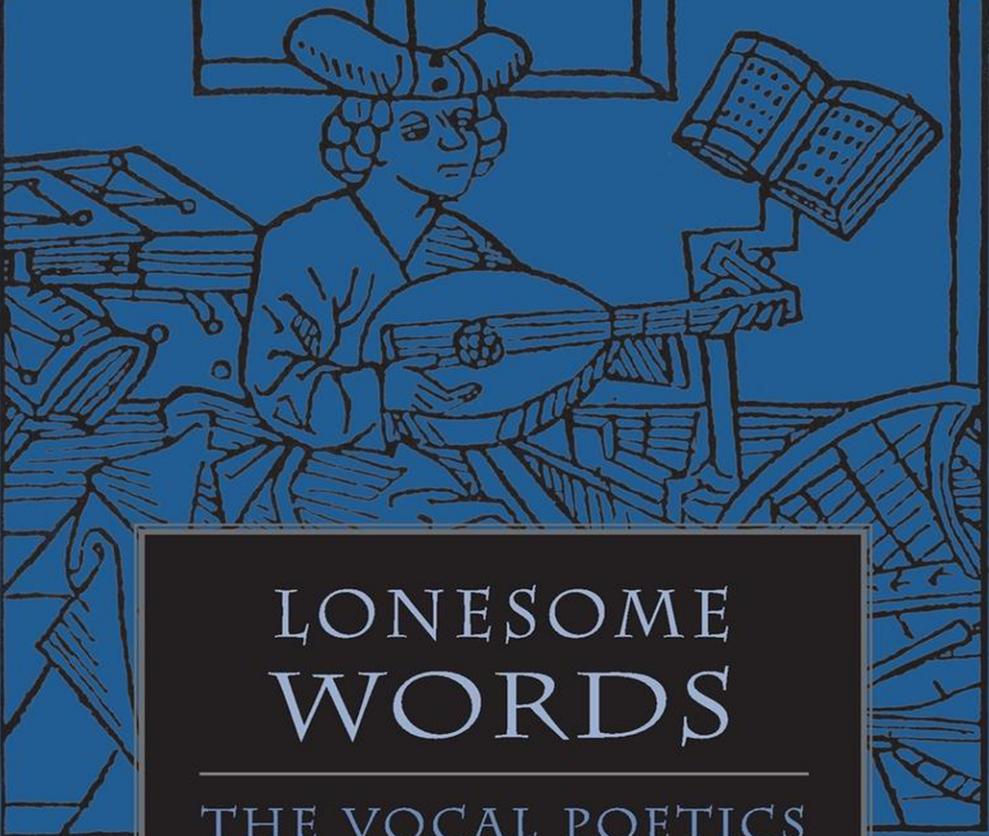


THE NEW MIDDLE AGES



LONESOME  
WORDS

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THE VOCAL POETICS  
*of the* OLD ENGLISH  
LAMENT *and the*  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
BLUES SONG

---

M.G. McGeachy



# THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

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by M. G. McGeachy

# LONESOME WORDS

THE VOCAL POETICS OF THE  
OLD ENGLISH LAMENT AND THE  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN BLUES SONG

*M.G. McGeachy*

palgrave  
macmillan



LONESOME WORDS

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2006 978-1-4039-6291-1

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First published in 2006 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-73172-5

ISBN 978-1-137-11765-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-137-11765-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McGeachy, M.G. (Margaret G.)

Lonesome words : the vocal poetics of the Old English lament and the African-American blues song / M.G. McGeachy.

p. cm.—(New Middle Ages)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Elegiac poetry, English (Old)—History and criticism. 2. Laments—England—History and criticism. 3. American poetry—African American authors—History and criticism. 4. African Americans—Songs and music—History and criticism. 5. Literature, Comparative—English (Old) and American. 6. Literature, Comparative—American and English (Old) 7. Oral tradition—England—History—To 1500. 8. Blues (Music)—History and criticism. 9. Oral tradition—United States. 10. Loneliness in literature. I. Title. II. New Middle Ages (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm))

PR207.M38 2006

829'.1009—dc22

2005040189

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: May 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Transferred to Digital Printing in 2013

To Kim, David, and Rob



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to David Townsend, whose graduate course in Old English at the University of Toronto opened up new perspectives, beginnings, and possibilities for me. I also thank Roberta Frank, Ted Chamberlin, David Galbraith, and Nicholas Howe for their invaluable expertise and support of this study throughout the years.

I am particularly grateful to Michael Taft for his foundational work on the blues formula, of which his *Anthology* and *Concordance* made this study possible. I owe special thanks to Stephen LaVere for his correspondence to me on the lyrics of Robert Johnson and for the information he provided on blues recording.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to following authors and publishers for permission to reprint material:

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## INTRODUCTION: DON'T THE WORLD SEEM LONELY. . .

*Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,  
minre sylfre sið. (WL ll. 1–2a)*  
[I utter this speech about myself, full of sorrow, my own journey.]  
Got the blues, can't be satisfied.

Strange yet familiar, the lonely voices of the Old English lament and the African American blues call beyond the walls of the text, captivating audiences, engaging listeners in a dialogue of longing. Although the lyrics of each poetry speak the language of a poetic tradition that evolved within a distinct history and culture, the voices are remarkably similar in their emotive expression of personal and social struggle.

*Woke up this morning with traveling on my mind.*  
. . .ic feor heonan  
elþeodigra eard gesece. (Sfr 37b–38)  
[. . .I far from here seek the land of strangers.]

For modern reader–listeners, removed in time and space from the origins of both poetries, these voices are immediate yet elusive, truthful yet mysterious.

This study juxtaposes the texts of the Old English laments and that of blues songs, and their respective critical reception, in order to explore the features that characterize the vocal poetics of each. My discussion allows each poetry to inform the other at various levels of investigation. The first concerns formal aspects that promote communication with an audience, while the second area focuses on the formula-generated themes that characterize both poetries. The study of how these themes produce emotive intensity allows consideration, beyond the text itself, of the circumstances within which each poetry was originally created; given the strong parallels, at so many levels, between blues texts and the laments, the relationship between themes, such as loss and travel, and the turbulent sociohistorical era during which blues performance and recording occurred leads me to

speculate that the Old English laments respond to a similar environment of hardship and upheaval. Finally, at a further level, I look at how the voices of blues and the laments were collected, heard, and read by a second audience.

By Old English lament, I refer to what Old English scholars have conventionally called an *elegy* to describe and categorize the poems *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message*, and *The Ruin*. Often added to the list are *Resignation* and *The Riming Poem*. All of these poems are preserved in the Exeter Book (MS 3501), generally believed to have been produced in the second half of the tenth century. I have chosen the term *lament* over *elegy* in response to two separate but related critical dilemmas. First, critics often complain about the imprecision of the term *elegy*: the poems do not exhibit classical elegiac meter nor do they have much in common with English pastoral elegies. Three of the poems—*The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *The Seafarer*—refer to themselves as a *giedd*,<sup>1</sup> but the word recurs in various literary contexts—riddles, biblical parables, glosses—making it impossible to translate accurately into modern English. The second dilemma centers on our uncertainty as to whether the poems actually represent a separate genre.<sup>2</sup> Each “*elegy*” exhibits a poetic style, an attitude, and method all its own. What they do have in common, however, Stanley B. Greenfield sums up nicely in his proposed definition:

the Old English elegy [is] a relatively short reflective or dramatic poem embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing attitude towards that experience.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the personal aspect of these poems distinguishes them as a kind of genre or form. The persistent use of a first-person speaker to voice “loss and consolation” promotes their attractive dramatic quality.

Yet, the melancholic mood of the “*elegies*” of the Exeter Book occurs elsewhere, notably embedded within long narrative poems. The “*elegiac*” quality of “The Lament of the Last Survivor” in *Beowulf*, the lament of the father for his dead son, also in *Beowulf*, and the lament of Guthlac’s disciple is often acknowledged but rarely (if at all) studied in conjunction with the Exeter “*elegies*.” In this study, the term *lament* expands the conventional view of the Old English elegy by including the speeches of Satan, contained within the longer poem *Christ and Satan* of the Junius 11 manuscript, alongside the discrete poems of the Exeter Book. Significantly, the term *lament* serves to emphasize the performative aspect of such moments of expression. The lament, then, is a highly identifiable expression in that it is stylized to evoke in the listener certain psychological and emotional

responses. The lament is conveyed as personal experience yet is significantly communal. While the presence of the lament within long poems might complicate our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon perception of poetic structure and genre, the situation is not unlike, perhaps, the modern development of blues writing, in which the mood and form of the blues lyric has crossed into prose.

Of the laments' historical context, we know very little. The donation of the Exeter Book by Bishop Leofric to Exeter Cathedral places written versions of poems such as *The Wanderer* within a monastic, literary environment. As for the Junius 11 manuscript, nothing is known of its provenance before its ownership by Franciscus Junius in the seventeenth century. For further information, we have to rely on the texts themselves. Like all Old English poetry, the compositional structure of the lament is based on half-line verbal units, governed by meter, and joined within a line by alliteration. Followers of the Parry-Lord oral-formulaic school view the presence of formulas in the poetry as evidence of oral composition, though the paucity of historical information makes the theory impossible to prove. My discussion throughout this book assumes that the formulaic nature of the laments connects them to an oral tradition of performance, regardless of compositional techniques.

The blues texts that speak throughout this study were recorded during the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike that of Old English poetry, the history of blues is recent and well known; in fact, the genre's participation in African American oral tradition continues today with performers such as B.B. King. Blues developed around the turn of the twentieth century from a combination of field hollers, work songs, songster ballads, religious songs, and African-derived music.<sup>4</sup> Blues were performed before an audience in elaborate settings such as traveling tent-shows and city cabarets, as well as in the informal contexts of the street-corner, juke joint, and house party. In 1920, the unexpected success of Mamie Smith's record featuring "That Thing Called Love" and "You Can't Keep A Good Man Down" initiated what quickly became a thriving industry of blues and gospel recording.<sup>5</sup> Smith was called back to record "Crazy Blues," for which advertising was specifically targeted at an African American audience. Over the next twenty years, the major companies issued thousands of recordings known as "race records," listed in segregated catalogues and marketed to African Americans. In the early years, female singers, such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, recorded most of the blues records. Their style of blues, known as "classic" or "vaudeville" blues, was accompanied by a band. After 1925, the "country" (sometimes called "folk") blues of male singers, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, became popular. These singers typically performed alone, accompanying themselves on guitar. During the

late 1930s, audiences turned to a new form of piano-based “city” blues. The production of “race records” peaked in 1928 but plummeted during the Depression years. Sales gradually climbed to a second peak in 1938 but then, once again, declined suddenly and finally with World War II. During these years, blues recordings were purchased predominantly by African Americans.

The many musical and regional styles of blues makes the genre as a whole difficult to define, a concern that preoccupies members of, what I refer to as, the second audience.<sup>6</sup> Musically, the “blues note” identifies the genre; Harry Oster explains,

The singer “wories” the third and often the seventh and/or the fifth of the scale, wavering between flat and natural. The same effect appears in the accompaniment, readily accomplished on a guitar by pushing the strings sideways and distorting the pitch, or by sliding a hard object along the strings so that pitches not in the European scale are sounded and notes are “bent.”<sup>7</sup>

Like the Old English lament, blues lyrics are based on the half-line, but blues “rarely conforms to a tight metric structure.”<sup>8</sup> A blues line consists of two half-lines, between which the singer typically pauses, emphasizing the caesura. Lines are linked by rhyme, so that, in general, the core of the blues stanza is the rhyming couplet. Although there are many stanza forms, the most common is the 2AA stanza in which the opening line of the couplet is repeated (but is rarely identical aurally):

I’s up this mornin’ blues walkin’ like a man  
I’s up this mornin’ blues walkin’ like a man  
Worried blues give me your right hand.<sup>9</sup>

Blues lyrics exhibit high formula density, which reflects the improvisational character of the genre.

Throughout this book, I distinguish between two main audiences of both the lament and the blues song. The “original” audience comprises those people who experienced the poetry first-hand in its initial historical, social, and cultural context and who directly participated in its creation and evolution. The “second” audience consists of reader–listeners who live outside the original historical or cultural context of the poetry. The reader–listeners of the second audience receive, and often reinterpret, the tradition second-hand and participate in the preservation and transmission of the poetry.

The original audience of the pre–World War II blues studied in this book comprise southern, rural African Americans who performed blues and listened to blues on record and in live performance settings in the

1920s and 1930s. The significance of African American history cannot be overlooked in the study of blues, and the historical and social context of blues is well documented elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, I do not attempt a historical reading of blues lyrics in this study.

However, it is important to emphasize that during the years in which the race records were produced, the Great Migration took thousands of southern blacks north in search of employment and refuge from the political and social injustices of the Jim Crow system. This event significantly informs the themes of travel and disillusionment in blues songs. Further, the history behind blues played an important role in its reception by the second audience. In contrast to the demographics of the initial listeners, the typical member of blues' second audience is urban, white, male, and middle-class. For this relatively privileged audience concerned with political and social injustices, the voices of blues are collected in new juxtapositions as idealized markers of a lost American past.

To be specific about the original audience of the Old English lament is impossible, but I will speculate that it heard poetry in theme and mood similar to that of *The Wife's Lament* and *Deor* in a secular social setting, as opposed to a monastic environment, and probably (but not necessarily) before the Exeter Book was written. The presence of the laments, within such a small surviving corpus of Old English poetry, attests to the popularity of this type of expression and, hence, their cultural importance. The laments' preoccupation with alienation from social stability reveals the need to speak a common sorrow—a traumatic event, an experience of displacement. Historically, the social upheaval of Anglo-Saxon society undoubtedly caused by the invasions and subsequent settlement of the Vikings in East Anglia would be a significant point of reference for the listeners of both the original and second audiences. The laments do not seek to interpret or understand the invasion of heathen armies<sup>11</sup>; rather, they offer a way of coping with the everyday immediacy of hardship of such an event. They speak of crisis in emotional and psychological terms in an effort to overcome despair.

The second audience of the laments includes those involved in collecting these poetic expressions of loss into anthologies such as the Exeter Book. The reader-listeners of the poems in their new written context, along with those who adapt the form for the new audience (likely the case of the *Christ and Satan* poet), are also members of the second audience. Given that this compilation took place in a monastic setting, I wonder if the voice of alienation was particularly significant to the secular clergy finding themselves displaced during the Benedictine reform.

Chapter 1 proposes that the poet of the lament, like the blues singer, optimized particular features, such as the first person speaker and certain

formulas, to simulate performance within the text itself. The text seeks to compensate for the physical distance between the poet–singer and the reader–listener, and, in the absence of the poet, engages the audience in a kind of textual call-and-response. For the second audience of both the laments and the blues, a lack of contact with and experience within the social and historical context of the texts results in interpretive difficulties.

Chapter 2 features a case study of the country blues of Robert Johnson to assist in the investigation of the role of formula within the anomalous performance context of recording. Michael Taft’s work on the blues formula and, in particular, his *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology* and *Blues Lyric Poetry: A Concordance* is invaluable here in exploring not only how Johnson utilizes an established tradition of formulaic composition but also how he consciously revises and refines the tradition. Throughout, I show how formulas generate the themes that characterize blues; a parallel formulaic analysis of the twelve recordings with supporting evidence is provided in the Appendix. In that Robert Johnson’s work occurs late in the history of blues recording, its reliance on and revision of the blues tradition provides a possible model by which manuscript context of the Old English laments can be viewed. The act of capturing a performance on record—audio or visual—challenges the rigid views of what constitutes oral poetry.

Chapter 3 takes into account the context within which blues and the laments were originally created in its exploration of the formula-generated themes of exile and imprisonment. Both poetries seek to overcome a hostile environment. In the texts, the speaker is consistently separated from society through a formulaic construction of isolation. This displacement takes place on the road in blues and the *wraeclast* [exile-track] in the lament, both associated with movement—and poetic creation. Working against the speaker’s physical mobility is the imagery of confinement. Imprisonment immobilizes the speaker physically and forces him to turn inward. The process enacts an imaginative and psychological release.

Chapter 4 discusses the reception of both poetries by their second audience. I compare the anthology of poetry contained in the Exeter Book to the 1952 *Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music* and discuss both as vehicles for the reception of unfamiliar yet poetically attractive texts. The lament and the blues song are recontextualized in the anthologies and, thus, reinterpreted in a new setting. The new contexts reveal much about the second audience and its approach to “traditional” art.

In creating a space in which the blues song and the Old English lament can call and respond to each other, this exploration seeks to transcend the rigid boundaries that limit modern perceptions of both poetries. The laments illuminate the nature of the second audience’s reception of blues; like the

laments, blues songs hide as much as they reveal. In return, blues shed light on the role of fixed texts within an “oral” tradition. The history of blues record production and reception suggests possibilities for the unknown aspects of composition, performance, and transmission of the Old English laments. Together, the vocal poetics of the Old English lament and the African American blues song speak to us the lonesome words of displacement, desire, suffering, and struggle.

## CHAPTER 1

### CAPTIVATED PERFORMANCE

#### **Call-and-Response**

Anyone who has had the good fortune to see and hear B.B. King knows that blues is a performance art, distinct not only in form but also in the dynamic interaction between singer, song, and audience. King's work uses, revises, and updates the language and conventions of pre-World War II blues, which were performed live in various informal settings. The art of blues is what we like to call an "oral tradition," created by and for a particular people to speak a unique experience. Of the Old English lament, it remains a mystery as to whether the poetry was actually performed, yet many readers interpret the recurrence of formulas in the poetry as evidence of a prior existence within an oral tradition. This oral trace—this vocality—this intense need to communicate is central to both the Old English lament and the African American blues song. In each exists the seeming contradiction of private anguish and public expression: both poetries employ the private and personal meditative techniques of the lyric but with the purpose of establishing communal experience with a public audience.

At some point in their respective histories, the vocality and rhythm of both poetries were captured by mechanical means: the lament on manuscript parchment and the blues song on the shellac of a 78 disc. The technology of writing and audio recording removed the text from the setting of a live performance and, in doing so, significantly affected the nature of its content and form. In the absence of visual cues and spontaneous aural response, the text itself—its language and composition—becomes paramount in bridging the performer and the audience through the construction of a performative space, which allows for interaction between singer and listener. The first-person speaker of both poetries is central to this dynamic interplay: these speakers are not merely overheard but rather demand attention by

directly addressing the poem's audience. Moreover, certain phrases take part in rhetorical strategies that presuppose and engage the audience in the expression of emotional struggle.

The lament and the blues song are defined by particular formulaic phrases and clusters that construct not only the melancholy associated with each but also its mode of communication. The seemingly restrictive formal conventions of both genres contain the chaos of emotion and desire, providing a protected space in which the speaker is allowed to express thoughts unacceptable in any other public forum. The Wanderer states his awareness of the social decorum of reticence:

. . . Ic to soþe wat  
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhten Deaw  
 þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde,  
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille. (ll. 11b-14)  
 [. . .] I, in truth, know that it is, in a warrior, a noble virtue that he bind fast  
 his mind-prison, hold his treasure-coffer, think as he will.<sup>1</sup>

Anxiety increases as speaking becomes an act of defiance, but the act of disclosing his *ferþlocan* is legitimized within the poem's conventional presentation. The lament and the blues song break silence with the assertion of personal voice and, even more importantly, through the expectation of a responsive audience. The texts of blues and the laments promote dialogue through the use of a first-person speaker and inherent performative strategies.

The solitary "I" is the speaker of both the laments and blues lyrics. Blues relies on the pronoun "I" more than any other word, and the speaker's self-assertion is further projected by "My," "Me," and "I'm," all included in the ten most frequently used words in blues.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, all the lament speakers present themselves in the first person. The feature of direct speech in both poetries is a significant source of the dramatic, emotive impact of the lyrics. Through direct speech, the speakers assert themselves and their story, an act of telling that effectively produces pathos. Direct speech allows the action of telling to be completed by automatically incorporating the participation of "you," a receptive audience.

In African American oral tradition, dialogue between singer and audience, known as call-and-response, is an integral and very complex component of verbal and musical performance. During a live blues performance, call-and-response occurs between singer and audience, singer and musical instrument, and between the singer's song and other songs both within and outside of the blues corpus. At all levels, the exchange involves "Signifyin(g)," a process, according to Henry Louis Gates, that is characterized by the "free play of language" based on a technique of indirection and

deferral of meaning.<sup>3</sup> Texts, such as those of blues lyrics, engage in Signifyin(g) through rhetorical play, verbal disruption, revision, and intertextual communication. An African American “culture-based and culture-wise” audience responds to and actively critiques a “Signifyin(g) act” *during* its performance.<sup>4</sup>

The church sermon exemplifies another oral performance based on call-and-response; the African American preacher designs the sermon to elicit active response from the congregation. The congregation, Bruce A. Rosenberg observes, “is actively involved in the service. They hum, sing aloud, yell, and join in the sermon as they choose, and almost always their timing is impeccable.”<sup>5</sup> In turn, the response of the audience influences the preacher’s performance<sup>6</sup>; vigorous participation encourages rhythm and energy, while an unresponsive congregation might allow a sermon to fall flat. The blues singer borrows the techniques of the preacher in an attempt to achieve a similar type of response from the audience, and, at the same time, audience response influences the singer’s continued performance.<sup>7</sup>

Angela Y. Davis observes that “[t]he blues in performance creates space for spontaneous audience response in a manner that is similar to religious testifying.”<sup>8</sup> Davis argues that the call-and-response mechanism of blues performance is of particular importance in women’s blues in that it provides a dialogic venue for female listeners. In the 1920s, blues was “one of the only arenas in which working-class black women could become aware of the deeply social character of their personal experiences.”<sup>9</sup> Many of the blues of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith take the form of advice songs directed at a female audience; Davis provides the following example recorded by Rainey:

I want all you women to listen to me  
 Don’t trust your man no further than your eyes can see  
 I trusted mine with my best friend  
 But that was the bad part in the end.<sup>10</sup>

Even when heard on record, the listener is included as a member of “an imagined community of women” and is invited to respond.<sup>11</sup> “Listen to me” and “Let me tell you” are common phrases in blues songs,<sup>12</sup> which, along with the speaker’s advisory role, were passed on to the country blues of male singers. For instance, ten years after Rainey’s “Trust No Man,” Bo Chatman recorded “Bo Carter’s Advice,” which begins

Now, listen here men : what Bo Carter say for you to do  
 Says don’t you never let none of these old trifling women : man never worry  
 you. (ChatB-19)<sup>13</sup>

The “Listen to me” formula of blues corresponds with the openers *Hwæt!* [Listen!] and *we gefrunon* [we have heard] of Old English poetry.<sup>14</sup> Two variations are employed in *Deor* (at lines 14b and 21a), a lament that, notably, also features a counseling speaker who punctuates each exemplum of suffering with the consolatory refrain “þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg” [That passed over, so may this]. The advisory role occurs elsewhere in the laments; for instance, the speaker of *The Seafarer* slips into the role of preacher in the latter portion of the poem. Here, he uses the homiletic “Uton we hycgan” [Let us consider, l. 117a] to engage his audience.<sup>15</sup> In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the speaker’s emphatic “Gehyrest þu. . .?” [Do you hear. . .? l. 16a] directs a warning to Eadwacer, enigmatic in its reference to a whelp, a wolf, a wood, and a riddle. Meanwhile, the Wanderer offers much advice on how to become wise: “Wita sceal geþyldig, / ne sceal no to hateort ne to hrædwyrde” [The wise one must be patient, / must not be too hot-hearted nor too hasty of speech, ll. 65b–66].

While it can be argued that counseling of the reader is a common purpose encountered throughout Old English poetry and prose, the laments present wisdom in a very distinct fashion. The presence of the first-person speaker is immediate, personal, and, hence, powerful; the effect is one of performance. *Christ and Satan* offers a glimpse of how at least one Old English poet perceived the lament as a distinct and effective vocal form and applied it to a literary context. Within this homiletic narrative poem, Satan expresses his condition of exile and imprisonment through lament. Part I features the performance of five laments, each clearly demarcated as a self-contained text by a narrator who introduces and closes the speeches.<sup>16</sup> The introduction of Satan emphasizes his presence as a speaker:

Cleopað ðonne se alda ut of helle,  
wriceð wordcwedas weregan reorde,  
eisegan stefne: . . . (ll. 34–36a)

[Then the ancient one cries out from hell, utters word-declarations, with accursed speech, with dreadful voice: . . .]

Satan himself then steps forward and directly expresses his complaints. The anticipation of the action of speech—of telling—builds with the accumulation of speech words—“cleopað,” “wriceð,” and “wordcwedas,” “reorde,” “stefne.” Satan, who, in turn, is conscious of an audience, begins with the rhetorical question “Hwær com engla ðrym, / þe we on heofnum habban sceoldan?” [To where has the glory of the angels come, that we in heaven should have had? ll. 36b–37]. In this speech, Satan uses a collective “we” (at lines 41a and 44a) in his recognition of the torment he and his fellow demons suffer. Call-and-response is immediately apparent when he is answered,

within the poem, in lines 53–64 by the “atole gastas” [terrible spirits, l. 51a]. Satan then shifts to the personal “I” in the next three laments, returning to “we” only in his final lament.

The narrator carefully sets up the second lament by dramatizing Satan’s presence as a performer with theatrical flourishes:

Eft reordade oðre siðe  
feonda aldor. Wæs þa forht agen,  
seoððan he ðes wites worn gefelde.  
He spearcade, ðonne he spreocan ongan  
fyre and atre; ne bið swelc fæger dream  
ðonne he in witum wordum indraf. . . (ll. 75–80)

[The fiends’ chief spoke again a second time. [He] was then fearful anew since he felt the magnitude of this punishment. He sparked when he began to speak with fire and poison; it is not such fair joy when he in misery uttered with words: . . .]

Here, Satan’s act of speech is visualized with the unique verb “spearcade” [sparked, l. 78a]: he speaks with “fire and poison.” His words are not only aurally powerful but also construed as visible objects; the effect increases interest in preparation for the direct connection Satan will make with the audience in the speech. As a mode of communication, the elaborate artifice of the lament heightens the contrast between Satan’s speech and the more natural patterns of Christ’s speech seen in Parts II and III. Robert Emmett Finnegan, in discussing the effective use of classical rhetorical devices in Satan’s speeches, proposes that the display of figures such as “*prolepsis*, *hysterology*, *hypozeugis* and *anaphora*” within the “Ealas” section of lines 163–171 shows that “the poet consciously contrived his lines to make as strong an impact on his audience as possible.”<sup>17</sup> The lament is appropriate in tone and topic for the voice of the exiled Satan, and the poet may have counted on its attractive emotive power to arouse response in the poem’s audience.

In contrast to Satan’s laments, those found in the Exeter Book are like blues records in that the texts exist apart from a narrative context. Only *The Wanderer* comes to us with what appears to be a short introduction (lines 1–7), quite similar to that of Satan’s speeches. Nevertheless, the voice of both the laments and blues exhibits a strategy of self-introduction, initiating a “Call” to a presupposed responsive listener; examples include the following lines drawn from each corpus:

I’ve got the blues, and it’s all about my honey man  
I’ve got the blues, and it’s all about my honey man  
What makes me love him I sure don’t understand.<sup>18</sup>

Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre  
 minre sylfre sið. (*WL* ll. 1–2a)

[I utter this speech about myself, full of sorrow, my own journey.]

The speakers of Bessie Smith’s “Honey Man Blues” and *The Wife’s Lament* declare their need to communicate private experience, to create a “blues” of personal struggle. In Smith’s stanza, the phrase “I’ve got the blues” demonstrates the usage of one of the most frequently occurring formulas in the corpus, identified as *I got the blues*.<sup>19</sup> The phrase is particularly significant in its multiple functions. The announcement *I got the blues* introduces and asserts the first-person speaker, the “I” whose insistence on revealing her blues—her personal distress *and* her song—simultaneously names both topic and genre. In this self-reflexive capacity, the formula is commonly used, as above, in the opening line of a blues song. The utterance of the highly familiar *I got the blues* immediately establishes an abstract performative stage from which the speaker calls out to an unseen audience and introduces appropriate expectations. *I got the blues* invokes, or “keys,” the interpretative frame of blues performance.<sup>20</sup> Robert Johnson’s employment of the formula in his “Cross Road Blues” emphasizes the idea of communication:

You can run, you can run tell my friend Willie Brown  
 You can run, you can run tell my friend Willie Brown  
 That I got the crossroad blues this momin’, Lord babe, I’m sinkin’ down.<sup>21</sup>

From the isolated location of the crossroad, the speaker asks his listener to transmit his blues—his distress embodied by his song—to his friend Willie Brown. The request highlights active audience participation in the blues of the speaker and performer.

The speaker of the Old English *Wife’s Lament* calls in a similar manner; she announces herself, her “giedd,” and the sorrow that defines both. The lines “Ic Þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre / minre sylfre sið” [I utter this speech about myself, full of sorrow, my own journey.] illustrate a collocation that recurs throughout the laments, in which, Anne L. Klinck states, “words for the self combine with verbs of intention and narration in the introduction of the speaker.”<sup>22</sup> A similar cluster begins *The Seafarer*,

Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,  
 siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum  
 earfoðhwile oft þrowade  
 bitre breostceare. . . (ll. 1–4a)

[I can about myself a truth-speech utter, journeys tell, how I in toil-days  
 often suffered hardship-times bitter breast-care. . .]

and *The Wanderer*,

Of ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce  
 mine ceare cwīpan. (ll. 8–9a)  
 [Often I had to alone speak my cares at each dawn.]

The subject of the laments is the speaker's own self: I speak ("cwīpan," "secgan") about myself ("be me sylfum"). The collocation also appears in *Deor*, "Dæt ic bi me sylfum secgan wille" [That, I, about myself, will say, l. 35], and in *Resignation*, "Ic bi me tylgust / secge þis sarspel ond ymb siþ spræce" [I, about myself, resolutely tell this sad-story and about my journey speak, ll. 96b–97]. The speaker of *Resignation* names the genre of his speech—he tells a "sarspel" [sad-story], while the Wife and the Seafarer create a "giedd," a term that defies modern genre classifications.<sup>23</sup> As in *The Wife's Lament*, the collocation identifies the psychological and emotional topic of the laments: the Seafarer will tell of how he suffered bitter "breostceare" [anxiety in the breast or heart, *Sfr* l. 4a], and the Wanderer must speak of his "ceare" [worry, *Wan* l. 9a]. The "sið" [journey] and "soð" [truth] are further elements of the collocation that, as I discuss in chapter 3, are intimately associated with personal anxiety and its communication.<sup>24</sup>

The introductory cluster of the Old English lament functions in a similar manner to the formula *I got the blues* in creating an intimate yet public place in which the speakers assert themselves not only as subjective narrators but also as subjects. Klinck observes,

In contrast to the epic *ic gefrægn/hyrde* or *we gefrunon/hyrdon*, announcing what is well known and public, the formula which characterizes elegy signals a private revelation. Like the riddle, it emphasizes a personal identity, but with reference to mental and verbal faculties (*mæg, wille; secgan, wrecan*), whereas the characteristic riddle formula introduces its speaker with *ic eom* or *ic wes*, a difference which reflects the elegy's preoccupation with psychology, as opposed to the riddle's with physical being.<sup>25</sup>

Private revelation is also the main preoccupation of blues and is literalized in the formula *I woke up this morning*, a phrase so familiar that it functions as the "Once upon a time" of blues.<sup>26</sup> Typically employed in the first line of a song, *I woke up this morning* anticipates a realization—the lover is gone; the blues have arrived; it's time to leave town:

*Woke up this morning* : found something wrong  
 My loving babe : had caught that train and gone. (McCoC-1)

*I woke up this mornin' feelin' 'round for my shoes*  
 Know by that I got these old walkin' blues.<sup>27</sup>

As in blues, morning is a significant time for personal expression in the laments: the Wanderer utters his worries at dawn (in line 1b), and the Wife suffers “uhtceare” (dawn-anxiety, l. 7b). The explicit use of daybreak as a setting in both poetries emphasizes the state of change and psychological upheaval as well as the recognition of that state. Daybreak also becomes a metaphor for artistic creation, an awakening captured and presented by the act of utterance.

The attractive power of blues and the laments lies within their ability to actively involve the reader–listener in the expression of emotional struggle. The texts do more than convey the message of an unseen singer–poet to a distant audience; they simulate the dynamics of live performance by incorporating call–and–response strategies within the message of the text. Central to the creation of a textual performative space is the internal “I” who directly engages an external “you.” In the process, both poetries exhibit, at a literal level, a paradox within the presentation of an isolated speaker<sup>28</sup>: although the “I” is alone, cut off from society in some ambiguously distant place, he or she not only speaks but does so with the confidence of being heard. This contradiction is fundamental to the premise of the utterance of personal distress; the circumstance of isolation activates and intensifies self-awareness and the need to reach a sympathetic listener. The involvement of the audience in the expression of desire and disappointment is a prime factor contributing to the intensity generated by both blues and the laments.

### Locating “I”

Despite the immediacy of the speakers’ dramatic presence, the “I” of blues and the laments eludes specific identification and location in time and space. Western conceptions of dramatic monologue are frustrated by the speakers’ habit of abruptly switching topics and voice, causing disruption to any sense of thematic development or narrative progression. This constant shifting of perspective strains the modern reader’s notion of structural unity; as a result (especially on paper), the voice of “I” appears splintered and disconcerted. Attempts to locate the speaker as a means of unifying seemingly disjunctive texts have led to debates amongst scholars: while blues listeners argue the issue of autobiography, Old English readers dispute the number of speakers within certain laments.

