recordings of the song across the whole spectrum of taste from jazz through country music (Letter 1). Yet this late reprinting of the Louis Jordan version, originally recorded 29 March 1939—when Little Richard Penniman was still only five years old—credits “Mays / Penniman / Williams” for its composition. Here then is an example of a song slowly rising through the oral tradition but suddenly acquiring a rendition so definitively popular that it monopolizes attention and thus so powerful that it reverses chronology. The power of the electronic media, which Little Richard exploited at their fifties inception, arrogate proprietary rights to anonymous lore. Thus individual performers stamp their private names onto traditional anonymity. But what was lost remains lore, beneath the bogus credits.

What then was Penniman's own contribution, or, what was it that he and his producer Bumps Blackwell exploited to make him perhaps the greatest rock 'n' roll stylist? His talent was promiscuous. Personally unmoored, he easily slurred beats, quivered all around notes, and, most significantly, jumbled extant styles. That was how he appealed so widely across American racial and sexual barriers simultaneously. The ability to jumble multiple worlds seamlessly—white and black, straight and gay, gospel and blues and pop—enriched his music even if only subliminally. And it later dictated his remorse about his career.

His legendary claims about himself include being born in Macon, Georgia, on Christmas 1935, taking his diminutive name eight years later while singing in hometown schools and churches, and being disowned at thirteen. In fact, however, he was born well before Christmas, on 5 December, and well before 1935, in 1925. His was not a second coming, nor was he any longer a teenager in 1955 when he broke into the public eye. Moreover, schools and churches were only two of his less important venues. More telling in his music were the minstrel shows and bawdy revues he played for the ten years preceding “Tutti Frutti.”

If Richard left home at thirteen to live with the white club owners Ann and Johnny Johnson, as Langdon Winner reports, Charles White's biogra-

phy confirms neither the move nor even their existence. In any case, at age fourteen or fifteen Penniman left home, whether his mother's or Miss Ann Johnson's, and began a career of one-night stands with a series of hucksters, carny circuses, and minstrel shows.

The titles of these shows are themselves an evocative folk exhibit. Following a Doctor Nobilis's advice, the youth joined Dr. Hudson's Medicine Show (which sold snake oil for $2 a bottle). Then he quit selling dubious cures to sing blues in B. Brown's Orchestra which followed migrant laborers across South Florida's muck farms around Lake Okeechobee. Then came a stint as a transvestite, billed as Princess Lavonne, "the freak of the year," he said, in a show called Sugarfoot Sam from Alabama. Little Richard described this act as a "minstrel show—the old vaudeville type of show...That was the first time I performed in a dress" (Charles White 24). This was clearly a significant period in the development of Little Richard's repertoire, a time when he would go to any length to win an audience. While he was with Sugarfoot Sam he met Esquerita, who taught him some of his piano style and, significantly, a mutual trademark which Esquerita calls their "obligato holler." (Little Richard later taught Paul McCartney this falsetto OOOOOOH! when the Beatles warmed up audiences in Hamburg for him during the early sixties.) "When I met him," Esquerita has said about Little Richard, "he was dancin' with a table and chair in his mouth...He used to stand up and dance and balance a chair in his mouth then put the table on top" (Billy Miller 5).

The King Brothers Circus, the Tidy Jolly Steppers, the L. C. Heath Show, and the Broadway Follies were four subsequent traveling shows in which Penniman developed his transvestite act across the South. Nor was he alone. Even before Esquerita taught him piano, Little Richard has said there were mentors in Madames Kilroy and Merle as well as fully pan-caked—and very popular—rhythm 'n' blues performers like the influential Billy Wright. This minstrel lore ballasts the gospel fervor and blues inflections in his style. Most importantly, the enforced double-talking patois of the underground taught Little Richard to signify different meaning to different audiences at once.

He learned to be a many-faceted fetish, to play the minstrel Sambo, and to project the artificial figure who survives by being exactly what perceivers want him to be. To this end, Little Richard has stressed his crippled status to many interviewers (Charles White 6, 7). He thus reinforces the connection between his act and its indirect origin in the dance of Jim Crow, the black and crippled hostler said to have inspired T. D. Rice's impersonation at the beginning of American blackface minstrelsy (Rourke
80). But we do not look to Little Richard for exegesis of his performance. Rather we turn northeast about fifteen miles from Macon to Milledgeville to reread Flannery O’Connor’s “The Artificial Nigger,” which she published the same year her neighbor released “Tutti Frutti.”

