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"Formal Renditions"

Revisiting the Baraka-Ellison Debate

If Amiri Baraka had never published anything but *Blues People,* he would still be an important cultural critic. The appearance of the book in 1963 is a plausible beginning for when and where cultural studies began in the United States, a starting point that, in fact, antedates the founding of the Centre for Cultural Studies by Richard Hoggart in Birmingham, England. As Nathaniel Mackey argued about *Blues People* in a groundbreaking 1978 essay on black music as impulse and theme in Baraka's work:

> The book thus has to do with the various transformations—from African to Afro-American, slave to citizen, rural to urban—undergone by black people in the United States and the attendant transformations of Afro-American music. [1]

In 1964 Ralph Ellison published a review excoriating *Blues People* for what he saw as its heavy-handed essentialism, especially in the conclusion to Baraka's book, famously saying that the sociological weight that Baraka heaped on the music "would even give the blues the blues." This essay revisits this conflict between Baraka and Ellison, which foreshadowed larger debates over the relationship (or nonrelationship) of African Americans to the United States in the Black Power and Black Arts period. Baraka and Ellison's debate used models of black music, particularly what Baraka termed a "blues continuum" rooted in the South and continually transformed in urban industrial centers while retaining a blues core (the "changing same" as Baraka would famously term it later), as guides for black artists in other genres and media, whether to enmesh themselves further in the fabric of "America" or draw away to some other notion of polity or nation. The goal of this essay is to consider the lasting importance of *Blues People*, and Ellison's response to it, in terms of cultural studies and cultural critique, indeed how we understand art and literature and what they are for, and how Baraka framed black modernity, anticipating his

later move to Marxism and his sense of black nationalism and internationalism. Another argument is that Ellison's review of *Blues People* did not simply frame Baraka's book in a way that continues to resonate even now in cultural criticism, but also, along with the other essays in *Shadow and Act*, provided a way of reading, or rereading, Ellison's *Invisible Man* as embodying the possibilities of "American" democracy and democratic culture in a manner that was not obvious when the novel first appeared in 1952. In fact, one might have seen Ellison's novel as close in spirit to *Blue People*—as did Baraka through much of his career.

BLUES PEOPLE, NATION, CLASS, AND CULTURE

In many respects *Blues People* is an ethnogenesis, the story of the creation of a people or nation in stages, as music history and historiography, the "formal renditions" of black history in black music, as well as a discussion of how that story might be, indeed should be, told. It is also a narrative of class stratification within that people that sees the black working class as the essential core of the black nation and the black "middle class" as a sort of self-hating ideological comprador whose witting or unwitting function is to pull the black nation toward "white" bourgeois values and interests, with a nod to Ellison that is perhaps ironic given Ellison's later take-down of *Blues People*:

> The blues people (as Ralph Ellison put it, "those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience") had their continuum, but the middle-class Negroes had gotten "free" of all the blues tradition, except as it was caricatured in white swing style, or the pitiful spectacle of Carnegie Hall boogie woogie, or Hazel Scott playing Grieg's *Concerto in A Minor* at Café Society. Assimilation, the social process they felt they must accept, always proposed that the enforced social scale of a people in American, or Western, society determined the value of that people's culture. Afro-American musical tradition could hardly be considered a social (or economic) asset in American society. Autonomous blues could not reflect the mind of the middle-class Negro, even if he chose not to deny his folk origins.[2]

Blues People proposes a movement of black people in what became the United States from "African" to "American," from slavery through Jim Crow to the Civil Rights present just before the onset of Black

Power. By "American" here, Baraka often means something more like "African American," or a "blues people" shaped by the conditions, the economy, the geography, the politics, the history (or histories), the psychology (or psychologies), and so on, of these shores, rather than "American" in any generic sense, or already postracial sense. In other words, African Americans were neither Africans, nor "Americans," in the way that most white people saw themselves (a way in which "white" and "American" and "America" are virtually synonymous), but rather a distinct people whose early identity was forged in the early modern capitalism of British North America and further complicated and developed in the industrial centers that drew post-Reconstruction African Americans from the Jim Crow South in the Great Migration that lasted much of the twentieth century. As Amy Abugo Ongiri points out, this transformation from, to use Baraka's formulation, "African captives" to "American captives" was closely linked to cultural production, which not only recorded and encoded this transformation, but was part of the material process that enabled it.[3]

