

“Where Is The Love?” Racial Violence, Racial Healing, and Blues Communities
by Adam Gussow, University of Mississippi

[a keynote speech delivered at “Echos Trans-Atlantiques,” a conference at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal as part of the 2005 Bouki Blues Festival]

Thank you, Dr. Seck. Thank you, members of the West African Research Center and Université Cheikh Anta Diop, for hosting this marvelous conference. As an American-born blues musician and blues scholar who has never previously been graced with the chance to visit Senegal or any other part of Africa, I am terrifically honored to be here, on African soil, for the first time. Thank you very much for extending me this invitation to speak.

The title of my paper, as you’ve just been told, is “Where Is The Love? Racial Violence, Racial Healing, and Blues Communities.” The phrase “Where is the Love?” is of course the title of a beautiful song recorded in the early seventies by Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway; the song was a lament for the way in which Martin Luther King’s dream of redemptive interracial brotherhood or “beloved community,” which animated the Civil Rights movement, seemed to have dissolved in the aftermath of King’s assassination, the riots that ravaged black urban communities across America, the militance of the Black Power movement, and of course the War in Vietnam. What I want to do today is reorient the question, “Where is the Love?,” so that it becomes a touchstone for a reconsideration of the blues. What role, I want to ask, does love, and the *absence* of love, play in the emergence of blues music and the creation of blues communities? Does love have the power to “heal us from the blues,” particularly the blues inculcated by racial violence and the persistence of what W. E. B. DuBois called “the color-line,” the socioeconomic boundary separating white from black? Finally, is it possible to understand the contemporary blues scene, or elements of it, as an incarnation of King’s beloved community— which is to say, a brotherhood of equals, animated by

love in the service of racial healing? The evidence I'll invoke as I explore these questions will be drawn both from the contemporary blues world and the blues literary tradition, particularly blues plays, novels, and autobiographies by African American authors such as August Wilson, Stanley Crouch, Bebe Moore Campbell, and B. B. King.

Although I am a New Yorker by birth, I currently make my home in Mississippi, a state that takes great pride in claiming that it is "the home of the blues." Certainly Mississippi is *a* home of the blues, if not perhaps *the* home, since it is the birthplace of B. B. King, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, and countless other celebrated blues musicians whose names are familiar to blues fans around the world. Mississippi is also a state, as many of you are surely aware, that was unique among American states between 1890 and 1965 for the violence and humiliation that its white residents routinely inflicted on its black residents as a way of keeping an exploitative cotton sharecropping economy in place. In this respect Mississippi was indeed "the home of the blues": it was generative terrain not just for blues *music*, but for a whole complex of emotions and attitudes evoked in its African American residents that we might call blues *feeling*—a swirling mixture of fear, despair, fury, heartache, extreme restlessness, freely ranging sexual desire, and a stubborn determination to persist against all odds and sing the bittersweet song of that persistence. One of the most evocative descriptions of *this* Mississippi, the Mississippi that produced blues feeling in its terrorized and survival-oriented black residents, can be found in the autobiography of Danny Barker, a black New Orleans jazzman. "Just the mention of the word *Mississippi* amongst a group of New Orleans people," insisted Barker in 1986,

would cause complete silence and attention. The word was so very powerful that it carried the impact of catastrophes, destruction, death, hell, earthquakes, cyclones, murder, hanging, lynching, all sorts of slaughter. It was the earnest and general feeling that any Negro who left New Orleans and journeyed across the state border and entered the hell-hole called the state of Mississippi for any reason other than to attend the funeral of a very close relative—mother, father, sister, brother, wife, or husband—was well on the way to losing his mentality, or had already lost it.

Mississippi has changed a great deal since the dark and bluesy days evoked by Danny Barker, of course, thanks in large part to the Civil Rights movement. My own institution, for example, has been transformed from a bastion of white supremacy, where students and others rioted to keep James Meredith from enrolling as the first black student in 1962, into a thoroughly integrated campus that features a vigorously activist "Institute for Racial Reconciliation." Blues music, which was once strictly the province of Mississippi's African American community, has become a surprisingly mainstream thing in the state—a so-called "cultural resource" rather than a disreputable subculture, and a conspicuous source of civic pride for black and white Mississippians alike. There are tourist dollars to be made from the Mississippi blues, it turns out, and everybody is hungry for a piece of the action. Since economic power in Mississippi continues to be wielded primarily by whites, even as African American political power has markedly expanded since the end of segregation in the mid 1960s, the so-called "blues tourism" business may turn out to be one more way in which white capital extracts profit from black artistry without truly sharing in the wealth—which is to say, blues tourism may yet end up reinscribing the same old blues on Mississippi's black citizens, the blues of economic expropriation that generations of black sharecroppers knew so well.