When her rustics granted the statue “all the mystery of existence,” they interpreted that mystery in ways that ratified their preconceptions, without any reference to the reality behind or inhering in the image. O’Connor showed therefore something that Little Richard and Bumps Blackwell instinctively used and confirmed. The backgrounds, educations, interests, and proclivities of Blackwell, Penniman, and O’Connor could hardly be more radically different. Their mutual use of the artificial figure’s radically disconnected status therefore demonstrates the ultimate condition of the black image at the end of the American minstrel tradition. It was free-floating and ripe for use.

Like so many other performers of these years, from writers to Supreme Court justices, O’Connor shows how the image of the Negro in postminstrel America had become so detached from specific anchors that it was a Rorschach blot, on which people flung their fantasies. At some level, Little Richard recognized this seeming vacuum. What’s disturbing in his work is that, like nearly all the black minstrel performers before him, he was not so passive as the watermelon-eating statue in O’Connor’s fiction, but active. He crafted his own image to emphasize his own indignity. He chose to project a self that allowed, even provoked, the audience’s private interpretations.

The singer’s volatile relations with several folk domains all over his region from 1947 to 1955 taught him that the Sambo role could hide and express meaning simultaneously. From housebroken happiness to libidinal eruption, the meanings audiences caught in it were what they needed to catch. Of great interest, however, is that none of his Sambo complexity is recorded prior to “Tutti Frutti” in late 1955. On not one of the four previous recording sessions Little Richard did with RCA and Peacock did he make compact the many parts he was working. He must have thought the Sambo foolery was too rude, dangerous, or threatening to display in the mainstream, despite his nightly strutting of it in minority culture venues from Macon to Miami.

What he was recording, rather than performing, before 1955 was above all safe. For the large public, he contained his burgeoning counterlore behind conventional surfaces. Indeed, despite the hints of an eccentrically plastic voice, his early sessions produced merely the era’s usual jump blues. Little Richard’s performance in this vein is distinguished primarily by his sententious and sometimes mother-ridden lyrics. I love my mother, he confessed in “Thinkin’ ’bout My Mother,” January 1952, like nobody else—“She formed me as she fed me, when I couldn’t even feed myself” (Every Hour with Little Richard [Camden LP 420]).

He recorded those feelings, and his vacillating career later confirmed that he truly meant them, but they were not the whole story and certainly not the moods by which he chiefly lived. The problem was that he did not yet trust the underground emotion and counterlore that were creating his persona and which, in turn, he would shortly redirect. Either he did not trust them, or he feared them. In any case, he rightly suspected the treachery at the center of the minstrel-Sambo joking. It would gain him access to the mainstream because it seemed harmless, but it was not. In fact, no other American folkway had a more complex history or bore more evocative energy. That a gamut of performers from Amos and Andy through Elvis Presley and Flannery O’Connor to Little Richard all squeeze under the umbrella of the postminstrel Sambo indicates the sheer span of the term’s meaning for America in the fifties. In short, no other native lore had more meaning, certainly not in the year of Earl Warren’s integration enforcement decree.

Therefore, by September 1955, just a few months after the Chief Justice had ordered blacks and whites together with all deliberate speed, Little Richard had gathered up all the lore, stigmata, and accoutrements of the old Tambo and Bones walkarounds. He had supplemented that with elements from the blues and sideshows and medicine spiels, had compressed them into one persona, and had paraded that act—testing it—around all the home regions of the old minstrel troupes. But he had not brought it out of the hole to the mainstream surface, yet.