The structural complexity of *The Wanderer* produces the effect of multiple voices. The poem begins with what seems to be the voice of an external narrator: lines 1–7 introduce the “anhoga” [solitary one, l. 1a] and announce “Swa cwæð eardstapa” [So spoke the earth-stepper, l. 6a]. The Wanderer himself appears to speak lines 8–110, but at line 29b he shifts

from the first-person account of his own hardships and distress to an objective third-person observation of exile: “Wat se þe cunnað / hu slíþen bið sorg to geferan” [He knows who experiences it how cruel sorrow is as a companion, ll. 29b–30]. At line 57, the Wanderer returns to the first-person voice and begins his new subject of the transience of life; but “I” is soon displaced within the meditation on destruction and ruin by “He” of line 88, who reflects upon the “wealsteal” [wall-foundation, l. 88a] and “acwið” [speaks, l. 91b] the following emphatic *ubi sunt* passage of lines 92–110. The narrator’s voice reappears to close the poem with “Swa cwæð snottor on mode” [So spoke the one wise in mind, l. 111a], echoing the introductory phrase of line 6a. Many have pondered, exactly who is speaking what? Are the “eardstapa,” the exile of lines 29b–57, the contemplating wise man of lines 88–110, and the “snottor on mode” all the same speaker, or do they represent different characters?<sup>29</sup>

In his 1965 article, John C. Pope suggests that the lack of “stage directions” to guide the reader through the abrupt vocal shifts in *The Wanderer* is due to the recording of an oral performance “in too nakedly a poetic form.”<sup>30</sup> He opposes previous monologue theories by arguing that the poem features two distinct “dramatic speeches and an epilogue.”<sup>31</sup> The first, lines 1–5 and 8–57, belongs to the Wanderer, who “as a typically loyal retainer, belongs to the conservative aristocratic world in both life and poetry,” and the second, lines 58–110, to the “thinker,” who “has moved into the sphere of Biblical and patristic learning, with some flavor of classical philosophy.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast to Pope’s position, Stanley B. Greenfield believes *The Wanderer* “is best taken as a monologue by an ethopœic speaker whose account suggests a progress in wisdom from futile hope of earthly amelioration to realisation that all *lif is læne*.”<sup>33</sup> The speaker develops from “eardstapa” [earth-stepper, wanderer] in line 6 to “snottor on mode” [one wise in mind] in line 111. In response to Pope, Greenfield argues that the imposition of modern dramatic expectations on Old English poetry constitutes “aesthetic irrelevance.”<sup>34</sup> The differing perspectives within *The Wanderer* reside in one figure whose view turns outward, away from the personal, toward the world.<sup>35</sup> Other writers have variously attempted to unify the voice(s) of *The Wanderer* by, for example, giving the speaker an identity and by re-assessing the poem’s genre.<sup>36</sup>

Shifting viewpoint also characterizes most blues lyrics. Sterling A. Brown writes, “the blues are often repetitious, inconsecutive, with sudden changes from tragedy to farce.”<sup>37</sup> Charley Patton’s “Hammer Blues” illustrates the loose, almost random, structure of the country blues song<sup>38</sup>:

Gonna buy me a hammock [*sic*] : carry it underneath through the trees  
So when the wind blow : the leaves may fall on me

Go on baby : you can have your way  
 Sister : every dog sure must have his day  
 They got me in shackles : I'm wearin' my ball and chain  
 And they got me ready : for that Parchman train  
 I went to the depot : I looked up at the board  
 And the train had left : went steaming on up the road  
 I was way up Red River : calling all night long  
 I think I heard : the Bob Lee boat when she moaned. (Pat 12)

Each stanza appears to start anew, defying narrative sequence and complicating the speaker's perspective: the speaker, in turn, buys himself a hammer, addresses his lover, awaits jail, goes to the train station, addresses his lover again, and travels on the river. Switching between "I" and "you" and "they," along with changes in scene, produces a fragmented experience. This manner of linking seemingly unrelated stanzas is typical of country blues singers of Patton's time and often results in a contradictory collocation within one song of the diverse attitudes and reactions (such as passivity and aggression) found throughout the corpus of blues. This changing landscape of blues texts aligns with Pauline E. Head's description of the Old English *Wanderer*: the *eadstapa*, Head observes, guides the reader through a succession of "tableaux."<sup>39</sup>

Ambiguity arises for blues listeners seeking distinction between the performer and the speaker. Over the years, the debate concerning the autobiographical aspect of the blues I has been fueled by statements such as that of Ralph Ellison: "As a form, blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically."<sup>40</sup> As will be seen in chapter 2, the formulaic compositional structure of blues does indeed allow for the insertion of details that have a personal association and significance for the singer. In fact, many singers name themselves, a feature illustrated by the song titles "Mr. McTell Got the Blues" and "Mr. Sykes Blues." The naming of a town, railroad line or specific train, a particular jail, or person enables the blues singer to personalize a formula. Such details are often treated as a source of information for biographers. For example, Charley Patton's "Tom Rushen Blues" (1929) and "High Sheriff Blues" (1934) are believed to recount his own experience of being arrested. The first three stanzas of Patton's "High Sheriff Blues" are as follows:

When the trial's in Belzoni : it ain't no use to screaming and crying  
 Mr Webb will take you : back to Belzoni jail a-flying  
 Let me tell you folks : just how he treated me  
 And he put me in the cellar : it was dark as it could be  
 It's late one evening : Mr. Purvis was standing around  
 Mr Purvis told Mr Webb : to let poor Charlie down. (Pat 23)

But researchers who attempt to use such songs as sources of biographical information encounter a number of problems, including “the reference to local personalities who could only have been known to Patton’s immediate circle.”<sup>41</sup> “Tom Rushen Blues” and “High Sheriff Blues” are members of a large subgroup of blues songs that treat the theme of prison, and, as such, the actions and events they depict are blues conventions. In other words, regardless of the singer’s actual experience in jail, the song’s presentation of incarceration is formulaic. Thus, blues lyrics offer little help to biographers looking for external facts within the songs.

Ralph Eastman states, “the rawness and immediacy of the best of these [blues] performances tended to create the illusion in the minds of audiences that the performer was expressing his own intensely personal experience directly to them without the filter of ‘Art.’”<sup>42</sup> In the art of blues, however, actual autobiographical details tend to be supplanted by the overarching formulaic “autobiography” of blues. Dennis Jarrett argues that the blues system of formula creates a fictional speaker, a “blues persona,” who embodies “the meaning of the blues”; this persona of the “bluesman,” is “encoded in lexical and psychological traditions which contribute to the genre,” and

though the blues artist purports to be telling us about himself, he does so within the highly stylized, contrived context of music—a means of expression which exaggerates the element of artifice and correspondingly militates against “realism.” We are constantly reminded by the music that we are listening more to a contrivance than a confession.<sup>43</sup>

Even when a blues singer employs original material, the lyrics are shaped in accordance with the conventional formulaic structure, and the singer “subsumes a personal situation to the requirements of a larger personality.”<sup>44</sup> Rod Gruver also argues against the notion of blues as autobiography; instead, he views blues as dramatic monologue in which “[a]ll those unnamed ‘I’s’ . . . are not projections of their creator’s suffering but true literary creations in the drama of the blues.”<sup>45</sup> The answer, then, to the question as to whether a blues song reflects the singer’s actual experience is both yes and no. The worldview of the blues reflects the experience of a particular people with a particular history. Blues, James H. Cone writes,

are not propositional truths *about* black experience. Rather they are the essential ingredients that define the *essence* of the black experience. And to understand them, it is necessary to view the blues as a *state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience*. This is what blues man Henry Townsend, of St. Louis, has in mind when he says: “When I sing the blues I sing the truth.”<sup>46</sup>

Cone goes on to state what has become an axiom amongst listeners: “to sing the blues truthfully, it is necessary to experience the historical realities that created them.”<sup>47</sup> To its original audience, then, the blues “I” is inherently multiple—both individual and communal, private and public—speaking a collective autobiography.

At a further level, the “bluesman” persona is continued outside of the songs by the singers themselves. Barry Lee Pearson, in his study of the life stories told by blues artists, finds that the autobiographical information given by singers during interviews exhibited “similar corresponding topics that appeared to be characteristic of the blues musician’s tale in general.”<sup>48</sup> The persona of the blues “I” is taken on by many singers in the construction of a public self: “Musicians talk about the blues and their own lives as if they were one and the same, using their experience to illustrate a point about the blues or using an example from the blues to make a point about their lives.”<sup>49</sup> Earlier, pre-World War II blues artists often adopted a public persona used by record companies to promote sales: women singers were marketed with royal titles, such as “Queen of the Blues” and “Empress of the Blues.” A number of male singers extended the demonic aspects of their songs to their public self; a well-known example is the legend that Robert Johnson received his musical expertise from the devil at the crossroad.<sup>50</sup> Tommy Johnson claimed the same story, and Peetie Wheatstraw marketed himself as “The Devil’s Son-in-Law.”

Blues poetry embraces yet rejects its own creator. Although dependent on the singer for its existence, the blues text is reluctant to promote the existence of its singer as an individual: autobiographical insertion is welcomed but diffused in its service to the overriding formulaic structure. Although the identity of a singer like Robert Johnson is distinguished on record by his voice and playing style, the “I” of “Cross Road Blues” is not Johnson, regardless of how uniquely and convincingly he claims that “I” as his own; it remains the “I” of the blues tradition.

In the light of blues, the “I” of the Old English lament can be seen as a persona constructed through formula to communicate with an audience that shares the poet’s worldview. The inherent performative strategies of the laments suggest that, for their initial audience, the “autobiography” of each speaker was drawn from communal experience, and, through its presentation, the group actively shared figurative scenes of life, various and familiar. The attempt to impose logic and order on the lament or the blues text by reading intellectual progression and pinning down speakers, internally or externally, reveals an uneasy relationship between oral lyric and audience members who read first and listen second. The harmony of these

poetries, within which lies their “Truth,” challenges the boundaries that circumscribe the western literary experience.

### Locating Experience

The shifting viewpoint of the laments, and blues, forces the modern reader to make conceptual adjustments without the aid of external information. In her study of *The Wanderer*, Pauline E. Head explains why the poem’s fragmentary structure causes confusion:

The reader of *The Wanderer* is “too close” to the characters who describe their visions; the poem offers no vantage point far enough away from the scenes to allow a wider, more inclusive, view. Like the reader of the Junius drawings, this reader must provide the narrative links, binding the separate scenes to each other and to the rest of the poem.<sup>51</sup>

A member of the poem’s original audience, however, *did* have a “vantage point,” that being his or her own cultural and historical frame of reference. Cultural knowledge and experience enable “narrative links” between scenes as the listener intuitively draws from the meta-narrative of tradition and life. The process is evident in the relationship between the laments of *Christ and Satan* and the larger narrative poem that contains them. The modern reader, like the poem’s Anglo-Saxon reader, encounters the lament with background knowledge of Christianity. As a result, the anti-linear, emotive speeches can be understood; this religious and literary context identifies and locates the speaker, explains allusions such as those to his former home and, moreover, subjects the speaker and his speech to moral judgment. In this case, the experience of the text, for both the eleventh- and the twenty-first-century reader emerges from and is dictated by the religious framework within which the text has been interpolated.

The mystery of the Exeter laments arises with their displacement from an external narrative.<sup>52</sup> Our distance from their original cultural context is emphasized by the series of allusions found in the poem *Deor*. Without their stories, the references to mytho-historical figures are meaningless. But the poem’s obscurity does not hinder the outsider’s involvement in the text; the allusions work beyond their historical specificity to engage all audiences emotionally. In content and technique, *Deor* is strikingly similar to Robert Johnson’s “Come On In My Kitchen.” Two stanzas of each are presented here so that the songs might talk to each other about how the poet engages his unseen and various audiences. Together, the texts demonstrate how the quality of the call-and-response dynamic is determined by audience knowledge.

*Deor* (ll. 8–17)

Beadohilde ne wæs hyre broþra deap  
 on sefan swa sar swa hyre sylfre þing  
 þæt heo gearolice ongieten hæfde  
 þæt heo eacen wæs; æfre ne meahte  
 þriste geþencan, hu ymb þæt sceolde.  
 þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

We þæt Mæðhilde monge gefrugnon  
 wurdon grundlease Geates frige,  
 þæt hi seo sorglugu slæp ealle binom.  
 þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

[To Beadohild the death of her brothers was not so painful in mind as her own situation, that she had clearly perceived she was pregnant; she was never able to confidently think how she should act about that.

That passed away, so may this.

Many of us have heard that about Mæthild: the Geat's desire became boundless so that this sorrow-love took all sleep from them.

That passed away, so may this.]

“Come On In My Kitchen” (take 2,  
 stz.2–3)

When a woman get in trouble  
 everbody throw her down  
 Lookin' for your good friend none  
 can be found  
 You better come on in my kitchen it's  
 goin' to be rainin' outdoors.

Ah, the woman I love took from  
 my best friend  
 Some joker got lucky stole her  
 back again  
 You better come on in my kitchen it's  
 goin' to be rainin' outdoors.

The stanzaic statements of both poems—distilled, concise, compact, and portable—glimpse other stories. Their very precision presupposes a knowledgeable audience, one that brings specific outside experience to the text. In *Deor*, legend provides us with the story behind Beadohild: Weland raped Beadohild in revenge against her father Niðhad.<sup>53</sup> This information gives a past and future to the moment of the stanza capturing Beadohild's distress; the enlightened listener can dip into legend for some consolation that her unborn child will become the hero Widia. In the next stanza, *Deor*'s assumption that “monge gefrugnon” [many have heard], unfortunately, excludes modern readers who have *not* been informed of the background story and cannot even be sure as to whether “Mæthild” is even a proper name.<sup>54</sup> The remainder of the stanza gives us little help, leaving what appears to be a residual of a lost story, provocative in its lexicon—“grundlease” [boundless], “frige” [desire], “sorglufu” [sorrow-love].<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, Johnson's "Come On In My Kitchen" exhibits full-line formulas that have developed into ready-made stanzas.<sup>56</sup> Although Johnson's subjects are not noble, legendary, or even individualized, these formulaic stanzas emerge from a sociohistorical narrative no less significant to his audience than that of legend and epic to Deor's listeners. In its recognition of the formulaic nature of blues, today's second audience may take for granted the precise description of rather complex social interactions and hear the stanzas as mere generic markers of hardship. Seemingly complete, the stanzas demand extrapolation: the all-too-common scenario of social ostracization of a woman in trouble (whatever trouble that may be) is not judged but is left open to consideration, and the devastating consequences for the woman is likewise unspoken. The answers to such questions are left to Johnson's original audience who knew too well the ramifications of the woman's plight. In the next stanza, the concise description of the love triangle is humorous in its matter-of-factness, a quality often found in blues. But the humor of the written text can be, and often is, bent into pain through the singer's presentation of the lines. The razor-edged irony of losing both friend and lover goes unaddressed within the text.

The allusions of *Deor* and "Kitchen" are sharpened with social implications known only to the original audience; external knowledge enriches and shapes the interaction between poet, text, and informed audience.<sup>57</sup> Lack of information diffuses the fullness of this relationship, but the effectiveness of Johnson's and Deor's stanzas is not entirely reliant upon outside sources. Each allusion prioritizes internal psychological and emotional distress over external narrative detail, and social struggle emerges as the primary thematic link between the stanzas. Although any particular social significance initial audiences might have applied to Beadohild is lost to us, her distress in itself remains clear. Similarly, even beyond its original context, "Kitchen" conveys the thematic link of betrayal, in the form of fair-weather friends and unfaithful lovers, and the overriding distress of aloneness. In both texts, the allusions to human struggle foreground disruption and anxiety. The refusal to elaborate upon narrative details serves to intensify the sense of upheaval and turmoil, regardless of the audience's degree of knowledge. In this respect, the lament and the blues text have the ability to connect with further, less experienced audiences.

The lyrics of *Deor* and "Kitchen" are distinctive within their respective corpora in the use of refrain, a feature that appears elsewhere in Old English poetry only in the lament *Wulf and Eadwacer* and rarely in country blues. The unusualness of the refrain draws attention to the poet and his attitude toward the text as a creative performative piece: Deor and Johnson use the refrain to mark the poems as theirs and to assert themselves as artists. Significantly, the "I" of *Deor* names himself and identifies his vocation as

*scop*—a *scop* in need of a job. In Johnson's work, the refrain is indicative of his treatment of blues as a fully developed art form. As a device of self-promotion, the refrain sets off the stanzas like items in a catalogue, presenting a sampler of the poet's compositional and performance abilities, as well as a brochure of further repertoire: I can also tell the story of Beadohild. Trouble? I can sing about trouble.

Within the text, the refrain of each song illuminates the subtle mechanisms of the laments and the blues in general. The refrain functions as a kind of threshold over which the audience crosses from one allusion to the next. As both border and bridge, it separates yet connects each self-contained fragment, effectively de-historicizing the characters by linking their suffering not only to each other but also, more importantly, to the listener. In both texts, the refrain is conscious of its intermediary position: Deor's "Ðæs ofer-eode, þisses swa mæg" [That passed over, so may this] differentiates and links "That" and "This."<sup>58</sup> Johnson's "You better come on in my kitchen, it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors" distinguishes itself as an inside space apart from the outside world of the stanzas. The kitchen works literally and metaphorically as shelter from hostile weather and society. Deor's optimism is erected against the emotional upheaval of the stanzas on either side. Between the emotional chaos of the stanzas, the refrain offers pause and shelter, beckoning the listener-reader to come in. The consolation of the refrain attempts to impose order on the text and provides structural stability to the poem as a whole. But neither refrain promises stability or permanence in itself; rather, they emphasize the cyclical nature of the poems—and of life. Forever open, the songs refuse to conclude, to stabilize, to resolve.

The open-endedness of the refrain speaks to the continual intertextual discourse that occurs amongst all blues songs and all laments. Although the external settings in which the texts originated are unavailable to the second audience, exposure to the vast, extant corpus of blues increases the listener's vision as she or he gains familiarity with the genre's figurative landscape and the various, often conflicting, views of the blues "I." Although the laments exist in small number, further appearances of the lamenting "I" within the world of other poems help to extend our view of the persona and the interior terrain of the lament. This process makes clear that the scope and vitality of the lament and the blues song reach beyond their mechanical borders, connecting, at various levels, with many audiences. Both poetics compensate for cultural inexperience in their treatment of the universal—the expression of desire, fear, sorrow, and hope.

Through the direct speech of the persona "I," the lyrics of blues and the Old English laments similarly construct a site in which the singer-poet and audience interact. The texts invoke a performance setting internally by creating a call-and-response dynamic with the use of special formulaic

phrases and clusters. The inherent performativity of the Old English lament strongly suggests that this poetic form was performed before an audience.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, the confusion the lament creates for modern readers illuminates the often unacknowledged experiential divide between blues texts and members of their second audience. All audiences feel the vitality of the lyrics, but the essence of the interaction between the artist and reader–listener depends upon historical and cultural proximity to the text. In short, the first audience hears the “I” as “we,” while the second audience hears the “I” as “they.” This difference in reception influences how each approaches the performative space created by the text: the first uses the site, participating directly in the expression of life; the second admires it, appreciating its method and artistry. Regardless of approach, the lament and the blues song both succeed in uniting singer, speaker, and audience in the creation of a blues of emotional struggle.

## CHAPTER 2

### RECORDING THE FORMULA

*Oral poetry, it may be safely said, is composed entirely of formulas, large and small, while lettered poetry is never formulaic. . . .*

—Magoun, “Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry”

So began the battle of the Oral Formula in the field of Old English poetry. Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord’s oral-formulaic theory, which applied the Yugoslav compositional technique to the texts of classical epics, served as a basis for Francis P. Magoun’s study of Old English narrative poetry. In his 1953 article, “Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry,” Magoun presented the formulaic half-lines of the opening of *Beowulf* as evidence of the poem’s oral composition. The article initiated a new scientific approach to the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral bard and was followed by a vast number of studies, which viewed the text of Old English narrative poems, such as *Beowulf*, as a record of an extempore performance of a poet trained in the use of traditional formulas to rapidly create an epic.<sup>1</sup>

The oral-formulaic approach to Old English poetry has been a challenging one: the very definition of “formula,” its boundaries, and the statistical methodology have been debated and adjusted on many occasions to accommodate the peculiar qualities—meter and alliteration—of Old English poetry.<sup>2</sup> Along the way, a number of issues surfaced. How do we understand “originality” and “artistry” within a formulaic structure?<sup>3</sup> How is the presence of learned—literary, Latin, and Christian—influence on these texts explained?<sup>4</sup> Above all, what is the relationship between these supposed oral poems and their written context?<sup>5</sup> In 1966, Larry D. Benson turned the tables on the proponents of Old English oral composition with his article “The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry,” in which he effectively showed that “poems which we can be sure were not orally composed use formulas as frequently and sometimes more frequently

than supposedly oral compositions such as *Beowulf* or the poems of Cynewulf.<sup>6</sup> To date, all we know for certain is that Old English poetry is formulaic. The assumption that *Beowulf*, or any other poem, was orally composed is forever complicated by the fact that it comes to us in written form.

While Old English scholars were engaged in debate during the 1950s and 1960s, the Parry–Lord oral–formulaic theory was invigorating the study of traditional poetry of other types and cultures. In a 1961 review of Lord’s *The Singer of Tales*, D.K. Wilgus acknowledges the value of the oral–formulaic approach for the ballad scholar but cautions that “a literal application of the ‘oral theory’ to ballad tradition may be dangerous.”<sup>7</sup> Ballads, with their “rigid stanzas set to rounded melodies,” differ from the epic. Wilgus concludes, however, that the “investigator may well find closer analogues in blues and even blues ballads.”<sup>8</sup> Eventually, with the resurgence of traditional music during the American folk revival, the oral poetry of country blues did become an object of study.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, although blues was still a living tradition, researchers of blues lyric composition relied, by and large, on the commercial recordings produced in the 1920s and 1930s as their texts.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the object of study was not the ephemeral song of a live performance context but that produced in an anomalous situation of the recording studio and bound within a mechanical medium. In this respect, the blues record is analogous to the Old English manuscript in capturing, stabilizing, and transmitting a formulaic poetry not only to us, members of the second audience, but also to the singers and listeners of the original audience.

Before the appearance of records, blues hits were published as sheet music. In 1926, Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson observed, “When the first published blues appeared, the problem for the student of Negro song began to become complicated. It is no longer possible to speak with certainty of the folk blues, so entangled are the relations between them and the formal compositions.”<sup>11</sup> For us today, the role of the fixed, material document in the compositional process continues to compound the already complex notion of orality. Moreover, Ruth Finnegan has pointed out that all three aspects that mark the “orality of a poem—its composition, transmission, and performance—differ from culture to culture, from genre to genre.”<sup>12</sup> The study of oral poetry concentrates on the “text,” a fixed record of words researchers identify as “the song”<sup>13</sup>; this process of stabilization and analysis contradicts the inherent ephemeral and revisionary nature of the oral performance. What we often forget, Finnegan states, is that an oral poem differs from a literary poem in that “a piece of oral literature, to reach its full actualisation, *must be performed*. The text alone cannot constitute the oral poem.”<sup>14</sup> She stresses that the performance aspect “lies at the heart of the whole concept of oral literature.”<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, scholars interested in the “orality” of medieval poetry have turned their attention away from composition and toward performance and the “vocality” of the texts, shifting from poet to audience.<sup>16</sup> This approach explores, as Andy Orchard puts it, the formula “as a communal vehicle for interpretation.”<sup>17</sup> As seen in chapter 1, the Old English *Deor* and Robert Johnson’s “Come On In My Kitchen” can be viewed as closed and self-referential “literary” works in their autonomous ability to communicate emotional struggle apart from their original context<sup>18</sup>; but the understanding of their full meaning is ultimately dependent upon extratextual knowledge, as with most verbal discourse: “Conventional utterances appeal for their meaning to shared experiences and interpretations, that is, to a common intuition based on shared commonsense knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> The focus on voice in Old English “oral-derived”<sup>20</sup> texts returns to the formula as the mode of expression and the intersection of understanding between singer and audience. In both actual performance and record (written or audio), the communicative role of the formula is central to the effectiveness of the verbal text. The “formulaic style,” then, Paul Zumthor explains,

can be described as a discursive and intertextual strategy: it inserts and integrates into the unfolding discourse rhythmic and linguistic fragments borrowed from other preexisting messages that in principle belong to the same genre, sending the listener back to a familiar semantic universe by making the fragments functional within their exposition.<sup>21</sup>

While Zumthor is concerned here specifically with the narrative discourse of the epic, his observation is especially applicable to the antinarrative, fragmented lyrics of the Old English laments and blues. As discussed in chapter 1, the vocality of these genres both enhances and depends upon performance. The first-person speaker intensifies the communicative aspect of both poetries, a process that seeks to connect the physically separated poet and audience.

Blues recordings offer a way of viewing the communicative role of the formula in the manuscript circumstance of the Old English laments: the formulaic composition of both poetries indicate a history of oral performance, but the texts of both are fixed within a mechanical medium—the performance is delayed until a reader–listener activates the text. The work of blues artist Robert Johnson has been chosen as the subject of my case study because Johnson’s work emerged late in the history of blues recording, allowing his songs to be seen as the culmination of the blues tradition of formulaic composition. He recorded sixteen titles for the American Record Company’s Vocalion label in November 1936.<sup>22</sup> His

records sold well enough (especially the first issue, “Terraplane Blues”) that Johnson was called back to record thirteen more songs in June 1937.<sup>23</sup> His vocal and instrumental style is representative of the Mississippi Delta region, and his work exhibits the influence of Delta singers who recorded around 1930, such as Son House, Tommy Johnson, and Skip James. In addition, the early 1920s recordings of the “classic” women blues singers and those of nonlocal male blues singers (Leroy Carr, e.g.) also had significant influence on Johnson’s art. Luc Sante views Johnson’s recordings “as a sort of historical funnel (reflecting what went on in blues before him and anticipating much that would happen [in popular music] after his death).”<sup>24</sup> John Hammond, a record producer who was significant in introducing black artists and their music to white audiences, recruited Robert Johnson to perform at the famous “Spirituals to Swing” concert held at Carnegie Hall in 1938<sup>25</sup>; unfortunately, Johnson died three months before the event. Thus, in his lifetime, Johnson’s work caught the attention of a second audience of blues; in this, Johnson is a pivotal figure in the transmission of blues—his work, indeed, influenced later musicians such as Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, and the Rolling Stones.<sup>26</sup>

This case study first examines what was expected of musicians in the recording context in order to demonstrate how romanticized ideas of oral poetry and poets become quickly undermined in a studio situation. Then, the blues formula, which develops as a result of the recording process, is described and, finally, analyzed in two takes of each of six songs (twelve recordings in all) recorded by Robert Johnson during the 1936 session. The analysis shows how Johnson worked with the poetic conventions he received from older musicians through both personal contact and recordings. His reliance on established formulas is especially pronounced in his lyric revisions made under pressure during the recording session. Furthermore, the compositional refinement and aesthetic stylistics that characterize his lyrics (and music) reflect Johnson’s consciousness of the tradition he was revising.

## **Case Study: Twelve Recordings of Robert Johnson**

### ***The Recording Context***

Like other blues singers, Johnson would have found the experience of recording to be unusually demanding in relation to more typical performance settings.<sup>27</sup> To begin with, the auditioning singer needed “original” material. H.C. Speir, a music store owner who worked as a talent scout during the race record years, told David Evans that potential recording artists were required to have “at least four different original songs. By *original* it was meant

that none of the singer's four songs could show the influence of anything recorded or published previously."<sup>28</sup> However, the recording officials' conception of originality often differed from that of the singer. For many singers, the reuse of the same tune with different lyrics constituted a new song, but such a practice might have been unacceptable to the company.<sup>29</sup> In practice, nevertheless, the attitude of the recording companies was far more relaxed, and direct influence is often quite obvious. For instance, Johnson's "32-20 Blues" borrows heavily from Skip James's "22-20 Blues," as does his "Sweet Home Chicago" from Charlie McCoy's "Baltimore Blues." Moreover, companies had no qualms about re-releasing a hit sung by an artist contracted to another company. Within a year, Albert Hunter's "Down Hearted Blues," released by Paramount in 1922, was covered by Bessie Smith for Paramount and again by Lucille Hegamin on the Cameo label.

Once selected to record, the artist sometimes had to endure the discomfort of travel to an unfamiliar city (both of Johnson's sessions took place in Texas) and long waits in unpleasant conditions, such as excessive summer heat.<sup>30</sup> The novice had to learn to sing into a microphone, which meant body movement was restricted for long periods of time. Perhaps most disconcerting for the country blues singer was having to work without immediate audience feedback.<sup>31</sup>

The company also exercised censorship over the singer's material, disallowing songs deemed obscene, social protest, or detrimental to the company's image.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the corpus of recorded blues does not reflect any subject matter (sexual or political) that may have been expressed overtly during live performances. Instead, sexual content is coded within metaphor systems, which can reach the level of elaborate *double entendre*, especially notable in the blues of female singers; a prime example is Victoria Spivey's "My Handy Man," which celebrates the abilities of her talented assistant.<sup>33</sup> In such songs, sexual desire is presented with self-confidence and humor. Johnson's bestseller "Terraplane Blues" employs an extended automobile metaphor to express sexual desire. It appears that censorship actually enhanced Signifyin(g)—verbal play—in recorded blues.<sup>34</sup>

The recording context complicates the notion of spontaneous composition of oral poetry. While improvisation was indeed a performance factor in typical informal settings, singers were expected to arrive at the recording session with prepared and well-rehearsed material.<sup>35</sup> Counter to the romanticized idea of illiterate oral poets, many blues singers used writing during the process of composition, and some even relied on written texts while recording<sup>36</sup>: "Singers like Big Bill Broonzy, Leroy Carr and Tampa Red *wrote* their blues."<sup>37</sup> But, as Michael Taft explains, these texts were "disposable" in that their purpose was one of memorization not preservation; once in the studio, the lyrics were "as changeable and fleeting as an orally composed piece."<sup>38</sup>

Although it is uncertain whether Robert Johnson used writing as a compositional aid,<sup>39</sup> commentators of his work especially note his “polished” recording performances. This observation sometimes arises in response to the refined quality of his lyrics; Peter Guralnick writes,

There is no end of quoting and no end of reading into [Johnson’s] lyrics, but unlike other equally eloquent blues, this is not random folk art, hit or miss, but rather carefully selected and honed detail, carefully considered and achieved effect.<sup>40</sup>

In comparison to the rather loose structure of the earlier recordings of his Delta mentors,<sup>41</sup> Johnson’s lyrics exhibit greater thematic cohesion and attention to structural devices, such as refrain.<sup>42</sup> Johnson’s “polish” is also seen in his ability to duplicate lyrics from take to take, evidence of extensive rehearsal. Interestingly, according to Taft, “even in non-recording contexts, Johnson shunned spontaneous versification”: David “Honeyboy” Edwards said of Johnson, “He didn’t change his numbers much. Just like he’d play his first number he recorded, he’d play it the same way all the time.”<sup>43</sup>

It is indeed true that Johnson duplicated his lyrics from one take to the next, but the practice is consistent only in the 1937 session.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, the takes of his first session clearly exhibit revision, including the addition of stanzas, reorganization of stanzas, and even the reworking of songs as a whole. This is not to suggest that Johnson’s repertoire was less developed in 1936<sup>45</sup>; rather, I propose that he arrived at the studio with prepared material, but during the course of recording, decisions were made either by him or the company officials to make alterations. It is important to note here that in the case of the ARC matrix numbers, the take numbers do not necessarily indicate the actual recording sequence but rather the preference of producer Don Law as to which version was to be released.<sup>46</sup> Even though it is close to impossible to ascertain which version of a song was performed first, the fact remains that a spontaneous revision process did occur. The reasons for revision can only remain speculative, but the difference between the takes of the 1936 session bear witness not only to Johnson’s reliance on and ability to use a tradition of formulaic composition under pressure but also to his conscious innovation within that tradition.

### ***The Blues Formula***

The impact of recording on the composition of blues lyrics was significant; Michael Taft explains,

Because of the lack of visual contact with an audience, the two-hundred second time-limit on the songs, and the pressure by record company officials

for ever new and innovative material, the lyrics of the race record blues became a highly complex and compact form of song in this new performance environment, relying heavily on short, aphoristic pronouncements and concise poetic imagery.<sup>47</sup>

The phenomenon of recording was significant in the stabilization of those blues formulas most effective in negotiating the physical distance between the singer and audience, and record sales were a powerful indicator of that effectiveness.

Early commentators of blues noticed the recurrence of certain phrases but did not discuss them as structural elements.<sup>48</sup> Later, while some writers identified the formulaic unit of blues lyrics as the line and even the stanza,<sup>49</sup> scholars such as Jeff Todd Titon, Michael Taft, and John Barnie recognized the half-line as the fundamental structural component of the blues lyric. According to Taft, the half-line consists of “at least one complete semantic predication,” which can take the form of a simple sentence and may “also take the form of an adverbial, adjectival, prepositional, or noun phrase.”<sup>50</sup> As a general rule, a blues line holds two half-lines, separated by a caesura, and “comprises at least one complete thought without any enjambment from one line to the next.”<sup>51</sup> The half-line is not constrained by metrical demands but is positioned within the line according to the general requirement of end-rhyme.<sup>52</sup>

Taft distinguishes between two main types of blues formulas: the non-rhyming x-formula opens the line, and the rhyming r-formula closes the line.<sup>53</sup> The x-formula is by far the more flexible of the two with regard to syntactical and lexical variations. By comparison, the requirement of end-rhyme constrains the r-formula. The two types are not interchangeable. Taft states that “about two-thirds of any given blues song can be found to exist in the lyrics of other songs in the corpus under analysis.”<sup>54</sup>

An analysis of the following couplet from Robert Johnson’s “Ramblin’ On My Mind” demonstrates the use of blues formulas and some theoretical considerations in the identification of these formulas:

*Runnin’ down to the station catch the first mail train I see  
I got the blues ’bout Miss So-and-So and the child got the blues about me*<sup>55</sup>

All four half-lines are formulaic. The first—*Runnin’ down to the station*—is an x-formula, which occurs elsewhere in the lyrics of other blues singers in forms such as *I’m going down to the station*, *Went to the station*, *I went to the station*, and *I went to the depot*. As with most, this formula can withstand variations in verb tense (going, went) and a certain degree of verb substitution (running, going, walked). The substitution of “depot” for “station” is

a demonstration of “slot-filling.”<sup>56</sup> At a deeper semantic level, the x-formula *I go to the station* is related to the major x-formula family represented as *I go to some place*. The identification of formula boundaries depends on the analyst who must decide what part of the formula is essential to its meaning: “the formula is, in actuality, a theoretical construction, rather than a well-defined, predetermined structural entity.”<sup>57</sup> If the analyst wishes to broaden the limits of *I go to the station*, the station can become any location—a building, a town, a natural landmark such as a mountain or river, or an unspecified “home,” as in the following examples<sup>58</sup>:

*I'm going to the big house* : and I don't even care. (JamJ-3)

*I'm going to Chattanooga* : get my hambone fixed. (BirB-3)

*I'm going to the river* : going to carry my rocking chair. (JefB-2)

*I'm going home* : I'm going to settle down. (Rain-5)

Taft observes,

With every change in the semantic, syntactic, or lexical structure of a phrase, no matter how slight, there is a change in meaning. The formula, therefore, must not be perceived as having one exact meaning, but as having a more general meaning which can be modified, embellished, or otherwise altered. What must remain constant is the “essence” of the formula, however that is to be defined.<sup>59</sup>

It is the analysis that determines to what degree semantic, syntactic, and lexical variation is allowed to change the *meaning* of a phrase before it becomes a member of a different formula.

For instance, the “essence” of the next half-line of Johnson’s couplet—*catch the first mail train I see*—is the idea of catching a train, which can be found in blues lyrics expressed in both the x- and r-positions:

I'll catch the Southern : and she'll take the Sante Fe. (JamS-3)

I'm going to catch me a freight train : and I'm going to be long long gone. (Clal-2)

Keep the blues : I'll catch that train and ride. (Hurt-6)

I'm going down to the station : catch that West Cannonball. (Weld-3)

But Johnson has used the essence of catching a train specifically in the r-position with the rhyme-word “see.” Although there are many r-position phrases ending in see,<sup>60</sup> there are none (in Taft’s corpus) describing the action or intention of catching a train. However, there are two phrases,

ending in “see,” which embody the broader idea of catching a moving object:

I’m going to hit this old highway : *catch the fastest thing I see*. (WasbS-27)  
 Going to stand right here : *catch the first old gal I see*. (DickT-1)

For the purposes of my analysis, these two half-lines can be considered analogues for Johnson’s half-line *catch the first mail train I see*: all use the word “catch,” qualify the moving object as being the “first” or the “fastest,” and end with the rhyme word “see.” Thus, together, the three phrases are members of an r-formula, albeit one of low frequency.

In the closing line of Johnson’s couplet, *I got the blues ’bout Miss So-and-So* is a version of the major x-formula *I have the blues*. Examples of some analogues include

*I’ve got the blues so bad* : that it hurts my tongue to talk. (Tamp-9)  
*I’ve got the blues today* : like I never had before. (McFa-1)  
*I got the railroad blues bad* : the boxcars on my mind. (JonE-1)  
*I got the Dallas blues* : and the Main Street heart disease. (JonM-19)

The adjectival modification of “blues” in the last two examples (“railroad” and “Dallas”) illustrates the most common type of variation in this formula. The addition of adjectival and adverbial elements allows the singer to embellish and personalize basic formulas.