That's one way of looking at the blues in 21st century Mississippi, and not an unreasonable one. But there are other, more hope-inducing, ways. I might point, for example, to the partnership between Morgan Freeman and Bill Lockett—a wealthy black actor and a wealthy white businessman, both native Mississippians, who recently helped revitalize Muddy Waters's old hometown of Clarksdale by opening the Ground Zero Blues Club. This sort of interracial partnership would have been unimaginable fifty years ago. Or one might point to the American Blues Network, a 40-station chain based in Jackson, Mississippi that is the brainchild of Rip Daniels, a Mississippi native and African American entrepreneur. Daniels is the great-great grandson of a black Civil War veteran who fought AGAINST the Confederacy; politically engaged and remarkably outspoken, Daniels presides over a broadcast operation that features African American on-air personalities who play the blues for a largely but not exclusively black audience across the South. If one wants even more evidence that the blues are, or can be, a force for economic justice and interracial fraternity in contemporary Mississippi, consider the

fact that my own University of Mississippi not only paid B. B. King \$50,000 last year to play a 90 minute concert at the brand-new performing arts center— which is to say, paid him his standard fee and not a penny less— but also made him an honorary professor of Southern Studies. Both events were, by any measure, outpourings of love and respect, symbolic rituals of atonement whose healing moment was evident to all. B. B. King, an African American man who came of age in a Mississippi marked by lynching, disenfranchisement, racialized poverty, and the most comprehensive form of racial disrespect, is a beloved and respected elder in the new Mississippi, well-paid for his artistic endeavors.

There is, in short, a paradox at work here. Blues music, a music born out of a vexed and painful relationship between black and white Americans in the segregated South, is also a music that has helped minister to the lingering wounds of segregation during the post Civil Rights era. It has brought its African American creators and advocates a measure of wealth, fame, and mainstream respect. It has helped in no small way to dissolve stubborn remnants of the color line in America by bringing black and white musicians and audiences together into a series of local subcultural communities or “blues scenes,” scenes governed by mutual admiration, economic partnership, and the spirit of shared aesthetic creation. It is as though the blues themselves, through the medium of music, have transmuted the mixture of fear, despair, fury, heartache, and restlessness that were their founding racial impulse into a powerful urge toward interracial brotherhood, a brotherhood that yearns to undo the spiritual and material conditions responsible for precipitating those blues-feelings in the first place.

The Civil Rights movement may have ended decades ago, but the spirit of the movement lives on in the volunteerist, ameliorative tenor of the contemporary blues world. The Music Maker Relief Foundation, for example, describes itself as “a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping the true pioneers and forgotten heroes of Southern musical traditions gain recognition and meet their day to day needs.” The organization’s advisory board is a Who’s Who of the contemporary black-and-white American blues scene: Taj Mahal, Bonnie Raitt, B. B. King, Kenny Wayne Shepard, Dickie Betts. “Today,” proclaims the organization’s website, “many [blues] musicians are living in extreme poverty and need food, shelter, medical care, and other assistance. Music

Maker's aid and service programs improve the quality of recipient's lives. Our work affirms to these artists that we value the gifts of music and inspiration they have delivered to the world. Our mission is to give back to the roots of American music. Nor is the Music Maker Relief Foundation alone. An Israeli organization called "Blues For Peace" informs us on its website that it was founded "to honor the roots of blues music and promote peace and the understanding that ALL peoples have had their share of the blues. -Isn't it time people stopped fighting and learned to play twelve-bar shuffles instead?" asks the website. French blues fans who want to endorse this bluesy version of "We Are The World" can purchase attractive cotton t-shirts with the logo, "Blues Pour La Paix." German blues fans can order trucker's caps reading "Blues fur Frieden." Italian blues fans can order hooded t-shirts reading "Blues per la pace." Anyone who begins to investigate the blues in an international context is forced into a remarkable and unexpected conclusion: Once the soundtrack of segregated black American life, the blues today are, at many points around the globe, the soundtrack of multiracial utopia grounded in the gospel of racial healing.