He surfaced with it only when he met Bumps Blackwell, the conservatory-trained producer whom Specialty Records sent to New Orleans to record him. All the evidence indicates it was Blackwell who had the initial confidence in Little Richard’s relationship to the lore. Moreover, that Blackwell had the shaping instinct is clear because Little Richard never made a successfully complex record without Blackwell’s collaboration. Conversely, Little Richard’s experience was absolutely necessary. The songs written by others which Blackwell brought him successfully confirm his catchy style, are energetic indeed, but remain lorelorn. Having later also worked with Sam Cooke at the crucial moment he moved into the pop world from gospel, Blackwell is often said to have helped assimilationists bleach their blackness. The charge is too simple. He helped them
deliver product. Some of it was empty; but he also found ways to push profound aspects of black lore into the white mainstream.

What Blackwell heard Little Richard sing at the Dew Drop Inn during that legendary 13 September lunch, knew enough to process, and tried to reproject was:

Tutti Frutti, good booty
If it don't fit, don't force it
You can grease it, make it easy... (Charles White 55)

Blackwell claims he immediately knew that Little Richard's song had the energy Specialty Records wanted. So he gave the task of sublimating the words to Dorothy La Bostrie, who wrote new lyrics suggestively heterosexual. Nevertheless, they retained the fay hint in the title, and particularly in "Sue" (who knew just what to do) and "Daisy" (who almost drove him crazy), for Sue and Daisy were gay argot for transvestites.

What Blackwell heard was similar to what Chuck Berry's producer, Leonard Chess in Chicago, heard in the protoversion of "Maybellene," and what Sam Phillips, Presley's producer in Memphis, heard lurking behind the blues tradition—but unrecorded even there. They believed, too, that it would stun, express, and enrich the consonant empathy of the emerging baby boomers. Little Richard, then, was part of a common, national movement. But if there is more uncommon vitality in his "Tutti-Frutti" and in the rest of his best songs than in Presley's or Berry's or even Bo Diddley's, it is because Little Richard tapped further into more underground lores than the others did.

The difference all the producers could sense and were hoping to document was the difference between the conventional jump blues Little Richard recorded for RCA in the beginning of the fifties, released on LP as Every Hour with Little Richard, and the rock sound of "Tutti-Frutti," at the midpoint of the decade. Beyond the significant reinforcement that Chess, Phillips, and Blackwell gave their singers to be true to their formative lore, the difference was essentially dimensional. The RCA jump blues songs like "Every Hour" and "Thinkin' bout My Mother" were treacle with the thinnest sort of commercial relation to the audience. But "Tutti-Frutti" and most of Little Richard's hits tapped into several vital folk groups at once. For instance, the puns on "Sue" and "Daisy" titillated uninitiated audiences simply as references to good opposite-sex partners. At another level in those days of desegregation, Daisy and Sue were racially moot names—unlike "Maybellene," who sounded specifically black in Chuck Berry's scenario. Was Little Richard probing the delights of miscegenated sex? At a third level, and to other audiences, Daisy and Sue were knowing referents to drag queens in the clubs where Little Richard had presented himself as Princess Lavonne.

In seeming to sanitize "Tutti-Frutti," so it might penetrate suburban bedrooms, Blackwell, La Bostrie, and Penniman had instead sublimated it with small nodes of latent excitement. Most audiences probably did not suspect any of this—"You don't know what she do to me," Little Richard admitted as he sang—but the singer knew, Blackwell knew, and so did the musicians in Cosimo Matassa's J & M Studio, where they were recording. Their performance took on a licentious exuberance commensurate to their release from restraint. Having found a strategy for eluding the censors, public and private, their speed and joy in the song memorialize both their freedom and the trick the song pulls off: ramming its underground reality to the mainstream airwaves. This is the quintessence of the sort of complex Samboing Little Richard enacted.

Although "Tutti-Frutti" is the most famous of Little Richard's songs because its mania far surpassed anything white listeners and most black audiences had heard, it actually did not yet beam all the fervid sureness of his next year's hits—"Rip It Up," "Slippin' and Slidin','" and especially "Long Tall Sally." This first time out, Penniman was still one quarter expecting lightning to strike from on high at any minute. Blackwell reports, for instance, that Little Richard was so embarrassed the first time he sang the original "grease it" lyrics to Dorothy La Bostrie that they could only induce him to perform facing away from her toward the wall. He did not yet have confidence in the sufficiency of his songs. Out of the closet into the corner: such are the unsuspected stages of a man's growth—and a music's. Little Richard did not know that the rocking moment he was winching up from the underground would have an intensity immunizing it against authority—so long as the song lasted, so long as it built its own armature.