The final r-formula, *and the child got the blues about me*, occurs elsewhere within the same collocation as Johnson’s line. Barefoot Bill’s “My Crime Blues” (1929) opens with the following couplet:

*I got the blues for my baby* : *she got the blues for I say me*  
 But I can’t see my baby : and she can’t see me. (Bare-1)

The two half-lines are linked also in Charley Jordan’s “Big Four Blues”:

*I’ve got the blues for my baby* : *my babe got the blues for me*  
 For she went and caught that Big Four : she beat it back to Tennessee.  
 (JorC-3)

Both examples are from songs recorded before 1931, five years before Johnson’s “Ramblin’ On My Mind,” demonstrating the development and transmission of conjoined half-line formulas. The aesthetic balance of the two phrases probably influenced the stabilization of the line; for Johnson’s contemporary audience, the x-formula *I got the blues ’bout Miss So-and-So* automatically anticipates some version of *she got the blues for me*. Johnson innovates the convention with the use of “Miss So-and-So”; although this

generic name appears often in blues lyrics, and usually in a derogatory sense, Johnson's usage is atypical in its affection.<sup>61</sup>

The preceding analysis of Johnson's stanza identified two major x-formulas: *I go to some place* and *I got the blues*. In his study, Taft lists and examines the twenty most frequently occurring formulas in his corpus of blues lyrics.<sup>62</sup> Significantly, these major formulas generate the main themes of recorded blues. The top ten x-formulas and the top ten r-formulas are listed here. The accompanying illustrative manifestations demonstrate possible lexical and syntactical variations. Furthermore, the major formulas are grouped according to the theme to which each contributes: movement/travel, love, anxiety/sorrow, and other (communication and revelation).<sup>63</sup>

### Major X-Formulas

#### **Movement / Travel**

1. *I go to some place*<sup>64</sup>

*Lord I'm going back down south* : man where the weather suits my clothes.  
(WillS-7)

*Now I'm going to Brownsville* : take that right-hand road. (Este-1)

*I'm going back to Tampa* : just to kill my worried mind. (Blak-6)

2. *I leave (some place)*<sup>65</sup>

*I'm leaving here* : ain't coming back till fall. (Stov-1)

*Now when I left Chicago* : I left on that G and M. (Este-25)

*I'm leaving town* : crying won't make me stay. (JefB-19)

#### **Love**

3. *I love you*

*I love you pretty mama* : believe me it ain't no lie. (Blak-1)

*The man I love* : had done left town. (Rain-5)

*I know you love me* : daddy it's understood. (ThoHo-4)

4. *I have a woman*

*Well now I have a woman* : I try to treat her right. (Hogg-1)

*And that man had my woman* : Lord and the blues had me. (ReedW-1)

*Got a man* : way down in Texas way. (JonM-3)

5. *I quit my woman*

*Well I'm going to leave you* : I ain't going to sing no more. (CarrL-12)

*I left my baby* : standing in the doorway crying. (JohLe-1)

*My good girl done quit me* : sure have got to go. (Scha-2)

6. *I treat you good/bad*

*If I mistreat you mama* : I sure don't mean no harm. (MooP-2)

*You treat me mean mama* : says that's your last. (Howe-1)

*She treats me so cold sometimes* : I think she got somebody else. (JohLo-19)

**Anxiety/sorrow**

7. *I got the blues*

*Got the blues* : can't be satisfied. (Hurt-6)

*Got the backwood blues* : for the folks I left down home. (SmiC-23)

*I got the worried blues* : Lord I'm feeling bad. (ThoHo-8)

8. *I worry*

*I'm worried all the time* : can't keep you off my mind. (Blak-13)

*I have been worrying all day mama* : and could hardly sleep last night.  
(MontE-3)

*Yes I worry* : because she won't treat me kind. (Gill-4)

**Other: communication**

9. *I tell you*

*I'm going to tell you* : baby tell you now. (Wilk-8)

*Mama told me* : daddy told me too. (OweM-2)

*You tell me you've had troubles* : and worry all your life. (JohLo-11)

**Other: revelation**

10. *I woke up (this morning)*

*I woke up this morning* : with traveling on my mind. (JorL-4)

*Woke up early this morning* : blues around my bed. (Stev-1)

*Got up the morning* : my good gal was gone. (WeaC-2)

**Major R-formulas**

**Movement/travel**

1. *everywhere I go*

I'm going to sing this old song : *everywhere I go*. (KeE-1)

I didn't have a friend : *and no place to go*. (SmiB-29)

People talk : *I can hear them whisper everywhere I go*. (Whij-2)

2. *I'm going back home*

Crying Lord I wonder : *will I ever get back home.* (JohTo-1)

Because I got a letter this morning : *my baby was coming back home.*  
(ThoR-13)

You see my Mary : *tell her to hurry home.* (McCoJ-5)

3. *I'm leaving town*

I've got a mind to ramble : *mind to leave this town.* (BlaAL-1)

Look out your back door : *see me leave this town.* (CollS-12)

I ain't seen my woman : *since she leave this town.* (UnkA-10)

**Love**4. *I treat you right*

Says I got a hard-hearted woman : *and she don't know how to treat me right.*  
(ArnK-36)

You treated me wrong : *I treated you right.* (SmiB-7)

Went out with you baby : *trying to treat you right.* (McTW-35)

5. *I will be gone*<sup>66</sup>

You going to call me babe : *and I'll be gone.* (BigB-7)

Now folks if you see my gal : *tell her that I'm gone.* (DorsT-6)

I ain't had no loving : *since my Louise been gone.* (Temp-5)

**Anxiety/sorrow**6. *I got the blues*

I been broke baby : *and I got these broke man blues.* (Palm-1)

That's the reason why : *mama's got the lost wandering blues.* (Rain-9)

But now she's gone : *and I got those red-hot blues.* (Weld-10)

7. *I cry*

And after I'm gone : *please don't hang your head and cry.* (Whea-20)

I can't count the times : *I stoled away and cried.* (JeFB-22)

And I'm a motherless child : *and I just can't keep from crying.* (CollC-2)

8. *what am I going to do*

Oh Lordy mama : *what am I to do.* (AleT-7)

I'm sorry you heard : *I don't know what to do.* (GreLi-10)

And winter is coming : *wonder what the poor people are going to do.*  
(DaviW-3)

9. *it won't be long*<sup>67</sup>

My lover's ghost has got me : *and I know my time won't be long.*  
(JohLo-28)

One of these mornings : *mama and it won't be long.* (Stok-15)

I'm going away babe : *and it won't be long.* (ThoH-12)

10. *some thing is on my mind*

I woke up this morning : *with traveling on my mind.* (JorL-4)

I'm standing in Chicago mama : *New Orleans on my mind.* (WillJ-3)

I'm worried about my baby : *she's on my mind.* (CamG-1)

Of the nature of the blues formula, Taft states, "there is a paradox of constraint and of freedom in blues composition; the singer worked within the constraints of formulaic structure, but his choice of formulaic manifestations was almost infinitely flexible."<sup>68</sup> Blues singers exercised a great deal of freedom in the employment of what Taft terms "extraformulaic elements." For example, the "paralinguistic utterance" is heard as a moan or hum, often preceding a half-line as in Johnson's "*Mmmm* babe, I may be right or wrong." On paper, such an utterance might be interpreted as a filler, employed primarily for aesthetic purposes rather than meaning, but, when heard, a moan or hum can evoke an emotive intensity unachievable with words. As a replacement for the x-formula, the moan acts as "a kind of emotional preparation for the r-formula."<sup>69</sup> Further, "exclamatory elements," such as "well," "Lord," and "yeah," are another common type of embellishment.<sup>70</sup> The "ooo well well" of Peetie Wheatstraw's songs became the signature feature of his work: "She tells me that she loves me : ooo well well but she has changed her mind" (Whea-36). The "vocatory element" addresses the subject of the song as "woman," "baby," or "papa" and so on<sup>71</sup>: "Now baby please don't go" (WillJ-6). Within the formulaic structure of blues, the singer has considerable choice in lexical substitution and extraformulaic insertion with which to customize formulas.

I turn now to six songs of Robert Johnson, examined in the order they were recorded on Monday, November 23, 1936: "Kind Hearted Woman Blues," "Ramblin' On My Mind," "When You Got A Good Friend," "Come On In My Kitchen," "Phonograph Blues," and "Cross Road Blues."

### “Kind Hearted Woman Blues”

#### Take 1

*I got a kindhearted woman do anything  
this world for me*  
*I got a kindhearted woman anything this  
world for me*  
*But these evil-hearted women man,  
they will not let me be*  
*I love my baby my baby don't love me*  
*I love my baby ooo my baby don't love me*  
*But I really love that woman can't stand  
to leave her be*  
*Ain't but the one thing makes Mister  
Johnson drink*  
*I's worried 'bout how you treat me, baby  
I begin to think*  
*Oh babe, my life don't feel the same*  
*You breaks my heart when you call Mister  
So-and-So's name*

(instrumental break)

*She's a kindhearted woman she studies evil  
all the time*  
*She's a kindhearted woman she studies evil  
all the time*  
*You well's to kill me as to have it on your  
mind*

#### Take 2

*I got a kindhearted mama do anything this  
world for me*  
*I got a kindhearted mama do anything this  
world for me*  
*But these evil-hearted women man, they will  
not let me be*  
*I love my baby my baby don't love me*  
*I love my baby ooo my baby don't love me*  
*I really love that woman can't stand to leave  
her be*  
*Ain't but the one thing makes Mister  
Johnson drink*  
*I gets worried 'bout how you treat me, baby  
I begin to think*  
*Oh babe my life don't feel the same*  
*You breaks my heart when you call Mister  
So-and-So's name*  
*She's a kindhearted mama she studies evil all  
the time*  
*She's a kindhearted mama but she studies evil  
all the time*  
*You well's to kill me baby as to have it on your  
mind*  
*Some day, some day I will shake your hand  
good-bye*  
*Some day, some day I will shake your hand  
good-bye*  
*I can't give you anymore of my lovin' 'cause I  
just ain't satisfied.*

“Kind Hearted Woman Blues” was issued with “Terraplane Blues” on Vo 03416, Johnson’s first and most successful record. The fact that “Kind Hearted” was the first song recorded suggests that it was his most developed piece.<sup>72</sup> The duplication of the lyrics, with the exception of an extra stanza in take 2, further supports this notion. In this respect, the two takes of “Kind Hearted” exhibit stability similar to that of the alternate takes of the 1937 session. Of the twenty-six half-lines in take 1 of “Kind Hearted,” twenty can be found elsewhere in the songs of other blues singers, resulting in a formulaic composition of 77 percent. With the additional stanza in take 2, the formulaic content increases to 81 percent.

The most prevalent theme of recorded blues is love,<sup>73</sup> or more accurately, unrequited love, and, as Sterling A. Brown states, “the formulas of loving and leaving are numerous.”<sup>74</sup> Of the six major formulas that construct the scenario of a failed love relationship, Johnson employs three in “Kind Hearted”: the x-formulas *I got a kindhearted woman* (stz.1), *I love my baby* and *But I really love that woman* (stz.2), and *I’s worried how you treat me, baby* (stz.3). The last is a manifestation of *I treat you good/bad*, a formula significant in generating conflict and disillusionment, which trigger not only physical escape but also psychological distress. Blues are not courting songs (at least, not within the world of the lyrics). Unlike the love poetry of, say, renaissance sonnets, blues speak of the messy aftermath of intimacy with a gritty honesty that refuses to idealize neither love nor the lover. The speaker’s conflict with a lover is often a central factor in his state of social isolation, and this state of aloneness becomes the premise for his desire to communicate his emotion.

In “Kind Hearted,” Johnson emphasizes conflict through a series of contrasts. He customizes the major x-formula *I have a woman* with the adjective “kindhearted,” unique in Taft’s corpus.<sup>75</sup> Hearts are usually hard, evil, cruel, down, or broken.<sup>76</sup> Johnson returns to the more familiar “evilhearted” women in the non-formulaic x-phrase of the third line, creating an antithesis between kindness and evilness. The result is an example of what Harry Oster observes as a characteristic appearing in all types of blues:

Often there is a striking contrast between the first and second halves of a line, or between the opening line of a verse and the last line. Sometimes balanced contrast reaches the extreme of appearing both within single lines and between separate lines.<sup>77</sup>

The conjunction “but” enhances the opposition and is noteworthy as an instance of enjambment. As mentioned previously, the typical blues line is end-stopped and relies on rhyme as a linking device. While conjunctions and relative pronouns are often used to link half-lines within a line, Taft believes that lines joined by “and” or “but” are too few to be considered important; he finds that blues lines are typically “independent of each other, in grammatical terms.”<sup>78</sup> Further, counter to the idea that the final line of a blues stanza “answers” or “resolves” the preceding lines, Taft observes,

There is nothing in the internal structure, either semantic or syntactic, which makes the second line an answer to the first. The two lines could as easily be two separate and unrelated assertions by the singer. It is the position of the lines which determines their thematic relationship, rather than being the thematic relationship which determines their position.<sup>79</sup>

In Johnson's song, the presence of the conjunction in the same stanza of take 2 suggests that he employed the somewhat unusual feature deliberately. In the second stanza of take 1, the conjunction occurs again; take 2, however, eliminates this instance.

The *me/be* rhyme pattern of the first stanza is doubled internally in "let me be" of the closing line. While the feature may seem coincidental, it is neatly counterpointed in the second stanza with the repetition of the rhyme and *r*-formula structure.<sup>80</sup> The switch in pronoun, from "me" to "her," in *can't stand to leave her be* intensifies the dynamic of the relationship between speaker and lover.

In the third stanza, the speaker's perspective turns inward; the shift is marked with a change in stanza form.<sup>81</sup> The AABB structure is relatively uncommon in country blues and is found more frequently in vaudeville blues of the 1920s. Taft claims that 80 percent of all blues songs follow the 2AA stanzaic structure,<sup>82</sup> a three-line stanza in which the second line repeats the first, and the third line rhymes with the first two. The first two stanzas of Johnson's "Kind Hearted" are 2AA stanzas. In addition to "Kind Hearted," the AABB stanza occurs in Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago" and "Terraplane Blues."

In the stanza, the speaker identifies himself in third person as "Mister Johnson," a specific and personal self that is counterbalanced in the fourth line by the generic "Mister So-and-So."<sup>83</sup> Over the course of the stanza, the self-reflexive "Mister Johnson" is gradually displaced. His introspection is rendered in "worried" and "think," and his confusion stated with the *r*-formula *my life don't feel the same*. The stanza captures the emotional anxiety of a current experience rather than the retrospective clarity of the past. The speaker describes the instability of the relationship in emotional and psychological terms. The final line completes his isolating displacement with the lover calling the name of another.

In take 1, the scene of deep thought is followed by a stanza-length instrumental break, the only one in Johnson's recordings.<sup>84</sup> The absence of the guitar solo in take 2 gives rise to certain questions. Was the break an intended part of the song, or did Johnson forget the words to the stanza? Why was it eliminated in this version? The occurrence of the instrumental break within the clearly well-rehearsed song does suggest that Johnson was quite comfortable with the feature and that it was indeed an intentional part of "Kind Hearted."

In the closing stanza of take 1, the word *study*, in the *r*-formula *she studies evil all the time*, is not unusual in blues.<sup>85</sup> The connotation of deep thought corresponds with *have it on your mind* of the final line. The antithesis of "kindhearted" and "evil" affects surprise and, in take 1, provides a tidy frame-like closing to the song in its echo of the first stanza. In take 2,

*she studies evil all the time* is spoken, not sung, with emphasis on “evil.” The “evil” she “studies,” whether it be infidelity or sorcery or both,<sup>86</sup> threatens the speaker with death. As a closing stanza in take 1, the violence is ambiguous in its metaphorical quality.

The additional stanza of take 2 softens the violent threat of the preceding stanza but refuses to resolve the confusion. *Some day, some day* is ambiguous in terms of decision or resolution, leaving the situation indefinite and unsettled outside of the conviction *I can't give you anymore of my lovin'*. The final assertion *I just ain't satisfied* is a concise summary of the song's expression of disillusionment.

### “Ramblin’ On My Mind”

#### Take 1

I got ramblin’ *I got ramblin’ on my mind*  
 I got ramblin’ *I got ramblin’ all on my mind*  
*Hate to leave my baby but you treat me so unkind*  
 I got mean things *I got mean things all on my mind*  
 Little girl, little girl *I got mean things all on my mind*  
*Hate to leave you here, babe but you treat me so unkind*  
*Runnin’ down to the station catch the first mail train I see*  
 (I think I hear her comin’ now)  
*Runnin’ down to the station catch that old first mail train I see*  
*I got the blues ‘bout Miss So-and-So and the child got the blues about me*  
*And I’m leavin’ this mornin’ with my arm’ fold’ up and cryin’*  
*And I’m leavin’ this mornin’ with my arm’ fold’ up and cryin’*  
*I hate to leave my baby but she treats me so unkind*  
 I got mean things *I’ve got mean things on my mind*  
 I got mean things *I got mean things all on my mind*  
*I go to leave my baby well, she treats me so unkind.*

#### Take 2

I got ramblin’ *I got ramblin’ on my mind*  
 I got ramblin’ *I got ramblin’ all on my mind*  
*Hate to leave my baby but you treat me so unkind*  
 And now babe I will never forgive you anymore  
 Little girl, little girl I will never forgive you anymore  
*You know you did not want me baby, why did you tell me so*  
*And I’m runnin’ down to the station catch that first mail train I see*  
 (I hear her comin’ now)  
*I’m runnin’ down to the station catch that old first mail train I see*  
*I got the blues ‘bout Miss So-and-So and the child got the blues about me*  
 An’ they’s devilment *she got devilment on her mind*  
*She got devilment little girl, you got devilment all on your mind*  
*Now I got to leave this mornin’ with my arm’ fold’ up and cryin’*  
*I believe I believe that my time ain’t long*  
*I believe I believe that my time ain’t long*  
*But I’m leavin’ this mornin’ I believe I will go back home.*

“Ramblin’ On My Mind” was the fourth title Johnson recorded on Monday, November 23, 1936; the song was issued with “Cross Road Blues” on Vo 03519. In contrast to the duplication seen in “Kind Hearted,” the lyrics of the two takes of “Ramblin’ ” exhibit considerable revision. Johnson’s reworking of the lyrics illuminates the compositional process of both takes: take 1 is 80 percent formulaic, while take 2 is 73 percent. Of the twenty-four formulas employed in the composition of take 1, seventeen are major formulas. In this respect, there can be no more conventional a blues song. The major x-formulas *I’m leaving (some place)*, repeated in take 1 in all but one stanza, and *I go to some place* generate the theme of travel, associating the song with the large family of traveling or “Walking” blues. Johnson introduces the connection between physical travel to mental activity in the first line with *I got ramblin’ on my mind*, which is a manifestation of the major r-formula *I got some thing on my mind*. The r-formula is also subsequently repeated, in the forms *I got mean things on my mind* (take 1: stz.2 and 5) and *she got devilment on her mind* (take 2: stz.4), as a prologue to travel. The association between travel and the word *mind* is common in blues; as I will discuss in chapter 3, anxiety is often expressed in terms of physical movement. In Johnson’s song, the idea of rambling evokes a sense of aimlessness, with no named destination, until, at the end of take 2, the speaker decides to return “home.”

Upon closer inspection, what purports to be a conventional blues song in its insistent formulaity is actually quite innovative, striking in its control and attention to aural stylistics. Both takes exhibit a conscious development of internal repetition embedded within the opening lines. The pattern is based on the use of a non-formulaic prefatory x-phrase, which is repeated and completed within its r-formula. Hence, “I got ramblin’ ” (takes 1 and 2: stz.1), “I got mean things” (take 1: stz.2 and 3), and “An’ they’s devilment” (take 2: stz.4) are not formulas.<sup>87</sup> The verbal pattern produces a strong rhythmic quality, a surging of anticipation in keeping with the theme of departure. At the same time, the internal repetition suggests hesitancy. Johnson’s care in preserving embedded repetition as a special stylistic feature of the song is evident also in the design of take 2.

Other aural features occur in the third stanza concerning the train station. The inserted line “I think I hear her comin’ now” is spoken and accompanied by the guitar’s imitation of the sound of an approaching train.<sup>88</sup> The existence of this dramatic aside in take 2 indicates that this stanza was a fundamental component of Johnson’s “Ramblin’.”

In take 1, the repetition of the B-line *Hate to leave my baby but you treat me so unkind* in all but one stanza shows Johnson’s predilection for refrain, an unusual feature in country blues. Johnson uses refrain elsewhere in “Come On In My Kitchen,” “Sweet Home Chicago,” “They’re Red

Hot,” and “Love in Vain.” In these songs, however, the refrain occurs as a non-rhyming entity separate from the main couplet. Here, in take 1, the attempt to integrate the refrain into the couplet restricts Johnson’s rhyme possibilities. He reaches beyond the mind/unkind combination only in the fourth stanza with cryin’/unkind.

The refrain of take 1 may have forced the repetition of the second stanza as a concluding stanza. Notably, the refrain does not occur in take 2, which may reflect either Johnson’s dissatisfaction with the repeated stanzas or with the constraints of a rhyming refrain. The former can be argued in light of African American verbal and singing contests, which display the ability to compose a sequence of verses without repetition.<sup>89</sup> Counter to this idea, however, is Johnson’s insistence of repeated stanzas in both takes of “When You Got a Good Friend” and of “Phonograph Blues.”<sup>90</sup> Regardless, the lack of refrain in take 2 opens up the stanzaic possibilities.

Given that Johnson made at least fourteen recordings (eight titles with one or two alternate takes each) on Monday, November 23, he did not have a great deal of time to consider his revisions. For take 2 of “Ramblin’,” Johnson begins with the same opening stanza but improvises the second. In the process, the vocative “And now babe” acts as a stall, allowing time to devise the new r-position half-line.<sup>91</sup> The result, “I will never forgive you anymore,” is rather unusual in its perspective. The word *forgive* is almost always found with the word *me*; in other words, the speaker usually asks for forgiveness with the r-formula *forgive me please*.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the choice automatically gives him his second line and time to compose a rhyming third. “Little girl, little girl” is held over from take 1 either in lieu of a fresh x-position phrase or perhaps because Johnson favored its rhythmic quality. He chooses a conventional line to close the new stanza: *You know you did not want me baby why didn’t you tell me so*.<sup>93</sup>

As was seen earlier, the third stanza is composed wholly of common formulas. In both takes, Johnson asserts his poetic individuality with interesting lexical fillers. The choice of the verb “running” in the first x-formula is relatively uncommon as most singers “walk” or, simply, “go” to the station. Johnson uses “Miss So-and-So” in the second x-formula to hide the name of the speaker’s partner. As seen in “Kind Hearted,” the generic title is ordinarily employed in a derogatory sense to refer to the unknown lover of the cheating partner.

Stanza four utilizes the half-line “with my arm’ fold’ up and cryin’ ” in a notable way. The image of folded arms is found frequently in blues in both x- and r-formulas that share lines with other specific formulas and images. Here we have an example of a conventional association between groups of formulas.<sup>94</sup> Consider the following blues couplets recorded prior

to Johnson's "Ramblin'":

1. Now I went to the station : *fold my arms* and moan  
 Asked the operator : how long my rider been gone. (Ishmon Bracey, "Left Alone Blues," Brac-2)
2. I walked down to the station : *fold my troubled arms*  
 We walked and asked the agent : has the train done gone. (Robert Wilkins, "Get Away Blues," Wilk-9)
3. I was standing at the terminal : *arms fold up* and cried  
 Crying I wonder what train : taking that brown of mine. (Robert Hicks, "She's Gone Blues," HicR-12)
4. Lord, *I fold my arms* : and I walked away  
 Just like I tell you : somebody's got to pay. (Son House "Dry Spell Blues—Part 1," Hous-5)<sup>95</sup>
5. And *I fold my arms* Lord : and I walked away  
 Says that's all right sweet mama : your trouble going to come some day.  
 (Willie Hambone Newbern, "Roll and Tumble Blues," Newb-5)

It appears that, aside from strict formulas, general images and scenes also develop in association with each other. The first three examples couple the train station with folded arms. The train station, a place of separation and abandonment in blues, connects the image of folded arms with despair—a connotation reinforced by "moan," "troubled," and "cried." Examples 4 and 5 do not refer to the train station but rather link the image with the action of walking away. These two instances, void of description of anxiety or sorrow, present the gesture of folded arms as a mixture of resignation and defiance. In all of these examples, the visual image of folded arms is also accompanied by the act of speaking: "Asked the operator," "asked the agent," "Crying I wonder," "Just like I tell you," and "says that's all right sweet mama"<sup>96</sup> Again, the tone of the utterance is influenced by the place: in the setting of the train station the utterance is a question that reveals the speaker's fears, whereas outside the station, the utterance is a statement of vengeance. Four days later, Johnson used a collocation very similar to Newbern's stanza (e.g. 5 given earlier) in "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day":

Had to fold my arms and I slowly walked away  
 (I didn't like the way she done)  
 Had to fold my arms and I slowly walked away  
 I said in my mind, your trouble gon' come some day.<sup>97</sup>

The collocation embeds a kind of iconography within the lyrics, which has developed into a touchstone of emotional feeling.

Significantly, in “Ramblin’ ” Johnson does not adhere to the two possible collocations shown earlier. In both takes, he uses the visual formulas of folded arms and the station but separates them into sequential stanzas; hence, the traditional association and order is maintained but delayed in an innovative manner. His design in take 1, however, sacrifices the component of address (such as “Asked the operator”) in preference for the refrain. Take 2 switches the folded arms image from its traditional spot in the opening lines to an unusual closing position.<sup>98</sup> It is possible that Johnson may not have intended to use it at all until he realized it would serve as a closer for the (possibly new) “devilment” lines.

Finally, Johnson’s new concluding stanza in take 2 continues the pattern of internal repetition with a standardized configuration used earlier that day in “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom.” The fourth stanza of “Dust My Broom” is as follows:

I believe I believe I’ll go back home  
 I believe I believe I’ll go back home  
 You can mistreat me here, babe, but you can’t when I go home.

Here, recent performance can be seen playing a role in the composition of take 2.<sup>99</sup> In “Ramblin’ ” Johnson holds the usual *I believe I’ll go back home* until the closing line and substitutes a variation of the major r-formula *it won’t be long* in the “I believe, I believe” pattern of the first lines. The result provides direction, albeit vague in the assertion of “home,” to the speaker’s aimless rambling.

### “When You Got A Good Friend”

#### Take 1

*When you got a good friend that will stay  
 right by your side  
 When you got a good friend that will stay  
 right by your side  
 Give her all of your spare time love and  
 treat her right  
 I mistreated my baby and I can’t see no  
 reason why  
 I mistreated my baby but I can’t see no  
 reason why  
 Everytime I think about it I just wring my  
 hands and cry  
 Wonder could I bear apologize or  
 would she sympathize with me*

#### Take 2

*When you got a good friend that will stay  
 right by your side  
 When you got a good friend that will stay  
 right by your side  
 Give her all your spare time try to love and  
 treat her right  
 I mistreated my baby I can’t see no  
 reason why  
 I mistreated my baby I can’t see no reason  
 why  
 Everytime I thinks about it I just wring my  
 hands and cry  
 Wonder could I bear apologize or  
 would she sympathize with me*

Mmmmm would she sympathize  
with me

*She's a brownskin woman as sweet  
as a girlfriend can be*

Mmmm babe, *I may be right  
or wrong*

Baby, it's your opinion *oh, I may be  
right or wrong*

*Watch your close friend, baby  
then your enemies can't do  
you no harm*

*When you got a good friend that will stay  
right by your side*

*When you got a good friend that will stay  
right by your side*

*Give her all of your spare time love and  
treat her right*

Mmmmm oh would she sympathize  
with me

*She's a brownskin woman just as sweet as  
a girlfriend can be*

*I love my baby but [I can't make that agree]  
I love that woman [but why can't we  
can't agree]*

*I really love that woman mmm wonder  
why we can't agree*

It's your opinion *friend-girl, I may be  
right or wrong*

It's your opinion *friend-girl, I may be  
right or wrong*

*But when you watch your close friend, baby  
then your enemies can't do you no  
harm*

*When you got a good friend that will stay  
right by your side*

*When you got a good friend that will stay  
right by your side*

*Give her all your spare time try to love and  
treat her right*

Immediately after “Ramblin’,” Johnson recorded his fifth title, “When You Got A Good Friend.” The title was never issued on 78rpm but was released in 1962 for a new audience of folk music revivalists.<sup>100</sup> With the exception of an additional stanza in take 2, the two versions exhibit textual stability. The formulaic content of take 1 and 2 amounts to 77 and 75 percent, respectively. “Good Friend” begins and ends as an advisory song. The intervening stanzas provide a kind of background to the moral-like frame; the speaker’s advice of “treat her right” has been learned through personal experience. Take 2 also employs the identical first and last stanzas, demonstrating a conscious employment of the frame as an aesthetic device. Supporting this idea is Johnson’s insertion of an additional stanza in the middle of take 2 rather than at the end (which occurred in “Kind Hearted”), keeping the frame intact. Moreover, the framing stanzas exhibit a complex structure: while a “when” clause is typically concluded by the following r-position phrase, Johnson extends his statement to the second line. Enjambment of this complexity requires thought above and beyond the formulaic system and is a characteristic of Johnson’s opening stanzas.

As the song progresses, the speaker becomes caught up in the conflict between himself and his lover, turning his attention from “you,” the

audience, to “you,” the lover. In the second stanza, he tells us that he regrets mistreating his lover. The anguish of “cry” is enacted in the third stanza as the speaker seems to be talking to himself as he considers reconciliation. The word “apologize” is unique in Taft’s corpus, and “sympathize” occurs only once elsewhere.<sup>101</sup> That is not to say, however, that apologies and sympathy are rare in blues; although most lovers choose to escape conflict by leaving, some do say, “I am sorry.”<sup>102</sup> In the fourth stanza, the speaker addresses the lover directly. Again, Johnson selects a unique word with “opinion.” The speaker’s indecisiveness reflects his confusion. The meaning of the closing line is ambiguous: who exactly is the “close friend” the speaker advises the lover to “watch”? The “enemies,” another unusual word in blues poetry, recur in Johnson’s 1937 “Stones in My Passway.”<sup>103</sup>

The additional stanza of take 2 deserves special attention as an example of a difficulty encountered by transcribers. While the x-formulas of this stanza are clearly the same used in the second stanza of “Kind Hearted,” the r-position phrase of the opening lines are not easy to decipher<sup>104</sup>:

*I love my baby* but [I can’t make that agree]  
*I love that woman* [but why can’t we can’t agree]  
*I really love that woman* mmm wonder why we can’t agree.

In this instance, poor recording quality is not a factor in the uncertainty of the r-formulas; rather Johnson fails to articulate the half-lines clearly. The stanza witnesses a possible slip; Johnson may have made a mistake in singing *I love my baby* (possibly rather than continuing with “It’s your opinion” of the first take) and then was forced to come up with an r-formula. Whether he intended an additional stanza or not, it captures Johnson in the process of working out what becomes a definite r-formula by the third line. Although transcription is difficult, I hear an approximation of the final *wonder why we can’t agree* in the first and second lines. A stanza of three identical lines appears nowhere else in Johnson’s recordings, and, in general, the structure is very rare.<sup>105</sup> Johnson’s extra stanza can be read as composition in progress.

### “Come On In My Kitchen”

#### Take 1

Mmmm mmmm  
 Mmmm mmmm  
*You better come on in my kitchen* babe,  
     it’s goin’ to be rainin’ outdoors  
*Ah, the woman I love* took from my  
     best friend

#### Take 2

Mmmm mmmm  
 Mmmm mmmm  
*You better come on in my kitchen* it’s goin’  
     to be rainin’ outdoors  
*When a woman get in trouble* everybody  
     throws her down

*Some joker got lucky stole her back  
again*

*You better come on in my kitchen it's  
goin' to be rainin' outdoors*

*Ah, she's gone I know she won't come  
back*

*I've taken the last nickel out of her  
nation sack*

*You better come on in my kitchen it's  
goin' to be rainin' outdoors*

*(Oh, can't you hear that wind howl?*

*Oh, can't you hear that wind howl?)*

*You better come on in my kitchen it's  
goin' to be rainin' outobors*

*When a woman gets in trouble  
everybody throws her down*

*Lookin' for her good friend none can be  
found*

*You better come on in my kitchen it's  
goin' to be rainin' outdoors*

*Winter time's comin' it's gon' be slow*

*You can't make the winter, babe  
that's dry long so*

*You better come on in my kitchen  
'cause it's gon' to be rainin'  
outdoors*

*Lookin' for your good friend none can be  
found*

*You better come on in my kitchen it's goin'  
to be rainin' outdoors*

*Mm, the woman I love took from my best  
friend*

*Some joker got lucky stole her back again  
She better come on in my kitchen babe, it's  
goin' to be rainin' outdoors*

*(Mama, can't you hear that wind howl?*

*Oh how the wind do howl!)*

*You better come on in my kitchen babe, it's  
goin' to be rainin' outdoors*

*Nn, the woman that I love I crave to see  
She's up the country won't write to me  
You better come on in my kitchen goin' to  
be rainin' outdoors*

*I went to the mountain far as my eyes  
could see*

*Some other man got my woman lonesome  
blues got me*

*You better come on in my kitchen it's goin'  
to be rainin' outdoors*

*My mama dead papa well's to be  
Ain't got nobody to love and care for me  
She better come on in my kitchen 'cause it's  
goin' to be rainin' outdoors*

Immediately following “Good Friend,” Johnson recorded “Come On In My Kitchen,” a song that has been described as “one of the most darkly affecting love songs ever recorded.”<sup>106</sup> Take 2, which has a faster tempo than take 1,<sup>107</sup> was issued with “They’re Red Hot,” a “hokum” style song popular at the time in the Chicago area. Of the six songs under discussion, “Kitchen” is the most original in terms of content: take 1 is only 56 percent formulaic and take 2 is 65 percent. Thus, there is a significant difference between the two takes both musically and vocally.

“Kitchen” also features a stanzaic structure rarely found in country blues, consisting of a simple AA blues couplet followed by the refrain “*You better come on in my kitchen it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.*” The form is consistent throughout both takes, and there is no attempt to connect the refrain to the couplet by rhyme. The refrain is composed of a common x-formula and a unique r-formula to convey a rather atypical offer of

protection. Johnson's performance of the song, especially in take 1, accentuates the refrain as a pause between the social struggle and emotional suffering of each stanza.

Special vocal stylistics play an important role in the presentation of "Kitchen," marking both the first and fourth stanzas, both of which occur in take 2. The couplet of the first stanza is composed entirely of a nonverbal "nasal moan" (mmmmm). Here, the failure of written transcription is most obvious. Paul Zumthor, writing of the "purified sound" of the southern black field holler, the Swiss yodel, and the "breath song" of the Inuit, states,

From its initial outburst poetry aspires, like an ideal term, to purify itself from semantic constraints, to get outside language, ahead of a fullness where everything that is not simple presence would be abolished. Writing occults or represses this aspiration. Oral poetry, in contrast, welcomes its phantasms and tries to give them form;. . .<sup>108</sup>

The nasal moan is the most common "paralinguistic utterance" in blues, typically used as an extraformulaic element to preface a verbal statement.<sup>109</sup> This practice was seen earlier in "Good Friend" where "mmm" operates as an x-phrase in the line "mmm, would she sympathize with me" (stz.3) and "mmm, babe I may be right or wrong" (take 1, stz.4). The extended full-line moan also occurs in "Terraplane Blues," "Preaching Blues," and "Hellhound On My Trail." Although a case can be made for the stalling function of the hummed line in "Terraplane," wordless lines function as an integral aesthetic element in Johnson's work, important enough to be specifically retained in the prominent first stanza position in both versions of "Kitchen."<sup>110</sup>

Stanza four displays this aesthetic quality in its departure from song with the repeated spoken question "Oh, can't you hear that wind howl?" The effect merges singer and speaker, connecting Johnson directly with his listener. Poetically, it adds power to the refrain by dramatizing the approaching storm and intensifying a sense of foreboding. Like the elaborate third stanza of "Kind Hearted" and the stylized third stanza of "Ramblin'," this spoken couplet remains a specialized core stanza, which is characteristic of Johnson's compositional style.

The four sung stanzas of take 1 are an interesting mix of very conventional and of original (non-formulaic) content. The second stanza is a fully developed couplet, found in the songs of many singers.<sup>111</sup> Some blues scholars use the term "ossification" to describe the stabilization of certain lines.<sup>112</sup> Stanza five exhibits the motif of fair-weather friends, conveyed through varying collocations of certain formulas.<sup>113</sup> In other words, Johnson's stanza demonstrates only one of many possible arrangements of

the fickle friend stanza, which can turn on a different rhyme word, depending on the formulas chosen.

In contrast, stanzas three and six contain original material. No analogue exists for the half-lines "I've taken the last nickel out of her nation sack." The "nation sack" is unique and is thought to refer to a "donation sack," which was a purse or pouch fastened around the waist.<sup>114</sup> For the sixth stanza, Johnson employs three formulas and one original phrase to produce a statement that is common in its allusion to hard times but also unusual in its focus. The r-formula *that's dry long so* is often annotated by transcribers.<sup>115</sup> As noted by Stephen Calt, the phrase appears in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "Y'all know we can't invite people to our town just dry long so. . . We got tu feed 'em somethin'."<sup>116</sup> Johnson may have designed this stanza to tie in with the refrain and close off the song.

Interestingly, apart from the refrain, the original material of take 1 does not appear in take 2; instead, Johnson employs traditional stanzas throughout. While the stylized first and fourth stanzas of take 1 occur in the same position, the second and third appear in a different sequence. The last three couplets of take 2 are all new, and each is highly conventional. Stanza five appears as a whole elsewhere; the word *grave* occurs forty-two times in Taft's corpus, thirty of which function as a rhyme word (most often with *grave*). The letter-writing theme of the closing line recurs frequently in blues, most often generated with the x-formulas *I got a letter from my baby* and *I'm going to write a letter*. Letters bring bad news<sup>117</sup> and are sometimes found within the prison song:

*Write me a letter* : and send it by mail

I want you to tell my dear old mother : I'm in the New Huntsville jail.  
(EvanJ-1)

As a device, the letter emphasizes the absence of the lover or relative, intensifying the speaker's isolation.