Does this claim seem excessive? Look at this stage. Look around this room. Blues is *powerful music*. Blues has gathered us together— an international, multiracial, diasporic community of blues-players, blues singers, and blues-lovers. We are an imagined community that has assembled itself from near and far out of a determination to become real to each other in the presence of the music we love. The blues have demanded that we bring them, and ourselves, back to Africa for a collective reckoning. In doing that, the blues have helped incarnate *all* of us, at least provisionally, as a version of King's beloved community. "We are tied together," King wrote, "in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." King's prophetic words seem to speak the condition of beloved interwovenness, or at least friendly and *collegial* interwovenness, that the blues have helped us enact here in Dakar.

It is worth remembering that when Martin Luther King spoke of love, he distinguished three different kinds of love, which he termed *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. "The word *eros*," he wrote, "is a sort of aesthetic or romantic love." Blues singers know all about *eros*; every time a bluesman cries, "Hey baby, won't you take a walk with me," he is dallying in the fields of *eros*. "The second word [for love]," writes King, "is *philia*,

a reciprocal love and the intimate affection and friendship between friends. We love those whom we like, and we love because we are loved.ö The enthusiast's passion that binds blues performers and blues fans into a blues "scene" and that binds all of us in this room--arguably falls into this second category of love, the "friendship between friends" category. This sort of love is not trivial; it has the power to break down social barriers and create new forms of civil society. If the contemporary blues scene is animated by a large helping of multiracial *philia*, if it creates "intimate affection and friendship between friends" from different locations on the social spectrum, then it is, by that criterion alone, a force for racial healing. Still, mere *philia* by itself is not, according to King, enough to constitute beloved community. A third kind of love is needed, wider and more comprehensive than the first two. "The third word [for love]," writes King, "is *agape*, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. An overflowing love which seeks nothing in return, *agape* is the love of God operating in the human heart.ö This is the love-your-enemies form of love that was cultivated by Civil Rights workers in the early 1960s as they confronted the most intransigent forms of white southern racism in Mississippi and elsewhere. It is also, I submit, the kind of redemptive, world-embracing love that is striving to make itself visible through the instrumentality of those bluesy do-good organizations like the Music Maker Relief Foundation and Blues For Peace. *Agape* does indeed show up in the contemporary blues scene" allied with more conventional forms of volunteerism and commodity capitalism, to be sure, but with a determination to engineer social justice and create beloved community nonetheless.

All this talk about racial healing in the contemporary blues world raises an obvious question: where, if at all, does *agape* love show up in the harsh, brutal, segregated world in which the blues were born" Mississippi in the pre-Civil Rights era, for example, a world which seems to have been ruled by hard-hearted white overlords utterly deaf to the call of beloved community?

One of my favorite recent writings about love comes from a book entitled *All About Love*, authored by bell hooks, an African American cultural critic who was born and raised in the "blues South," which is to say segregated Georgia during the 1950s. If we define *agape*, with King, as "the love of God operating in the human heart," then it becomes clear that *agape* is hooks's subject: the power of God working through the

human heart to transform blues-laden wounds into spiritual treasure. "Love heals," hooks writes:

When we are wounded in the place where we would know love, it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything. No matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if born again, not forgetting the past but seeing it in a new way, letting it live inside us in a new way. Mindful remembering lets us put the broken bits and pieces of our hearts together again. This is the way healing begins.

In the time that remains, I'd like to embrace the challenge that hooks's invocation of love poses to our familiar ways of talking about the blues. If our mission, according to hooks, is not to forget the past, but to see it in a new way, then it may be possible for us to see blues literature and culture freshly, as a discourse of trauma and recovery, racial wounding and racial healing, love denied and love extended. We may come to see blues communities of all kinds, for example, as healing alternatives or antidotes to the radical isolation of the love-deprived, blues-suffused individual. "When we are wounded in the place where we would know love," hooks writes, "it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything." I know fifty different definitions of the blues, but hooks, I would suggest, has inadvertently provided us with the master key: *to have the blues is to be wounded in the place where we would know or have known love*. [repeat]. This definition allows us to understand blues as both a universal feeling—since virtually all of us, at one time or another, have been wounded in that place—and a more narrowly racial feeling, a "black thing," since an open-hearted reappraisal of the Jim Crow South in which the blues were born leads us to acknowledge the humiliations of segregation, the fears engendered by lynching, the rages and despairs prompted by economic exploitation, for the uniquely heart-ravaging wounds they were. What is a spectacle lynching, with its bodily tortures and ritual castration, if not the white South's loveless attempt to wound black folk, literally and metaphorically, in the place where they would know love? It may seem fatuous to speak of the "blues South" as a land traumatized by the loss of interracial *agape*, of embracing brotherly love. Yet what is blues song, with its thousand and one ways of saying "Baby, you don't love me," if not