What audiences hear in Little Richard's definitive versions of rock songs is just this capsulated moment between duties and responsibilities. His songs enact a joy of love that is but a moment long:

Good golly, Miss Molly, you sure like to ball.
And when you rock 'n' roll, I can't hear no mama call.
("Good Golly, Miss Molly," emphasis added) 11

Little Richard actually stretched his moment out less than two years, until late 1957 when he did hear something like his Mama call. Then he renounced rock for Bible study and preaching. This stage in turn lasted a full
seven years—with lapses in Europe to train the Beatles—until his rock comeback in 1964, when he trained Jimi Hendrix. The orthodoxy of the mother church and the joyful release of his rock songs are the opposite poles between which his career always oscillated. He never synthesized nor repressed either side. These poles in Little Richard’s music drove him back and forth, each whipping the other into more extreme expression.

His heyday songs between 1955 and 1957 explore the terrain of liberty enjoyed only in such foreshortened freedoms as shore leave, sexual ecstasy, and carnival revelry. The best of these singles was his second hit with “Long Tall Sally” and “Slippin' and Slidin’” on opposite sides, released March 1956. “Long Tall Sally” is an incredibly energetic tableau with a curious origin in three lines scribbled on a doily by Enoris Johnson, a scrubbed and plaited innocent of sixteen or seventeen. She had walked to New Orleans from Opalooa, Mississippi, in order to raise money for her aunt. Her lines were as follows:

Saw Uncle John with Long Tall Sally  
They saw Aunt Mary comin'  
Saw they ducked back in the alley.

“Aunt Mary is sick,” she said, “and I’m going to tell her about Uncle John” (Charles White 61). From this unpromisingly poor and vengeful beginning, Bumps Blackwell and Little Richard Penniman fashioned one of rock’s most richly tolerant songs, with understanding for all parties. This fashioning occurred in the studio, with Blackwell pressing for speedy delivery of the line he liked, “they ducked back in the alley,” trying to make it so fast that Pat Boone would never be able to “get his mouth together” to cover it. One can hear this speeding up on the alternate early versions. The first was recorded 29 November 1955 (available on a bootleg, Redita LP-101). It is roughly half the tempo of the great Specialty release recorded 10 February 1956.

If Blackwell was trying to outspeed the competitors—a standard strategy in musical revolution as prominent in bebop’s development as in rock ‘n’ roll—Little Richard was pursuing additional dimensions in the material. He was pumping minstrel and gay lores into it. “Long Tall Sally” is an acting script, a quick treatment of visual actions, lightly directed by the scenic directions for players’ movement and behavior on the flipside. They slip and slide in both songs. They peep and hide. They hope not to be life’s fools anymore. Alternatively, one can understand this record as Crescent City cubism with accounts of adultery seen simultaneously from multiple perspectives. Taken together, the songs on both sides sympathize with the cheaters, the cheated, and the hardly passive or innocent onlookers—the omnipresent surveillance. Moreover, several layers of identity mask the characters in “Long Tall Sally,” as befits a tale that all the musicians collaboratively assembled. As Blackwell reports, “we pulled stuff from everybody” (Charles White 62).