The mountain of the sixth stanza in take 2 is inherited from the spirituals. Blues speakers typically climb a mountain to either look, as in Johnson's line, or call to their lover.<sup>118</sup> The closing line, *Some other man got my woman lonesome blues got me*, is a popular conjoined unit. The r-formula is significant in presenting blues itself as an active entity with which the speaker struggles. Four days later, Johnson reused the couplet as a standard AAB stanza in "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day."

Another echo of the spirituals is evident in the "motherless child" theme of the final stanza. The mother/father construction in blues lyrics typically explains the absence of family. Johnson's r-phrase "papa well's to be" maintains the balance (mama/papa) but with a unique half-line. The

contraction “well’s” (might as well be?), seen also in “Kind Hearted,” appears to be a characteristic of Johnson’s speech. Conventionally, the x-formula *My mama’s dead* always appears with an r-position half-line describing the whereabouts of the father. Johnson’s stanza reflects the tendency in blues to cluster the motherless child formulas with isolation formulas; the following two stanzas exhibit analogous configurations:

*Now my mama’s dead* : and my papa can’t be found  
*I ain’t got nobody* : throw my arms around  
 (Sam Collins, “Devil in the Lion’s Den” 1927; CollS-2)  
*My mama’s dead* : my papa’s across the sea  
*That leaves no one* : to love and care for me.  
 (Tom Dickson, “Death Bell Blues” 1928; DickT-1)

The presence of these conventional stanzas in take 2 strongly suggests that this version was recorded after take 1. Johnson’s decision to replace his original material with “ready-made” lines and stanzas may have been influenced by the change in music. Either Johnson felt that the faster tempo of take 2 was not appropriate for the ominous poignancy of a statement such as “You can’t make the winter, babe” or his concentration on the musical revision superseded attention to the lyrics. Regardless, the refrain, the non-verbal first stanza, and the spoken couplet of the fourth stanza remained as the basic structural features of “Kitchen.” Under pressure, Johnson was able to draw on conventional lines and stanzas to reinforce the idea of aloneness and alienation and to construct the sheltering refrain as a bridge between himself and his audience.

### “Phonograph Blues”

#### Take 1

*Beatrice, she got a phonograph and it  
 won’t say a lonesome word*  
*Beatrice, she got a phonograph but it  
 won’t say a lonesome word*  
 What evil have I done *what evil has that  
 poor girl heard*  
*Beatrice, I love my phonograph but you  
 have broke my windin’ chain*  
*Beatrice, I love my phonogra’-ooo honey,  
 you have broke my windin’ chain*  
*And you’ve taken my lovin’ and give it to  
 your other man*

#### Take 2

*Beatrice got a phonograph and it won’t say  
 a lonesome word*  
*Beatrice got a phonograph and it won’t say  
 a lonesome word*  
 What evil have I done *what evil has that  
 poor girl heard*  
*Beatrice, I love my phonograph but you  
 have broke my windin’ chain*  
*Beatrice, I love my phonograph but you  
 have broke my windin’ chain*  
*And you’ve taken my lovin’ and give it to  
 your other man*

Now, we played it on the sofa, now <i>we played it 'side the wall</i>	And we played it on the sofa <i>and we played it 'side the wall</i>
My needles have got rusty, baby <i>they will not play at all</i>	And we played it on the sofa <i>and we played it 'side the wall</i>
We played it on the sofa <i>and we played it 'side the wall</i>	But boys, my needles have got rusty <i>and it will not play a-t'all</i>
But my needles have got rusty <i>and it will not play at all</i>	Mmm, Beatrice, I love my phonograph <i>babe, and I'm 'bout to lose my mind</i>
Beatrice, I go crazy baby, I will lose my <i>mind</i>	Beatrice, I love my phonograph <i>and I'm 'bout to lose my mind</i>
And I go cra'-eee honey, I will lose my <i>mind</i>	Why'n't you bring your clothes back home <i>baby, try me one more time</i>
Why'n't you bring your clothes back home <i>and try me one more time</i>	Now, my phonograph, mmm babe, it <i>won't say a lonesome word</i>
She got a phonograph <i>and it won't say a lonesome word</i>	My little phonograph <i>and it won't say a lonesome word</i>
She got a phonograph <i>ooo won't say a lonesome word</i>	What evil have I done <i>what evil have the poor girl heard</i>
What evil have I done <i>or what evil have the poor girl heard</i>	Now, Beatrice <i>won't you bring your clothes back home</i>
	Now, Beatrice <i>won't you bring your clothes back home</i>
	<i>I wanna wind your little phonograph just to hear your little motor moan</i>

In light of the fact that many listeners of Johnson's contemporary audience owned a Victrola, it is surprising that "Phonograph Blues" is one of few blues songs to refer to the phonograph. Bob Groom observes, "The lyrics are striking. Other bluesmen have used the jukebox as a female sexual image (e.g., Washboard Sam's 'Let Me Play Your Vendor' Bluebird B-8967) but the use of the home phonograph is less usual."<sup>119</sup> There does occur one "victrola" in Leola B. Wilson's "Do It Right":

When your pal buy your gal : a Coca-Cola  
You can bet your life : he's playing her victrola. (WilsL-3)

The double meaning of Wilson's closing line is the basis of Johnson's "Phonograph Blues." Like "Good Friend," "Phonograph Blues" was never heard in Johnson's time and is thought to have been censored by the record company.<sup>120</sup> The song was the last to be recorded on November 23 and was immediately preceded by another *double entendre* song, "Terraplane Blues," which plays on the imagery of an automobile as an expression of

sexual desire: "I'm gon' hoist your hood, mama I'm bound to check your oil."<sup>121</sup> Here, the metaphor of a phonograph is used, but unlike the bravado of "Terraplane," the sexual desire of "Phonograph" is undermined by the implication of sexual dysfunction. The topic of impotence is quite unusual in blues but recurs in Johnson's work in "Dead Shrimp Blues" and, possibly, "Stones In My Passway."

Despite the unusual choice of a phonograph, the song's composition is 75 percent formulaic in take 1 and 69 percent in take 2. The lyrics of both takes are essentially the same, except for the structural adjustment of stanza three and an extra stanza in take 2.<sup>122</sup> As a (literary) text, "Phonograph" is not as straight forward as "Terraplane"; where "Terraplane" exhibits control and focus in its wordplay, the exact nature of the phonograph is hard to pin down: it is variously an object owned by Beatrice, Beatrice herself, and the speaker himself. However the metaphor is read, it is plain that the phonograph needs repair: "you have broken my windin' chain. . . My needles have got rusty *and it will not play at all.*"

As in "Good Friend," Johnson employs a frame by repeating the first stanza in the final position of take 1. The frame is disrupted in take 2 by the addition of a new final stanza. Johnson's first line, *Beatrice, she got a phonograph and it won't say a lonesome word*, produces an unexpected and clever twist. The half-line *and it won't say a lonesome word* can be read as a description of a broken phonograph (on a literal and metaphorical level). Also, "lonesome word" can also be read as a synecdochal term for the blues record—the phonograph will not play a blues record. In Taft's corpus, *lonesome* is employed fifteen times in the phrase *lonesome song*, a self-reflexive description of blues.<sup>123</sup> At the metaphorical level, the phonograph represents Beatrice and the "lonesome word" of the blues record represents the speaker-blues singer: Beatrice will not engage in sex with the speaker. In take 2, the opening x-formulas of the fourth stanza are different with *Beatrice, I love my phonograph*, resulting in the mention of phonograph in every stanza but the third. What might appear tedious on paper is made lively by Johnson's vocal stylistics. As in "Terraplane," a variety of vocal and instrumental effects complement the wordplay of the lyrics. For the closing stanza, Johnson uses *won't you bring your clothes back home* in the r-position and reworks elements of "Terraplane" for the last line. Here, again, recent performance influences composition, but even while under pressure, Johnson is able to put one last innovative spin on a conventional formula. His version of the despairing r-formula *hear me moan* turns the sound of sorrow into one of potential sexual pleasure with *I wanna wind your little phonograph just to hear your little motor moan.*

### “Cross Road Blues”

#### Take 1

*I went to the crossroad fell down on my  
knees*  
*I went to the crossroad fell down on my  
knees*  
*Asked the Lord above “Have mercy,  
now save poor Bob if you please”*  
*Mmm standin’ at the crossroad tried to  
flag a ride*  
*Ooo-eee I tried to flag a ride*  
*Didn’t nobody seem to know me, babe  
everybody pass me by*  
*Standin’ at the crossroad, baby risin’  
sun goin’ down*  
*Standin’ at the crossroad, baby eee,  
risin’ sun goin’ down*  
*I believe to my soul, now poor Bob is  
sinkin’ down*  
*You can run, you can run tell my  
friend Willie Brown*  
*You can run, you can run tell my  
friend Willie Brown*  
*That I got the crossroad blues this mornin’,  
Lord babe, I’m sinkin’ down*  
*I went to the crossroad, mama I looked  
east and west*  
*I went to the crossroad, babe I looked  
east and west*  
*Lord, I didn’t have no sweet woman  
ooh-well, babe, in my distress*

#### Take 2

*I went to the crossroad fell down on my  
knees*  
*I went to the crossroad fell down on my  
knees*  
*Asked the Lord above “Have mercy, save poor  
Bob, if you please”*  
*Mmm standin’ at the crossroad I tried to flag  
a ride*  
*Standin’ at the crossroad I tried to flag a ride*  
*Ain’t nobody seem to know me, babe  
everybody pass me by*  
*Mmm, the sun goin’ down, boy dark gon’ catch  
me here*  
*Ooo-ee boy, dark gon’ catch me here*  
*I haven’t got no lovin’ sweet woman that love  
and feel my care*  
*You can run, you can run tell my friend-  
boy Willie Brown*  
*You can run tell my friend-boy Willie  
Brown*  
*Lord, that I’m standing at the crossroad, babe  
I believe I’m sinkin’ down*

Today, “Cross Road Blues” is one of Johnson’s most famous blues. In a brilliant set-piece of despair, the song voices the anxiety of a speaker stranded at a desolate crossroad. Recorded on the last day of his first session, take 1 of the song was issued with “Ramblin’ On My Mind” (Vo 03519). The formulaic content of “Cross Road” is 73 percent for take 1 and 79 percent for take 2.

Johnson establishes the setting with the unique substitution of “crossroad” for the more familiar “station” of the x-formulas *I went to the station* and *I’m standing at the station*. The resulting statements, *I went to the crossroad* and *Standing at the crossroad*, are repeated throughout, each time connected

to a new re-formulation of distress. In combination, the formulas present a past and present to the speaker's arrival at the crossroad. The absence of any of the numerous formulas that express possible future plans (such as *I believe I will go back home*) denies hope and escape.

The opening stanza initiates the song's "Call" with the iconographic formula of the plea. The convention of Johnson's collocation can be seen in many songs as speakers fall to their knees before lovers, judges, and even gravediggers, as in Mattie Hite's early "Graveyard Blues":

*Went to the graveyard : fell down on my knees*

*And I asked the gravedigger : to give me back my good man, please. (Hite-1)*

Robert Wilkins employs his own version of the image in "Falling Down Blues," in which the first three couplets anticipate Johnson's "Cross Road":

*I'm tired of standing : on the long lonesome road*

*Thinking about my baby : and got nowhere to go*

*It's far down the road : friend as I can see*

*See the woman I love : standing waving after me*

*I run to her friend : fell down at her knees*

*Crying take me back baby : God knows if you please.*

Although prayer in blues is usually presented ironically or as parody, Johnson's *Asked the Lord above* appears, on the surface, to be serious. In the context of train songs, this x-formula (*I asked the conductor*) traditionally initiates a dialogue between the speaker and railroad official; here, however, the call is unanswered—the speaker is alone in his helplessness.<sup>124</sup>

As noted previously, blues singers often name themselves in their songs, but the use of a first name is unusual. While Johnson's use of "poor Bob" may have been triggered by the very common phrase *poor boy*,<sup>125</sup> it dramatically personalizes the blues "I," promoting an intimacy between Johnson and his listeners.<sup>126</sup> The naming of the speaker in the third person also emphasizes a sense of self-dissociation.

In the second stanza, the speaker's alienation continues in the temporal realm as he vainly attempts to connect with passing strangers. As will be seen in chapter 3, the x-formula *Nobody knows me* is one of many that evoke anonymity and isolation. In the third stanza, the approaching darkness heightens anxiety. The seemingly contradictory r-formula *risin' sun goin' down* is striking in its succinct expression of regret. As the light fades, so too does the speaker's psychological strength. The historical reality of curfews for southern Blacks and the dangers of being on the road alone after dark informs the sense of fear evoked in this stanza. The closing line,

*I believe to my soul, now poor Bob is sinkin' down*, profound in its simple expression of vanishing hope, elicits intense emotional distress by juxtaposing the disassociated “Bob” with the idiom “sinking down.” Movement away from God, from hope, and from himself is expressed as physical descent in “sinking down.”

The fourth stanza of take 1 contrasts the action of running with the previous inaction of standing. The pronoun “you” of the unique x-position half-line “You can run, you can run” emphasizes the speaker’s own immobility and turns the call outward to the audience with the request that the listener contact Johnson’s friend Willie Brown.<sup>127</sup> *That I got the crossroad blues this mornin’*, *Lord* is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I got the blues*, which, as discussed in chapter 1, keys the performance of blues. Although the word *mornin’* contradicts the sunset of the previous stanza, its significance is traditional in the revelation of change.<sup>128</sup>

In take 1, the finality of “sinking down” is interrupted by the fifth and final stanza with the return to prearrival at the crossroad. The effect creates a moment at the crossroad both frozen and fleeting. The non-formulaic r-phrase “I looked east and west” effectively emphasizes the state of indecision and of being lost. The lonely speaker utters his anxiety in the final word “distress,” a word strangely unique in blues; “distress” can be read as a psychological word-emblem encompassing the turmoil expressed throughout the song.

Although Johnson’s take 2 version of “Cross Road” sacrifices some of the more poignant and complex aspects of take 1, it results in a more streamlined and concise rendition of the song. The performance of take 2 is slower in tempo and instrumentally more spare, creating a sense of open space.<sup>129</sup> The third stanza reflects the significance of rhyme as a blues convention. Instead of the repetition of “down” in all three lines, Johnson uses the r-formula *risin’ sun goin’ down* in the x-position and inserts the r-formula *dark gon’ catch me here*. This configuration embellishes the scene of fading daylight with the device of personification, which magnifies the threat of darkness and the sense of unease. In order to fulfill the rhyme, he uses *I didn’t have no sweet woman* of the final stanza in take 1 with the r-formula *love and feel my care*.

### Transmitting Desire

Robert Johnson’s work looks back on fifteen years of blues recording. The overall formulaic percentage of the twelve recordings examined earlier is 73 percent; in other words, almost three-quarters of the lyrics can be found in earlier recordings of other blues singers. The very formulaity of Johnson’s work produces and perpetuates the voice and the themes of blues: loneliness,

restlessness, disappointment, worry. Yet, his songs are somehow distinct; the voice is particularly resonant. This quality is the result of a consciousness of design that departs from the loosely structured blues of Johnson's mentors and appeals to the western European sensibilities of the members of a second audience. The examination of both takes of each of the six songs given here shows not only how Johnson worked within and responded to the blues tradition but also how an oral tradition evolves, and culminates, with the recording—audio or visual—of its art. Here, we see the significance of the recording of blues songs in the development of the formulas that define the genre of blues.

Features such as refrain, enjambment, stanzaic framing, and internal verbal patterns (such as the internal repetitions of "Ramblin' ") strongly imply careful prior composition and rehearsal. An elaborate opening stanza (often enjambed) and a core stanza stylized with vocal and instrumental effects (as seen in "Kind Hearted" and "Kitchen") further characterize Johnson's work and indicate memorization. Moreover, songs such as "Cross Road" and "Phonograph" exhibit consideration of thematic cohesion and the creation of various kinds of atmosphere and mood. These texts clearly reflect prior composition, rehearsal, and memorization, which, in effect, act as a kind of writing. In this respect, Johnson's blues would not qualify as oral poetry.

On the other hand, the variations seen between takes show Johnson's ability to compose on the spot as well as how the formula assists in improvisation. In take 2 of "Good Friend," for instance, it appears that Johnson runs into trouble with the fourth stanza: when he begins with a major x-formula (*I love my baby*) instead of his non-formulaic phrase "It's your opinion" of take 1, he struggles to find a suitable r-phrase. By the time he gets to the third line of the stanza, he decides upon *mmm wonder why we can't agree*. The experience may have influenced the quite different scenario of "Kitchen," recorded immediately following "Good Friend." Here, I argue, take 2 shows Johnson replacing the unique material of the first version with well-established lines and stanzas. The combination of the compositional glitch of "Good Friend," fatigue, stress, and the demand of musical revision in take 2 might have led Johnson to draw on conventional formulaic units. Regardless of the reason for revision, take 2 of "Kitchen" is evidence of Albert B. Lord's principle of spontaneous composition: "An oral poem is not composed *for* but *in* performance."<sup>130</sup>

Johnson's work exhibits frequent use of full lines and stanzas that had stabilized into formulaic units. Some commentators see the "overuse" of these collocations by blues singers of the 1930s to be a sign of a stagnated art form. The issue of originality often arises in such discussions. For instance, of "ossified" lines and stanzas, John Barnie states, "Lines and stanzas of this kind are widespread in the recordings of country blues made during the 1920s and early 1930s, and some singers, at least, had clearly lost the potential for

creative change that is an essential feature of any truly oral-formulaic tradition."<sup>131</sup> Yet, by their very nature, formulas are “stock” and “common-place,” and it is within the familiarity of their expression that the artist creates meaning. In his discussion of conventionality of blues lyrics, Taft concludes,

The function of the formula in the blues is aesthetic. It gives the audience a secure feeling, in that the pattern is recognizable. At the same time, it “shocks” the audience with ever new combinations of formulaic elements. And furthermore, the formulas are both pleasing and extra-significant to the audience because of their accumulated psycholinguistic overtones.<sup>132</sup>

While the original, or non-formulaic, material of Johnson’s songs is often significant in distinguishing his work, it is Johnson’s manipulation of conventional formulas that reveals his artistry. In other words, within a formulaic genre, creativity is seen and heard in the innovative presentation of familiar material; new arrangements produce the surprise wherein lies the satisfaction listeners desire.

When Wayne O’Neil analyzed the formulaic composition of the Old English “elegies,” he found “that three out of every ten verses has an exact counterpart elsewhere in OE poetry, and nearly six of every ten have close analogies.”<sup>133</sup> More specifically, he calculated the formulaic percentage of *Deor* to be 71 percent, *The Seafarer* 56 percent, *The Wanderer* 64 percent, *The Wife’s Lament* 61 percent, and *Wulf and Eadwacer* 53 percent.<sup>134</sup> Interestingly, these figures align with those I calculate for Johnson’s songs. However, although O’Neil treated the “elegies” as a separate category of poetry, he analyzed their texts in the context of *all* Old English poetry. The question arises, if over half the verses of a lament also exist within different types of poetry, such as long narrative poems, then what role does the formula play in distinguishing the lament from, say, the epic? What makes *The Wanderer* different from *Guthlac A* or *The Phoenix*? The next chapter will address this question through an examination of certain formulas that converge in the laments to evoke the themes of exile and imprisonment in a particular way to achieve a particular effect. The presence of the first person speaker gives these formulas additional power and resonance.

Robert Johnson’s recordings offer insight into the relationship between composition, performance, and transmission of an oral tradition. Like the blues songs caught on old 78s, the Old English laments come to us fixed on the parchment members of the second audience used to capture, circulate, and thereby develop the genre. Writing, like recording, necessitated the stabilization of formulas to effectively key the “blues” of the lament—its poetic realm and ritual of personal conflict.

## CHAPTER 3

### BLUES AND TROUBLE. . .SORG OND SLÆP

#### [SORROW AND SLEEP]

*Cryin' I ain't going down this big road by myself. . .*

*Forðon ic sceal hean and eam hweorfan ðy widor wadan*

*wræclastas, wuldre benemed,. . . (XSt ll.119–120)*

*[Therefore I must, despised and miserable, wander the wider, wade the tracks of exile,  
deprived of glory,. . .]*

The Great Migration, during which southern African Americans traveled north to find work and escape the injustice of Jim Crow, is a significant event in the social and historical context of blues. The songs recorded in the 1920s and 1930s voice an emotional response to an experience of struggle as they speak the promise and disillusionment of the search for stability. It has long been noted that, for its original audience, blues functioned to release the tension of stressful circumstances.<sup>1</sup> For instance, James H. Cone observes,

When the blues caught the absurdity of black existence in white America and vividly and artistically expressed it in word and suitable music, it afforded black people a certain distance from their immediate trouble and allowed them to see and feel it artistically, thereby offering them a certain liberating catharsis.<sup>2</sup>

Blues, then, developed in response to crisis—the cruelty of a brutal social system, the forced relocation to yet another inhospitable place—and was, indeed, entertainment but, importantly, a mode of entertainment that promoted a way of coping with traumatic experience.

The Old English laments, too, are designed to produce an emotive intensity that ultimately enacts an emotional and psychological release. The striking similarity in specific thematic features and in the dynamic interplay of those features to that of blues suggests that the laments, like blues, capture an emotional response to a particular social crisis. Conceivably, the Old English lament expresses the psychological turmoil of a people facing the violence of the Viking invasions or the social disruption of Danish settlement. Individuals and families would have found themselves suddenly displaced.

Loss and forced travel are indeed central themes of both the laments and blues. What follows is a comparative exploration of the dynamic of such formula-generated themes in the creation of the emotive intensity that distinguishes the poetry of blues and the laments of male speakers.<sup>3</sup> In essence, the poems evoke the feeling of isolation within particular settings. The emotive quality begins with a single voice of loneliness calling over time and space. The conventional motif of exile in the laments is comparable to the pervasive sense of alienation in the blues; the isolation of the speaker from society positions him outside a sense of order. In his role of outsider, the speaker attempts to come to terms with the pain of isolation through the imaginative act of song. Yet, it is not loneliness in itself that creates the power associated with these two genres.

Isolation, in these texts, occurs within two distinct settings: the road and the prison. The road is an elusive location of motion and creative freedom, while the prison is an immobilizing and oppressive structure. Both settings are evoked through the use of concise formulaic expressions. Often, in both poetries, the movement of exile and the stasis of confinement come together within a text to produce a significant contradiction. The paradox of a physically free speaker suffering entrapment signals a process in which the speaker enters an interior realm and directly engages in personal psychological struggle. These moments of contradiction and struggle create the tension with which the poetic voice performs a ritual of release.

### The Lonesome Speaker

*Ain't got nobody. . .*

*winemagam bidoren [deprived of dear-kin, Sfr l. 16a]*

The formulaic introductory cluster, as in the Seafarer's *Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied urecan* (l. 1), establishes a lone voice. Deor, along with the Seafarer, also makes it clear that he speaks from and about personal experience, as does the Wanderer who explicitly states that he speaks of his cares alone.<sup>4</sup>

The isolation of each voice is intensified by the circumstance of exile, a motif that recurs throughout Old English poetry, subjecting a range of characters—from saints to Satan—to the misery of displacement. In each case, various combinations of certain formulaic phrases reassemble to assert particular aspects of exile. The poet manipulates these formulas according to the needs of meter, modifier, and alliteration.<sup>5</sup> Exile finds its fullest expression in the laments, where as a subject in itself, it provides an identity, albeit a problematic one, for the speaker and a setting apart from orderly society.

The formulas that evoke the theme of exile provide a template of emotional distress, deprivation, travel, and search in a very concise and efficient manner. Notably, relatively few of these specialized formulas are required to set up the context of displacement. For instance, only ten exile formulas occur in 115 lines of *The Wanderer* and eight formulas are present within the 156 lines spoken by Satan in *Christ and Satan*. The exile formulas tend to cluster in concentrated groupings: half of the ten formulas in *The Wanderer* occur within lines 20–25. In *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the groups appear in the first part of the poems. In *Deor*, the one exile formula appears in the final passage of the poem, and in *Christ and Satan*, Satan's second and fourth lament are each anchored by exile groupings.

The formulas function in the laments as basic structural units that guide and stabilize the description of the speaker's experience of transition from order to disorder. Emphasis is placed on the psychological impact of displacement on the individual. The trauma of alienation resides within *wræc*, a word meaning both "exile" and "misery." In *The Wanderer*, the exile formula "*earnne anhogan*" [miserable solitary one, l. 40a] associates emotional anguish with the idea of isolation.<sup>6</sup> The exile's disconnection from human society is configured with "*wineleas guma*" [friendless man, l. 45b], a variation of the on-verse formula *wineleas wrecca* [friendless exile].<sup>7</sup>

In blues, as far as I can tell, the word *exile* does not appear. Nevertheless, the experience of displacement underlies the expression of personal struggle. The role of outsider is conveyed in a variety of ways. One instance of the word *outcast* appears in Thomas A. Dorsey's "Broke Man Blues": I'm feeling like an outcast : looking like a tramp (DorT-2). More commonly, the speaker identifies himself as a stranger; the x-formula *I'm a stranger* has developed into two separate full-line units through the conventional accompaniment of the following r-formulas:

I'm a stranger here : just come in your town. (WeaC-2)

I'm a stranger here : just come in on the train. (JefB-10)

A sharper sense of alienation is produced by *I don't feel welcome*, an x-formula that is also found as an r-formula with the addition of the rhyming word "here":

*And I can't feel welcome* : babe nowhere I go. (Darb-3)

I might leave : *because I don't feel welcome here*. (Crud-4)

Aloneness is sometimes made explicit as in Walter Davis's "The Only Woman": "Now I'm left here all alone : all in this great big world alone" (DaviW-24). However, the phrase "by myself" is the key element of a common r-formula used to convey isolation; the most familiar variations have been extended into the following two conventional lines:

*Mama I done got tired* : of sleeping by myself. (BelE-1)

*Crying I ain't going down* : this big road by myself. (JohTo-2)

The psychological vulnerability of the isolated speaker is expressed in a series of related formulas based on the perception that nobody cares. The x-formula *I ain't got nobody* is one of the more common renderings of social separation:

*I ain't got nobody* : ain't got nowhere to go. (Blacw-8)

*I ain't got me nobody* : carry my troubles to. (CollS-5)

*Ain't got nobody* : nobody feel my care. (JamS-5)

The variation *Nobody wants me* occurs in a few instances, such as in the line, *Ain't nobody wants me* : they wouldn't be in my shoes (Howe-7). Also, a closely related x-formula family is that of *Nobody knows*, made famous by the song "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out." An innovative variation is seen in Johnson's half-line *Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe*, which, in the context of "Cross Road Blues," dramatically emphasizes the speaker's struggle for self-identity.

Loneliness pervades blues lyrics. The statement of loneliness is sometimes conjoined with a statement of isolation:

I said isn't it lonely : since I'm all alone. (Bare-3)

Don't the world seem lonely : when you got to battle it all by yourself. (JohLo-22)

More often, however, isolation is articulated solely through the speaker's feeling of loneliness. There occurs a small x-formula group of *I'm lonely*:

*Baby I'm feeling so lonely* : and I'm feeling so blue. (Temp-4)

*I'm so sad and lonely* : love has been refused. (DorsT-1)

After the words *blues* and *worried*, *lonesome* is the word most frequently used to describe a state of mind.<sup>8</sup> *I am lonesome* is a common x-formula and is found in Robert Johnson's "Love in Vain": *Well, I was lonesome, I felt so lonesome and I could not help but cry.*

His repetition of "lonesome" is not unusual. "Lonesome" is used so frequently as a modifier that certain phrases have developed into formulas. For instance, *lonesome song* is a common self-reflexive substitute for "blues." *Lonesome day* has stabilized into the full-line formula *Today has been : a long old lonesome day* (Blacw-6), and the "lonesome road" is conveyed by an established r-formula, as in *Look down look down : that long old lonesome road* (JohLo-9).

Both the Old English exile and the blues stranger express the loss of a sense of security. In the laments, the loss of home—its place, people, and comfort—is conveyed with a common formula of deprivation, most conveniently identified in modern English as *x deprived*.<sup>9</sup> This formula tolerates a number of noun and verb substitutions; the recurring verbs of deprivation and separation are *bedælan*, *bescierian*, *bereafian*, *bedreosan*, and *benæman*. The Wanderer describes himself as "*edle bidæled*" [separated from the homeland, *Wan* l. 28b] and the Seafarer is "*winemagum bidroren*" [deprived of dear-kin, *Sf̆r* l. 16a]. In *Christ and Satan*, the formula occurs three times in Satan's laments: in a double construction, he complains of being "*wuldre benemed / dugudum bedeled*" [deprived of glory / separated from the hosts, *XSt* l. 120b-1a], and later, in a more usual single occurrence, he admits to being "*goda bedæled*" [separated from good, l. 185a]. And, finally, *Deor* speaks of one who sits "*sælum bidæled*" [separated from joys, *Deor* l. 28b]. Within these instances the various noun substitutions refer to elements of comfort and stability; the exile has lost his homeland, family, and the joy associated with a place of belonging. Inherent in the formula of loss is a past in which the exile enjoyed the comforts of social stability.

In blues, the statement of loss focuses on human relationships. Corresponding to the Old English deprivation formula is the familiar *I'm a motherless child* formula inherited from the Spirituals. The ancestry of this formula gives it special significance; born in songs of slavery, *I'm a motherless child* carries a legacy of endurance within an alien and hostile environment. In blues, the formula is usually linked to the r-formula *don't know right from wrong*, conveying the importance of the mother in the socialization of a child. Booker Washington White aligns the absence of the mother with distant separation from home: *I'm a motherless child : I'm a long ways from home* (WhiW-1). In a few instances, the formula is extended to include the lack of other family members; for example, in "Broke and Hungry," Blind Lemon Jefferson sings, *I'm motherless, fatherless : sister and brotherless too* (JefB-13). Lonnie Johnson, in "Friendless and Blue," provides a variation

somewhat similar to the Old English *wineleas wrecca* formula: *I'm motherless and I'm fatherless : I'm almost friendless too* (JohLo-22).

Akin to the motherless child formula is the mama–papa configuration, which commonly begins with the x–formula *My mama's dead* and is balanced by an r–phrase stating the whereabouts of the father. Robert Johnson's stanza in “Come On In My Kitchen” is an example: *My mama dead papa well's to be / Ain't got nobody to love and care for me*. Elsewhere, the father is “in the mines,” “at sea,” “can't be found,” and dead “too,” according to the desired rhyme pattern. The mama–papa line is consistently followed with a statement of isolation. Here, Johnson chooses the *Ain't got nobody* x–formula to fulfill the convention.

Stability, for the Old English Deor, Wanderer, and Satan is embodied in the figure of the lord. In their laments, the type–scene of lord and devoted servant recurs specifically within passages of memory that intensify the speaker's present disconnection from a meaningful social context.<sup>10</sup> Outside the relational system of lord and servant, the exile must redefine himself. Poetically, the conventional scene provides an opportunity for embellishment. The memory of the lord not only emphasizes an absence but also provides a canvas for the imaginative activity of the exile–poet.

Deor articulates his present emotional state through episodic allusions to mytho–historical figures. Only at the end of his poem does he speak in first person to tell us who and what he no longer is:

Ðæt ic bi me sylfum secgan wille,  
 þæt ic hwile wæs Heodeninga scop,  
 dryhtne dyre. Me wæs Deor noma.  
 Ahte ic fela wintra folgað tilne,  
 holdne hlaford, oppæt Heorrenda nu,  
 leoðcræftig monn londryht gepah,  
 þæt me eorla hleo ær gesealde.  
 Ðæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg! (ll. 35–42)

[That I will say about myself that I once was the scop of the Heodenings, dear to my lord. My name was Deor. I had for many winters a good place, a loyal lord, until now, Heorrenda, a song–crafty man, received the landrights that, before, the protector of men gave to me. That passed over, this so may!]

The problem of identity outside the borders of society is readily seen: when Deor loses his job, he loses his lord, his land, and his name—“Me *wæs* Deor noma.” The replacement of scop has deprived Deor not only of his *place* in society but also an identity. Further, even though Deor associates himself with a mytho–historical figures, his own name cannot be found outside of the poem.

The Wanderer states that since the death of his “goldwine” [gold–friend, *Wan* l. 22b] he has “sohte sele dreorig sinces bryttan” [homesick, sought a treasure giver, l. 25] who will know and comfort him (ll. 27b–8a). The

Wanderer then switches to the impersonal third person to speak knowingly of exile:

Gemon he selessecgas ond sincþege,  
 hu hine on geoguðe his goldwine  
 wenede to wiste. Wyn eal gedreas! (ll. 34–36)

[He remembers the hall-warriors and treasure-receiving, how in his youth his gold-friend entertained him at feast. All joy has perished!]

The memory of former pleasure—carried by the alliterative markers “selessecgas” / “sincþege,” “geoguðe” / “goldwine,” “wenede to wiste” / “wyn”—merges into the well-known dream passage:

Ðinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten  
 clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge  
 honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær  
 in geardagum giefstolas breac.  
 Ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma,  
 gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas,  
 baþian brimfluglas, brædan feþra,  
 hreosan hrim ond snaw, hagle gemenged. (ll. 41–48)

[It seems to him in his mind that he embraces and kisses his lord, and lays hand and head on his knee, as he, in times before, in days ago, enjoyed the gift-throne. Then the friendless man awakens again, sees before him grey waves, bathing sea-birds spreading their wings, falling rime and snow, mingled with hail.]

The vivid and tactile presentation of the lord and servant dramatically contrasts the warmth of human contact with the bitterness of the exile’s loneliness. The exile’s loss of identity is reinforced lexically: outside the hall the man—the “wineleas guma”—remembers his comrades—the “selessecgas” [hall-warriors]. The status of *secg* [warrior, hero] and *eorl* [brave man, warrior, leader] belong only to those inside the walls of society. The idea of revelation is striking as the exile “onwæcneð,” awakens, to the harsh reality of exile. The contrast of the two scenes adds poignancy to the passage that threatens to collapse the distance the Wanderer erects between himself and his subject of exile. Here, beyond the borders of human society, the idealized memory of the lord is an attempt to create order.<sup>11</sup>

In *Christ and Satan*, the scene of lord and thane emphasizes Satan’s displacement from a harmonious existence by contrasting the hostile surroundings of Hell with the joy, security, and comfort of Satan’s former home in the kingdom of Heaven. As in *Deor* and *The Wanderer*, the lord–thane scene functions as a memory of a lost past, but here, in the context of a

religious narrative, the scene carries additional significance as an icon of heavenly bliss. In his first lament, Satan exclaims,

Hwæt, we for dryhtene iu dreamas hefdon,  
 song on swegle selrum tidum,  
 þær nu ymb ðone æcan ædele stondað,  
 heled ymb hehseld, herigað drihten  
 wordum and wercum, and ic in wite seal  
 bidan in bendum, and me bættran ham  
 for oferhygdum æfre ne wene. (ll. 44–50)

[Lo! we, before the Lord, once had joys, song in heaven, in better times, where now the noble ones stand around the eternal one, heroes about the high-throne, praise the Lord in words and works; and I in torment must endure in chains, and for myself, a better home—because of pride—never expect.]

Epic elements—“Hwæt,” remembrance of times past (“iu”), and nobility (“ædele,” “heled”)—celebrate the image of ritualistic praise of the lord-figure in heroic terms. As in *The Wanderer*, the scene of bliss is butted against the exile’s present condition, deepening the sense of deprivation. Satan’s loss is compounded by the knowledge that *now*, in his absence, the angelic host continues to enjoy the pleasure of the lord’s company. The lord–thane scene recurs in the third lament when Satan realizes that his misery is increased by having once experienced the joy:

Is me nu wyrsa þæt ic wuldres leoht  
 uppe mid englum æfre cuðe,  
 song on swegle, þær sunu meotodes  
 habbað eadige bearn ealle ymbfangen  
 seolfá mid sange. (ll. 140–144a)

[It is worse for me now that I ever knew the glory’s light, up with angels, song in heaven, where the son of the Ruler has all the blessed children surround him with song.]