the profoundest kind of lament for just such a *collective* loss? As angry young white and black generations segregated and violently collided across the South at the dawn of the Twentieth Century, as residual paternalist sympathies dissipated and spectacle lynching flared out of control, the blues line "Baby you don't love me" spoke not just to romantic desertion but to black sociopolitical despair, the utter failure of white America to deliver on the promise of full citizenship for its African American residents.

Yet it has never been difficult for African American blues people to imagine, in bell hooks's words, "that love really has the power to change everything." Quite the opposite: blues lyricism is grounded in a desperate faith that *one good lover* entering your life, one transcendent dose of *eros*, has the power to change everything, healing all the wounds inflicted by the white world's lovelessness. Marvin Gaye sang of sexual healing; so did virtually every blues singer who came of age in Mississippi. No one lover in the Jim Crow South, of course, could finally fill the aching void left by so much willfully inflicted spiritual damage, which is why blues song is a never-ending dance of immoderate hungers— for love, for money, for a fresh start in a friendly town— and bitterly dashed promises. *Well bye bye babe, if I never see you no more!* *You know I love you girl!* *I can't stand to see you go!*

Blues literature offers countless inscriptions of this blues-heroic dance of desire and disillusionment, of love extended and love denied, of trauma suffered and trauma overcome. Sometimes, to be sure, the spiritual wounds inflicted by loveless whitefolk are an insurmountable trauma, destabilizing and defeating would-be blues heroes. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, by August Wilson, the Mississippi-born blues trumpeter Levee erupts twice in the course of the play. The first eruption reveals the scars that white racial violence has carved into his body and spirit; the second eruption, in which he succumbs to a murderous fraternal rage, shows us what happens when unhealed trauma is left to fester for decades without love's transformative intercession. At the end of Act 1, Levee explodes after his fellow bandmates tease him about how he is "spooked up by the white man." "Levee got to be Levee!" he yells:

And he don't need nobody messing with him about the white man— cause you don't know nothing about me. You don't know Levee. You don't know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of heart I got beating here! I was

eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my daddy's house and have do with my mama any way they wanted.

Levee continues his impassioned narration, describing the way in which he interrupted the rape of his mother by attacking one of the men with his father's hunting knife, suffering a deep gash across his own chest, and the way in which his coolly calculating father later killed four members of the gang before the rest "caught up with him and hung him and set him afire." "Mindful remembering," bell hooks reminds us, "lets us put the broken bits and pieces of our hearts together again. This is the way healing begins." Levee's tragedy is that he begins the healing process hooks describes "centering himself in his rage-filled heart, engaging in a kind of mindful remembering" but he's never graced by his fickle female lover or his fractious male bandmates with the kind of tender embrace that might enable him to reassemble the "bits and pieces" of his broken heart and make peace with his past. His blues-filled life lacks redemptive love. At the end of the play's second act, when his dream of fame and fortune as a blues songwriter is suddenly shattered by a manipulative white record executive who has been playing him for a fool, Levee's "white man" blues are reanimated. Those blues possess him, overpower him, and lead him to stab his black bandmate Toledo to death for no good reason. His blues community wounds him with callousness rather than embracing him with love; he, in response, violently shatters that community.