Traditional black folk figures scampers through this song in scandalous antics. Uncle John is a stock figure in black lore from the “John cycle” of tales about a slave who outwits the authorities. On this level, the song’s Aunt Mary is a good wife, not unlike the Mary Rambo who counsels and shelters Ralph Ellison’s invisible youth in Harlem, inspiring him with her kitchen rendition of “Back Water Blues.” But “Aunt Mary” is also gay argot for a possessive queen. So she operates on at least two levels, apparent nurturer and drag possessor. In any case, Uncle John in this song is ducking out on Aunt Mary’s authority, whatever she represents. It’s Long Tall Sally, “built for speed,” who “got everything that Uncle John need.” But where did Sally come from? Nightmare to every Aunt Mary, Sally is the newly noticed, old, subtraditional freak. Not only long, tall, and speedy, she’s “bald-headed.” As such, she’s figuratively phallic, flashing in and out of alleys in the hand of Uncle John, that trickster. That is attractive enough in the male-bonding context of the studio where all this cropped up mutually among these men, but there is more. In the transvestite shows of Little Richard’s apprenticeship, baldheadedness was preparation for one’s wigs. Clearly Sally is a freak, the same term the singer had applied to his own incarnation as Princess Lavonne. Long Tall Sally, in addition to her other meanings, is therefore a transvestite fantasy figure slipping and sliding through life’s niches. She delights the nephews and seduces the uncles. A transsexual variant of Sambo, and just like this new rock form which her surfacing embodied at this mid-fifties moment of family breakdown, she represents whatever anyone wishes her to represent. She bears variant and deviant fantasies. She is as new as rock ‘n’ roll. She is as old as the oral tradition, old enough to be a stock runaway tease, as in Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Pneumonia Blues” from the 1920s, which someone in the recording studio had surely heard:

I went slipping ’round corners, running up alleys too  
Watching my woman, trying to see what she goin’ do.  
(Sackheim 72)

As an observant nephew and our stand-in, Little Richard plays this scandal every way against the middle. He is far removed from the innocence of Enoris Johnson and her simple, single original attitude, which he
has dusted over the song's surface, like sugar on a doughnut. On the one hand, he identifies strongly with John's escape; if Penniman tells us of John's fun once, he relates his own fun half a dozen times. On the other hand, hanging over the joy is the song's first line like a guillotine primed to fall, thus increasing the excitement: "Gonna tell Aunt Mary about Uncle John." Thus he enacted the censor, the tattletale, as well as the cheater and releaser.

"Long Tall Sally" knotted up in four verses all the contrary tensions of Little Richard's career. In his life, he tried to relax his contrary impulses by switching from one to the other, from censor to solid sender, mama's boy to phallic performer. But in "Long Tall Sally," as in his other strongest rock songs, his success depended on the way Blackwell helped him compound that tension into his rich Sambo persona.

At the climax of this capsulated period, when the rock charts were filled with his hits about the joyous moment, Little Richard delivered "Miss Ann," in June 1957. This song shows Perhaps best of all how deeply he mined lore's lodes. The first line of its first couplet is a seemingly suggestive tickler in which Richard gasps to Miss Ann, "you're doin' somethin' no one can." And audiences are free to impose a sexual interpretation on the line, as the performer's Sambo strategy prompts. However, the song illustrates the use of that strategy to express and repress meaning simultaneously. The minstrel tradition had presented an artificial image of Negroes that seemed detached from significance even while the image smingly conveyed modes of black culture into nooks of consciousness blacks were segregated from entering straightforwardly. Just so, Little Richard's Sambo strategy made him seem the very figure of nonsense—too this day critics usually discuss his lyrics as babtalk meaninglessness, wop bop a loo bop — when in fact he was projecting folk substance. That is, Miss Ann's doing what no one can was not only exact, in fact it was hoary. It seemed empty, it seemed nonsense, but it was not.

The encyclopedists of children's lore, Iona and Peter Opie, writing only a few years before Penniman sang his song, reported the use of the same rhyme in a riddle verse from the English "storehouse of popular memory":

Little Bird of Paradise
She works her work both neat and nice;
She pleases God, she pleases man,
She does the work that no man can. (82-83)

The Opies find its earliest printed instance appearing as a devotional riddle in a 1511 manuscript, and show it published at regular intervals thereafter, right up to the 1939 version they cite.

Out of the Hole

Both the English riddle and Richard's sly variant on it imply that the song's subject is performing promiscuously. But both riddle and song surprise us. The answer to the riddle is that only a bee can buzzily please the Maker while providing man with both wax and honey. And the Miss Ann of the song is no counterpart to the pleasing, spinning, baling women and/or freaks who populate Little Richard's other rock songs. Here the singer probably refers to the white woman, Ann Johnson, who mothered him as a young teenager (Winner 52). She was serving both God and man by nurturing him when he was young and homeless. A further dimension stems from the common use of "Miss Ann" to refer to a maid's white female employer, and by extension to all white women. And the song came as close as he dared to talk about God in a rock song, for when he was with Miss Ann, he sang, he was "living in paradise." Little Richard was once again bootlegging interracial love into the radios and pop charts of the fifties. All this he chocked into the confines of the blues form.