Satan’s embellishments of the type-scene feature sound, particularly song. The recurrence of the half-line “song on swegle” (l. 143a and, earlier, l. 45a) highlights sound as a key element of the scene and plays with the aural similarity of *swegle* [heaven] and *sweġ* [sound, song, harmony], found a few lines later in a third lord–thane scene:

Ealle we syndon ungelice  
 þonne þe we iu in heofonum hæfdon ærror  
 wlite and weorðmynt. Ful oft wuldres *sweġ*

brohton to bearme bearn hælendes,  
 þær we ymb hine utan ealle hofan,  
 leomu ymb leofne, lofsonga word,  
 drihtne sædon. Nu ic eom dædum fah,  
 gewundod mid wommun; . . . (ll. 149–155a)

[We are completely different from before when we were in heaven—we had then beauty and dignity. Very often we, children of the Lord, brought the *sound* of glory to his bosom; there we round about him, servants around the beloved, all raised the words of praise-songs, sang to the lord. Now I am stained in deeds, wounded with evils; . . .]

The past state of beauty and the present tarnish of evil frame the image of inclusion. The idea of *sweg* is again featured as the primary component of the heavenly embrace, from which Satan and his demonic troop are now excluded: “We are completely different.”

The scene of lord and servant embodies a past lost to the original audience of the laments, a past that, Nicholas Howe points out, evokes a pagan Germanic homeland. In his study of the migration myth in Old English literature, Howe observes how writers used mythic ancestral history to interpret current events such as the Viking invasions.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to poems such as *Exodus*, which feature the plight of a collective we, however, the laments focus intensely on the emotions of loss and loneliness. Yet, both respond to traumatic social events. The poet of *Christ and Satan* reconfigures the lord and thane scene in a complex manner: the scene both remembers a mythic heroic past—lost to Satan—and, at the same time, transforms it into a Christian future—for the devout listener.<sup>13</sup> For the exiled Satan, the temporary insertion of narrative provided by the type-scene combats the anxiety of disjunction.

Stability, in blues, is embodied by the lover, and the failure of a love relationship forces the speaker into a realm of transition. However, unlike the Old English exile, the blues speaker has little memory of better times. Aside from the fleeting pleasure implicit in the speaker’s recent love relationship, a couple of formulas do specifically recall the past. One is found in the form of a conventionalized stanza:

*Said I woke up this morning : I was feeling so bad  
 Thinking about the good times : that I once had.* (Gill-4)

The other is the r-formula *days of long ago*:

*My mind was running : back to days of long ago  
 And the one I love : I don’t see her anymore.* (CarrL-13)

I can't help but remember : *those days of long time ago*  
 And then again I often wonder : ooo well well will they happen anymore.  
 (Whea-16)

Neither formula induces the kind of elaboration of the past seen in the laments but do serve a similar function in reinforcing the expression of present misery.

Memory also occurs with the topic of money but is used for a critical view of an existing society rather than for an idealized glorification of a lost community. Money comes and goes throughout blues—earned and spent, won and lost. The importance of money—or the loss of it—in the songs is evident in the high frequency of the word *money*, which occurs 359 times and ranks 108th on Taft's frequency list. Naturally, money is a key element in the large family of Gambling Blues.<sup>14</sup> However, the concern for money is based not on its financial or economic value but rather on its impact on interpersonal relationships. The correlation between the amount of money in one's pocket and the number of one's friends exists in blues as an expression that is in essence proverbial but is not conventional in its exact articulation. The stanzaic collocation is initiated with the x-formula *When I had money* and generally balanced in the closing line with a version of its opposite *I have no money*. There exist a wide variety of combinations to express the same essential idea:

*When I had money : I had a friend*  
*Ain't got no money : I ain't got no friend.* (BracM-4)  
*Now when I had money : hello sugar pie*  
*Now I'm spending all my money : goodbye country guy.* (Este-4)  
*I had money baby : I even had friends for miles around*  
*Well all the money gone : ooo well and my friends cannot be found.* (WillJ-11)  
*When I was down : lost my wife and my friend*  
*When I got my money : they all come back again.* (BigB-12)

The memory of pleasant companionship enjoyed during prosperous times diminishes with the realization of the nature of the attraction. In contrast to its relative flexibility in construction, the complaint of fair-weather friends is a persistent theme. The association of money with a lack of human reliability and integrity severely undermines any sense of community support and stability.

Like the exile of the laments, the blues speaker suffers disconnection from comfort and stability. Both desire and seek the security of home, a place made all the more elusive through the idealization of the lament speaker, on one hand, and the brutal honesty of the blues singer, on the other.

## The Road

. . . *modcearig*

*geond lagulade*. . . (Sfr ll. 2b–3a)

[. . . *heart-anxious, over the sea-way*,. . .]

*I'm the man that rolls when icicles is hangin' on the tree*

(*"I'm a Steady Rollin' Man," Robert Johnson*)

An expected feature of exile is the necessity of travel and movement away from what once was considered home. While the road in blues is an actual roadway or a railroad, the road for the Old English exile can be the road of whales, the sea. In both, the road is a territory defined by the absence of anything representing ordered society. Free of external obstacles, the road is unrestricted territory in which the speaker gains the freedom to express personal thought. On the road, physical travel corresponds with mental activity.

In the laments, the exile travels the “*wræclast*,” or exile-track. Stanley B. Greenfield sees this formalized aspect of the exile theme as an expression of “endurance of hardships” or “continuative movement in exile.”<sup>15</sup> In both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the track of exile is located on the winter sea: the Wanderer is introduced as one who

. . . *modcearig*

*geond lagulade longe sceolde*

*hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ,*

*wadan wræclastas*. (ll. 2b–5a)

[. . . *heart-anxious, over the sea-way, long had to row the ice-cold sea with hands, “wade” the tracks of exile*.]

and in a similar collocation, the Seafarer states that the land-dweller does not know

*hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ*

*winter wunade wræccan lastum*. (ll. 14–15)

[how I wretchedly-anxious, inhabited the ice-cold sea for the winter on the tracks of an exile.]

The exile-track in both poems is experienced as a bitter, cold, and inhospitable landscape. In each case a formulaic *-cearig* compound lies in close proximity, associating anxiety with the idea of travel. The formula *wadan wræclastas* occurs also in *Christ and Satan* in conjunction with two deprivation formulas:

*Forðon ic sceal hean and earm hweorfan ðy widor,*

*wadan wræclastas, wuldre benemed,*

*duguðum bedeled*,. . . (ll. 119–121a)

[Therefore I must despised and miserable wander the wider, “wade” the tracks of exile, deprived of glory, separated from the hosts,. . .]

The tracks of exile for Satan are understood as Hell itself. In his third speech, Satan utilizes a further variation of the exile-track formula in combination with a *-cearig* compound when he states that he “*seal nu wreclastas / settan sorhoccearig*” [must now lay the tracks of exile, anxious with sorrow, ll. 187b–188a]. Similarly, the Seafarer speaks of “*þe þa wræclastas widost leggað*” [they who widest lays the tracks of exile, l. 57]. Thus, the exile-track represents a place outside of society, and setting out on that track enacts a transition from the known to the strange, from order to chaos.

The road in blues lyrics gives form to the idea of transition. While the highway offers escape and future possibilities, it is also a place where the solitary traveler must come to terms with himself. The road in blues inherits from the Spirituals a symbolic quality of overwhelming difficulty. The arduous journey along a seeming endless road magnifies the lonely suffering of the speaker:

That’s a long old road : a long road that has no end. (JohLo-9)

Says I ain’t going down : this big old road by myself. (Aker-4)

The railroad also serves as the “tracks” of exile for the blues speaker. When not being left at the station, the blues speaker often “rides the blinds” to escape his troubles.<sup>16</sup> The substantial number of Railroad Blues featuring the names of railroad lines such as “New York Central,” “M & O Blues,” “Southern Railroad Blues” attest to the significance of trains not only as vehicles of consolation but also as hostile entities that carry lovers away.

There exist a variety of attitudes toward the road. Like the Seafarer, some blues speakers choose the road over staying put, either to satisfy the urge to travel or, sometimes, to avoid manual labor:

Mmmm I rather be outdoors—walking up—walking up—and down the road  
I say, I rather be outdoors, I said, and walking up and down the road  
Than to be laying around here working for my board and clothes.<sup>17</sup>

While the idea of travel is inherent within the setting of the road and the *wræclast*, the texts of the laments and blues songs further a sense of motion in a variety of ways. In the laments, the journey is sometimes included within the introductory cluster. The Seafarer, for example, will “*siþas secgan*” [of journeys speak, l. 2a]. The sense of physical movement involved in journey destabilizes the speaker and reflects psychological commotion. The expression of sorrow and anxiety commonly accompanies the formulation of travel.

As Greenfield observes, along with the *-cearig* compounds, the words *hean* [despised, lowly, poor], *earn* [wretched, miserable], and *geomor* [troubled, sad] appear in conjunction with movement formulas.<sup>18</sup>

Departure is expressed with the formula *ic sceal feorr hinan* [I shall/must far from here] and a verb of motion. Some variations replace *hinan* with *þanon* [thence], and *feor* with an adjective such as *hean*. The complex appears in *The Wanderer* with a *-cearig* element as

. . .ond ic hean þanon  
 wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind. (ll. 23b–24a)  
 [. . .and I lowly thence waded winter-anxious over the fetter of waves. . .]

and in the *The Seafarer* as

. . .þæt ic feor heonan  
 elþeodigra eard gesece. (ll. 37b–38)  
 [. . .that I far from here seek the land of strangers.]

The latter example combines departure with a manifestation of the formula of search: *eard gesece*. The *Wanderer* employs a version of the formula in past tense to speak of how he *sohte sele dreorig* [homesick, sought, l. 25a] a treasurer-giver.

The nature of the travel endured by the Old English exile is articulated by the verb *hweorfan*, which carries a range of meanings: to turn, change, move, wander about, roam, depart. The word *hweorfan* is linked to the exile's state of mind lexically and metaphorically. A typical example occurs in the lament of Guthlac's disciple:

. . .He sceal hean þanon  
 geomor hweorfan. . . (Glc B ll. 1353b–1354a)<sup>19</sup>  
 [. . .He must wretched go from there, miserably wander. . .]

The words *hean* [wretched, lowly] and *earn* [miserable, destitute] occur as elements in the formulaic construction of wandering. Satan states, “*Fordon ic sceal hean and earn hweorfan ðy widor*” [Therefore I must wretched and miserable wander the wider, *XSt* l. 119]. Within the story of Satan's fall, the import of *hweorfan* is clearly infused with aimlessness, a randomness that reflects the disorderly, irrational mind of the devil himself. Throughout Old English poetry *hweorfan* occurs within the context of transition, and in religious verse, it promotes several levels of meaning. In *Genesis*, when Eve finally convinces Adam to eat the fruit, “his hige hweorfan” [his mind changed, l. 669a]. Once the devil-thane is successful in his mission to lead

Adam astray, he anticipates his master's pleasure in knowing that the sons of men must forfeit the kingdom of heaven and "on þæt lig to þe / hate hweorfan" [into that flame, to you, scorching wander, ll. 753–754a]. God's punishment of Adam and, later, Cain includes that they "on wræc hweorfan" [in exile wander, ll. 928b and 1014b]. The sequence of these instances of *hweorfan* in *Genesis* combines spiritual loss of faith with the state of being physically lost. In the context of exile, *hweorfan* marks a transition from one state to another, from belonging to displacement, from stability to instability, from abundance to need.

In blues, six of the twenty major blues formulas initiate movement: the x-formulas *I go to some place* and *I leave (some place)*, and the r-formulas *everywhere I go, I will be gone, I'm leaving town, and I'm going back home*. The disillusioned blues speaker typically copes with a cheating lover or some other dissatisfying situation through physical flight, whether it be by train, bus, or on foot.<sup>20</sup> The preoccupation with travel in blues is evident in the large family of Rambling Blues, of which Johnson's "Ramblin' On My Mind" and "Walking Blues" are prime examples. The traveling speaker often desires to return "home." As one of the one hundred most frequently used words in blues lyrics, *home* remains more of an elusive ideal than an actual place.<sup>21</sup> Many speakers, disillusioned with the promise of the North, return southward in an effort to find security:

*Lord I'm going down south* : where the weather sure do suit my clothes. (PetW-3)

*I'm going back south* : if I wear out ninety-nine pairs of shoes. (Sulv-2)

When not attempting to reach home, the traveling speaker moves with no apparent destination in a manner similar to that of the Old English exiles; for instance, Mississippi John Hurt sings, "Ain't no tellin' how much further I may go."<sup>22</sup> Robert Johnson's lyrics are famous for their restless quality:

I got ramblin' I got ramblin' on my mind  
 ("Ramblin' On My Mind")  
 I got to keep movin' I've got to keep movin' blues fallin' down like hail  
 ("Hellhound On My Trail")  
 Travel on poor Bob just can't turn you around  
 ("Preaching Blues")

The aimless wandering in blues corresponds to the sense of *hweorfan* in the laments. On the road, the speaker is free of social restrictions. Although separation from the security of society is a traumatic experience, physical

movement outside of the order of society is intimately associated with artistic creation. The chaotic space of the road is conducive to poetic endeavor.

In both the laments and blues, movement characterizes mental activity. In *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, interestingly, the verb *hweorfan* is not used to describe the movement of the speaker but rather the mind. The idea of the mind seeking comfort is made manifest in the visual presentation of memory. When the *wineleas guma* [friendless man, *Wan* l. 45b) awakens from his memory-dream of embracing his lord to the cold reality of waves and birds, the Wanderer explains,

Ðonne beoð þy hefigran heortan benne,  
sare æfter swæsne. Sorg bið geniwad,  
þonne maga gemynd *mod geonðhweorfeð*;  
greted gliwstafum, georne geondsceawað  
secga geseldan. Swimmað eft on weg! (ll. 49–53)<sup>23</sup>

[Then the heart's wounds are heavier, sore after the dear one. Sorrow is renewed, when the memory of kinsmen *moves through the mind*, he greets it with joyful words, watches eagerly comrades of warriors—they swim away again.]

The ebb and flow of the memory that “moves through his mind” is reproduced in the text with the repetition of the scene of kinsmen. The fleeting nature of memory is interwoven with the shifting of emotional response as sorrow is “renewed,” replacing joy.

In *The Seafarer*, the speaker explains that his urge to travel originates in his “modes lust” [mind's desire, l. 36a] for his “ferð to feran” [spirit to go, l. 37a]. Shortly after, he describes his wide-roaming thoughts as a bird:

Forþon nu *min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan*,  
*min modsefa* mid mereflode  
ofer hwæles eþel *hweorfeð wide*,  
eorþan sceatas, cymed eft to me  
gifre ond grædig, gielled anfloga,  
hweteð on hwælweg hreþer unwearnum  
ofer holma gelagu. (ll. 58–64a)

[Therefore now *my mind wanders beyond my heart-locker*, *my heart-spirit* with the sea-flood over the whale's homeland *wanders wide* the regions of the earth, and comes back to me ravenous and greedy; the lone-flyer cries out on the whale-road, encourages the heart irresistibly over the ocean surface.]

The repetition of “hweorfeð” presents the mind's movement with a sense of freedom. The metaphorical presentation simultaneously describes a mental process and anticipates the Seafarer's subsequent physical travel.

The depiction of mental activity in association with travel in both poems is at once the subject and the basis of poetic creation. While the idea of turning or wandering in *luveorfan* carries a sense of desperation within the formulation of exile, it works here to explore and enact creative possibilities.

In blues, *mind* is one of the one hundred most frequently used words,<sup>24</sup> and it often occurs in conjunction with the action of travel:

Got a mind to ramble : ain't going to settle down. (Hull-3)

I'm going away : to wear you off my mind. (Clev-1)

I got the railroad blues : the boxcars on my mind. (Rach-2)

An even closer association occurs between the mind and the verb *rambling*:

I woke up this morning : with rambling on my mind. (Blacw-5)

My mind got to rambling : like the wild geese from the west. (Temp-2)

Jailhouse doors open : then you got a rambling mind. (Pett-3)

As with the Seafarer, the “rambling mind” urges the blues speaker to move on and is his song as well as the source of poetic inspiration and creativity of that song. The departure and travel of the speaker enacts psychological upheaval; on the road, poetry embraces incompleteness, indirection, and uncertainty.

### The Prison

*They got me shackled. . .*

*. . . Is ðis wites dom*

*feste gebunden. . . (XSt ll. 102b–103a)*

*[This chain of torment is bound fast. . .]*

In contrast to the open space of the road, the prison separates the speaker from society through physical enclosure. Within the walls, boundaries are all too evident as space and time become agonizingly concrete. The setting of the prison appears in a large number of blues songs as well as many Old English poems. Poets of both genres use formulas to convey the experience of stasis, bondage, and oppression.

“Jailhouse Blues,” “Parchman Farm Blues,” “Ball and Chain Blues,” and “Death Cell Blues” are only some of the many titles of blues songs devoted to imprisonment. Although commercially recorded prison blues differ from the work songs of convicts in several fundamental ways,<sup>25</sup> the texts of both focus on physical surroundings of the prison and the forces that deny the inmate his freedom. In the work songs collected in Texas prisons

by Bruce Jackson, there occur many references to lovers and places outside the walls. However, Jackson observes,

a man also thinks a great deal about the things that keep him *from* his woman, the things that restrict his freedom. And those restrictions are far more concrete, more corporeal, than a distant female or an abstract concept that can be identified only by its absence.<sup>26</sup>

In a similar manner, prison blues focus on physical surroundings, such as the cell, walls, the key, restraining equipment, and on legal procedures and authority figures. The speaker typically finds himself in a cell, described variously as lonesome or “dark” or even more brutally as “the death cell.” The walls of the cell are referred to most frequently with the developed full-line formula *I laid in prison my back (face) turned to the wall*.<sup>27</sup> Typically found early in a song, this formula identifies its premise and promotes the idea of immobility. The image of lying down turned toward a wall effectively conveys the prisoner’s entrapment and a feeling of helplessness.

While locks and keys appear elsewhere in blues as sexual metaphors, the key in prison songs is associated with the denial of freedom, as in Blind Willie McTell’s “Death Cell Blues”:

Goodbye : oh here comes the jailor with the key  
I’ll have to cry farewell to freedom : I want none of you women to pity me.  
(McTW-27)

In a formulaic stanzaic collocation, the absence of the key is humorous yet painful<sup>28</sup>:

*She bring me coffee : and she bring me tea*  
*She bring me everything : except the jailhouse key.* (ThoH-9)

Handcuffs, chains, and shackles, although mentioned occasionally in blues, do not seem to have developed as formulas. Instead, the ball and chain is the subject of the favorite r-formula *I’m wearing a ball and chain*, as a stanza from Charley Patton’s “Hammer Blues” illustrates:

Got me in shackled, *wearing a ball and . . .*  
They’ve got me shackled, *I’m wearing a ball and chain*  
An’ they got me ready for that Parchman train.

The lyrics of prison blues, in general, exhibit a more rigid thematic cohesion than the looser associative structure of traveling blues. The context

of the prison not only governs specialized formulas, imagery, and motifs but also, in many songs, orders those components in a sequential manner. In songs deeply entrenched within their subject matter of incarceration, the sequence of events is dictated not by the speaker's actions or feelings but rather by external forces such as legal procedure. For instance, after introducing himself as a prisoner, the speaker invariably recollects the trial with particular attention to his verbal exchange with the judge, which most often takes the form of a plea. Lawyers and clerks, and occasionally a jury, can also play a part in this phase. The announcement of the sentence is usually given prominence. Finally, the speaker might express his grief, usually with the major r-formula *I cry*, and sometimes laments that his circumstances will kill him. Peg Leg Howell's "Ball and Chain Blues" illustrates the narrative pattern:

I'm lying in jail : my back turned to the wall  
 Says a Georgia woman : was the cause of it all.  
 They arrested me : carried me before the judge  
 Say the judge wouldn't like me : and he say a mumbling word.  
 I asked the judge : what might be my fine  
 Get a pick and shovel : dig down in the mine.  
 I told the judge : I ain't been here before  
 If you give me light sentence : I won't come here no more.  
 Mr judge Mr judge : please don't break so hard  
 I always been a poor boy : never hurt no John.  
 So the next day : they carried the poor boy away  
 Said the next day : I \*led\* a ball and chain.  
 Take the stripes off my back : chains from around my legs  
 This ball and chain : about to kill me dead. (Howe-8)

Howell's four stanzas devoted to the trial are a relatively extended version of the dialogue between the speaker and judge. Similar exchanges with authority figures occur in Railroad blues where the speaker pleads with the engineer or brakeman to ride the train. In prison blues, however, courtroom dialogue marks a specific phase in the sequence of events leading to imprisonment. The courtroom drama of prison blues consistently presents the law as merciless and cruel, and, as might be expected, the speaker never pleads successfully at the trial. Rather, the judge consistently surprises the speaker with a heavier sentence than anticipated; as in Howell's song presented earlier, the requested fine is typically countered with a sentence of enforced labor.

The premise of capture and confinement by an oppressive system affects the compositional structure of the song itself. The second part of Hambone

Willie Newbern's "Shelby County Workhouse Blues" further illustrates how within the prison, order is forced upon the song:

Lord the police arrest me : carried me before the judge  
 Well the lawyers talk so fast : didn't have time to say not nary word  
 Well the lawyer pleaded : and the judge he done wrote it down  
 Says I'll give you ten days buddy : out in little old Shelby town  
 And they stood me up : \*tied me around the peg\*  
 Guard said to the trustee : said put the shackles \*still\* around his leg  
 Mmmm : Lordy Lordy Lord  
 Lord the guards done treat me : like I was a lowdown dog. (Newb-3)

Newbern shows the full legal process of arrest, trial, sentencing, and final incarceration. The courtroom detail of the half-line *and the judge he done wrote it down*, in the second stanza earlier, is a very common r-formula, found more typically as part of a judge-clerk combination:

*Now the judge he repeat it : the clerk he wrote it down.* (LewN-1)  
*Oh the judge he sentenced me : the clerk he wrote it down.* (MooAl-2)

In the songs completely dominated by the prison setting, the social relationships and interactions between lovers and friends featured in traveling songs are replaced by legal and institutional relationships. Jackson states,

To express both hope and longing, both his sense of self and his lack of control over that self's movements, the singer is forced to document the concreteness of the enemy, the prison itself, because that is all that *is* concrete, and depend on rhetoric to return to his real themes [of his woman or his freedom].<sup>29</sup>

In Newbern's song, the prisoner's inability to speak for himself heightens helplessness and confusion and emphasizes the speaker's loss of control within an unfamiliar environment.

The narrative of legal procedure tends to diffuse and displace the emotive elements that characterize traveling blues. Although the prison is a prime setting for a lament, the songs that are entrenched within the jail cell give relatively little attention to the expression of emotion. When stated, the most common response to confinement is carried by the major r-formula *I cry*. A typical variation occurs in Bob Coleman's "Sing Song Blues":

And I locked in the death cell : *and drop my weary head and cried*  
 I told the sing sing prison board : this ain't like being outside. (ColFB-1)

As seen in traveling blues, the action *hang my head and cry* marks the helplessness associated with deep loss, as the prisoner responds to the reality of his situation. The inherent despair of confinement often gives way to the pervasive theme of death. While the speaker of Sam Collins's "The Jail House Blues" contemplates suicide—"I believe I'll lay down : take morphine and die" (CollS-1)—more often the prison itself is seen as the killer, as in Joe Evans's "New Huntsville Jail":

Now I'm laying here in this New Huntsville jail : and I'm almost dead.  
(EvanJ-1)

or Fred McMullen's "De Kalb Chain Blues":

Take these rings and chains : from all around my legs  
Well I believe to the Lord : these going to kill me dead. (McMu-2)

As the speaker is forced to succumb to the prison, his emotional capacity shuts down, and death becomes the ultimate expression of loss of self within an oppressive system.

In contrast, the highly rhetorical laments of the Old English Satan are emotionally charged. Satan is a prisoner both physically and psychologically. The issue of control underlies the presentation of his fall in *Christ and Satan*. His attempt to gain possession of heaven is defeated and punished by the expulsion into the "deopan wælm" [deep turbulence, l. 30b] of Hell. His emotional speeches render the turbulence of the hell-prison devoid of rational thought and reflect his loss of self-control. Like the blues prisoner, Satan is preoccupied with his surroundings. In his first lament, Satan introduces his circumstance of imprisonment:

Dis is ðeostræ ham ðearle gebunden  
fæstum fyrclommum; flor is on welme. . .(ll. 38–39)

[This dark home is severely bound [by]firm fire-chains; the floor is burning. . .]

Ironically, Satan does not directly refer to Hell as a prison but rather, with a mixture of surprise and regret, insists on calling it a "home." The nature of this home is not lost on Satan's fellow devils, however, who call the place a "fyrlocan" [fiery prison, l. 58a]. Filled with fire yet devoid of light, his new home is defined by the absence of spiritual enlightenment. Satan's perception of hell as a hostile *ham* [home] is the central structural component of his laments and is conveyed through variations of the phrase "This dark home." Frequent references to the *ham* reinforce the irony of his exilic search for a

homeland as well as the opposition of hell's jailhouse to the heavenly home.<sup>30</sup> Hell is depicted throughout the laments as a vast building with floors, walls and doors guarded by dragons, and inhabited by snakes.<sup>31</sup> In the second lament, the two-verse collocation "This x home is xx" acts as a refrain: "Is ðes atola ham / fyre onæled" [This terrible home / is inflamed with fire, ll. 95b–96a] is echoed by "Is ðæs walica ham wites afylled" [This woeful home is filled with torments, l. 99]. A variation with a noun substitution follows two lines later: "Is ðis wites clom / feste gebunden" [This chain of torment is bound fast, ll. 102b–103a]. Within seven lines the half-line "to þisum dimman ham" [to this dim home, l. 110b] carries the refrain with its similar construction. The reiteration of "This x home" concretizes hell as a place of confinement and firmly locates Satan's predicament and misery in the present.

In the third lament, the dark home develops into a vast hall:

. . . ic gelutian ne mæg  
*on þyssum sidan sele, synnum forwundod.*  
 Hwæt, her hat and ceald hwilum mencgað  
 hwilum ic gehere hellescealcas,  
 gnornende cynn, grundas mænan,  
 niðer under næssum; hwilum nacode men  
 winnað ymb wyrmas. *Is þes windiga sele*  
 eall inneward atole gefylled. (ll. 129b–136)

[. . . I cannot hide *in this vast hall*, wounded with sins. Lo, here hot and cold sometimes mingle; sometimes I hear hell's subjects, a lamenting kind, bemoan the abysses below the earth; sometimes naked men struggle among serpents. *This windy hall* is completely filled inside with horror.]

Hell's architectural design is transformed into a perversion of the epic hall, ordinarily a site of joyful drinking and conversing amongst kinsmen. The formulaic half-line "Niðer under næssum," literally "down under the headlands," locates the "sidan" [vast] and "windiga" [windy] hall below ground and at the border of stable land and chaotic sea.<sup>32</sup>

Bondage imagery is an integral feature of the Old English prison, but the *fyrclommu* of *Christ and Satan* are strangely intangible when compared to other instances of imprisonment. For example, in *Genesis* (also in the Junius manuscript), Satan describes his bondage in elaborate detail, which is further concretized by accompanying illustrations. The *Genesis* Satan's complaint emphasizes his loss of power and motion: if he had control of his hands, he would escape,

Ac licgað me ymbe irenbenda,  
 ridedð racentan sal. Ic eom rices leas;

habbað me swa hearde helle clommas  
 fæste befangen. Her is fyr micel,  
 ufan and neoðone. Ic a ne geseah  
 laðran landscipe. Lig ne aswamað,  
 hat ofer helle. Me habbað hringa gespong,  
 sliðhearda sal siðes amyrrred,  
 afyrrred me min feðe; fet synt gebundene,  
 handa gehæfte. Synt þissa heldora  
 wegas forworhte, swa ic mid wihte ne mæg  
 of þissum lioðobendum. (ll. 371–382a)

[But bonds of iron lie about me, a collar of chains chafes me. I am powerless; such hard hell fetters have fast surrounded me. Here is great fire, above and below. I have never seen a more hostile landscape. The flame will not die away, hot throughout hell. A clasp of rings, a cruel-hard collar, has hindered my journey, has deprived me of my mobility; my feet are bound, hands shackled. The ways through these hell doors are blocked, so that I cannot at all [escape] from this limb-bondage.]

The “hearde helle clommas” [hard hell fetters] restraining the *Genesis* Satan are described in realistic terms: he is bound by iron chains and a collar; his hands and feet are shackled, and the doors are blocked off. The passage provides a lexicon of bondage with the poetic word “clamm” [chain, bond, fetter], the “bend” [bond] of “irenbenda” [bond of iron] and “lioðbendum” [“limb”-bondage], and “racente” [chain, fetter]. Verbs meaning to be tied or bound include “gebunden” and “gehæftan,” of which the noun “hæfte” can mean captive or slave. The restraining collar (“sal”) and clasp of rings (“gespong”) are unique to this passage, as is Satan’s description of his surroundings as a “laðran landscipe” [more hostile landscape]. The attention to detail evokes a realistic scene of bondage.

In contrast, *Christ and Satan* presents a surrealist version of Satan’s bondage. Satan is “ðearle gebunden” [severely bound, l. 38b] by “fyrclom-mum” [fire-chains, l. 39a], a unique and imaginative compound that is oxymoronic in its juxtaposition of the material concreteness of iron chain with the instability of fire. The contrast is further enhanced by the modifier “fæstum” [firm, fixed] and reinforced by Satan’s cohorts who accuse Satan of being a criminal “in fyrlocan feste gebunden” [bound fast in a fiery-prison, ll. 57b–58]. The half-line *feste gebunden*, a manifestation of the formula family *x gebunden*,<sup>33</sup> renders concrete a psychological or metaphorical condition of bondage. This feature of abstract confinement is seen once again at lines 102b–103a:

. . .Is ðis wites clom  
*feste gebunden*. . .(ll. 102b–103a)

[This chain of torment is bound fast. . .]

The association between state of mind and physical bondage is again seen when Satan complains that he

. . .in wite sceal  
*bidan in bendum*,. . .(ll. 48b–50a)  
 [in torment must endure in bonds,. . .]<sup>34</sup>

Confinement and psychological state conflate so that Satan's distress becomes not only a response to bondage but also the material of the chains.

While, in *Genesis*, the detailed equipment of bondage is realistic evidence of God's punishment, the intangible shackles of *Christ and Satan* render, specifically, Satan's psychological response to the expulsion and, generally, his deviation from God, which led to the expulsion in the first place. In other words, Satan's bondage is self-induced. Significantly, the *Genesis* passage of bondage, cited earlier, is devoid of exile formulas: the *Genesis* Satan is not identified as an exile nor does he speak with the reflective voice of the laments but rather in a manner designed to advance the poem's plot. As a result, the two characters exhibit quite different attitudes toward their imprisonment: where the *Genesis* Satan is angry, vengeful, and, despite his bondage, aggressively active, the *Christ and Satan* Satan is immobile in his sorrow, confusion, and contemplation.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that the latter is passive: the Satan of *Christ and Satan* works emotively, and rhetorically, through lament to convey the misery of excommunication. His action lies in his art as he seeks release from psychological paralysis.

### Jailbreak

*Blues and trouble have been my best friends.*  
 . . .sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre  
*eamme anhogan oft gebindað. (Wan ll. 39–40)*  
 [. . . sorrow and sleep gathered together often bind the miserable solitary-one.]

Paradoxically, the prisoner of *Christ and Satan* is also an exile; as seen earlier, he complains he must "*hwæorfan ðy widor, / wadan wræclastas*" [wander wider, wade the track of exile, ll. 119b–1120a]. The contradiction between the motion of exile and the stasis of bondage can be seen elsewhere in Old English religious poetry. In the poem *Christ I*, for instance, the theme of exile unifies the lyrical divisions but is complicated by images of imprisonment.<sup>36</sup> The condition of hell's inhabitants, presented as a combination of

bondage and exile, is extended to all living Christians<sup>37</sup>:

. . . þe we in carcerne  
 sittað sorgende, sunnan wenað,  
 hwonne us liffrea leoht ontyne,  
 weorðe ussum mode to mundboran,  
 ond þæt tydre gewitt tire bewinde,  
 gedo usic þæs wyrðe, þe he to wuldre forlet,  
*þa we heanlice huweofan sceoldan*  
 to þis enge lond, *eðle bescyrede*. (*Chr ll.* 25b–32)

[. . . for we in prison, sit sorrowing, hoping for the sun, for when, to us,  
 the Lord of life may show the light, become to our heart a protector,  
 entwine our weak understanding with glory, of that make us worthy,  
 which he allows into heaven when we had to wretchedly wander into this  
 confining land, homeland deprived.]

The static endurance of the Christian sitting, waiting, hoping within the prison of this life is opposed by the formulaic imagery of movement in exile as the prisoners, homeless, *wander* through life, this “enge”—confining, narrow—land. The combination of imprisonment and exile results in the deliteralization of both: the assertion of exilic movement destabilizes the prison as a literal structure, while imagery of confinement forces movement into an interior realm to depict psychological process.

Prison elements frequently intrude upon traveling songs as a method of presenting psychological struggle. The motif of confinement, verbalized through images of stasis, bondage, and oppression, is essential to the process of release. In blues lyrics, impediments to the speaker’s attainment of “satisfaction” are perceived as external entities. Whether it be the mistreating lover or the more generalized phenomena of “hard times” and “bad luck,”<sup>38</sup> external hindrances underscore a general frustration in being unable to gain control of one’s own life. In this sense, the blues speaker’s anxiety is that of the prisoner. Confronted by his own powerlessness to overcome social, economic, or even political obstacles, the blues speaker often takes advantage of the one freedom he does have—escape through travel. Yet, on the road, interior forces replace exterior restrictions as the solitary speaker turns inward and engages in the real struggle of self-rescue. Within this interior world the ultimate jailor is the blues itself, the speaker’s own psychological state.

In traveling blues, stasis signals a moment of intense anxiety. At the crossroad, for instance, Robert Johnson’s traveler falls to his knees and prays for mercy. Within the shifting landscape of the road, motion ceases at a place where a choice must be made. Immobilized, the traveler states, “I

looked east and west,” and can go no further without the assistance of those he reaches toward—the Lord, passing strangers, his listener, his friend, an absent lover. At the very center of the first take of “Cross Road Blues” lies one of the most powerful stanzas in the blues corpus:

Standin’ at the crossroad, baby risin’ sun goin’ down  
 Standin’ at the crossroad, baby eee, risin’ sun goin’ down  
 I believe to my soul, now poor Bob is sinkin’ down.

Having reached the limit of his psychological strength, the speaker comes to a standstill.

Static scenes of standing in blues are often countered with the mental activity of thinking, but unlike the association, seen earlier, of the mind with rambling, the thought linked to standing is formalized as “wondering,” an anxious searching:

And I’m just standing and I’m wondering : Lord just how to make a meal. (Este-11)  
 Standing here a-wondering : will that car pass my way. (JohBi-2)

The position of sitting also brings on thinking and wondering, as in *I’m sitting here thinking*. “Seated” thought tends to be modified by the r-position half-line as contemplation:

*I’m sitting here thinking* : about the girls I left behind. (McFa-1)  
*Sitting down here thinking* : yes babe I believe I better go. (Bond-3)  
*Sitting down here wondering* : would a matchbox hold my clothes. (JefB-19)

Arthur Petties uses a variation of the x-formula in the context of jail in his “Good Boy Blues”:

*You sit and you wondering* : you looking through your mind  
 You don’t want no more canned heat : when the judge give you your time.  
 (Pett-3)

In this example, the unusual r-position half-line “looking through your mind” extends the idea of deep contemplation in the face of shifting circumstance. When the speaker is stationary, the process of thought is brought to the surface, often taking on an overwhelming presence.

In Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues,” the traveler expresses his desperation as “sinking down.” In blues, the idea of descent works against the horizontal movement of travel. The word *down* is one of the most frequently used words in blues; occurring 1524 times in Taft’s *Concordance*, it ranks 23rd in frequency. *Down* most often implies geographical movement (“down south,” “down the road”), but when used to describe a state of mind, the

idea of descent produces an image of burden. A number of phrases reinforce the image. The discouraged speaker often describes himself as “down-hearted,” a state directly related to sadness and feeling “blue”: I was feeling so blue : down-hearted as could be (JohK-2).