Baraka was not an academic historian of the blues and jazz and its relation to African American culture. Such a position was more or less nonexistent, more or less impossible in the early 1960s, especially for a black academic. There were, of course, black academics, notably Sterling Brown, who were deeply knowledgeable about the historical eras of blues and jazz, but they were not hired to teach or write about that music and rarely offered the opportunity to do so except informally as Brown did with Baraka and those students at Howard University whom he saw as potentially receptive. Melville Herskovits did invite the black poet and journalist Frank Marshall Davis to lecture about jazz and the blues at some of his classes at Northwestern University, but, again, that was a very unusual situation and not Davis's vocation. While there were some white academic folklorists who studied African American folklore, they rarely did so in the context of its relationship to black music. Black jazz and popular music critics, such as Baraka, Larry Neal, and A. B. Spellman (a classmate of Baraka's at Howard and another beneficiary of Brown's informal lessons about black music), and black jazz musicians, such as Archie Shepp and Max Roach, would teach in Black Studies undergraduate departments and programs, but the earliest of those were still several years off at the time Baraka was writing *Blues People*—and the first Ph.D. programs decades in the future.

However, what Baraka did have, beyond the knowledge as a fan of bebop in his youth as well as the other forms of jazz, blues, gospel, and R&B that circulated in his hometown of Newark, New Jersey, then and from Sterling Brown, was his experience at *The Record Changer* magazine run by Dick Hadlock, a Dixieland musician and himself a nonacademic historian of early jazz, in Greenwich Village. The *Record Changer* was basically an early fanzine and medium of record sales and collecting for Dixieland enthusiasts. Baraka was the shipping manager for the journal in his early years in New York. As he notes in his *Autobiography*, this job allowed him the opportunity to listen systematically to different eras of blues and jazz recording found in the journal's office. It also brought him into contact with such younger white jazz critics as Martin Williams, Nat Hentoff, Ross Russell, and Larry Gushee, with whom he discussed the antecedents, history, and contemporary scene of jazz as well giving him the chance to develop his critical writing on music in such jazz journals as Martin Williams's *Metronome* and *Down Beat* as well as in *Kulchur*, a journal that emerged from the New American Poetry scene of New York, especially the "New York School" associated with the poet and art critic Frank O'Hara (a member of the *Kulchur* editorial board and a close friend of Baraka, a member of the board, at the time). Baraka's new connections in the jazz and blues world also led to a job as a writer of liner notes for Prestige Records, a jazz label that recorded many of the leading artists of the 1950s and early 1960s. This job not only provided Baraka with much-needed income, but also gave him access to and the occasion to write about a wide range of new jazz, often strongly blues-inflected jazz, recordings. In short, despite not being a professional scholar and having many other literary, cultural, and political projects as a central figure of both the radical black bohemian community of New York and the literary counterculture generally, Baraka was probably as well prepared, including in terms of what might be seen as archival research, to write such a cultural history of blues and jazz as anyone in the United States at that time.[4]

Blues People can be roughly divided into two parts. The first part describes the journey from African to African American or "American Negro" (as a not fully resolved hybrid of African and American) to American, from slave to freedman (though not citizen), and from object to subject. Focusing substantially on black sacred music and other sorts of sacred performance (with some reference to secular folk song, particularly the work song), this section of *Blues People* lays out the

creation of a black American sensibility, spaces that black people were able to significantly control, and stages (primarily cultural) in which they were able to play great roles:

> And the point I want to make most evident here is that I cite the beginning of blues as one beginning of American Negroes. Or, let me say, the reaction and subsequent relation of the Negro's experience in this country in *his* English is one beginning of the Negro's *conscious* appearance on the American scene. If you are taken to Mongolia as a slave and work there seventy-five years and learn twenty words of Mongolian and live in a small house from which you leave only to work, I don't think we can call you a Mongolian. It is only when you begin to accept the idea that you *are* part of that country that you can be said to be a permanent resident. I mean, that until the time when you have sufficient ideas about this new country to begin making some lasting *moral* generalizations about it—relating your experience, in some lasting form, *in the language* of that country, with whatever subtleties and obliqueness you bring to it—you are merely a transient. There were no formal stories about the Negro's existence in America passed down in any pure African tongue. The stories, myths, moral examples, etc., given in African were *about* Africa. When America became important enough to the African to be passed on, in those *formal* renditions, to the young, those renditions were in some kind of Afro-American language. And finally, when a man looked up in some anonymous field and shouted, "Oh, Ahm tired a dis mess,/Oh, yes, Ahm so tired a dis mess," you can be sure he was an American.[5]

It is the "formal renditions," which is to say organized expressive culture, in the first place (here, at least) black music, that both signal and historically record the appearance and national experience of the people that is neither "African" nor "American" (as understood by "middle-class" white people in the United States as a real citizen or capable of becoming a citizen), but both. As Baraka would later put it in a 1991 essay clearly descended from the thinking he displayed in *Blues People*, "The 'Blues Aesthetic' and the 'Black Aesthetic' as the Continuing Political History of a Culture":