Of Little Richard's hits, "Miss Ann" most patently follows the AAB stanza pattern of the downhome blues and its middle two stanzas are straight from the stanza storehouse. Stanza two of "Miss Ann" is for instance Blind Lemon Jefferson's fifth stanza in his first blues, "Got the Blues," recorded probably in March 1926. Both singers like to hear their lovers — "good gal" (Jefferson) and "Miss Ann" (Little Richard) — call their name, as they say in the A lines. Their B lines are virtually identical. First Jefferson sang "She don't call so loud, but she call so nice and plain." Then Little Richard substituted "can't" for Jefferson's "don't" and "sweet" for Jefferson's "nice." Whether or not Little Richard had heard Jefferson's recorded variant, he certainly was drawing on blues tradition, just as he pulled the riddle in stanza one from an ancient English oral tradition.

The poles of his career remain those of black folklore. Little Richard Penniman is a perfect example of folklorist Roger Abrahams's figure, "the man of words." As preacher and singer, Little Richard has used language to mediate visions unavailable in the sanctuary of orthodox reality or even the opportunistic media, except at ripe moments such as the mid-fifties. His songs were literally good booty. They were the repressed stuff of underground lore, which he made charismatic for public consumption. In Little Richard those lores found a vehicle prepared to bear their chocked energy. He transferred that energy from its underground holes, putting it in capsulated form on vinyl, where it now resides as a public storehouse, which the whole culture continues to use and occasionally pauses to decipher.
humble circumstances until they became the ragtag blues bands and medicine shows, roaming mostly across the South, that trained the rhythm 'n' blues and jazz performers of the fifties. For the complexity of the minstrel show, see my essay, "Constance Rourke's Secret Reserve," and my bibliographical essay in the same volume. Roger Abrahms illustrates signifying in the tale-telling tradition in Afro-American Folklore. His definition:

Signifying is one of those bedrock black terms that can be self-contradictory—that is, it comes to mean one thing and its opposite at the same time. . . . Signifying can refer, as it does in standard English, to the ability of a word or act to carry deep meanings to the surface. But when used in the black sense of the term, it draws on both the standard definition and the strategy of testing and even casting doubt on the ability to bear the conventional meanings. Signifying, then, becomes a stance toward life itself, in which the significance of a reported action cannot be interpreted as meaning only one thing, for it may convey many messages at the same time, even self-contradictory and self-defeating ones. (6)

A lengthy analysis of signifying is in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s full discussion of its contemporary use—"The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey." For an incidental description of jazz signifying, see Ross Russell's description of Charlie Parker at the Parisien Ballroom (104).

12. Most widely available on Paul Oliver's collection The Story of the Blues (Columbia CG 30008). Chris Albertson has a minimal account of the session (379).
13. Enid Wellesford lists the "grotesques of various kinds" where the Graeco-Roman world recruited to function as fools: "hunchbacks, pygmies, dwarfs, negroes, living skeletons, caricatures of ordinary men and women, who are usually represented as bald, or idiotic or with an exaggerated phallus" (65).

Three OUT OF THE HOLE

1. These lines doubtless lurk as a source for Ginsberg's opening line in "Howl," written four years later.
2. For Joan Crawford, see "Joan Rawshanks in the Fog," one of the most wonderful sections of Visions of Cody, pp. 275-90. For the Three Stooges, see pp. 300-06.
3. Baldwin wrote in his introductory notes to Blues for Mister Charlie, "the germ of the play [is] the case of Emmett Till" (5). Two of the stories in Newsweek appeared 12 September and 3 October 1939. The first identified the weight around Till's neck as a cotton gin pulley, the second called it a fan; one looks through these stories today for a single detail that individualizes the picture, but it remains entirely in amber clichés: Till's mother, Mrs. Mamie Bradley, was a Chicago civil servant; the jury were mostly farmers, all white, all male; Carolyn Bryant, from whom Till bought his gum, was "an attractive, dark-haired mother of two"; the eulogy in Chicago included Christ's words: "For as much as ye have done unto one of these, my little ones, ye have also done unto me."
4. Black woman: Berry was originally calling "Maybellene" "Ida May," after the country song "Ida Red," a standard to which he had added his own touches; he changed the title at the behest of producer Leonard Chess. Berry insists that the new name was racially neutral, taken from a third-grade storybook cow named Maybellene (443). Berry's great pianist, Johnny Johnson, remembers the change differently: "we thought Maybellene was a joke y'know. Took the name off the hair cream bottle" (Lydon 9).
   That Berry believed in his automotive symbolism is clear in his autobiography, where he mnemonically remembers scenes by the car that delivered him to the action. His first high school car was a beat-up 1934 V-8 Ford sedan (41) and he balances his being the first in his family to go to jail with being the first in his family to own a Cadillac (48). He drove a "seven-
month-new red Ford station wagon” with his band from East St. Louis to Chicago for the “Maybellene” recording session (40).