A “sinking” speaker is overwhelmed by his own powerlessness and, in that, is losing himself. Loss of control can be seen in Blind Darby’s “Built Right on the Ground”:

I believe I believe : I’ll stop my barrelhouse ways  
For I feel myself : sinking every day. (Darb-3)

The formula *I believe* ironically marks the surfacing of personal revelation as the speaker sinks under the weight of psychological distress. Commonly, the speaker sinks into a “hole,” a confining enclosure that resembles a grave:

Down so long : down don’t worry me  
Don’t believe I’m sinking : believe what a hole I’m in. (Brac-6)<sup>39</sup>

This stanza opens Ishmon Bracey’s “Trouble-Hearted Blues,” a song in which the speaker visits the graveyard where his lover is buried. In Lonnie Johnson’s “Blue Ghost Blues,” the speaker, haunted by the “blue ghost,” associates sinking down with death:

Mmm : I feel myself sinking down  
My body is freezing : I feel something cold creeping around  
My windows is rattling : my doorknob turning round and round  
This haunted house blues is killing me : I feel myself sinking down  
I been fastened in this haunted house : six long months today  
The blue ghost has got the house surrounded : Lord and I can’t get away  
They got shotguns and pistols : standing all around my door  
They haunt me all night long : so I can’t sleep no more.  
The blue ghost haunts me all night : the nightmare ride me all night long  
They worry me so in this haunted house : I wish I was dead and gone. (JohLo-6)

Here, death itself replaces the grave-like hole, surrounding and confining the speaker in a highly dramatic manner.

The notion of sinking down, like many other elements in blues, can be traced back to the spirituals where the enslaved singer-speaker struggles, physically and mentally, with the literal burden of work.<sup>40</sup> Although antebellum images and themes provide the blues singer with a traditional expression of social struggle, the secularization of this received tradition closes off the possibility and hope of ultimate consolation.

Where Spirituals move the group heavenward (and northward), blues songs move the displaced individual hellward. The “grounding” of traditional religious elements can be seen in Mississippi John Hurt’s “Blue Harvest Blues,” in which the distress of a poor harvest burdens the speaker:

Standing on the mountain : far as I can see  
 Dark clouds above me : clouds all around poor me  
 Feeling low and weary : Lord, I’ve got a trouble in mind  
 Everything that gets me : everybody’s so unkind  
 Harvest time’s coming : and will catch me unprepared  
 Haven’t made a dollar : bad luck is all I’ve had  
 Lord how can I bear it : Lord what will the harvest bring  
 Putting up all my money : and I isn’t got a doggone thing  
 I’m a weary traveler : roaming around from place to place  
 If I don’t find something : this will end me in disgrace  
 Ain’t got no mother : father left me long ago  
 I’m just like an orphan : where my folks is I don’t know  
 Blues around my shoulder : blues are all around my head  
 With my heavy burden : Lord I wished I was dead. (Hurt-7)

Weariness, trouble in mind, the weary traveler, the orphan, and the heavy burden are all traditional expressions of enduring hardship. The mountain, too, is from the Spirituals, but here in the blues world, its promise of eventual salvation is literally clouded. In the last stanza, the blues surround and burden the speaker and, like the clouds of song’s opening, impair his outward vision and hope.

The most prominent burden of blues is anxiety, expressed primarily as “worry” and secondarily as “trouble.” There occur 392 instances of the various forms of “worry” in Taft’s *Concordance*, with “worried” ranking within the top 200 most frequent words.<sup>41</sup> The major x-formula *I’m worried* perpetuates a feeling of mental agitation throughout blues, contributing to the restless nature of the road songs:

*I’m worried about my baby* : she’s on my mind. (CamG-1)  
*You know I’m worried* : worried all the time. (Weld-11)

As in the second example, worry plagues the blues speaker as a chronic condition, threatening to wear him down. The lover is directly addressed as the cause of worry in a very common stanzaic configuration featuring the closing line *You keep me worried* : and bothered all the time.<sup>42</sup> The opening

line varies, but always ends with the rhyme-word “mind.” Examples include

Now honey babe : you got me troubled in mind  
*You keep me worried : and bothered all the time.* (Vinc-8)

Lord mama : what’s on your mind  
*You keep me worried : and bothered all the time.* (Shad-11)

I’m going away : to wear you off my mind  
*For you keep me worried : and bothered all the time.* (Virg-2)

The first example emphasizes the turbulence of the speaker’s mental state by using the distraction and irritation of being worried and “bothered” to explain “troubled in mind.” Although the lover is blamed, the speaker’s distress arises from his inability to control her, which prevents him from obtaining his idea of love and satisfaction. The inevitable solution of escape appears in the last example provided, the most popular of the three stanzas.

Fear is the basic emotion of anxiety. Fear, formulaically expressed through worry and trouble, generates a significant energy in blues lyrics. Worry, as a fundamental characteristic of the psychological state of being blue, can be seen most readily in the common phrase “worried blues,” of which Son House and, later, Robert Johnson sing<sup>43</sup>:

Well, some people tell me that the worried blues ain’t bad  
 Worst old feelin’ I most ever had.

When worry and blues meet in the lyrics, the speaker frequently turns his attention inward to dwell specifically on the nature of his anxiety. In these cases, the inner condition of the blues is described in tangible terms. Johnson’s “Preaching Blues,” for instance, focuses exclusively on the worried blues, described in the third and fourth stanzas as a disease:

The blues is a low-down shakin’ chill (yes, preach ’em now)  
 Mmm is a low-down shakin’ chill  
 You ain’t never had ’em, I hope you never will.  
 Well, the blues is a achin’ old heart disease  
 (Do it now. You gon’ do it? Tell me all about it.)  
 Well the blues is a low-down achin’ heart disease  
 Like consumption killing me by degrees.

The anxiety of blues is seen as a life-threatening external force over which the speaker has no control.

The externalization of the psychological state of anxiety is most evident with the use of personification: “the Blues” appears in the songs as a figure who pursues, overtakes, and confines the worried speaker. The issue of control arises again when, rather than “having” the blues, the Blues “has” the speaker. At the literal level, the Blues takes the place of the lover: “Some other man got my woman, lonesome blues got me.”<sup>44</sup> In this, there arises an intimate yet antagonistic relationship between the speaker and the Blues, akin to that seen in the prison songs between inmate and jailor. The anxious speaker becomes preoccupied with the Blues as a source of his confinement and misery to the extent that many songs are entirely devoted to the subject. Ironically, the physically active and aggressive character of the Blues dramatizes the speaker’s psychological paralysis.

Personification produces some of the genre’s most lively and imaginative poetry. The x-formula *Blues and trouble* signals relatively simple instances of the device<sup>45</sup>:

*Blues and trouble* : both running hand in hand. (Blacw-9)

*Blues and trouble* : have been my best friends. (McFa-1)

*Trouble* often replaces *worry* in its partnership with blues, perhaps because the word offers a more appealing aural combination. Moreover, unlike worry, the idea of trouble efficiently blends actual external difficulty with internal distress. In “Back Door Blues,” Kokomo Arnold employs one of the earlier lines along with a conventional line that presents the Blues as a walking character:

*Says the blues come down the alley : headed up to my back door*

Says I had the blues today mama : just like I never had before

*Blues and trouble* : have been my best friends

I says when my blues leave me : my trouble just walked in

Now some folks says blues is trouble : nothing but evil running across  
your mind

Lord when you setting down thinking about someone : have treated you so nice  
and kind. (ArnK-7)

Another example is found in Kid Cole’s “Niagara Fall Blues,” which employs conventional material in an innovative manner:

I got the blues so bad : that it hurts my tongue to talk

I got the blues so bad : that it hurts my baby’s feet to walk

Now it’s run to your window : heist your shade up high

It’s stick you head out the window : see the worried blues pass by

I looked down the lonesome road pretty mama : far as I could see  
 Another man had my wife : and I swear the Niagara blues had me. (ColeK-2)

In both of these songs, personification enhances particularly intense feelings of distress and dramatizes the disintegration of the self. Yet, at the same time, it diffuses the distress with a kind of self-ironic humor. The poetic conjuration of the Blues reveals an assertion of control through language and a deliberate playfulness significant in the process of release.

In African American oral tradition, verbal play is the domain of the trickster Signifying Monkey, whose cousin Brer Rabbit possesses an amazing, magical ability to play musical instruments. Trickster tales inform the stories many blues artists tell of themselves and their music.<sup>46</sup> In turn, the personified figure of the Blues is yet another version of the trickster. Like its Yoruba ancestor Esu, the Blues (along with its creator-singer) resides at the crossroad of the abstract and tangible realms and is associated with language, sexuality, ambiguity, and creation.<sup>47</sup> As was seen earlier in Lonnie Johnson's "Blue Ghost Blues," the Blues is often a supernatural entity transgressing the border of the temporal world. In Thomas A. Dorsey's "Maybe It's the Blues," the Blues appears in the liminal place of dreams:

Something pounding : in my breast  
 When I lay down : to take my rest  
 Horrid nightmares : scary dreams  
 Then the blues : steps on the scene  
 Oh maybe it's the blues : that keeps me worried all the time  
 If I could lose these weary blues : that's on my mind  
 Happiness that comes around : but never comes to stay  
 If I only had someone : just to drive my tears away. (DorsT-5)

The combination of otherworld, pursuit, and fear exist in the common association of the Blues with the devil, another border-stepping trickster.<sup>48</sup> Blues' usual partner, trouble, is replaced by the devil in Lonnie Johnson's "Devil's Got the Blues":

Good morning blues : where have you been so long  
 I just stopped by to leave you enough of worries : to last you while I'm gone  
 My brains is cloudy : my soul is upside down  
 When I get that lowdown feeling : I know the blues must be somewhere close  
 around  
 The blues is like the devil : it comes on you like a spell  
 Blues will leave your heart full of trouble : your poor mind full of hell

Some people say that's no blues : but that story's old and stale  
 The blues will drive you to drink and murder : and spend the rest of your life in jail  
 The blues and the devil : is your closest friend  
 The blues will leave you with murder in your mind : that's when the devil out  
 of hell steps in. (JohLo-23)

The joint affliction of the Blues and the devil portends a hopeless situation—but not for the speaker. Rather, “you” are the one in potential danger. Protection, however, lies within the song and its singer-poet. The craft of blues is most evident in songs that evoke the Blues. By “craft,” I include, along with the composition of the lyrics and music, the dynamic of performance in activating the transforming power of poetic voice. In songs like Lonnie Johnson’s presented earlier, personification makes dangerous forces visible and thus combatable. As a poetic device, personification draws attention to the poetry itself and, in doing so, brings the presence of the singer-poet to the foreground at the threshold where anxiety and craft meet.

At this crossroad, the singer-poet meets and addresses the Blues; Lonnie Johnson begins his song,

*Good morning blues*<sup>49</sup> : where have you been so long?

The apostrophe to blues conventionally accompanies personification. Surreal “Little Brother” Montgomery employs the strategy in “The First Time I Met You,” a title that seems to promise a love song:

The first time I met the blues mama : they came walking through the wood  
 They stopped at my house first mama : and done me all the harm they could  
 Now my blues got at me : Lord and run me from tree to tree  
 You should have heard me begging : Mr blues don't murder me

*Good morning blues* : what are you doing here so soon  
 You bes with me every morning : Lordy every night and noon  
 The blues came down the alley : mama and stopped right at my door  
 They give me more hard luck and trouble : than I ever had before. (MontE-5)

Leroy Carr also employs apostrophe in two different songs, each devoted to the subject of blues:

Blues why do you worry me : why do stay so long  
 You come to me yesterday : been with me all night long.  
 (“Midnight Hour Blues,” CarrL-13)  
 About four this morning : blues come in my door

Please Mr. blues : don't come here no more.  
 ("I Keep the Blues," CarrL-12)

Robert Johnson's apostrophe in "Preaching Blues" belies the complex entanglement of singer, speaker, and personal anguish; the song opens with a personification of blues that anticipates his later overt treatment of the devil<sup>50</sup>:

Mmm

I's up this mornin' blues walkin' like a man  
 I's up this mornin' blues walkin' like a man  
 Worried blues give me your right hand.

And the blues fell mama's child tore me all upside down  
 Blues fell mama's child and it tore me all upside down  
 Travel on, poor Bob, just can't turn you 'round.

He refuses to temper the intensity of emotional turmoil as the two addressees, the Blues and "poor Bob," blend into one another. In the moment of apostrophe, the singer/speaker turns away from the song's audience to directly address the Blues, the source of misery. Jonathan Culler states, "to apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire."<sup>51</sup> The use of personification and apostrophe presupposes a power to evoke, confront, and reverse the debilitating effects of psychological distress:

One who successfully invokes nature is one to whom nature might, in its turn, speak. He makes himself poet, visionary. Thus, invocation is a figure of vocation.<sup>52</sup>

The apostrophe draws attention to the craft, and business, of the blues singer. In the written text, it marks the "poetic presence" of the singer and a "poetic act."<sup>53</sup> Live performance fully activates the power of the apostrophe to dispel the Blues.

The speakers of the Old English laments similarly externalize emotional turmoil in a process of release. As in blues, the lament speaker articulates anxiety as an oppressive, imprisoning entity. Bondage imagery occurs specifically in the preliminary sections of the laments, making it a significant feature in the expression of personal struggle. This strategy is especially evident in *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, where the initial sections most closely correspond to blues not only in mood but also in the assertion of an intimate knowledge of suffering, a knowledge that reveals and authorizes a poetic voice, which claims transforming capabilities.

In *The Seafarer*, the winter sea plays an important role as an inhospitable physical setting, which, as seen before, serves as a transitional location in which the exile suffers separation from the comfort of home. Opposed to the stability of land, the naturally shifting environment of the sea provides a particularly apt metaphor for the exile's psychological turmoil. Winter storm furthers the expressive capability of the metaphor by providing tactile imagery of physical discomfort. Through winter and storm, anxiety is configured as an oppressive binding entity.

While the description of a perilous nightwatch that opens *The Seafarer* indeed conveys the experience of sea voyaging, the focus on the surrounding threat of the sea moves inward as an equation develops between physical affliction and psychological turmoil. The main emphasis of the passage is *cearu* [anxiety]. The word occurs in consecutive lines within two compounds: the Seafarer has known “bitre breostceare” [bitter breast-anxiety, l. 4a] onboard the “cearselda” [abode of anxiety, l. 5b]. Anxiety is articulated through the language of bondage:

. . . þær mec oft bigeat  
 nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan,  
 þonne he be clifum cnossað. Calde geþrunge  
 wæron mine fet, forste gebunden,  
 caldum clommmum, . . . (ll. 6b–10a)

[. . .there oppressive nightwatch often occupied me at the ship's prow when it tosses by the cliffs. Cold pinched were my feet, bound by frost, in cold chains, . . .]

Personification intensifies the anxiety of the “nearo”—narrow, constricted, oppressive—nightwatch: cold pinches and binds. The formula *forste gebunden* and the poetic “caldum clommmum,” reminiscent of the *fyr-clommmum* of hell,<sup>54</sup> transform a familiar discomfort of “pinching” cold into active entrapment. With the chains of cold, the physical and psychological merge; alliteration directly links the literal coldness and figurative chains to anxiety:

caldum clommmum, þær þa ceare seofedun  
 hat ymb heortan; hungor innan slat  
 merewerges mod. (ll. 10–12a)

[cold chains. There, anxiety sighed hot about my heart; hunger inside tore the mind of the sea-weary one.]

Anxiety is joined by desire in an oppositional pattern: cold—chains—*ceare* / hot—heart—hunger.<sup>55</sup> The Seafarer experiences an inner turmoil similar to

that suffered by one of Robert Johnson's speakers:

And the blues fell mama's child, tore me all upside down  
Travel on, poor Bob, just can't turn you 'round.

As with Johnson's speaker, the Seafarer finds an outlet for his emotional distress in physical travel, but the desire to travel constitutes a behavior that puts the Seafarer at odds with expected social practice. The choice to turn away from society, as well as the anxiety arising from that choice, is negotiated through the use of exile formulas:

. . . ðæt se mon ne wat  
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð  
*hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ*  
winter wunade *wræccan lastum*,  
*winemægum bidoren*,  
bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag. (*Sfr* ll. 2b–17)

[. . . That the man does not know, he who most agreeably belongs on land, *how I, wretchedly anxious*, inhabited the ice-cold sea for the winter on the *tracks of an exile, deprived of dear-kin*, hung about by icicles; hail flew in showers.]

Here, the Seafarer distinguishes himself from the land-dweller, a distinction based not so much on his vocation but rather on his own experience of suffering, evoked in the conventional terms of exile. Anxiety, conveyed through the emotive element "*earmcearig*," continues its alliance with the winter sea in four half-lines. With the introduction of the "exile tracks," however, anxiety becomes a source of creative energy with transformational properties.

In *The Wanderer*, the winter sea accompanies formulaic expressions of movement in exile, and as in *The Seafarer*, it intensifies the emotive element of the exile collocation. The Wanderer, *modcearig* [anxious in mind, l. 2b], rows the

. . . hrimcealde sæ,  
*wadan wræclastas*. (ll. 4b–5a)  
[ice-cold sea, wades the exile tracks.]

The two half-lines, at line 24a, are conflated, condensing movement, winter, and anxiety into one verse unit: "*wod wintercearig*" [waded winter-anxious]. These two instances of winter and movement in exile frame the Wanderer's main concern about the disclosure of emotion.

Like the blues speaker who has “no one to take my cares to,” the Wanderer desires to reveal—to “sweotule asecgan” [clearly tell, l. 11a]—his “modsefan” [mind-thoughts, l. 10a]. While his need to be heard is frustrated (within the confines of the poem) by the fact that he no longer has trusted family or friends, personal voice is restricted even in the company of others. Anxiety intertwines with voice as social decorum dictates that the expression of emotion be suppressed. The order of society depends upon individual control of the “hreo hyge” [stormy mind, l. 15a] and is manifest in silence—an “act” of self-bondage:

. . . Ic to soþe wat  
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw,  
 þæt he his ferðlocan *fæste binde*,  
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille.  
 Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan,  
 ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman.  
 Forðon domgeorne dreorigne oft  
 in hyra breostcofan *bindað fæste*; . . . (ll. 11b–18)

[. . . I, in truth, know that it is, in a warrior, a noble virtue that he bind fast his mind-prison, hold his treasure-coffer, think as he will. Nor may a weary heart withstand fate nor the troubled mind perform help. Therefore, the reputation-eager often, in their breast-coffer, bind sorrow fast.]

The body becomes a prison and the public self a jailor. The mind and heart are represented as chambers within which thought and emotion are locked. The “ferðlocan” recalls the *fyrlocan* of hell in *Christ and Satan* in its containment of psychological turmoil. The metaphorical “hordcofan” [treasury] attaches value to personal feeling, and the “breostcofan” physically locates the source of emotion within the body. Throughout, the action of binding dominates the passage, emphasized with the repetition of “bindan” in line 13—þæt he his ferðlocan *fæste binde*—and echoed in line 18—in hyra breostcofan *bindað fæste*.

Once the Wanderer introduces his situation as an exile, the *ferðlocan* opens, and there occurs a reversal in control when emotion is externalized.

swa ic modsefan minne sceolde  
 oft *earncearig*, *eðle bidaled*,  
 feomægum feor feterum sælan,  
 siþþan geara iu goldwine minne  
 hrusan heolstre biwrah, *ond ic hean þonan*  
*wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind*; . . . (ll. 19–24)

[So, I—often miserably anxious, separated from home, far from kinsmen—must tie my mind-thoughts with fetters, since, years ago, I covered my

gold-friend with earth's darkness, and wretched, I thence waded winter-anxious over the fetter of waves.]

On the exile-track of the sea, the Wanderer is confronted with his own anxiety. While, in the previous lines, the objectivity of social custom simplified the dictum of silence (one should “healde his hordcofan,” e.g.), beyond the borders of community, the silencing fetters are distanced from the “modsefan,” delayed by the insertion of exile formulas. Two lines later, the fetters are transferred to the winter sea when the Wanderer explains that he “wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind.” The “fetter of waves” continues and reinforces the theme of binding oppression and the suppression of emotion. As in blues, the exile's personal struggle is manifest in the externalization of the psychological forces that threaten to subdue him.

Within the transitional space of the exile-track, the Wanderer voices his emotion, and indeed after line 25, his focus turns to “sorg” [sorrow, ll. 30, 39, and 50] and “cearo” [anxiety, l. 55]. As in *The Seafarer*, the experience of suffering in exile is presented as authoritative knowledge. Here, sorrow is personified as a traveling companion: “Wat se þe cunnað / hu sliþen bið sorg to geferan” [Learned is the one who knows how cruel sorrow is as a companion, *Wan* ll. 29a–30]. Again, the Wanderer asserts that he who is separated from his lord “wat” [knows, l. 37a] that

. . .sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre  
 earmne anhogan oft gebindað. (ll. 39–40)

[. . .sorrow and sleep gathered together often bind the miserable solitary-one.]

In both cases, the knowledge of sorrow is expressed through the device of personification, used to present the emotion as an oppressor. Like the personified Blues, Sorrow, in its partnership with sleep, dwells at the threshold between reality and illusion. The lines presented earlier introduce the lord–thane dream passage, a sequence that vacillates with the movement of the winter sea. The appearance and disappearance of images of past comfort enact poetic creation, which specifically demonstrates transformational powers: sea birds are changed into people. When the lord and kinsmen fade, “Sorg bið geniwad” [Sorrow is renewed, l. 50b] and, again, “Cearo bið geniwad” [Anxiety is renewed, l. 55b]: the sea and its wildlife are further transformed into emblems of misery.

In *Deor*, emotion is personified in a manner reminiscent of the blues line “Blues and trouble are my best friends”: Weland

hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longað,  
 wintercealde wræce; . . .(ll. 3–4a)

[had as his companions sorrow and longing, winter-cold exile; . . .]

Again, the binding nature of winter brings a physical aspect to the misery of “wræce” and anticipates the account of actual bondage that follows: Niðhad “nede legde” [laid fetters] on Weland. Sorrow and longing preside over the poem, embodied in turn by a succession of mytho-historical subjects, linking together each distinct moment of social struggle. The subjects are joined through their experience of psychological paralysis.

Deor employs the iconographical posture of sitting to convey the notion of entrapment. As in blues lyrics, sitting here marks deep thought and misery. Under the oppressive rule of Eormanric, the grim king of wolfish thought,

Sæt secg monig sorgum gebunden,  
wean on wenan, wyscte geneahhe  
þæt þæs cynerices ofercumen wære. (ll. 24–26)

[Many a warrior sat bound in sorrows, in expectation of woe, wishing frequently that the kingdom were overcome.]

“*Sorgum gebunden*,” a variation of the binding formula seen in *Christ and Satan* (at lines 38b, 58b, and 103a), presents sorrow as an oppressor binding those who can do nothing but wish for freedom. The stasis of sitting and thinking bridges the last section of the poem, which moves into Deor’s present:

Siteð sorgcearig, sælum bidæled,  
on sefan sweorced, sylfum þinceð  
þæt sy endeleas earfoða dæl. (ll. 28–30)

[If a man sits anxious in sorrow, separated from joys, he grows dark in mind; it seems to him that his share of hardships is endless.]

Sorrow and anxiety are united in “*sorgcearig*,” which, along with the deprivation formula “*sælum bidæled*,” recalls the “wræce” of Weland. Although sitting frustrates the expectation of physical movement in exile, here again we see the activation of emotive thought. In collapsing history into the present, Deor—a poet by vocation—merges himself with each of his subjects. In doing so, he demonstrates his poetic powers by using past stories to speak of present distress.

Although we have no knowledge of the poet-singer of *Deor* or the other laments, the highly self-reflexive dramatic quality of the poetry points to an original performance setting. The presence of the lament within longer narrative poems shows the importance of the form as a familiar and meaningful expression of sorrow and worry. In other words, the formula-generated themes of loss and displacement assume a point of reference

known to both poet and audience, a common experience that needs to be acknowledged. The experiential landscape of the laments, and blues, succinctly evoked by highly recognizable formulas of isolation, exile, and imprisonment, translates a difficult reality into imaginative, emotional terms. The process offers temporary psychological relief from devastating hardship. Given the strong thematic and emotive similarities between the two poetics, the fact that blues are informed by particular events and circumstances in American history encourages a parallel understanding of the original context and role of the Old English laments. The upheaval experienced by Anglo-Saxons in proximity to Viking invasions and settlements is a likely context for a poetry that seeks to help its listeners cope with a common emotional distress—loss of family, community or belongings; forced travel; violence and oppression.

The singer of the laments, then, would be more than an entertainer; like the blues artist, his business would be similar to that of the preacher in that he would guide his audience through a process of emotional release. The lonesome call of the displaced speaker of both the laments and blues connects the singer—poet with his audience at a deep, personal level to speak a common upheaval. Meanwhile, bondage imagery intensifies the emotional distress of loss and fear and emphasizes the struggle for control of self, of life. The poetic power is most strongly felt when the psychological state is externalized through personification. At these points, the effort to overcome oppressive forces is most clearly seen and is most moving.

The emotive call of both poetics continues to transcend the cultural and historical boundaries of its original audience, reaching new listeners attracted by its power. The second audience of the laments and of the blues invest new meaning in the poetry according to new needs and appreciation for the voice of loneliness.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANTHOLOGIZING SORROW

When an oral text moves beyond the boundaries of its original performance context, it encounters an audience lacking in the cultural interpretative skills with which to fully participate in its rhetorical strategies. The text's original meaning and purpose ultimately remain hidden from new listeners, removed in time and place, who attempt to gain access through what *is* apparent—its formal qualities. Two anthologies—the tenth-century Exeter Book and the 1952 *Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music*—can be viewed as documents significant in the presentation of oral texts to a new, second audience. Side by side, these two works demonstrate the impulse of the second audience to collect together the vocal poetics of texts that once existed as individual entities in an attempt to preserve, examine, show, and understand the voices of a significant, lost past.

In the case of both the Exeter Book and the *Folkways Anthology*, technology enabled the anthologization of the oral text: writing not only fixed the poems of the Exeter Book but also introduced interrelationships between them; the relatively new medium of the 33 1/3" LP in the 1950s allowed up to fifteen songs to be played in succession, facilitating the comparison of songs. Although, today, *The Wanderer* and Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave is Kept Clean" are both considered to be works of art in their own right, the anthologies that passed these songs on to us presented them as illustrative pieces within a large and very diverse collection of vernacular poetic expression. The anthologies participate in the construction of a "tradition" that may not have been recognized by the original audience of the texts. The Exeter Book and the *Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music* speak less of the original cultural context of their contents and more about the second audience's interest in the texts as aesthetic modes of expression.

### The Exeter Book Anthology

The Exeter Book survives as MS 3501, housed in the Library of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral. It has become standard to identify the manuscript as the book itemized in a list of Bishop Leofric's donations to the Cathedral: ".i. mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht" [one large English book about various things written in poetry].<sup>1</sup> The Exeter Book's square Anglo-Saxon minuscule script indicates that it was copied in the second half of the tenth century by a single scribe.<sup>2</sup> The location and date of the Exeter Book suggest that it was a product of the monastic revival.<sup>3</sup>

In comparison with the ornate illuminated manuscripts of the time, the Exeter anthology is relatively plain in appearance. MS 3501 contains 131 parchment leaves measuring "on the average 31.5 by 22 centimetres."<sup>4</sup> The anthology begins on folio 8 and consists of seventeen gatherings.<sup>5</sup> The parchment used for the collection varies in quality<sup>6</sup>; seventeen folios were defective at the time of copying, forcing the scribe to write text around a number of holes.<sup>7</sup> There also exist drypoint drawings, but they are unrelated to the adjacent text and at least four predate the writing.<sup>8</sup> Ornamentation occurs only in the form of decorative initials used to open poems; there are no ink illustrations. Patrick W. Conner's codicological and paleographical analysis of the Exeter Book divides the manuscript into three booklets: the first is comprised of folios 8–52 (*Christ I* through *Guthlac B*), the second of folios 53–97 (*Azarias* through *Partridge ll. 1–2a*), and the third of folios 98–130 (*Partridge ll. 2b–16*<sup>9</sup> through *Riddle 95*).<sup>10</sup> The soiled condition of folio 53r indicates that it was exposed at some point, serving as the front leaf of Booklets II and III.<sup>11</sup> If Conner is right, Booklet I may have existed independently before being bound with the others or, as he argues, was written last and then added to the front of the book.<sup>12</sup> When not in use as reading material, the Exeter Book apparently served as a cutting board (slashes exist on the front folio), a coaster (a circular stain from a pot of liquid—beer? glue?), and a storage container for goldleaf.<sup>13</sup>

The conservative, and even economical, production of the manuscript, combined with evidence of its donor, location, and date, suggest that the book of poetry was copied for (perhaps informal) use within a monastic community. The actual identities of and relationship between the poet(s),<sup>14</sup> the scribe, and the anthologist are unknown. However, a number of textual anomalies suggest that the Exeter scribe was neither the poet nor the compiler but, rather, employed to transcribe a completed exemplar. For example, some of the riddles are run together and, conversely, the *Husband's Message* is marked off as three independent poems.<sup>15</sup> Kenneth

Sisam points out a number of persistent spelling irregularities and unusual linguistic features throughout the Exeter Book.<sup>16</sup> He argues that the nature of such errors “point to a mechanical copyist”<sup>17</sup> and originate with the exemplar—possibly with the compiler. Although the question as to when the anthology was compiled will never be answered satisfactorily, the poems *Widsith* and *Deor* reflect a ninth-century interest in Germanic legend.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of whether the Exeter anthology was compiled in the ninth century or the tenth, it appears that its language was somewhat alien, removed in time or place, to the compiler.<sup>19</sup>

For the modern reader the Exeter anthology is a curious mix of sacred and secular, pagan and Christian, narrative and lyric, didacticism and play; from the hagiographical *Guthlac* poems and *Juliana* to the “jauntily indecent”<sup>20</sup> riddles, the Anglo-Saxon anthology of 190 (depending on how you count them) poems resists modern expectations of categorization and organization. S.A.J. Bradley sees the Exeter anthology as “a kind of poetic commonplace-book into which [the compiler] entered appealing poetry as he came across it.”<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Sisam observes, “the order of contents is generally haphazard. . . . It seems that the collection was put together by tacking on new groups or items as codices or single pieces came to hand.”<sup>22</sup> If the anthology was planned, why are the two Cynewulf poems not together and why are the two main groups of riddles separated by intervening poems? Why are the laments scattered throughout?

Attempts to discern an overall organizational principle have prioritized the Christian material. Bradley sees a general theme of penitence.<sup>23</sup> Muir argues that the first eight poems (*Christ I* through *Juliana*) present “different models for Christian living.”<sup>24</sup> James E. Anderson reads *Soul and Body II*, *Deor*, and *Wulf & Eadwacer* as an allegorical sequence on “the wasted life,” and the group from *Wife’s Lament* to *Ruin* as a riddlic sequence in which Germanic traditions are employed to parallel “the events of the Easter tridium.”<sup>25</sup> Conner argues that the Exeter anthology was written over a period of time, reflecting issues specific to certain phases of the Benedictine Reform; accordingly, he sees the poems of Booklets II and III as products of pre-Reform Continental influence (his specific example being the lament) and early Reform concerns and the *Christ* and *Guthlac* poems of last-written Booklet I as “long, rhetorical complex compositions, all concerning issues important to the Reform, and all employing techniques of structure and style appropriate to the artistic habits of the reformers.”<sup>26</sup>

But the poems of the Exeter Book are not constrained by religious didacticism; secular experience holds an equally important place in the collection. We might be overlooking the obvious: the anthology brings together poems that are (as the donation listing states) English and various. Multiplicity in itself is an important principle within the collection of

diverse genres, voices, and subject matter. The overall preoccupation with transmission of wisdom, both secular and sacred, employs multiplicity both in presentation and in method. The Exeter collection delights in enigma, indirection, hiding and revealing, a technique most readily seen in the riddles. Plurality enables the transformative process of unlocking—unbinding—hidden truths, and the process is one of wonder. Roberta Frank states, “A major theme in the Exeter Book from the opening Advent antiphons to the final riddles is the importance of wonder and the wondrous in accessing the divine.”<sup>27</sup> As she notes, the frequent occurrence of words such as “wundrum” (wondrously) and “wraetlic” (wondrous, rare) distinguish the Exeter Book from the other poetic codices.<sup>28</sup>

The opening lines of *Maxims I* could serve as an epigraph for the Exeter Book:

Frige mec frodum wordum! Ne læt þinne ferð onhæln,  
 degol þæt þu deopost cunne! Nelle ic þe min dyrne gesecgan,  
 gif þu me þinne hygecræft hylest ond þine heortan geþohtas.  
 Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan. (ll. 1–4a)

[Sound me out with wise words. Let not your mind be hidden, nor keep secret what you know most deeply. I will not speak my secret to you if you hide from me your wisdom and your heart's thoughts. Wise men must exchange sayings.]

The act of reading the Exeter Book is an exchange between the poetic speakers and reading listeners. The texts teach the reader to recognize and interpret wonder, and through the act of interpretation, the reader learns to appreciate and participate in the wonder of the texts. The collection presents its poetry not only as examples of written art but also as source material for the composition of poetry. For instance, *The Riming Poem* demonstrates a particular technical skill. The catalogue poems, *The Gifts of Men*, *Precepts*, *The Fortunes of Men*, and *Maxims I*, as a group, represent a particular method of communicating wisdom based on multiplicity. Each poem has its own consciously constructed “inner logic of form.”<sup>29</sup> Explicitly designed to teach, the catalogue poems itemize individual aspects of human life and the physical world, and weave them together into an intricate tapestry of existence. The *sum* catalogues of human skills and talents, found in *Gifts* and *Fortunes*, are deliberately long enough to emphasize variety: one man is strong, one is handsome, one is gifted with song, and so on. Singly, the attributes are interpreted as separate gifts from God; together, they demonstrate God's artistic powers:

Swa wraetlice weoroda nergend  
 geond middangeard monna cræftas

scop ond scyrede ond gesceapo ferede  
 æghwylcum on eorþan eormencynnes. (*Fortunes* ll. 93–96)

[Thus wondrously has the Saviour of the multitudes throughout the world shaped and appointed the skills of men and directed the destiny of each of humankind on earth.]

The catalogue poems' consciousness of the craft of poetry is most obvious in *Widsith* and *Deor*, which both feature a scop as speaker and employ the catalogue as an organizing principle.<sup>30</sup> While the catalogue poems teach their reader how to read the poetry of life, they also offer source material for the further composition of poetry. *Widsith* and *Deor* provide a list of allusions to other stories. *Cynewulf* utilizes the *sum* list in *Christ II* (at lines 664–685).<sup>31</sup> A maxim is uttered by the Seafarer: "Dol biþ se þe him his dryhten ne ondrædeþ; cymeð him se deað unþinged" [Foolish is he who does not fear his lord; death comes to him unexpected, l. 106].<sup>32</sup>

The reading lesson of the catalogue poems is continued throughout the Exeter Book. *The Phoenix*, *The Panther*, and *The Whale* describe an animal wondrous in its physical appearance and behavior and then interpret the description as an extended religious metaphor: the Phoenix becomes the individual righteous soul, the Panther becomes the Lord, and the Whale becomes the Devil. Notably, *Phoenix* contains eight occurrences of "wundrum," three of which are combined with "wætlic."<sup>33</sup> These poems are related to the "giedd" composed by Job in *Christ II*, which we are told employs a bird in flight to explain the Ascension, but only certain people are able to construe the poem's meaning:

Wæs þæs fugles flyht feondum on eorþan  
 dyrne ond degol, þam þe deorc gewit  
 hæfdon on hreþre, heortan stænne. (ll. 639–641)

[The flight of this bird was concealed and hidden from the enemies on earth who had dim perception in mind and a stony heart.]

The Jews could not interpret the poem because they would not acknowledge the "monig mislicu" [many and various] signs of God throughout the earth.<sup>34</sup> Thus, for their second audience, the texts are presented in the Exeter Book as containers of Christian significance, which can be unlocked only by a Christian reader.

The emphasis placed on the reader to interpret—to unlock—metaphors is explicit in the riddles that demand "Saga hwæt ic hatte" [Say what I am called]. Here, transformation, multiplicity, and wonder is most pronounced. Pauline E. Head observes, "Most generally, the riddles function as metaphors, involving the reader in producing similarity through difference."<sup>35</sup>

The challenge of naming the object is complicated because its “identity is not represented as being stable and unified; the object/creature goes through transformations, and the reader, glimpsing facets of its world, witnesses contradiction and change.”<sup>36</sup> The “elliptic, fragmented” description of the speaker’s environment, often presented in a series of *hwilum* [sometimes] statements, as Head argues, sheds light on the shifting perspective of the laments,<sup>37</sup> but it also echoes the view and manner of the catalogue poems.