> The Blues Aesthetic must emotionally and historically carry the heart and soul of the African antiquity, but it is also a Western Aesthetic, i.e., expressing a western people, though an African-American one. (Finally, Europe is not the West, the Americas are! Head west from Europe you come to Jersey! West of the Americas is the East!)[6]

The second part of *Blues People* begins with Emancipation and the increasing class stratification of the black community into "freedmen," the great mass of working-class African Americans who have no belief in or expectation of "American" citizenship, and the "middle class," which aspires to citizenship, largely through denial of and distancing themselves from the culture of the "freedman":

> After slavery, the stratification of the social order among Negroes was rapid. At the bottom of the new social ladder were the tenant farmers and migrant laborers, and at the other end were the ministers, storekeepers, and professional men. It was the latter who naturally came to be regarded as the leaders of the many Negro communities; usually they set the stance the new society would take. The emulation of white society proved to be not only a pattern for the new leaders, but an end in itself. Negroes who were highest in the social and economic hierarchy also became the most fanatic imitators of white society, while the great masses of Negroes were much slower in their attempts at complete imitation. This phenomenon caused a split in the psychical disposition of the Negro's temperament which certainly affected all areas of his life. The developing middle class and the mainstream of black society found themselves headed two different ways. This disparity within the black community is of such importance that it cannot be overemphasized, and it became more and more pronounced as the Negro achieved more latitude and status in America. At its ugliest, this attitude was symbolized by the abandonment by a great many Negroes of the mores or customs they considered slave customs, or "too Negroid."[7]

The culture of the freedmen is seen most clearly in the blues, a form rooted in slavery, but developed after Emancipation, and the experience and worldview the blues express, simultaneously one of the individual black subject and of a collective black people—or at least the collective black masses. Baraka asserts that the idea of a middle class blues singer is virtually unthinkable ("Such a thing as a *middle-class blues singer* is almost unheard of. It is, it seems to me, even a contradiction of terms.")[8] While in this account the middle class is certainly assimilationist, the poor black masses are not so much nationalist or separatist, except during certain moments like the heyday of the Garvey Movement, as skeptical or fatalistic about truly becoming "citizens."

This second section becomes complicated with the rise of the recording industry and what Baraka sees as the more commercial genre of the "classic blues" as well as jazz as a popular music that both is-

sues from and is contemporary with the blues as a genre. One thing that happens with the emergence of jazz as a popular musical genre is that it makes the form of the blues, if not the content and worldview, accessible to white musicians and listeners, in turn drawing black middle-class musicians (e.g., Duke Ellington) into jazz as a path toward a sort of citizenship in which it is neither possible nor desirable to leave the "blues people" entirely behind. While the blues (and, in Ellison's terms, "the blues impulse") remains in Baraka's account as a sort of "secret" music of a subculture of involuntary nonconformists, a dialectic is set up in jazz in which it is pulled between the pole of the blues, especially the blues as attitude as opposed to simply a musical form, and that of a basically white, commercialized notion of musical (and by extension political) citizenship in which this whitened music basically denies the music's black and blue origins, its early blues sensibilities and approach to playing jazz. Baraka holds up swing, particularly the late institutionalization of a highly arranged swing as America's music ruled by the king Benny Goodman, as the epitome of the pull away from the blues toward what he sees as a vapid commercialism.

Another complication related to the rise of the recording industry is the increasing urbanization and industrialization of the black community with the onset of the Great Migration and the advent of two world wars, producing enormous changes in the attitudes, expressive culture, and, indeed, the economic power of this new black industrial working class, especially its younger members, providing the impetus for the growth of "Race Records" and other black-oriented musical culture. This leads to the creation of new sorts of blues and blues-inflected music, both in what might be thought of as more plebian and more avant-garde forms, both R&B and bebop—hence, Baraka's notion of a blues continuum in which the basic blues worldview or attitude was given new forms and new emphases within the context of the hurried, crowded urban milieu of the ghetto, particularly during and after World War II. What we see here is an early articulation of his famous notion of the "changing same" that he would develop at more length four years later, after the advent of the Black Arts Movement. He also lays out a vision of recurrent black musical avant-gardes, as exemplified first by bebop and later free jazz, that seemingly paradoxically are formally radical while returning jazz to the blues attitude and worldview of the black masses:

> Bebop also re-established the blues as the most important Afro-American form in Negro music by its astonishingly contemporary re-statement of the basic blues impulse. The boppers returned to this basic form, reacting against the all but stifling advance artificial melody had made into jazz during the swing era.