5. An example of its use in the 1980s: “An athletic scholarship sent Mr. Jackson from Greenville to the University of Illinois, one of college football’s Big Ten. ‘The promised land,’ says Jacqueline Jackson, sarcasm in her voice. ‘Yeah, the promised land,’ repeats her husband.” (Joyce Purnick and Michael Oreskes, “Jesse Jackson Aims for the Mainstream,” New York Times Magazine, 29 November 1987, 35.)

6. “First I was Prof. Eskew Reeder, then at Capitol I figured one name would add to the mystique. ‘Is he Spanish?'” (Billy Miller 5).

7. White says that he left the Johnsons out of the biography because Penniman asked him to, saying they were “not important in his life” (phone conversation 11 July 1986).

8. David Evans suggests that “B. Brown” may be “Buster Brown, who came from near Macon and who recorded some blues hits in the 1950s. Brown played harmonica” (Letter 1).

9. See Billy Wright, The Prince of the Blues (Route 66 KIX 19). This part of Little Richard’s education only surfaced when Penniman cooperated with biographer White, thirty-five years after the fact.

10. In addition to Constance Bourke’s chapter on minstrelsy, “That Long-Tail’d Blue,” for the minstrel tradition as it developed into the twentieth century see Paul Oliver’s chapter three, also called “The Long-tailed Blue: Songsters of the Road Shows” in Songsters and Saints.


12. David Evans, letter to author, 1.

13. David Evans (77-78) and Jeff Todd Titon (114-15).

Four

CONGENIALITY

1. The term poplore has an entangled history too rococo to analyze here, though the merest summary is necessary. In 1909, in the magazine American Mercury, the folklorist Richard Dorson proposed the concept of “Takeslore” to separate the proliferation of folklike material from authentic folklore. The effect was one more in the series of modern deracinations of popular culture. In the sixties, as a tactful answer to Dorson, Marshall Fishwick developed the term poplore to refer to urban culture which he thought was “as true to its environment as was folklore to an earlier one” (20). Richard Dorson counterattacked in his full-length defense of the folk-fake divide in Folklore and Fakelore (1976). This dispute opened for me after I naively thought I was coining the term poplore in a 1978 article on Bob Dylan. It turned out not to be my term, but I stand by its value.

2. “Silas Green from New Orleans” was an institution. Walker Evans had photographed posters for the Silas Green show in the thirties—see numbers 38 and 98 in his Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-38.

3. See Betty, Poose, and James Melvin Lastie’s father was Frank Lastie, who learned drums in the same New Orleans Colored Waifs Home that nurtured Louis Armstrong. He became a Grand Marshall of the funeral marches important to the jazz of the city, and he introduced drums to the city’s storefront church services. His wife, Alice, sang. Their Ninth Ward home was a haven for musicians. Their three sons—Melvin, David, and Walter—all played professionally, and their daughter, Betty Ann, is a gospel singer. A. B. Spellman tells some of this story but has the Lastie name as “Lastie.”

4. This is Andreas Huyssen’s useful term for cultural hostility. He has called “the great divide” the central problem for modern art especially at the end of the last century and the middle of this one. He need not have limited himself to modernism; what he is noticing is the natural resentment and aggression when an emergent loregroup is shouldering its way into the space of culture.