I spoke earlier about the way in which blues seems to function in the contemporary world as an adjunct to *inter-racial* healing, an instrument for addressing and transcending the continuing aftereffects of segregation and racial violence. The truth is, however, that not all African Americans are happy about the surge of white interest in blues music and African American blues people over the past several decades. Some are profoundly disturbed by the dizzying proliferation of white claims on a music that has spent most of its lifespan as an African American cultural practice and is so clearly grounded in a continuing legacy of violent, impoverishing, and humiliating bad news inflicted on black folk by white folk. For writers such as Bebe Moore Campbell and Roland L. Freeman, the modern blues scene is a terrain on which familiar old wounds are

reinflited, familiar old scenarios are played out. "Do you see 'em, here they come," writes Freeman at the beginning of his 1997 poem, "Don't Forget the Blues":

Easing into our communities
In their big fancy cars,
Looking like alien carpetbaggers
Straight from Mars.
They slide in from the East,
North, South and West,
And when they leave,
You can bet they've taken the best.

Listen to me,

I've been drunk a long time
And I'm still drinking.
I take a bath every Saturday night,
But I'm still stinking.
This world's been whipping me upside my head,
But it hasn't stopped me from thinking.
I know they've been doing anything they choose,
I just want 'em to keep their darn hands off 'a my blues.

It's not clear whether Freeman is complaining about white blues fans who swarm into black communities and party to the blues as a form of cultural tourism, or white record executives who record black blues artists and keep the profits for themselves; quite possibly he's complaining about both. What is clear is that white blues fans who cross the color-line in search of "real blues" aren't necessarily propagating the ideal of beloved community⁶ at least in the eyes of some of some African Americans⁷ and may in fact be sowing one more crop of the same old disrespect-and-exploit-the-black-folks blues. In a novel entitled *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, Bebe Moore Campbell critiques the integrated contemporary blues scene for precisely this reason by depicting a conversation between several older black

denizens of a Chicago blues bar called the Down Home. The Down Home has recently been renamed "The All-New Down Home Bar and Grill" after being overrun by white college kids. "The white kids done discovered us. That's what's new," complains the bartender. "That's why I don't hang out here on the weekend nights no more," volunteers an older black patron. "Ain't nothing worse," complains a third man

than drinking with white college kids. While it's early, they all educated. By midnight, they done turned into the damn Klan and shit. They get drunk, they liable to say or do anything. Next thing you know, one of 'em done called you a nigger. If I'm in a situation where white folks is drinking, I be watching them. Soon as they faces turn red, shade number three, I'm gone. Shades number one and two are manageable. Number three is the turning point. They start looking like beets and shit. That's when the devil commence to possessing they souls. You know what I mean? What they want to come in here for anyway? They got they own music."

"But they ain't got no blues," said a light-skinned man, so thin that the veins in his temples seemed to bulge out of the sides of his skull.

"Yeah, they do," the man in the [Chicago] Bulls cap said. "That yahoo music. Loretta Lynn. Hank Williams. Willie Nelson. That's they blues."

"That ain't no blues," the light-skinned man said. He slammed his fist against the counter, and the ice in his drink tinkled. "White people don't sing no blues, 'cause they ain't got no blues. But they indirectly responsible for the music, 'cause they sure be giving black folks the blues."

The vision of race relations offered by Freeman and Campbell is a blues song of its own, a kind of "interracial blues-scene blues" that offers us vital but partial truths about contemporary blues culture. The *spiritual* lesson it conveys is undeniable: both Freeman's poetic speaker and the aggrieved patrons of the Down Home blues bar are, to paraphrase bell hooks, wounded in the place where they would know love. They are traumatized by painful histories of cultural and economic expropriation, sensitive to perceived signs of racial disrespect, and leery of white violence erupting out of the rebelliousness of blues-stoked white euphoria. As far as they're concerned, a form of interracial

sociality organized around blues consumption and imposed on them by white people re-inflicts familiar wounds in a grievous way, rather than healing them with love.

Yet there is, as it happens, a very different vision of blues music as a terrain of interracial contact put forward by another set of African American writers, a vision far more in accord with King's dream of redemptive interracial brotherhood. In this vision, white American blues musicians and blues fans are not cultural thieves and callous exploiters of African American blues people, but supportive audiences, committed musical apprentices, and even, on occasion, blues masters in their own right, equal partners in the shared task of aesthetic creation. I'm thinking here of Stanley Crouch's novel *Don't the Moon Look Lonesome*, the story of an interracial romance between Carla, a white jazz/blues singer from South Dakota, and Maxwell, a black sax player from Texas. In an audacious and deliberate gesture of racial healing, Crouch imagines himself into the soul of his white female protagonist at the moment of her triumphant vocal showcase at a Manhattan party given by Celestine, a New Orleans trumpeter modeled on Wynton Marsalis. There are no "white ripoffs of black music" here. Rather, Celestine and his band happily back Carla up, cradling and prodding her talent, drawing her "a cultural pilgrim on the cusp of musical mastery" into a call-and-response dialogue. "This time," Crouch writes,