Similarly, Baraka says of free jazz in its simultaneous rebellion against cool jazz and cool's movement away from black culture and against what he saw as the clichés of hard bop and soul jazz:

> What these musicians have done, basically, is to restore to jazz its valid separation from, and anarchic disregard of, Western forms. They have used the music of the forties, with its jagged exciting rhythms, as an initial reference and have restored the hegemony of the blues as the most important basic form in Afro-American music.

One might argue, as indeed Ellison did (as will be discussed below), with the notion of "free jazz" as more fundamentally aligned with the blues than swing (especially the Southwestern/Midwestern "Territory Bands," such as those of Count Basie and Jay McShann), soul jazz, and hard bop. Still, one sees here a notion of a music that embodies the forward press of the contemporary black working class in motion (and in at least indirect rebellion) while honoring the historical experience that produced African Americans as a people.

ELLISON ON *BLUES PEOPLE*, NATION, CLASS, AND CULTURE AS A WAY OF REREADING AND REMAKING BLUES PEOPLE AND INVISIBLE MAN

Ellison's essay-review of *Blues People* also marks an intellect in ideological and aesthetic transition, appearing more than a decade after the appearance of *Invisible Man*, a novel that, as Barbara Foley has shown, was itself a product of a long and incremental movement away from the Communist Left toward a Cold War liberalism on the part of Ellison, a journey that was incomplete at the novel's publication.[9] In other words, *Invisible Man*, in which Southern "folk" characters, whether still in the South like Jim Trueblood or transplanted to the North like the yam seller Peter Wheatstraw, were wiser and more resilient "blues people" than the the narrator, with his middle-class aspirations, was closer in spirit to *Blues People* than the review later republished in the

collection *Shadow and Act*. And, even Ellison's review shared a perhaps surprising kinship with Baraka's study for such a negative commentary, talking at one point of the blues as a key feature of a black way of life. And, after all, at least in *Invisible Man* he proposed that the whitest white, optic white, was only possible with just the right admixture of black.

Given Ellison's well-known competitiveness with other black writers, perhaps it is not so peculiar that he would launch an attack on an up-and-coming black artistic and intellectual star who seemed to be working the same side of the street as himself. Of course, this was not unique to Ellison or to black writers, the literary culture of the United States, especially among male writers, was ferociously competitive with novelists and poets obsessively concerned with where they ranked among their peers and worried that some rising young artist would displace them from their perch. One sometimes wonders, for instance, whether the mental illness and substance abuse that plagued so many of the leading "academic" poets of the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, and Randall Jarrell) was in part a result of this intense competition.

There was also a strong tendency among black writers, especially, again, male writers, that only moderated, perhaps, in the later 1960s, to critique their black predecessors (often their mentors) and their contemporaries as insufficiently sophisticated literarily or insufficiently in tune with the black masses, generally as expressed in black music, or both. Even Langston Hughes, a collegial writer supportive of younger black artists, was not immune to this early in his career, as evidenced by his 1926 "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Later, Richard Wright was similarly dismissive of his predecessors and, indeed most of his contemporaries (including Hughes); Baldwin of, among other black writers, his former mentor Wright; and Ellison, likewise of Wright and Hughes (who both had done much for Ellison's career) and other black writers whom he famously (or infamously) described as artistic "relatives," but not "ancestors" in his classic reply to criticisms of *Invisible Man*'s politics (or lack thereof) by Irving Howe, "The World and the Jug."[10] Baraka did much the same thing in the 1962 *Saturday Review* essay "The Myth of Negro Literature," which opens, "The mediocrity of what has been called 'Negro Literature' is one of the most loosely held secrets of American culture."[11] Baraka would go on to damn Ellison with the faintest of praise in that essay:

> Moreover, it is only recently that formal literature written by American Negroes has begun to approach the literary standards of its model, *i.e.*, the literature of the white middle class. And only Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin have managed to bring off examples of writing, in this genre, that could succeed in passing themselves off as "serious" writing, in the sense that, say, the work of Somerset Maugham is "serious" writing. That is, serious, if one has never read Herman Melville or James Joyce. And it is part of the tragic naïveté of the middle class (brow) writer, that he has not. [12]

So there is a sense that Ellison's essay, which, too, gives *Blues People* some faint praise before eviscerating it (or as Baraka wrote to his close friend and fellow poet Ed Dorn, "he really reamed me"), is payback for Baraka's essay.[13]