A number of the Exeter poems employ a prison setting to enact the process of unlocking. The antiphonal lyrics of *Christ I* work to free the imprisoned exiles of hell and earth. In *Azarias*, religious faith, manifest in song, protects the fettered youths in the furnace. The poem is an excerpt from the story of Daniel and, in fact, shares its first seventy-six lines with lines 279–362 of the Junius 11 *Daniel*.<sup>38</sup> In *Daniel*, Nebuchadnezzar perceives the event as a miracle, a “wundor” (l. 458)—although it does not change him for the better—and leads quickly into the two interpretation episodes in which Daniel reads the king’s dream and then the holy graffiti. Within these three hundred lines of *Daniel wondor* occurs eleven times. In selecting the furnace episode, the Exeter compiler accomplishes three things: he highlights the act (and result) of voicing inner thoughts (*Azarias ingeponcum / hleoprede*, ll. 1b–2a), connects *Azarias* to other speakers in the collection, and also alludes to a narrative of interpretation.

In *Juliana*, the imprisoned heroine physically forces a devil to disclose trade secrets, which are based upon deception—misguided interpretation. Only the poem’s audience is privy to the significance of her struggle; within the poem, the heathens outside the walls of her cell never learn. In *Soul and Body II*, the soul rants about the evils of his fleshly prison and indulges in a grisly celebration of his release. *The Descent into Hell* recounts Christ’s rescue of hell’s exiles: the “locu feollan, / clustor of þam castrum; cyning in oprad” [locks and bars fell off that prison; the king entered in, ll. 39b–40]. The second half of *Descent* comprises a speech of praise similar to the prayers of *Christ I*; as in *Azarias*, the song is an integral part of the release.

Three of the remaining poems do not employ a prison to show the transcendence of the expression of faith but rather focus on the transmission of revealed wisdom. *Vainglory* and *The Order of the World* are found in the neighborhood of the catalogue poems and like them are concerned with passing on ancient knowledge. As with *Precepts*, both poems are explicit in the transmission of wisdom from an authoritative source. In *Vainglory*, the speaker discloses what he has learned from an ancient sage, wise in books, who “Wordhord onwreah” [revealed his word-hoard, l. 3a] and in “ærcwīde” [ancient speech, l. 4b] spoke of “sundorwundra fela” [many separate wonders, l. 2b]. In *Order*, the reader is urged to ask the traveling

stranger, a “woðbora” [speaker of eloquence, l. 2a], about the world’s creatures, those “wundra fela” [many wonders, l. 7a] God brings to humans. Each creature is a “orgeate tacen” [clear sign, l. 8b] to the one who, through wisdom, knows the world. We are told that the wise know what long ago was spoken with “gliwes cræfte” [music, l. 11b] and “gieddingum” [songs, l. 12a]; through asking, saying, and remembering most men knew the “searoruna gespon” [web of mysteries, l. 15b]. Each poem acts as a self-conscious transmitter of ancient knowledge, teaching the new reader to interpret signs.

In quite a different manner, *The Husband’s Message* is also preoccupied with communication, not across time but across distance. In combination with the preceding *Riddle 60*, solved as a reed pen, a sequence arises in which the “muðleas” [mouthless, l. 9b] speech of the pen is made visible in the runes at the end of *Husband’s Message*. Pauline Head notes that in *Riddle 60* the two different mediums of speaking and writing are treated as interchangeable modes of communication: “The poem describes the act of writing, but always in comparison to that of speaking; the instrument of writing is mouthless, unlike a speaker, but it performs its function at the mead bench, taking the place of oral speech.”<sup>39</sup> The paradox is inherent in the entire anthology: the poems transmit the spoken words by means of a mouthless pen.

When seen in the context of the Exeter anthology, the laments remain distinct in their emotive intensity but also participate in the collection’s premise of multiplicity and communication. Like the traveling strangers of *Order* and *Widsith*, there is something to be learned from the roaming speakers of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *Deor*. It is probably no coincidence that *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are found among the catalogue poems: they feature authoritative speakers who unlock their thoughts and wisdom. The Wanderer reads physical signs such as the “weal wundrum heah” [wall wondrously high, l. 98a]. The Seafarer’s “soðgied” [truth-song, l. 1b] is related to the “gieddingum” [*Order*, l. 12a] of long ago, which communicated the web of mysteries. The male lament speakers share with their female counterparts a predilection for indirection and enigma. *Wulf & Eadwacer* and *The Wife’s Lament* occur at either end of the first group of riddles with which they share their shifting, fragmented expressions. Each of the confined speakers of these two poems presents a *giedd*,<sup>40</sup> which to this day has yet to be unlocked.

The Exeter Book preserves and perpetuates the sound and sight of strange old texts, giving their individual formal conventions a new significance. The many voices are brought together to show variety, transformation, and communication of wisdom as a method of comprehending Christian truth.

### **The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music**

Two years before Robert Johnson's first recording session, Leadbelly attended the 1934 MLA Conference in Pennsylvania. His role there was to demonstrate the folk songs discussed by folklorist and Library of Congress archivist John Lomax. The first of two presentations took place at the Friday night smoker, listed in the program as

Negro Folksongs and Ballads, presented by John and Alan Lomax with the assistance of a Negro minstrel from Louisiana.<sup>41</sup>

The second was given the following morning in a Comparative Literature session:

Comments on Negro Folksongs (illustrated with voice and guitar by Negro convict Leadbelly of Louisiana) John A. Lomax, Library of Congress.<sup>42</sup>

Leadbelly's appearance at the MLA is significant in the introduction of African American vernacular song to a new audience. Although John Lomax had previously played his field recordings for MLA participants,<sup>43</sup> the actual presence of Leadbelly "brought home to one of the nation's largest gathering of academics a sense of the living folk music tradition."<sup>44</sup>

The image of Leadbelly's presence at the MLA is an emblem of incongruity, capturing the factors affecting the reception of oral texts by a second audience. The racial, cultural, and social divide between Leadbelly's music and the audience is pronounced in the academic conference setting. A brief account of Leadbelly's career shows how a second audience embraced blues as an art form with political significance.

Lomax met Leadbelly (born Huddie Ledbetter) in the Angola State Prison Farm in Baton Rouge during a field recording trip. The researcher chose the segregated and isolated conditions of penitentiaries as prime locations for his search for material free from outside intervention. Lomax believed that in such locations the folk songs of African Americans "in musical phrasing and in poetic content, are most unlike those of the white race, the least contaminated by white influence or by modern Negro jazz."<sup>45</sup> Despite Lomax's desire for "uncontaminated" material, Leadbelly's work exhibits the cross-pollination between African American song, traditional white rural songs (which would come to be known as "hillbilly" and, later, "country" music), and popular mainstream tunes. The exchange of musical and textual material between black blues and white country can be easily heard on recordings of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The work of Jimmie Rodgers, for example, was heavily influenced by the African

American music he grew up with in Mississippi.<sup>46</sup> His trademark yodeling vocal style, exaggerating the falsetto used by Mississippi blues singers (such as Tommy Johnson), sold millions of records to whites and blacks.<sup>47</sup> The cross-borrowing between white and black musicians can be seen with Rodgers' famous "Blue Yodel" (the first of thirteen versions), which was released on February 3, 1928. Within a year, the song's line "T for Texas, T for Tennessee" appeared in at least three blues recordings, the earliest recorded only ten days after the release of "Blue Yodel."<sup>48</sup>

Leadbelly's MLA appearance attracted much media attention, ushering the singer and Lomax into New York City for a three month whirlwind of interviews and performances, both live and on screen.<sup>49</sup> The pair worked together: Lomax contextualized the songs and Leadbelly performed them. Although Leadbelly's vast repertoire included blues and popular songs, his white audiences heard only Lomax's idea of African American "folk" music—Leadbelly was kept to "old-time" hollers, work songs, and ballads.

Despite the publicity, Leadbelly never achieved commercial success with black audiences. ARC recorded forty songs for its "race" labels, all of which were blues, including a few versions of Blind Lemon Jefferson songs.<sup>50</sup> Two records were released as test cases, and both failed to sell enough copies to warrant further releases. Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell comment, "It didn't seem to dawn on ARC that Huddie's audience was not necessarily among the black families that routinely bought race records, but among northern white audiences who liked to hear Huddie's version of 'Irene' and 'Governor Pat Neff.'" <sup>51</sup> Poor sales may also have been due to a shift in musical tastes toward the sound of "city" blues. For whatever reason, Leadbelly never gained an African American following. Instead, to white middle-class urban audiences, he became, along with Woodie Guthrie, a folk icon in which protest and music merged.

After Leadbelly and Lomax parted ways, the singer was embraced by the political and social activists associated with the Popular Front.<sup>52</sup> In 1937, Richard Wright devoted one of his *Daily Worker* columns to Leadbelly, entitled "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People." The piece presents the singer as a symbol of African American history, art, and strength: "it seems that the entire folk culture of the American Negro has found its embodiment in him."<sup>53</sup> Wright significantly reinterprets the prison story, shifting the focus from the sensational details of Leadbelly's crimes to the crimes of the Jim Crow system: "This hard stocky black man sang his way through the Louisiana swamplands, . . . and out of two state prisons where he was sent for protecting himself against the aggression of Southern whites."<sup>54</sup> Wright criticizes Lomax for being responsible for "one of the most amazing cultural swindles

in American history” by exploiting the singer’s talent, refusing him a contract, and leaving him financially strapped.<sup>55</sup> Wright sees Leadbelly’s songs as powerful weapons against injustice; when the Emergency Relief Bureau denied Leadbelly assistance, “the folksinger threatened to write a song about the rotten relief methods and the relief authorities granted his demands.”<sup>56</sup> The article interprets Leadbelly’s blues and ballads as effective vehicles of protest.

Leadbelly appeared regularly with Guthrie, Aunt Molly Jackson, Pete Seeger, and others at Popular Front music events and on radio programs, such as Alan Lomax’s *Back Where I Come From*.<sup>57</sup> In 1940, he recorded *The Midnight Special and Other Prison Songs* for RCA Victor. Also released that year was Josh White’s *Chain Gang* (Columbia) and Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* (RCA). Michael Denning sees each record as “a landmark in American vernacular music”:

In all three cases, the singers were packaged thematically: Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl* songs were intended to capitalize on the success of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the albums of White and Leadbelly were issued to capitalize on the popular exposés of the South’s oppressive convict labor system, which had come to national attention through John Spival’s muckraking journalism and the Paul Muni film, *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*. As a result the three albums are somewhat artificial. Nevertheless, each was a powerful work of art, and their appearance on major labels marked a unique moment in American popular culture.<sup>58</sup>

Josh White, along with blues singers Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and the Golden Gate Quartet, hailed from the Piedmont, an industrial area known for black labor and political activism.<sup>59</sup> These singers, along with Leadbelly, performed with the Almanacs, to which belonged Pete Seeger, Bess Lomax, and Woody Guthrie.<sup>60</sup>

The Almanacs exposed young urban audiences to blues, hillbilly, and other forms of rural music. The group was noteworthy in encouraging the audience to participate in sing-alongs; Cantwell observes,

the Almanacs were altering the conventional relation between performer and audience in a nascent social sphere. The group’s informality and conscientious nonprofessionalism opened to the audience a new sense of access, . . . the entire performance space being redefined to bring audience and musicians together into active participation. It was a music of symbolic social leveling. . .<sup>61</sup>

Although Seeger and company acted as intermediaries between “the people” and urban audiences, they themselves were not the “folk” of the songs they performed. The irony of the group’s attempt to impersonate the working

class, or its somewhat romanticized view of workers, was not lost on them:

“There I was,” Seeger recalled, “trying my best to shed my Harvard upbringing, scorning to waste money on clothes other than blue jeans. But Leadbelly always had a clean white shirt and starched collar, well-pressed suit and shined shoes. He didn’t need to affect that he was workingman.”<sup>62</sup>

Later, the *Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music* would impress upon its audience the distinct performance styles of traditional performers, a revelation that would spark among folk music revivalists the hotly debated issue of “authentic” performance. In the meantime, however, political ideology took precedence: “Aunt Molly Jackson and Leadbelly, though unquestionably authentic, were ideologically unpredictable, while in the Almanacs the left had, through impersonation, both embodied folksingers and trustworthy ideological exemplars.”<sup>63</sup> For its second audience, blues was a form of entertainment but one loaded with political purpose. Whether “original” performers, such as Leadbelly, shared the political vision of their new audience is difficult to discern. Leadbelly’s biography provides a look at how members of a second audience attempt to filter, categorize, and reinterpret the art—the voice, the lives—of another culture in a search for authenticity. The aesthetic appreciation white, urban outsiders have for blues music arises, to some degree, from a combination of academic curiosity and a romanticization of the genre—its history and its performers. The second audience’s courtship of blues reflects a desire for some kind of truth within a climate of social crisis. The 1952 *Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music* followed Leadbelly in its offering of various types of American vernacular song but presents them as remnants of a lost American ideal.

In 1952, the *Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music* introduced the folk revival audience to acoustic blues and hillbilly tunes that had been recorded twenty years before. This three volume LP set reissues eighty-four songs previously released on 78 rpm discs between 1927 and 1932, drawn from the extensive collection of the avant-garde filmmaker, artist, collector Harry Smith.<sup>64</sup> Significantly, the *Anthology* reintroduced the recordings commercially but within a whole new market of folk music. The LP format surpassed previous literary collections of songs in its ability to offer audio examples of a vast array of performance styles. The *Anthology* was the first part of a (never completed) series aimed at tracing the development of American music and the impact of recording on that development. In the accompanying Handbook, Smith writes,

Only through recordings is it possible to learn of those developments that have been so characteristic of American music, but which are unknowable

through written transcriptions alone. Then too, records of the type found in the present set played a large part in stimulating these historic changes by making easily available to each other the rhythmically and verbally specialized musics of groups living in mutual social and cultural isolation.<sup>65</sup>

Smith's awareness of the cultural distance between the songs of his *Anthology* and their new listeners is evident in the physical packaging. His esoteric interest in alchemy serves as an external decorative theme, encouraging an overall cohesion and a view of the songs as elemental vehicles to the mystical. The theme of alchemy emphasizes the *Anthology's* role in the initiation of outsiders. The original cover art, as Cantwell describes it, was an etching by "Theodore DeBry from Fludd's four-volume *History of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm*, published in Germany between 1617 and 1619. The drawing shows the hand of God tuning, on what appears to be a dulcimer, the Celestial Monochord, that is, creating the heavenly harmony to unite the base elements of earth, air, fire, and water."<sup>66</sup> Each record volume represented an element, issued in red, blue, and green (the proposed volume four was to be brown). Later, in the 1960s, Irwin Silber replaced the cover with a "Ben Shahn Farm Security Administration photograph of a battered, starving farmer, effectively transforming Smith's alchemical allegory into Depression-style protest art," an image, Greil Marcus notes, that reflected the trend of envisioning poverty "as ennobling and the poor themselves. . . as art statements, it was a smart commercial move."<sup>67</sup>

The inclusion of the twenty-five-page Handbook anticipated the listener's need for assistance in his or her encounter with the *Anthology's* collection of diverse vocal and musical styles. With the exception of some quotations appearing at the end of the annotations, the Handbook departs from the alchemical theme and takes on the look of an old-fashioned catalogue. An assortment of antiquated printer's devices, old record catalogue images of performers, and pictures of musical instruments frame and decorate the scholarly notes producing a visual notion of a quaint and curious past.

In compiling the *Anthology*, Smith's criterion for selection of material was one of representation not excellence; he explains,

The Anthology was not an attempt to get all the best records (there are other collections where everything is supposed to be beautiful), but a lot of these were selected because they were odd—an important version of the song, or one which came from some particular place. For example, there were things from Texas included that weren't very good.<sup>68</sup>

The eighty-four selections are organized into three broad musicological categories: volume one contains "Ballads," volume two "Social Music"

(divided into secular and sacred), and volume three “Songs,” which include blues. These categories deliberately avoid the segregation of singers by race or region, a significant feature of the collection that opposes earlier marketing practices.<sup>69</sup> During a 1968 interview, Smith recalled,

Before the Anthology there had been a tendency in which records were lumped into blues catalogs or hillbilly catalogs, and everybody was having blindfold tests to prove they could tell which was which. That’s why there’s no such indications of that sort (color/racial) in the albums. I wanted to see how well certain jazz critics did on the blindfold test. They all did horribly. It took years before anybody discovered that Mississippi John Hurt wasn’t a hillbilly.<sup>70</sup>

Along with Hurt, African American singers such as Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Furry Lewis appear side-by-side with white performers such as the Carter Family, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, and Uncle Dave Macon. The racial and regional mix also effectively disrupted what Cantwell calls the “socialist romance” of New Dealers with “preindustrial” peoples:

We do not have, then, Labor Songs or Mountain Songs or Songs of the Cowboy or Songs of the Negro, picturesque conceptions that enforce in one realm distinctions proper to another by supposing that music observes racial, occupational, regional, and other social boundaries. Of course music *does* observe such boundaries—but with hopeless irregularity and inconsistency.<sup>71</sup>

The Handbook guides the listener through the “odd” musical terrain. It is easy to overlook the irony of reading the written word as a necessary step in gaining access to the oral traditions of rural America. While it is perfectly reasonable for a newcomer to listen to the *Anthology* without recourse to the Handbook, the need to make sense of the unfamiliar vocal and musical styles would motivate the interested listener to seek additional information.<sup>72</sup> The Handbook tells the listener how to listen by drawing attention to the formal aspects of the songs, their performance, and their transmission. Smith’s annotations provide discographical information on the recording (title, name of artist, recording date, issue number), a condensed transcription of the lyrics, source notes for lyrics of ballads, notes on musical and vocal stylistics, and further bibliographical and discographical references.<sup>73</sup> Smith employs the notes to identify a text’s representative qualities and its similarities to others.

The ballads of volume one dwell on death and misfortune as we catch glimpses of sinking ships, train wrecks, murder, the scaffold, suicide, failed

crops, and outlaws. The notes guide the listening reader through this landscape according to historical chronology: the sequence moves from European descendents, which are ordered according to their Child ballad number (such as “Henry Lee”—Child no. 68 as “Young Hunting,” and “Old Lady and the Devil”—Child no. 278), to American originals such as “Charles Giteau,” whose speaker is President Garfield’s assassin, and “Gonna Die with My Hammer in My Hand,” a version of “John Henry.” For this volume, Smith concentrates on sources and variations of lyrics, and for the “The Wagoners Lad,” he explains how “word clusters and entire verses” recur in many songs. He refers the reading listener to four other selections, all of which appear on volume three and share formulas with “The Wagoners Lad.” With the help of the notes, the sequence of ballads carries the listener geographically across the Atlantic and forward through time.

The “Social Music” of volume two offers secular dance tunes on one record and sacred music on the other. The secular selections provide examples of different musical instruments and instrumental combinations. For example, the first four songs are placed together for comparison as the notes direct attention to the banjo of “Sail Away Lady” and the violin-guitar of the following “The Wild Wagoner,” which is in turn compared to a more complex instrumental arrangement in the next “Wake Up Jacob,” and again to that of the Acadian performance of “LaDanseuse—Fox Trot.” There are four Acadian selections on this volume, employed to illustrate the distinct features of Acadian melody, rhythm, and accordion playing. Smith also treats interesting interpolations of music such as that of the “hymn tune ‘At the Cross’ “ into “Moonshiners Dance (Part 1).”<sup>74</sup>

The selections representing sacred music expose the listener to “lined hymns,” “shape note” songs, and “fuguing tunes,” along with performance techniques such as chanting, call-and-response, and hand clapping. Throughout this section, a rough historical progression emerges from “Must Be Born Again” and “Oh Death Where is Thy Sting” by Rev. J.M. Gates, illustrating a movement from “one of the earliest modes of Christian religious singing in this country” to the “advanced style of singing” of the last selection, “I’m In the Battle Field of My Lord” by Rev. D.C. Rice and His Sanctified Congregation.<sup>75</sup>

The Songs of volume three encompass travel, disappointment, betrayal, jail, and defiance. Technically, Smith aimed at the representation of as many states as possible. The notes to this section specifically identify each singer’s region: Kentucky (represented by Buell Kazee), Tennessee (Uncle Dave Macon) and specifically Memphis (Cannon’s Jug Stompers and the Memphis Jug Band), Louisiana (the Acadian Didier Herbert and the New Orleans musician Richard “Rabbit” Brown), Virginia (the Carter Family

and the Stoneman Family), and Texas (Blind Lemon Jefferson). But while regional distinctions are noted, attention to what Smith calls “folk-lyric elements” destabilizes the idea of performance differences with evidence of textual similarities. The notes to the first song, Clarence Ashley’s “The Coo Coo Bird,” remind us of the interchange of phrases and verses between folk songs. For instance, “The Mountaineer’s Courtship” ends with the very familiar “Run and tell Aunt Sally” verse.<sup>76</sup> Five songs, all pertaining to prison, are grouped together as examples of formulaic composition.<sup>77</sup> For Julius Daniels’s “Ninety-Nine Year Blues,” Smith refers the reader to Robert Johnson’s “Last Fair Deal Gone Down” and Booker Washington White’s “Parchman Farm” as two more recent recordings (not included on the *Anthology*) that share the song’s formulas.<sup>78</sup> Thematically, the prison songs connect to Uncle Dave Macon’s “Way Down The Old Plank Road,” which leads to another group of five songs, this time demonstrating work songs. Of this group, Mississippi John Hurt’s “Spike Driver Blues” is another version of “John Henry,” which, in recalling “Gonna Die with My Hammer in My Hand” of the ballad section, shows how subject matter does not obey genre classifications.

Overall, the selections and arrangement of songs offer a view of life burdened with hardship and incarceration, punctuated by remembrances of murder, disaster, and outlaws. In the midst of this life, and the *Anthology*, the Folk dance and find hope in God. The listener is forced to consider the songs in relation to each other within their new context, despite the variety of vocal and musical styles. The Handbook emphasizes intertextual (and intermusical) relationships not just between the songs contained in the *Anthology* but also with those outside it. Throughout, the notion of isolated development of musical traditions is simultaneously presented and questioned.<sup>79</sup> The Handbook’s index meticulously cross-references themes and lexicon, such as “prison,” “railroad,” “death,” and “dreams.” The *Anthology* and its apparatus harmonize its diverse voices, instrumentations, and styles through a vision of an alternative musical heritage, challenging “what was considered to be the world culture of high class music.”<sup>80</sup> It was highly significant in stimulating the reception of folk music, including blues, by a second audience, which celebrates the collection as “the founding document of the American folk revival.”<sup>81</sup> Many listeners were inspired to emulate the performances, collect early recordings, and seek out the performers heard on the *Anthology*. Artists such as Mississippi John Hurt found themselves performing once again, but this time the venues and audience were very different. In 1959, Samuel Charters’s publication *The Country Blues*, which features a chapter on Robert Johnson, led a blues revival that lasted until about 1970, only to resurface in the 1980s.

Both the Exeter Book and the *Anthology of American Folk Music* employ the principle of variety to convey a vision of truth. The Exeter Book compiler

employs multiplicity as a formal feature and as an interpretative device to participate in the wonder of God's power and the hope of future salvation. Harry Smith employs multiplicity to contemplate an American past, one connected to land and people, authentic in its honesty and simplicity. Both anthologies explicitly teach their audience how to listen to the spoken and musical voices of the texts. Both anthologies construct meaning through selection, arrangement, and explanation. The original significance of each text is altered in its new anthologized existence and by the views of its new listeners.

The Folkways *Anthology* provides a model of transmission and reception of oral texts by successive audiences. Recording technology of the 1920s had a profound impact on the circulation and stabilization of initially isolated vernacular expression. The commercial success of blues records simultaneously reinforced and limited the development of the genre. The lyrical and musical formulas that identified a blues song became even more necessary as a common language to be shared with an unseen, distant audience. Commercial success also resulted in the transmission of blues through the object of the record to its second audience; it is only because a surplus of records still existed that Harry Smith discovered blues and other forms of folk music and was able to reintroduce them through the *Anthology*. It took about fifty years for the blues to travel from its inception, as a form unto itself, to its reception by a new audience. The ballads, on the other hand, took anywhere from forty to five hundred years to reach the *Anthology*.<sup>82</sup> Almost another fifty years has passed since the *Anthology's* first release, and, as before, new technology, this time the CD, allows the collection to be rereleased to a new generation of listeners.

At some point, the appeal of the orally transmitted lament was recognized and written down. Circulated in manuscript, the lament stabilized as a form, distinguished by its particular formulas, which like those of blues had to connect the poet with an absent audience. The survival of these manuscripts enabled the compiler of the Exeter anthology to include them as examples of old poetry. By giving its contents new meaning, the Exeter Book preserved and perpetuated the use of those poetic forms. As we have seen, the old fashioned lament is put into the mouth of the ancient Satan in the Junius manuscript and is employed in poetic interludes of history chronicles.<sup>83</sup>

The Exeter Book's emphasis on the act of unlocking hidden meaning illuminates the significance of Smith's Handbook as a guide to new musical and lyrical territory. For the audience of both anthologies, reading is integral to the experience of oral texts. But for all the attention the compilers give to formal varieties of structure, voice, and technique, the texts themselves remain ultimately mysterious. The riddling poems of the Exeter

Book, which hide and reveal, shift and change, challenge the listeners of the American *Anthology* to admit how little we really understand about those songs. Even after the *Anthology*'s "Masked Marvel" is unveiled as Charley Patton, and the words to his "Mississippi Boveavil Blues" are eventually worked out, the urban, middle class listener will never fully appreciate the significance of a talking boll-weevil. The Exeter Book reminds us that the songs of the *Anthology* hide more than they reveal.

## CONCLUSION: STRANGE YET FAMILIAR

*Oh, can't you hear that wind howl? (Robert Johnson, "Come On In My Kitchen")*  
*Gehyrest þu. . . ? [Do you hear. . . ?]*

—*Wulf and Eadwacer*, l.16a [or *W&E*, l. 16a]

Today's North American mainstream society immediately recognizes the sound of blues as an expression of hardship. Evidence of this is easy to find: in television advertising, the authentic art of blues guitar regularly calls to a pre-middle-aged, hard-working, need-a-beer population and provides a background for the consumer's search for satisfaction. Words are no longer required; instead, product advertisers replace the lyrics with a visual image, effectively manipulating the vocal poetics of desire.

In a sense, this process of historical and cultural recontextualization, by which a blues song like Robert Johnson's "Hell Hound On My Trail" finds its way to a 1990s beer ad, takes the blues formula full circle. Once again, the blues presumes an audience that can interpret the essence of its newly diluted (and distorted) meaning. Although the symbolic quality of the music carries the intricate vocal utterances of thousands of earlier blues songs, the erasure of the verbal text by advertisers disconnects the blues "tradition" from its vocal origins in order to facilitate a relationship between a revised "blues tradition" and its new audience. A version of this process of reception for Old English poetry (aside from the appearance of *Beowulf* as a comic book action-hero) is a recording of *Deor*, to which I have had the pleasure of listening.<sup>1</sup> The poetic text is sung in Old English and set to a popular style of rock music. In this case, the preservation of the language honors the text by retaining its original utterance; yet, such an act in a society where there no longer exist native speakers of Old English, in effect, erases the text. Further inquiry into the nature of the presence of blues and Old English poetry in today's popular culture might reveal an audience in need of a tradition of uninhibited expression with which to utter personal and public disillusionment, alienation, and anxiety.

My study of Old English laments and African American blues has listened to the voices of their texts call and respond to each other. As seen

in chapter 1, both poetries are self-reflexive in their presentation of speakers who are aware of their role as performers. Formulaic introductions and touchstones, such as *I got the blues*, evoke a performance environment within which the poet-singer engages his or her unseen audience. The mechanical borders of the text simultaneously capture and release the expression of emotional turmoil, chaotic in its shifting perspective and discontinuity. The speakers' refusal to individualize themselves encourages the transformation of an intensely personal utterance into a public expression of shared experience. This experience—lived by the original audience—is rooted in the here and now. The Old English lament is decidedly earthbound, yet, like blues, appears to have a performative affiliation with the uplifting sermon. The juxtaposition of lament and homily in *Christ and Satan* suggests that the Anglo-Saxons may have perceived the lament as a performative poetry.

All that is distinct in the vocal poetics of the blues and the laments—the first-person speaker, the melancholic mood, the themes of hardship and loneliness—is produced by formulas. The case study of Robert Johnson's blues recordings offered a perspective with which certain issues arising in the scholarship pertaining to the "orality" of Old English poetry can be viewed. The context of blues recording similarly complicates the application of Parry-Lord's theory of oral poetry. The complex structural design of one take of each song clearly reflects Johnson's prior preparation, rehearsal, and memorization of his texts; at the same time, however, a number of the alternate takes reveal improvised composition. Writing played a role in both composition and transmission of blues songs. The relatively elaborate, cohesive structure of Johnson's blues reflect the use of writing; even so, 70 percent of his lyrics employ conventional blues formulas found in the recordings of other singers. The second take of "Come On In My Kitchen" replaces the unique (non-formulaic) material of take 1 with developed lines and stanzas. Some see the use of "stock" or "ossified" stanzas as a sign of a stagnant and dying oral tradition, but my study of blues leads me to conclude that such a suggestion reveals the aesthetic judgment of an outsider who imposes a conception of "originality" that is alien to formulaic poetry. The view fails to see how successful communication with distant audiences requires a common language of stabilized formulas. Furthermore, Johnson's lyrics reveal how the well-established blues formula can be expressed in innovative ways. Familiarity combined with surprise is a key factor in the communication of blues. Ironically, Johnson's departure from the blues convention of a loose associative lyric structure appeals to a new audience with Western expectations of structural and thematic unity. Today's audience praises his work as an advanced form of blues: "Robert Johnson's music remains the touchstone against which the achievement of the blues is measured."<sup>2</sup>

As in blues, the themes, mood, and landscape of the Old English lament are generated formulaically. Although the formulas associated with exile and with confinement are found throughout Old English poetry, they converge in the laments to be spoken by a voice of personal experience. Chapter 3 examined the paradox of this convergence. The exile is physically free yet confined by his own anxiety. On the blues road or Old English *wræclast*, apart from social restrictions, the speaker reveals personal anguish, and that act of speech is also an act of creation and transformation. Within the poetic interior realm, the oppression of worry and sorrow is personified and confronted by the speaker. The process is a poetic ritual of release. For the original blues audience, the value of this ritual was significant. Ralph Ellison writes,

Bessie Smith might have been a “blues queen” to the society at large, but within the tighter Negro community where the blues were part of a total way of life, and a major expression of an attitude toward life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group and man’s ability to deal with chaos.<sup>3</sup>

The Old English laments may have served a similar purpose for their original audience. If the lament was performed before an audience, the voice of lonely struggle would have been shared publicly as a self- and group-affirming ritual, celebratory in the acknowledgment, confrontation, and release of the anxiety of hardship.

The emotive intensity of blues and the laments continue to attract new listeners and readers, who attempt to understand the strange wanderings of these texts. One of the more famous members of the second audience of traditional folk music is quoted as saying in the mid-1960s,

“All the authorities who write about what is and what it should be,” Dylan said, “when they say keep it simple, [that it] should be easily understood—folk music is the only music where it isn’t simple. It’s never been simple. It’s weird. . .”<sup>4</sup>

Bob Dylan’s observation, based on performance experience, illuminates the barriers encountered by outsiders to the poetry of blues and the laments. As discussed in chapter 4, second audience members, raised outside the historical and social context of blues, attempt to gain access to the meaning of the texts through reading. The failure to unlock blues is often compensated for by a romanticized and politicized version of the music’s origins and meaning. The *Folkways Anthology of American Music* was significant in the rediscovery of blues and country music in America; the collection presented the new territory of traditional song as a vision of authenticity.

Similarly, the Old English lament came to be anthologized as an example of vernacular verse. In its new context of the Exeter Book, the lament can be reinterpreted as a poetic exercise designed to teach the reader–listener how to unlock divine truth. The second audience seeks stability in the elusive worlds of both poetics. The vocal poetics of the Old English lament and the African American blues projects the call across time and space, and we listen and respond to those lonesome words.

## APPENDIX: A FORMULAIC ANALYSIS OF ROBERT JOHNSON'S RECORDED BLUES

The following analysis presents supporting evidence for each formula occurring in the lyrics of the twelve recordings discussed in chapter 2. A half-line is considered a formula when at least two analogues exist elsewhere in the corpus compiled by Michael Taft in *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology*. While phrases and collocations that recur only in Johnson's own work are noted to show his personal formula preferences, I do not include these instances as evidence of formulaity. My focus is on the dissemination of formulaic phrases throughout the corpus of blues recordings. The analysis proceeds stanza by stanza, and each stanza is identified with a reference code. For example, KH 1.1 refers to "Kind Hearted Woman Blues," take 1, stanza 1. The corresponding stanza in take 2 is identified as KH 2.1. Due to space restriction, I provide only two or three (sometimes more) examples of analogues for each formulaic phrase found in Johnson's texts. Because illustrative manifestations of major formula families appear in chapter 2, I do not present those examples here.

### "Kind Hearted Woman Blues"

Take 1: 77 percent formulaic (26 half-lines, 20 formulas)

Take 2: 81 percent formulaic (32 half-lines, 26 formulas)

#### ***KH 1.1 and KH 2.1***

*I got a kindhearted woman* do anything this world for me  
*I got a kindhearted woman* anything this world for me  
But these evil-hearted women *man, they will not let me be*

*I got a kindhearted woman* is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I have a woman*; variations similar to Johnson's occur in *I got a brownskin woman* (WillJ-4; AleT-2) and *Says I got a hard-hearted woman* (ArnK-36). Although

Johnson's r-position phrase "do anything [in] this world for me" might be related in sense to the following r-phrases, both of which are coupled with a *I have a woman* x-formula, there is no satisfactory analogue:

*I got a woman in San Antone* : I declare is sweet to me. (JonL-9)

*I got a little woman* : but I swear she treats me mean. (GibC-20)

In the closing line, the incomplete x-phrase "But these evil-hearted women" has no analogue. The final half-line, *man, they will not let me be*, is a fairly common r-formula, which also appears in the opening lines of Johnson's "Little Queen of Spades": Now, she is a little queen of spades *and the men will not let her be*. Other analogues include:

I had a good woman : *but the men wouldn't let her be*. (DorsT-12)

Guess I'll travel : *I guess I'll let her be*. (Blak-31)

### **KH 1.2 and KH 2.2**

*I love my baby my baby don't love me*

*I love my baby ooo my baby don't love me*

*But I really love that woman can't stand to leave her be*

*I love my baby* is the major formula *I love you*. The second half-line can be found elsewhere in the same conjoined position: *Now I love my baby : but my baby don't love me* (CarrL-15). A second instance occurs in the opening stanza of Barrel House Buck MacFarland's 1934 "I Got To Go Blues," which is configured along the same lines as Johnson's:

I got to go : *got to leave my baby be*

*And I love my woman : but my woman do not care for me*. (McFaB-1)

Of the closing line, *But I really love that woman* is, again, a manifestation of the major x-formula *I love you*, and *can't stand to leave her be* is another manifestation of the last half-line of stanza 1 (see KH 1.1 and KH 2.1).

### **KH 1.3 and KH 2.3**

Ain't but the one thing makes Mister Johnson drink

*I's worried 'bout how you treat me, baby I begin to think*

Oh babe, *my life don't feel the same*

*You breaks my heart when you call Mister So-and So's name*

I find no analogue for "Ain't but the one thing" and only one possibility for the r-phrase "makes Mister Johnson drink": The woman I love : has

driven me to drink (Blak-27). Thus, the phrase cannot be considered formulaic. Of the 149 occurrences of the word *drink* only 8 (2 being Johnson's) function as end-rhymes. *I's worried 'bout how you treat me baby* is a conflation of the two major formulas *I worry* and *I treat you good/bad*. Manifestations of the r-formula *I begin to think* include:

I told her to give me time: *and let me think*. (JohAl-2)

But I don't never sit down one time: *you know and just sit and think*. (WillS-21)

You keep on talking: *till you make me think*. (Ledb-11)

The first two examples rhyme "think" with "drink" as in Johnson's couplet. Like *drink*, only 8 instances of the word *think* (again, 2 are Johnson's) function as end-rhymes.