"I'm right in the middle of the blues, everybody was equal to the action" no room for squares" and [Carla] was the quarterback, calling the plays and throwing the passes out of her throat, which was, like her heart, all the way open. Her classical training allowed for a sound of such magnitude that the guys didn't have to back away in order to allow this woman the freedom of space that keeps a singer without a microphone from being smothered. She was meeting them, and as they touched in the invisible huddle of the rhythm, Carla called some gutbucket verities into the room, hitting the next to last word of the third line with a correct and saucy illiteracy that inspired calls of approval from the dancers: "All right now, get below sea level."

Carla may be a white girl singing the blues here" and thus culturally suspect" but Crouch demands that we forget what we *think* we know about white/black interchange

under the sign of the blues and acknowledge what is actually transpiring: Carla is *getting down*, engaging in a deep, playful, and joyous dialogue with her black musical peers. Far from diluting black culture with her pale-faced presence, she's bringing her own cultural gifts to the table—a powerful vocal instrument she's been graced with thanks to her classical training—and deploying them in the service of gutbucket verities, for everybody's benefit. Where August Wilson's Levee accuses his bandmates of "not knowing what kind of heart I got beating here," Crouch shows us Carla singing from her "all the way open" heart, sharing what and who she is with her black bandmates, amalgamating *her* blues with the common stock. Buoyed and supported by her blues community, Carla has opened her heart to love in a way that Levee, mocked by his bandmates and exploited by his white bosses, simply could not.

Since the so-called "usual crime" that led to lynching in the blues South was sexual intimacy or indeed *any* sort of suspected intimacy between black men and white women, an intimacy figured invariably as rape, Crouch is treading on haunted terrain here. He's doing so, it seems to me, with a clear and evident desire to heal that most painful of American wounds. His point is at once bold, witty, and necessary: Carla's husband is a black man, her bandmates are black men, her familial and creative life are defined by sexual and musical intimacies with black men, and she's *okay!* In fact, she's flourishing. And she's doing so under the sign of the blues. It's instructive to compare the vision of blues-healing offered by Stanley Crouch with the vision offered by B. B. King in his 1996 autobiography, *Blues All Around Me*. The world in which King came of age, the Mississippi Delta in the bad old days of Jim Crow, is a long way from the contemporary Manhattan in which Carla sings her open-hearted blues. Interracial intimacies are a source of white hysteria in that southern world—a fact that young B. B. discovers one traumatic, blues-inflicting afternoon when he wanders into the town square of Lexington, Mississippi. "There were moments of shock and pain that can't be erased from my memory," confesses King:

Suddenly I see there's a commotion around the courthouse. Something's happening that I don't understand. People crowded around. People creating a buzz. Mainly white folk. I'm curious and want to get closer, but my instinct has me staying away. From the far side of the square, I see them carrying a black

body, a man's body, to the front of the courthouse. A half-dozen white guys are hoisting the body up on a rope hanging from a makeshift platform. Someone cheers. The black body is a dead body. The dead man is young, nineteen or twenty, and his mouth and his eyes are open, his face contorted. It's horrible to look at but I look anyway. I sneak looks. I hear someone say something about the dead man touching a white woman and how he got what he deserves. Deep inside, I'm hurt, sad, and mad. But I stay silent.

What do I have to say and who's gonna listen to me? This is another secret matter; my anger is a secret that stays away from the light of day because the square is bright with the smiles of white people passing by as they view the dead man on display. I feel disgust and disgrace and rage and every emotion that makes me cry without tears and scream without sound. I don't make a sound.