It is worth noting the degree to which Ellison's essay-review shaped the critical assessment of *Blues People* from that point on. Prior to the review's appearance the reception of the book was generally positive, if somewhat slight—though one might argue that for a book by a young black author (whose only previously published book to that point was the 1961 volume of poems *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, published by Baraka's own Totem/Corinth Press) to be reviewed at all by the *New York Times* was notable. The publisher of *Blues People* was able to get positive advance reviews from the poet and Bay Area countercultural poetry doyen Kenneth Rexroth and Langston Hughes, who blurbed it as "a must for all who would more knowledgeably appreciate and better comprehend America's most popular music." The *Times* review, written by the folklorist Vance Randolph was mostly devoted to Harold Courlander's *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.*, with only one of the review's twelve paragraphs discussing *Blues People*, and a very general paragraph at that after a long and technical discussion of Courlander's book. Interestingly, given the common assertion following Ellison's essay that Baraka's book was too freighted with social science jargon, Randolph lauded *Blues People*, perhaps a bit condescendingly, "The book is filled with fascinating anecdotes, many of them concerned with social and economic matters. There is a personal warmth here that is lacking in Mr. Courlander's larger and more scholarly work and which many readers may find attractive."[14]

There was a decidedly different and more hostile tone by many, mostly white, reviewers after the publication of Ellison's piece. The folklorist Roger Abrahams (then a faculty member at the University

of Texas) savaged *Blues People* in a 1966 omnibus review in the *Journal of American Folklore* that also considered Ellison's *Shadow and Act*, basically calling Baraka an inauthentic black man imitating the stance of bohemian "white Negroes":

> The volume by the noted Negro playwright and poet LeRoi Jones is but his most sober statement in his argument of Negro alienation, revolt, and esoteric rejection. Taking his cue from Mezzrow (and more recently, Mailer) and other "white Negroes," he sees the blues (and all Negro musical expression) as the progressive development of an arcane vocabulary and a totally in-group expression which the white world needs to feel but cannot ever understand.[15]

Since Abrahams's review appeared after *Dutchman*, *The Dead Lecturer*, and, indeed, after Baraka's move uptown to Harlem after the murder of Malcolm X and the founding of the Black Art Repertory Theater and School (in fact, by 1966, Baraka was already back in Newark), Baraka's reputation as the leading contemporary black nationalist poet and playwright of the United States was already established. So, in part, Abrahams's critique was premised on the notion that the emerging Black Arts Movement, of which Baraka was the most prominent member, was actually a sort of inauthentic negative reflection of what Abrahams posed as the primitivist fantasies of Norman Mailer and "Mezz" Mezzrow (a.k.a. Milton Mesirow—a white jazz musician most famous as a translator of black "hip" culture and language to a mass white audience as well as the provider of marijuana to many jazz musicians, including Louis Armstrong). This notion that Baraka's move toward a deeper and more militant blackness was actually a new manifestation of the faux black bohemian he had been all along became a common critique of Baraka, especially of his Black Arts period, from commentators as diverse as the black left academic Jerry Watts (who wrote books both on Baraka and on Ellison) and Frank O'Hara's friend, roommate (and sometime lover) Joe Lesueur.[16]

Abrahams draws on Ellison's review of *Blues People* both to give a sort of authority to his own pronouncements on Baraka's book, but also to anchor his comments on *Shadow and Act*, which was also ostensibly a subject of the review:

> Ralph Ellison's book is of importance here because it contains his magnificent essay-review of Jones' book, originally printed in the

> *New York Review*. Ellison is not only a polished writer but also a jazz performer who knows his music and musicians first hand. He is embarrassed by Jones' pronouncements, especially by the rejection of the blues as an art form in favor of a tepid and tendentious sociological argument in regard to the function of these songs.[17]

Abrahams goes on to praise Ellison's review as making "some of the most pregnant remarks about the Negro as a creative musician that this reviewer has ever encountered." Abrahams creatively combined fragmented quotes from a couple of pages of Ellison's review, attributing to Ellison a model of African American music that is a sort of negotiation between Europe, Africa, and America, a model that embodies the possibilities of "American" democracy and culture at their best, even if, as Langston Hughes suggested in "Let America Be America Again," those possibilities have never been actualized for African Americans. Oddly enough, as argued above, this was not too far from Baraka's position in *Blues People* and "The City of Harlem" where black working-class culture, especially music and dance, is a nonconformist "old-time American" holdout against "Big-time America," though, again, it is perhaps not so much *Blues People* that Abrahams is reviewing as Baraka's politics and art at the beginning of the Black Power and Black Arts era, an era that was clearly under way in 1966. While it is questionable how influential Abrahams's review in a scholarly journal was in a direct sense, one can consider it representative of a long line of reviews and commentary on *Blues People* that draw on Ellison's review to make their critique. This line of commentary has the virtue of seeing Baraka's book as anticipating and helping shape Baraka's transition to black nationalism, Black Power, and Black Arts—though its connection to his later move to Marxism is less noted.[18]