In this astonishing passage, King evokes the lovelessness of the blues South as starkly and as wrenchingly as they have ever been evoked. We have become so used to the mellow, avuncular presence of the elder King as a mainstream cultural hero and commercial spokesman that it shocks us to glimpse him here as a helpless 10-year old: disgusted, disgraced, raging, sobbing inwardly, but also silenced by the aftermath of a lynching that, by design, threatens everything that he is about as a young black man. The witness that King bears here, years after the incident, is one way in which racial healing proceeds, for it is we, his readers, whose compassionate witness he also requests. Like all blues performers, he needs us to listen to the song he is singing; he needs to open his heart to us, and *does* open his heart to us. "Mindful remembering," writes bell hooks, "lets us put the broken bits and pieces of our hearts together again. This is the way healing begins." King is engaging in just that sort of mindful remembering here, evoking his youthful blues-feelings in all their debilitating intensity and asking his blues community—us, his readers—to participate in his unburdening.

But King also depicts another kind of racial healing in his autobiography, a form of interracial communion in which blues music plays a crucial role. In 1969, King played a concert at the Fillmore West auditorium in San Francisco in which, for the first time, he

found himself playing for a mass white audience, a sellout crowd of flower-children. "At the microphone," King remembers,

Bill Graham gave me a straight-to-the-point introduction. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "the Chairman of the Board, B. B. King." By the time I strapped on Lucille, every single person in the place was standing up and cheering like crazy. For the first time in my career I got a standing ovation *before* I played. Couldn't help but cry. With tears streaming down, I thought to myself, *These kids love me before I've hit a note. How can I repay them for this love?* The answer came in my music. I played that night like I've never played before. Played "Rock Me Baby" and "Sweet Little Angel" and "You Upset Me Baby" and "How Blue Can You Get," played all my stuff with all my heart while they stayed on their feet, screaming and stomping for nearly three hours. It was hard for me to believe that this was happening, that the communication between me and the flower children was so tight and right. But it was true, it was probably the best performance of my life!

In its own way, this passage is as astonishing as the earlier description of King's traumatic confrontation with a lynching in a Mississippi town square. In fact, King's triumphant night at the Fillmore West *is* such a triumph because it represents, in symbolic terms, a point-by-point redress of that earlier occasion. In the earlier passage, violence and lovelessness structure the relationship between the white mob that has conducted the lynching and the black victim at the center of the spectacle; in this passage, loving approval beams down on King from the enthusiastic white audience. In the earlier passage, King felt silenced, annihilated, by the dead black body and the leering white looks; he wanted to cry but couldn't. In this passage, by contrast, he is blown wide-open by love and he can't *help* but cry "freely, gloriously" before returning the gift of the audience's love with his own inspired playing.

"When we are wounded in the place where we would know love," writes bell hooks, "it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything." In this extraordinary pair of scenes, I suggest, B. B. King mindfully remembers the disgust, disgrace, and rage that lynching engendered in him; he *tells the truth*, fulfilling the

bluesman's sacred trust but he also opens his heart to love, receiving it and reciprocating it across a color-line that love, and blues music, seem temporarily to have liquidated. The result, as hooks prophesies, is that he thrives onstage "as if born again." He offers us a striking example of the way in which blues communities, under the right circumstances, can embody the ideals of Martin Luther King's beloved community, healing old wounds and enlivening our social imaginations in constructive ways.

I return, at last, to the paradox I've been exploring throughout this talk: the fact that blues, the soundtrack of segregation and the witness to racial violence, should also, in our own day, have become the instrument through which a range of cultural workers are pursuing the project of racial healing. Blues performers, blues writers, and blues-based activists challenge us to throw off our reflexive cynicism and unconscious despair about race relations in America and other points on the Afrodiasporic continuum. They ask us to move towards a wholeness, to *risk* a wholeness, that might redeem us both individually and collectively. Bebe Moore Campbell's vision of the blues today, a vision in which "your blues ain't like mine," is one possible contemporary articulation of the blues, and one with which I sympathize. The blues *do* live on in black communities, evoking age-old inequalities in ways that demand both articulation and redress. But there are other more hopeful blues-visions and spirit-visions at large in the new millennium, too. I couldn't agree more with bell hooks: we don't need to forget about the past and the scars it's left on all of us, but we *do* need to see that past in a new way, and let it live inside us in a new way. Slavery did happen; segregation did happen. The blues bear deep and eloquent testimony to that history. But the blues also challenge us to move beyond that history to keep on moving down the road, looking for love, extending the love inside us in the direction of community, singing the song we were put here to sing. This, with luck, is the way healing begins.