Black critics associated with Black Arts and Black Power read *Blues People* far differently and far more favorably, though, interestingly enough, often for much the same reasons that other critics condemned the book. They appreciated Baraka's efforts to provide a deeper socio-historical understanding of the meaning of black music and its evolution, in part so as to judge its usefulness in the struggle for black liberation; they, too, saw *Blues People* as an important marker of Baraka's development into the leading black nationalist poet, playwright, and intellectual in the United States. An interesting review in this respect is one by a very young William Harris in the *Antioch*

Review in 1967. Harris himself, then an undergraduate who would become the foremost scholar of Baraka and his work, could be said to be in intellectual and political transition, too, as any young black intellectual in that era almost inevitably would. He acknowledged both the power of Baraka's work, both more abstractly and how it affected him personally, as well as criticizing its black separatism. For the purposes here, though, what is significant is that he used *Blues People* as a lens through which to read the more recent *Home*, a collection of "social essays" by Baraka arranged to demonstrate his movement from a radical bohemian integrationism to black nationalism. Not only is *Blues People* seen as sounding, so to speak, many of the key tenets of Baraka's aesthetics in the Black Arts era (and, as it would turn out, beyond), but also more generally the meaning and political import of the cultural, in short an activist form of cultural studies.[19]

Much of the negative commentary on *Blues People*, particularly by white critics, focuses on what is seen as the tiresome and foreign (to the "true" core of black culture) socio-historical analysis and social science language that Baraka employed—though, as noted previously, that was not in general the response of reviewers like Randolph in the *Times* before Ellison. This commentary is also defensive about the European art heritage (at its best). However, it is on the question of a black avant-garde, both radical and popular in the sense of a wide audience and of issuing from the people, that Ellison most sharply diverges with Baraka. In a number of respects, the Ellison of the early 1960s and Baraka agreed about jazz. Ellison wrote in his essay on guitarist Charlie Christian, "Jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group," sounding much like Baraka on the blues.[20] Yet, as has been much noted, Ellison was deeply critical of bebop, seeing it not as a return to a blues sensibility, but as helping provoke a rupture between jazz and a mass black audience, even if Ellison (like Baraka) had a great fondness for the Territory Bands out of which so many of the leading beboppers (and proto-beboppers) issued. In his review of *Blues People*, as in other essays contained in *Shadow and Act*, Ellison sets the black music of the swing era (and of innovators who bridged early jazz and swing eras, most notably Louis Armstrong) as an elegant and achieved form that, rather than requiring an anarchic break with the West, placed African Americans at the heart of U.S. culture, whether white Americans were able to see or accept that location or not:

> For as I see it, from the days of their introduction into the colonies, Negroes have taken, with the ruthlessness of those without articulate investments in cultural styles, what they could of European music, making of it that would, when blended with the cultural tendencies inherited from Africa, express their own sense of life—while rejecting the rest. Perhaps this is only another way of saying that whatever the degree of injustice sustained by the slaves, American culture was, even before the official founding of the nation, pluralistic . . ."[21]

Ellison's conflicting notion of the power of the music and its model for the writing of black people into the heart of the United States even as it comments on the history of racism and the experience of African Americans in the nation also would exert considerable influence over a long line of jazz and culture critics (and some musicians) as seen most clearly in recent years, perhaps, in Ken Burns's documentary film *Jazz*, which both in presentation and comments by Wynton Marsalis and others sometimes actually quoting Ellison, praise jazz as expressing U.S. democracy (and placing black people near the center of that democracy), downplaying the role and value of the post–World War II black musical avant-gardes.

One might also say that what Ellison does in his review as well as in *Shadow and Act* generally is provide an interpretive frame for reading or rereading his fiction, particularly *Invisible Man*. Given the ways that *Invisible Man* has been canonized, lionized, and demonized since the appearance of *Shadow and Act* in 1964 and the rise of Black Power and Black Arts circa 1965–1966, it is important to recall the other ways it could be read besides as an affirmation as well as critique of U.S. democracy and democratic potential. There is no real reason to see *Invisible Man* as particularly affirming of the collective project of American democracy or as particularly optimistic about the future of that project. Neither is its much-claimed kinship (by Ellison as much as anyone else) to what might be thought of as classic and modernist "American" literature, to Emerson, Twain, Whitman, Melville, and so on, unproblematic—at least without the gloss that Ellison provided later in many of the essays of *Shadow and Act*, not the least in the *Blues People* review. While the invocation of these authors could be read as a sort of intertextual homage, passages such as the "blackness of blackness" sermon in the Prologue riffing on the moment in Chapter Two of *Moby Dick* when Ishmael stumbles into a black church where the

preacher is giving a sermon on "the blackness of darkness," and the narrator's encounter with the younger Emerson, a sort of Carl Van Vechtenesque figure who attempts to project a sexual fantasy of Huck and Jim on his relation to the narrator and who invites the narrator to go with him to "Club Calamus," could also be read as parodic critique. At the end, the narrator has fallen out of history and society and is literally living "underground," albeit in a very clean, well-lit underground. He proposes to come out and do something, but the reader does not really know what. It is true that he rejects a certain sort of nationalism associated with Marcus Garvey and the post-Garveyite Harlem black nationalist Hamid Sufi, though that nationalism has a strange fascination for him, and the Brotherhood, which was certainly the Communist Party whatever else it might have been, though he feels lost and empty after leaving the Brotherhood. But one cannot say that the narrator embraces "America," or even truly imagines that embrace at the novel's end.

The fact is that there is not a single sympathetic white character in the novel. Some of the white characters, such as Brother Jack, are unsympathetic and actively malevolent, and others, such as Sybil and Norton, are unsympathetic and basically pathetic. All are blind with that peculiar disposition of their psychic eyes that prevents them from actually seeing black people. This, of course, is true of many of the black characters in various ways, but not all of them. Ellison does suggest that black and white intertwine in intimate ways. In the Liberty Paints section of the novel, the narrator (and the reader) learns that a few drops of black (and it has to be just the right amount of black) are necessary to make "Optic White" paint, the whitest white. That process and knowledge of the precise portions is managed by Lucius Brockway, a black worker at the Liberty Paints factory who jealously guards his position against both black and white encroachment, real and paranoidly imagined. Brockway would rather kill the narrator than allow him to learn his secrets. In short, it is a paranoid black man (but a paranoid with real enemies) who makes white white through a judicious use of black. In a similarly complicated way, one more germane to the discussion of *Blues People*, the narrator descends into the history contained in Louis Armstrong's version of Andy Razaf's and Fats Waller's "What Did I Do (To Get So Black and Blue)" under the influence of jazz, marijuana, sloe gin, and ice cream in the Prologue. Among the series of visual and auditory encounters in that descent is

one with a black slave woman who has poisoned her master, who is also the father of her sons. She claims to have murdered him because she loves him after a fashion and that her way of death is kinder than those of her (and the master's) sons, who were going to cut him up with knives. So yes, black and white are intimately related and dependent on each other in fundamental ways. But the idea that one has to read the parable of the black mother, white father, and their sons as one of the potentialities of "American" democracy rather than, after Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, a nightmare from which one is trying to escape, seems dubious.

It is in the essays of *Shadow and Act* (even in the pre-*Invisible Man* essays that have been recontextualized), not the least the review of *Blues People*, that Ellison reimagines the place and meaning of African Americans and African American culture, especially music, in U.S. culture and politics, providing also a new ideological vantage point from which to read *Invisible Man* (and presumably Ellison's second novel, which was never completed in his lifetime, however finished one might consider the two versions of that work constructed from the mass of Ellison's manuscripts and notebooks, *Juneteenth* and *Three Days Before the Shooting*, that have appeared since his death). This, of course, does not mean that the interpretation that Ellison retroactively offers is invalid in any way, only that it is not one that would obviously follow from the novel in the moment it was published. And, again, *Blues People* becomes a sort of negative touchstone against which Ellison's explicit and implicit retrospective reading of his novel is set.

What one finds, then, in *Blues People*, and its critique by Ellison, is the articulation of a number of extraordinarily important concepts that would greatly influence the production, reception, and interpretation of black expressive culture from the 1960s on—and the framing of Baraka's work *and* Ellison's work, especially *Invisible Man*, that would both negatively and positively inform our understanding of the contributions and meanings of that work. Now, to give the primary work final say, perhaps, over its review, it is worth closing with a list of a few of *Blues People*'s most lasting impacts. First, one sees in *Blues People* the connection of the black musical avant-garde to a popular blues sensibility or blues continuum. This notion of a black cultural movement that is both avant-garde (or vanguard), aesthetically and politically, and yet popular became a hallmark of the Black Arts Movement. The notion that a work of art could be radical and

popular, serious and popular at the same time, transformed not only black expressive culture, but the understanding of what art is, what it should do, and who it is for. It proposed and attempted to realize with some success the possibility of a mass audience for formally and politically radical art. From the 1970s on this proposition became a sort of cultural common sense, with the understanding that art, say hip hop, can be formally and politically radical, circulating throughout the general population of the United States. For example, Beyoncé's status as a superstar significantly rests on the desire of her fan base, the "Bey Hive" (primarily younger black women), to seriously interpret and apply her work.

As noted before, *Blues People* is also a pioneering attempt to materially track an ethnogenesis, the birth of a people or nation, through a social history of black music. While such an enterprise was not a novel idea, one thinks of Sterling Brown's introductory comments at the Popular Front "From Spirituals to Swing" concerts, where he dates the beginnings of a black culture of bifurcated meanings of accommodation and resistance, of mask and reality, from what went on above-and belowdeck on the slave ships. Still, Baraka was really first to seriously undertake such a project on black music—Ellison never did despite his provocative essays on the meaning of black music and black folk culture. *Blues People* raises issues of culture and subculture in ways that anticipate the development of cultural studies and are contemporary with the new social history associated with the British New Left and historians like E. P. Thompson and Christopher Hill (and certainly antedating the widespread influence of the new social history in the United States) that had such an impact on the rise of cultural studies and the field of history generally. It also drew on a Third International Marxist notion that the rise of a nation also meant the division of that nation into classes so that black people had national interests and consciousness as well as class interests and consciousnesses that inflected their national consciousness (and their relation to the United States in which they were located) in complicated ways. This vision informed Baraka's conception of black modernity in both his cultural nationalist and more strictly Marxist phases.

With respect to black literature, which Baraka takes up at some length and mostly as a negative example, *Blues People* suggests that it will prosper only when black authors take on the same formal daring and connection with the blues sensibility as had the beboppers and

the free jazz artists. While one might argue, and Ellison did, with the reality of a mass black audience for free jazz or even bebop, and while Baraka certainly moderated his critique of many earlier black writers (and black swing musicians), the model of the jazz (and R&B/Soul) artist's relationship to her or his audience and the idea of an innovative "anarchic disregard for Western forms" connected to a blues, which is to say, bedrock black, sensibility of a black nation (and a black world, a Bandung World) that demanded and required self-determination, exerted much influence over African American literary production from the 1960s to the present, more than fifty years on.

NOTES

[1] Nathaniel Mackey, "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka," *boundary* 2, 6.2 (Winter, 1978): 359.

[2] Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) *Blues People*. New York: William Morrow, 1963: 176.

[3] Amy Obugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009: 137.

[4] Baraka, *Autobiography*, 137-141. As many commentators have noted, one complicated thing about Baraka's *Autobiography* is Baraka's predilection for using pseudonyms for some, but not all people, places, organizations, institutions, and so on, in the memoir. This use is not for preserving anonymity in many, if not all, cases since anyone even moderately familiar with Baraka's life will know, for example, that "Nellie Kohn" is his first wife Hettie Cohen (whom he met working at the Record Changer) and "Lucia DiBella" is the poet Diane DiPrima. Baraka himself claimed that these changes were not, obviously, for disguise, but as a sort of psychological device for himself that helped create a certain psychic distance that allowed him to write about emotionally difficult events ((Charlie Reilly, ed., *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1994: 240). Whatever the motivation, anyone checking the citations of the *Autobiography* here will find some differences between the names I use in this (and other) chapters and those in the cited sections of the *Autobiography*.

[5] Baraka, *Blues People*, xii.

[6] Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009: 20.

[7] Baraka, *Blues People*, 57–58.

[8] Ibid, 140.

[9] Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

[10] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act.* New York: Random House, 1964: 140.

[11] Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays*. New York: Morrow, 1966: 105..

[12] Ibid, 107.

[13]*Amiri Baraka, and Ed Dorn*:, *The Collected Letters,* edited by Claudia Moreno Pisano. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013: 176. Ellison writes in the early portion of his review, "Jones would take his subject serious—as the best of jazz critics have always done—and he himself should be so taken." (*Shadow and Act*, 248).

[14] Vance Randolph, *New York Times* (November 17, 1963): BR12.

[15] Roger D. Abrahams, "Review of *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* by LeRoi Jones; *Negro Folk Music, U. S. A.* by Harold Courlander; *The Book of the Blues* by Kay Shirley; *Shadow and Act* by Ralph Ellison." *Journal of American Folklore*, 79.313 (Jul.–Sep., 1966): 494.

[16] Jerry Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics of a Black Intellectual*. New York: New York University Press, 478–479; Joe Lesueur, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003: 247–248.

[17] Abrahams, 494.

[18] One can also see Ellison's implicit presence in Richard Howard's 1965 condescending review of *Blues People* in *Poetry*, where Howard also attacks what he finds to be Baraka's obscurantist social science jargon and incipient black nationalism. Howard attributes Baraka's diction and approach to a pseudo-French desire to freight popular culture with an overwrought significance, which might be seen as ironic considering Howard's later work as a translator of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Giles Deleuze (Howard, "Some Poets in Their Prose," *Poetry* 105.6 [March 1965]: 403–404).

[19] William Harris, "Manuals for Black Militants," *Antioch Review*, 27.3 (Autumn 1967: 408–416..

[20] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 234.

[21] Ibid., 255.