Of the second couplet, "Oh babe" is not a formula but rather a vocative element that prepares for the r-phrase. Analogues for the r-formula *my life don't feel the same* include:

Since we been apart: *my life don't seem the same*. (SykR-3)

Says I feel so different: *till this old world don't seem the same*. (ArnK-34)

Now ever since Louisa you been gone: *my life don't seem the same*. (WillS-6)

In the closing line, the x-formula *You breaks my heart* occurs elsewhere 6 times, including:

*I know it would break her heart*: if she found I was barrelhousing this way. (BaiK-1)

*Lord it breaks my heart*: to sing about Highway Sixty-One. (SykR-16)

The r-formula *when you call Mister So-and-So's name* is more commonly found as seen in the following lines:

Look a-here you get mad: *every time I call your name*. (MemM-2)

I think I heard: *my good gal call my name*. (JeffB-2)

#### **KH 1.4 and KH 2.4**

*She's a kindhearted woman she studies evil all the time*

*She's a kindhearted woman she studies evil all the time*

*You well's to kill me as to have it on your mind*

*She's a kindhearted woman* is a manifestation of a common x-formula, which exhibits a high degree of variation; examples include *She's a beautiful woman* (ChatP-8), *She's a cotton-picking woman* (PetW-4), *She's a easy rider* (AleT-19),

and *She's a high-stepping mama* (JefB-41). The half-line *she studies evil all the time* is an intriguing variation of a common r-formula, defined in general terms as *I do x all the time*. Other manifestations include *she barrelhouse all the time* (CarrL-23), *I'd stay drunk all the time* (LewF-2), *she keeps a good man worried all the time* (JefB-21).

The phrase *You well's to kill me* [You may as well kill me?] can be seen as a form of a general x-formula *I kill you*: *Going to kill everybody* (DanJ-2), *Now I'm going to kill her* (KelJ-9), *You don't have to kill me* (FulB-5). The final half-line *as to have it on your mind* is a variation of the major r-formula *some thing is on my mind*.

### **KH 2.5**

*Some day, some day I will shake your hand good-bye*  
*Some day some day I will shake your hand good-bye*  
*I can't give you anymore of my lovin' 'cause I just ain't satisfied*

Although Johnson's doubling of "some day" is unusual, its use as a line opener is common:

*Baby some day baby* : you poor heart is sure going to ache. (WasbS-33)  
*But some day baby* : you'll long for me. (Vinc-20)

Analogues of *I will shake your hand good-bye* include

You don't miss pretty mama : *till you shake your hand goodbye*. (Ledb-10)  
 I don't want you no more sweet baby : *shake hands and tell your daddy goodbye*.  
 (Vinc 14)

In the closing line, *I can't give you anymore of my lovin'* is a negation of the common x-formula *I give you some thing*: *Lord I'll give you satisfaction* (BigB-14), *I done give you my money* (TowH-4), *Can't give you nothing but loving* (WasbS-14). The final r-formula occurs twenty times and is typically presented as *I can't be satisfied*:

Got the blues : *can't be satisfied*. (Hurt-6)  
 Poor boy has been mistreated : *now I can't be satisfied*. (ButlS-2)  
 I've got these blues : *means I'm not satisfied*. (McTW-3)

### **"Ramblin' On My Mind"**

Take 1: 80 percent formulaic (30 half-lines, 24 formulas)

Take 2: 73 percent formulaic (30 half-lines, 22 formulas)

**R 1.1**

I got ramblin' *I got ramblin' on my mind*  
 I got ramblin' *I got ramblin' all on my mind*  
*Hate to leave my baby but you treat me so unkind*

The opening x-phrase is a non-formulaic preface. *I got ramblin' on my mind* is a manifestation of the major r-formula *some thing on my mind*. The third line begins with a variation of the major x-formula *I'm leaving (some place)*. The r-formula *but you treat me so unkind* occurs in the songs of at least eight other artists; examples include:

Because the man I'm loving : *treats me so unkind*. (TucB-1)  
 Judge I done killed my woman : *because she treated me so unkind*. (CarrL-20)

In take 1, the closing line is repeated as a refrain in all but the third stanza. In the fifth stanza of take 1, the x-formula is altered to *I go to leave my baby*.

**R 1.2**

I got mean things *I got mean things all on my mind*  
 Little girl, little girl *I got mean things all on my mind*  
*Hate to leave you here, babe but you treat me so unkind*

The first x-phrase is a non-formulaic preface. "Little girl, little girl" is a vocative preface. The r-formula of the first two lines is another manifestation of the major r-formula *some thing on my mind*. For the closing line, see R 1.1.

**R 1.3**

*Runnin' down to the station catch the first mail train I see*  
 (I think I hear her comin' now)  
*Runnin' down to the station catch that old first mail train I see*  
*I got the blues 'bout Miss So-and-So and the child got the blues about me*

The formulaic construction of this stanza is discussed in chapter 2 (33–36). Analogues for the common x-formula *Runnin' down to the station* include:

*I went down to the station* : and I could not keep from crying. (WilsL-2)  
*I'm going to the station* : meet the Cannonball. (CollS-5)

Two analogues exist for the x-formula *catch the first mail train I see*:

I'm gong to hit this old highway : *catch the fastest thing I see*. (WashbS-27)  
 Going to stand right here : *catch the first old gal I see*. (DickT-1)

Of the closing line, *I got the blues 'bout Miss So-and-So* is a manifestation of the major x- formula *I got the blues*. The x-formula *and the child got the blues about me* is found within the same line configuration in the following examples:

*I got the blues for my baby : she got the blues for I say me*. (Bare-1)  
*I've got the blues for my baby : my babe got the blues for me*. (JorC-3)

### R 1.4

*And I'm leavin' this mornin' with my arm' fold' up and cryin'*  
*And I'm leavin' this mornin' with my arm' fold' up and cryin'*  
*I hate to leave my baby but she treats me so unkind*

The x-formula of the opening (and closing) line is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I'm leaving (some place)*. The opening r-formula is a specialized version of the major r-formula *I cry*. For the closing line, see R 1.1.

### R 1.5

See R 1.2.

### R 2.1

See R 1.1.

### R 2.2

And now, babe I will never forgive you anymore  
 Little girl, little girl I will never forgive you anymore  
*You know you did not want me baby, why did you tell me so*

“And now babe” and “Little girl, little girl” (as in take 1) are vocative prefaces. The r-phrase “I will never forgive you anymore” has no clear analogue. It could, however, be related to the r-formula *I will never see you anymore*, but in all cases of this formula, the verb is definitely “see,” with one exception of “hear.” Thus, I consider Johnson’s r-phrase to be anomalous. In contrast, the closing line is a standardized conjoined unit;

analogues include:

*I said if you don't want me : why don't you tell me so.* (BrowR-1)

*Now if you don't want me : why don't you tell me so.* (Shaw-3)

*If you didn't love me Elsie : why didn't you tell me so.* (McCl-15)

### R 2.3

See R 1.3.

### R 2.4

An' they's devilment *she got devilment on her mind*

She got devilment *little girl, you got devilment all on your mind*

*Now I got to leave this mornin' with my arm' fold' up and cryin'*

The opening x-phrases are non-formulaic prefaces. The new r-formula *she got devilment on her mind* is yet another manifestation of the major r-formula *some thing is on my mind*. In the closing line, the x-formula is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I'm leaving (some place)*. The r-formula is a manifestation of the major r-formula *I cry*.

### R 2.5

*I believe I believe my time ain't long*

*I believe I believe that my time ain't long*

*But I'm leavin' this morning I believe I will go back home.*

The incomplete statement *I believe* developed as an x-formula in its connection with the major r-formula *I'm going back home*. Here, it is linked to a new partner: *I believe my time ain't long* is a manifestation of the major r-formula *it won't be long*. The line *I believe I believe I'll go back home* is well established, appearing as the first line in songs such as Kokomo Arnold's "Sissy Man Blues" (ArnK-5), Leroy Carr's "I Believe I'll Make a Change" (CarrL-25), and Jack Kelly's "I Believe I'll Go Back Home" (KelJ-4). Johnson uses the line in "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom."

### "When You Got A Good Friend"

Take 1: 77 percent formulaic (30 half-lines, 23 formulas)

Take 2: 75 percent formulaic (36 half-lines, 27 formulas)

**W 1.1 and W 2.1**

*When you got a good friend that will stay right by your side*

*When you got a good friend that will stay right by your side*

*Give her all of your spare time love and treat her right.*

In a broad sense, *When you got a good friend* can be seen as a manifestation of the major x-formula *I have a woman*, but as a “when” clause, it takes on a more specialized form. More specifically, the phrase is one of a small number of variations of *When you have someone*; further examples include *When you got a hard-hearted woman* (GibC-14), *Now when you got a man* (CoxI-2), and *Oh when you had that woman* (WasbS-17). The opening r-formula belongs to a small group that includes:

I cannot shun the devil : *he stay right by my side.* (Howe-8)

I didn't have to look for my buddy : *ooo well well he's right there by my side.*  
(Gill-12)

If you want your lover : *you better pin him to your side.* (JefB-19)

In the closing line, *Give her all of your spare time* is an unique variation of a formulaic imperative *Give her some thing*. Other instances include *Give him thirty-nine days* (JackC-7), *Give a poor man a chance* (SmiB-27), and *Give me your money* (Gill-2). The phrase *love and treat her right* is a manifestation of the major r-formula *I treat you right*.

**W 1.2 and W 2.2**

*I mistreated my baby and I can't see no reason why*

*I mistreated my baby and I can't see no reason why*

*Everytime I think about it I just wring my hands and cry.*

*I mistreated you baby* is a manifestation of major x-formula *I treat you good/bad*. Analogues for the r-formula *and I can't see no reason why* exist in forms such as *I'll tell you the reason why* (Shad-9), *please tell me the reason why* (SmiBM-3), and *you know the reason why* (Blak-13).

For the closing line, there are two definite analogues for *Everytime I think about it*:

*Every time I think* : I think I'm downtown. (Stok-4)

*Every time I think of that woman* ; I wished I had never been born. (CarrL-23)

This formula can be seen as a member of the larger system *Every time I do something*, which includes *Every time I get drunk* (ArnK-31), *Every time I see*

you (Stok-4), and *Every time I move* (WillK-2). The r-formula *I just wring my hands and cry* is a manifestation of the major *I cry*.

### ***W 1.3 and W 2.3***

Wonder could I bear apologize or would she sympathize with me  
 Mmmmmm would she sympathize with me  
*She's a brownskin woman as sweet as a girlfriend can be*

Both half-lines of the opening line are original (i.e., non-formulaic). In the closing line, the x-formula *She's a brownskin woman* is of the same family as Johnson's earlier *She's a kindhearted woman* (see K 1.4 and K 2.4 earlier). Analogues for the r-formula *just as sweet as a girlfriend can be* include *as funny as can be* (WasbS-8), *and he's sweet as can be* (JonM-11), and *I know the feeling is sad as can be* (MartD-1).

### ***W 1.4***

Mmmm babe, *I may be right or wrong*  
 Baby, it's your opinion *oh, I may be right or wrong*  
*Watch your close friend, baby then your enemies can't do you no harm*

In the first line, “Mmmm babe” is a vocative preface. A small group of analogues for the r-formula *I may be right or wrong* include:

Lord : *am I right or wrong.* (HilSy-1)  
 I may be right : *I may be wrong.* (Vinc-19)  
 Boy I may be right Lord : *boy I may be wrong.* (Weld-5)  
 Some people say I'm right now : *and some say I'm wrong.* (Spru-3)

As can be seen in the last three examples, Johnson's variation more typically occurs in an expanded full-line form.

For the closing line, I find only three other variations of the r-formula *Watch your close friend* exist: *You can't watch your wife* (ReyJ-1), *I mean to watch my man* (SmiB-15), *Boys you better watch them women* (Doyl-2). I have not included phrases based on “watch your step mama” or “watch yourself” because the sense diverges from that of mistrust. The r-phrase “then your enemies can't do you no harm” is original; of the twenty-nine instances of the word *harm*, twenty-two are found in the established r-formula *I don't mean no harm*, which I feel differs in sense from Johnson's half-line: the word *mean* emphasizes intention rather than actual threat of harm.

**W 1.5**

See W 1.1 and W 2.1.

**W 2.4**

*I love my baby* but [I can't make that agree]  
*I love that woman* [but why can't we can't agree]  
*I really love that woman* mmm wonder why we can't agree

The x-formula of all three lines is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I love you*. For the r-phrases, see chapter 2. Of the closing line, analogues for the final r-formula *mmm wonder why we can't agree* include:

Because you know I love you : *and how come we can't agree*. (JohLo-3)  
 If I ever find a way to leave him : *if we cannot agree*. (MartD-1)  
 Because don't you know baby : *you and I can't agree*. (WasbS-6)

**W 2.5**

See W 1.4.

**W 2.6**

See W 1.1 and W 2.1.

**“Come On In My Kitchen”**

Take 1: 56 percent formulaic (34 half-lines, 19 formulas)

Take 2: 65 percent formulaic (40 half-lines, 26 formulas)

Excluding Refrain

Take 1: 59 percent formulaic (22 half-lines, 13 formulas)

Take 2: 73 percent formulaic (26 half-lines, 19 formulas)

**K 1.1 and Refrain (all stanzas)**

Mmmm mmmm

Mmmm mmmm

*You better come on in my kitchen* babe, it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

For a discussion of the nonverbal utterance, see chapter 2.

At a deep semantic level, *You better come in in my kitchen* is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I go (to some place)*; Taft provides the example *Says*

*you coming back baby* (ThpA-1; “Lyrics,” p. 527). Variations closer to the surface include *You had better come* (SmiC-12) and *Somebody better come here* (BakW-1) as well as a small family of *Come in x*-formulas, which include *Oh come in friends* (WhiW-9), *Said come in here* (CollS-11), and *Come in here baby* (GibC-4). Of the thirty-six occurrences of the word *kitchen*, all but three appear in the *x*-formula *some thing/one is in the kitchen: Rats is mean in my kitchen* (JefB-59), *Blues in my kitchen* (JefB-41), *Starvation in the kitchen* (BigB-2).

Although the word *outdoors* is a common rhyme word (twenty-two of its twenty-nine occurrences function as an end-rhyme), there is no satisfactory semantic analogue. In most cases, the “outdoors” *r*-formula renders the breakdown of a love relationship in the physical action of forcing the lover to leave. In other words, either the person or their belongings get thrown out: *you put me outdoors* (McTW-34), *she kicked me outdoors* (JorL-2), *she done set my trunk outdoors* (Aker-1). The *r*-formula is also used in the overdue rent/unsympathetic landlord scenario. The essence of Johnson’s *r*-phrase is quite different.

### K 1.2

*Ah, the woman I love took from my best friend  
Some joker got lucky stole her back again  
You better come on in my kitchen it’s goin’ to be rainin’ outdoors*

This couplet is an established unit; I find six other occurrences, including:

*The woman I love Lord : stoled her from my best friend  
But he got lucky : stoled her back again. (JamS-1)  
I stole my good gal : from my bosom friend  
That fool got lucky : he stoled her back again. (McTW-2)*

### K 1.3

*Ah, she’s gone I know she won’t come back  
I’ve taken the last nickel out of her nation sack  
You better come on in my kitchen it’s goin’ to be rainin’ outdoors.*

This stanza’s *Ah, she’s gone* belongs to the *x*-formula group *She’s gone*, which includes seven instances of *My baby’s gone* (e.g., DaviW-1, McCoJ-13, and McTW-26) and at least eight versions of *You gone and left me* (e.g., SmiB-4, Rain-22, and Lock-1). The word *gone* (occurring 428 times) is predominantly used as a rhyme word. Three analogues exist for Johnson’s *r*-formula

*I know she won't come back:*

Because them double-crossing woman left me : *ooo well well and won't come back.* (Whea-29)

I said you may go : *you'll come back*

Now it don't worry my mind : *ooo well now I don't care if the woman never come back.* (Whea-38)

A closely related r-formula group retains the rhyme-word *back* but places the responsibility of the lover's return on the speaker:

If only : *could get my good man back.* (MemM-24)

Believe I'll take: *my old-timey rider back.* (GibC-11)

#### **K 1.4**

(Oh, can't you hear that wind howl?)

(Oh, can't you hear that wind howl?)

*You better come on in my kitchen it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.*

Because the couplet is spoken, I consider the lines to be extraformulaic interjections. A note on howling in blues: the wind howls in a small x-formula group, as in *The wind is howling* : hear that wicked sound (JonM-7). More often, however, the howling is done by the speaker himself (again, as an x-formula), as in Johnson's "Stones In My Passway":

*And when you hear me howlin' in my passway, rider please open your door and let me in.*

#### **K 1.5**

*When a woman gets in trouble everybody throws her down*

*Lookin' for her good friend none can be found*

*You better come on in my kitchen it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.*

*When a woman gets in trouble* is a variation of the multifaceted x-formula *I am in trouble*. Specific analogues include *When I was in trouble* (Gill-12), *Did you ever get in trouble* (McClu-1), and *You got me in trouble* (AleT-10). The following example employs the r-formula to similarly convey the fair-weather friend motif: *When you get in trouble* : you can always tell who's your friend (Luca-4). Johnson's *everybody throws her down* appears elsewhere in such forms as *your good friend throws you down* (OweG-1), *please don't throw*

*me down* (Howe-4), and *she try to put her sweetie down* (ChatB-8). Johnson's opening line as a whole appears with slight variation in two songs of Jaybird Coleman: *When a man gets in trouble : every woman throws him down* (ColFJ-1 and -6).

Of the closing line, many versions of *Lookin' for her good friend* exist; examples include *Looking for my girl* (LewF-1), *I'm looking for you baby* (JohMa-3), and *I'm looking for someone to love* (Gros-2). The r-formula *none can be found* appears elsewhere in Ida Cox's "Southern Women's Blues": Southern men will stick by you: *when the northern men can't be found* (CoxI-6). And Blind Boy Fuller uses the r-formula to convey the fair-weather friend motif: *Yeah now I'm broke: women and friends they can't be found* (FulB-15). As discussed in chapter 3, the formulas of Johnson's stanza are often employed to generate the motif of social abandonment and isolation. A stanza of Robert Lee McCoy's "Tough Luck" (1937) utilizes two of the formulas:

*When a man gets in tough luck : nobody wants him around*  
 If he haven't got any money : *there is no friend to be found.* (McCoR-1)

## K 1.6

*Winter time's comin' it's gon' be slow*  
 You can't make the winter, babe *that's dry long so*  
 You better come on in my kitchen 'cause it's gon' to be rainin' outdoors.

*Winter time's comin'* belongs to a subset of the general x-formula *It is coming*, in which slot-fillers often indicate time, particularly seasons: *And winter is coming* (DaviW-3), *Springtime coming* (ThoR-3), and *Harvest time's coming* (Hurt-7). Analogues of the r-formula *it's gon' be slow* include *Lord it's coming too slow* (Hull-5), *he was very slow* (LeeX-1), and *but she walk too slow* (LofW-3).

No analogue exists in Taft's corpus for the x-phrase "You can't make the winter babe." However, the seemingly unusual final r-formula *that's dry long so* does occur in the songs of three other singers:

Reason I'm hanging around here : *man I'm sticking here dry long so.* (JefB-27)  
 Reason I'm hanging around here: *sticking here dry long so.* (Este-23)  
 These hard times will kill you: *just dry long so.* (JamS-4)

## K 2.1

See K 1.1.

**K 2.2**

See K 1.5.

**K 2.3**

See K 1.2.

**K 2.4**

See K 1.4.

**K 2.5**

*Nn, the woman that I love I crave to see*  
*She's up the country won't write to me*  
*You better come on in my kitchen goin' to be rainin' outdoors.*

Variations of this stanza appear in Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Wartime Blues" and Curley Weaver's "Oh Lawdy Mama":

*Well the girl I love : is the one I crave to see*  
*Well she's living in Memphis : and the fool won't write to me. (JefB-12)*  
*Woman I love : woman I crave to see*  
*She in Cincinnati : won't even write to me. (WeaC-4)*

In light of the high degree of flexibility of the closing x-formula *She's some where*, Johnson's *She's up the country* is rather uninspired; it is an established formula that occurs nineteen times. For example: *Well I'm going up the country* (SpiV-10 and CollS-2) and *Lord she went up the country* (AleT-4).

**K 2.6**

*I went to the mountain far as my eyes could see*  
*Some other man got my woman lonesome blues got me*  
*you better come on in my kitchen cause it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.*

This stanza also occurs in Johnson's "If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day." The formulas of the opening line developed as a conjoined unit. Variations include:

*Standing on the mountain : as far as I can see. (Hurt-7)*  
*I went up on a mountain : just to see what I could see. (BirB-3)*

Likewise, both formulas of the closing line are found together elsewhere, as in following examples:

*And that man had my woman : Lord and the blues had me.* (ReedW-1)

*Some man had my woman : and the worried blues had me.* (Tore-2)

*Another man had my wife : and I swear the Niagara blues had me.* (ColeK-2)

### **K 2.7**

*My mama dead papa well's to be*

*Ain't got nobody to love and care for me*

*She better come on in my kitchen 'cause it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.*

*My mama's dead* occurs six times as an x-formula with minimal variation. Although the mother/father collocation is common, Johnson's r-phrase, "papa well's to be," is unique.

In the closing line, the x-formula *Ain't got nobody* occurs frequently in blues lyrics; analogues include *I ain't got nobody* (Blacw-8), *Now you ain't got nobody* (ThoJ-2), and *She ain't got nobody* (McCoJ-20). Johnson's r-formula *to love and care for me* combines two closely related formulas: *you don't love me* and *you don't care for me*. Analogues include *but my baby don't love me* (CarrL-15), *but my woman do not care for me* (McFaB-1), and *but you don't even care for me* (ArnK-21).

### **"Phonograph Blues"**

Take 1: 75 percent formulaic (32 half-lines, 24 formulas)

Take 2: 69 percent formulaic (36 half-lines, 25 formulas)

### **P 1.1 and P 2.1**

*Beatrice, she got a phonograph and it won't say a lonesome word*

*Beatrice, she got a phonograph but it won't say a lonesome word*

*What evil have I done what evil has that poor girl heard.*

The x-formula *Beatrice, she got a phonograph* is a variation of the common *I got a x*, which has infinite possibilities: *I got a letter from my rider* (NelsR-2), *She got a head like a switch-engine* (SykR-6), or *My baby she got a mojo* (McTW-33). The r-formula *and it won't say a lonesome word* is a form of *won't say a word*:

*My baby quit me : didn't say a word.* (BracM-4)

*Eight o'clock in the morning : don't say one mumbling word.* (MemM-27)

In the closing line, there are no analogues for the x-phrase “What evil have I done” in this position; elsewhere the phrase does occur as an r-formula; for example, Hey jailor : *tell me what have I done* (Rain-16). Although the half-line is formulaic, its anomalous position in Johnson’s line disqualifies it from being counted as a formula here. The subsequent r-formula *what evil has that poor girl heard* is an unusual variation of the *something she heard* group typically rhymed with the r-formula *won’t say a word*, as in the following:

Baby done quit me : *ain’t said a mumbling word*  
 It weren’t nothing that she knowed Lord: *just something that she heard.* (Estes-9)  
 And my friend passed me: *and she never said a word*  
 Nothing I did: *but was something she had heard.* (BaiK-1)

### **P 1.2 and P 2.2**

*Beatrice, I love my phonograph* but you have broke my windin’ chain  
*Beatrice, I love my phonogr’-ooo* honey, you have broke my windin’ chain  
*And you’ve taken my lovin’* and give it to your other man.

The opening x-formula is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I love you*. Its r-phrase is unique due to the substitution of “windin’ chain” for “heart”; the r-formula *you broke my heart* occurs sixteen times in Taft’s corpus.

The two formulas of the closing line can be found together elsewhere, as in

*Say you taken all my money* : *give it to your no-good man.* (BigB-9)  
*You taken my money* : *and spent it on your other man.* (Whea-5)

### **P 1.3 and P 2.3**

Now, we played it on the sofa, now *we played it side the wall*  
 My needles have got rusty, baby *they will not play at all*  
 We played it on the sofa *and we played it ‘side the wall*  
 But my needles have got rusty *and it will not play at all.*

This stanza is reconfigured in take 2 as a standard 2AA stanza. All of the x-phrases are unique. The r-formula *we played it ‘side the wall* is related to the general *some thing on the wall*; manifestations include *you can hang it on the wall* (WileG-1 and JohLs-3), *just like a clock up on the wall* (ArnK-39), and *put your foot up side the wall* (DaviW-18). Louise Johnson’s “On the Wall”

presents the idea of vertical sex more directly with the line, Going to tell you women : *how to cock it on the wall* (JohLs-3).

The rhyming r-formula *they will not play at all* belongs to the family of *I won't/can't do something at all : I can't see your face at all* (DaviW-1), *well, I won't be back at all* (JohTo-4), *I can't sleep at all* (WilK-5).

### **P 1.4 and P 2.4**

*Beatrice, I go crazy baby, I will lose my mind*  
*And I go cra'-eee honey, I will lose my mind*  
*Why'n't you bring your clothes back home and try me one more time.*

Analogues for Johnson's *Beatrice, I go crazy* include:

*Crazy about a married woman : afraid to call her name.* (McCl-19)  
*I'm just as crazy crazy : as a poor girl can be.* (MemM-21)  
*And I was almost crazy : because I had nowhere to go.* (McTW-31)

In take 2, Johnson replaces *I go crazy* with a repeat of *I love my phonograph*, a manifestation of the major x-formula *I love you*. The r-formula *I will lose my mind* occurs frequently and is often paired with the above "crazy" x-formula:

*Well well well I'm going go crazy : but baby I've got to now lose my mind.* (Whea-3)  
*If I don't go crazy : I'm sure to lose my mind.* (ThoR-4)  
*Lord you'll either run me crazy woman : or either make me lose my mind.* (McTW-31)

Ordinarily, Johnson's *Why'n't you bring your clothes back home* would be used as an r-formula (as he does in take 2, stz.6), but, here, it can be viewed as an elaborate version of the x-formula *Come back to me*. Analogues include *Will he come back to me* (SmiT-9), *I'm going back home to my baby* (Spru-7), and *Come back home* (Glov-3). Or it can be seen as a variation of the x-formula *I'm going back home*, which includes *Said I'm going back home mama* (ArnK-11) and *If I ever get back home* (Linc-6). The x-formula *try me one more time* occurs elsewhere in conjunction with the x-formula *Take me back*, a construction Johnson adheres to in essence only.

*Take me back baby : try me just one more time.* (Linc-4)  
*Take me back pretty mama : try me one more time.* (ReedW-2)  
*Take me back baby : try poor me one more time.* (Darb-1)

**P 1.5 and P 2.5**

See P 1.1. This stanza repeats P 1.1 except that in take 2, Johnson replaces the x-formula with the vocative preface “Now, my (little) phonograph, mmm.”

**P 2.6**

Now, Beatrice *won't you bring your clothes back home*  
 Now, Beatrice *won't you bring your clothes back home*  
*I wanna wind your little phonograph just to hear your little motor moan.*

The opening x-phrase, “Now Beatrice,” is a vocative preface. Johnson uses *won't you bring your clothes back home* in the more conventional r-position. Here, it is a manifestation of the major r-formula *I'm going back home*.

The closing line echoes the metaphorical pattern of “Terraplane Blues” in which an x-phrase such as “I'm gon' hoist your hood, mama” is a template for *I wanna wind your little phonograph*. The closest analogues occur in a common *double entendre* x-formula *I want to squeeze your lemon*, as seen in the following:

*Baby please let me roll your lemon* : and squeeze it the whole night long. (ChatB-10)  
*Now let me squeeze your lemon baby* : until my love come down. (Pick-2)  
*Come on let me squeeze your lemon baby* : I mean anyhow. (Wills-8)

Johnson's concluding r-formula *just to hear your little motor moan* is an innovative play on the common r-formula *I moan*, similar in meaning but technically not analogous to the major r-formula *I cry*. Variations include:

That's the reason why : *you hear me cry and moan*. (HicR-21)  
 I'm going back to Texas : *hear that wild ox moan*. (OweM-1)  
 Baby baby don't you worry : *sugar don't you weep and moan*. (Spru-8)

**“Cross Road Blues”**

Take 1: 73 percent formulaic (30 half-lines, 22 formulas)

Take 2: 79 percent formulaic (24 half-lines, 19 formulas)

**C 1.1**

*I went to the crossroad fell down on my knees*  
*I went to the crossroad fell down on my knees*  
*Asked the Lord above “Have mercy, now save poor Bob if you please.”*

*I went to the crossroad* is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I go (some place)*. The stanza as a whole is a conventional collocation describing a ritualized plea. Other versions include

*I went to the praying ground : and fell on bended knees*  
*I ain't crying for no religion : Lordy give me back my good gal please.* (McTW-16)  
*Then I'm going to the judge : and I'm going to fall down on my knees*  
*Ask him please fair judge : have mercy on me please.* (CarrL-20)  
*Went to the graveyard : fell down on my knees*  
*And I asked the gravedigger : to give me back my good man please.* (Hite-1)

### C 1.2

*Mmm standin' at the crossroad tried to flag a ride*  
*Ooo-eee I tried to flag a ride*  
*Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe everybody pass me by.*

The first x-formula is a variation of the common *I am standing (some place)*, found in such forms as *Standing at the station* (Howe-9), *I was standing at the corner* (WasbS-11, WelS-1, MooAl-4), and *Standing here a-wondering* (JohBi-2). Johnson's *tried to flag a ride* appears elsewhere in the context of train travel:

Delano was a man: *who could flag my train for a ride.* (WillX-2)  
 And I know he was a rambler : *when he caught that train to ride.* (BogL-20)  
 Well now when a man takes the blues: *please now he will catch him a train a ride.*  
 (Whea-4)  
 Keep the blues: *I'll catch that train and ride.* (Hurt-6)

Of the closing line, *Didn't nobody seem to know me* belongs to a small family, which also includes *Nobody knows my name* (SmiB-19) and *Nobody knows my troubles* (RedN-1). This group could be extended to include the more common x-formula *I ain't got nobody* (e.g., SmiC-4, HendK-3, Blak-37). The half-line *everybody pass me by* qualifies as an r-formula based on a small number of occurrences of the general *someone/thing pass by*; variations include *still you pass me by* (Vinc-14), *see the worried blues pass by* (ColeK-2), or *must I pass on by* (JackC-9).

### C 1.3

*Standin' at the crossroad, baby risin' sun goin' down*  
*Standin' at the crossroad, baby eee, risin' sun goin' down*  
*I believe to my soul, now poor Bob is sinkin' down.*

Johnson repeats the opening x-formula of the previous stanza (see C 1.2). The r-formula *risin' sun goin' down* is found verbatim in Blind Blake's "One Time Blues" (Blak-9) and Blind Boy Fuller's "Somebody's Been Talkin' " (FulB-10). More broadly, there are many versions of the r-formula *the sun go down*; the most common variation is—I hate to see : *that evening sun go down*.

The closing x-formula *I believe to my soul* occurs verbatim twenty-seven times in Taft's corpus:

*I believe to my soul* : sweet mama going to hoodoo me. (JefB-4)

*I believe to my soul*: my girl got a black cat bone. (WalkB-1)

Johnson uses the x-formula again in "From Four Till Late," recorded during the 1937 session: *I believe to my soul* that your daddy's Gulfport bound. Analogues for Johnson's *poor Bob is sinkin' down*" include:

Have all my money gone : *I feel myself sinking down*. (SykR-2)

Blue ghost has got me : *I feel myself sinking down*. (JohLo-28)

#### C 1.4

You can run, you can run tell my friend Willie Brown

You can run, you can run tell my friend Willie Brown

*That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord babe, I'm sinking down.*

Johnson's opening line is unique; no analogues exist for either half-line. The closing line combines a manifestation of the major x-formula *I got the blues* and the "sinking" r-formula used in the previous stanza (see C 1.3).

#### C 1.5

*I went to the crossroad, mama* I looked east and west

*I went to the crossroad, babe* I looked east and west

*Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman* ooh-well, babe, in my distress.

The opening x-formula repeats that of the first stanza and is a manifestation of the major x-formula *I go (some place)*. There exists two instances that could serve as analogues for "I looked east and west," but both are found in the work of Henry Thomas; therefore, I do not consider the phrase to be formulaic.

The x-formula *Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman* is a negated version of the major x-formula *I have a woman*. The final half-line of take 1 is unique; the word *distress* does not appear in Taft's corpus (which does not include take 1 of "Cross Road").

**C 2.1**

See C 1.1.

**C 2.2**

See C 1.2.

**C 2.3**

*Mmm, the sun goin' down, boy dark gon' catch me here*  
*Ooo-ee boy, dark gon' catch me here*  
*I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that love and feel my care.*

As an x-formula, *Mmm, the sun goin' down* is more flexible than the r-formula seen in C 1.3. Analogues include:

*Well the sun going down* : and you know what you promised me. (JamS-2)  
*Just at the setting of the sun*: that's when the work is done. (WhiW-8)  
*See the sun went down mama*: left it so lonesome here. (Brac-4)

Included in this family are variations such as *Well the sun rose this morning* (DayW-2) and *Before the sun rises* (PerkG-1). There exist four analogues for the Johnson's r-formula *dark gon' catch me here*; the first two are as follows:

Got a Saturday one: *well she better not catch me here*. (Hull-1)  
 I've got a Thursday one: *that she better not catch me here*. (LofC-2)

The third shares Johnson's line collocation: *The rising sun : will never catch me here*. The fourth analogue occurs within a stanzaic collocation quite similar to Johnson's:

*Said the sun going down now : black dark caught me here*  
*Ain't got nobody to love me : nobody to feel my care*. (BracM-2)

The closing line reuses the x-formula *I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman*, seen in C 1.5. It is a negated manifestation of the major x-formula *I have a woman*. In addition to the earlier instance (BracM-2), variations of Johnson's r-formula *love and feel my care* include:

The reason I feel that way mama : *I ain't got nobody to feel my care*. (Shor-5)  
 Well well well if she do: *well well she sure don't feel my care*. (Whea-1)  
 If he do: *he sure don't fell my care*. (Pope-2)

**C 2.4**

You can run, you can run tell my friend-boy Willie Brown  
You can run tell my friend-boy Willie Brown  
*Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe I believe I'm sinking down.*

As in C 1.4, the opening half-lines are unique. The revised closing line reuses the x-formula *Standin' at the crossroad* (see C 1.2 and C 2.2) and the *sinking down* r-formula of take 1 (see C 1.4) with the elaboration of “I believe.”

## NOTES

### Introduction

1. In *WL* at line 1a, *W&E*, l.19, and “soðgied” [truth-song] in *Sfr*, l. 1b.
2. Timmer, “The Elegiac Mood,” p. 41, systematically eliminates all but two poems, concluding “we cannot speak of Old English elegies except in the case of *The Wife’s Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*,” but, he says, “we are certainly justified in speaking of an elegiac mood in Old English poetry” and should not “confine ourselves to the nine poems mentioned here.”
3. Greenfield, “The Old English Elegies,” p. 143.
4. Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 43. See also Niles, “Story of the Blues,” p. 20. According to Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs*, p. 19, W.C. Handy “is credited with having published the first blues (*Memphis Blues*, 1910) and with having had much to do with their popularization.”
5. For a history of blues recording, see Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, who explain, on p. 9, Mamie Smith’s record was listed with no special attention to her race, but “the black press proclaimed ‘Mamie made a recording’ and sales were unexpectedly high.”
6. The concern for classification of blues appears to differ between African American and white writers. For instance, some of the tunes presented in Handy’s 1926 *Blues: An Anthology* would not be classified as blues today. Later, Murray’s *Stomping the Blues* treats the music of big-band and jazz musicians, such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie, as blues. For an example of categorization practices of the second audience, and a useful guide organized chronologically and regionally, see Oliver (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide*.
7. Oster, “Blues as a Genre,” 260. For a musical analysis of blues see Niles, “Story of the Blues,” pp. 17–20, and, more recently, Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, pp. 137–174.
8. Taft, *Blues Lyric Poetry*, p. ix. For a discussion of meter in blues, see Barrie, “Oral Formulas,” 39–52.
9. Johnson, “Preachin’ Blues,” *The Complete Recordings*.
10. For example, Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, discusses blues within their historical context.
11. In contrast, according to Howe’s study in *Migration and Mythmaking*, writings, such as *Exodus* and those of Alcuin, that evoke the migration myth in response to the Viking invasions do so in an effort to interpret the crisis.

## Chapter 1

1. Texts of poems contained in the Exeter Book are from Krapp and Dobbie (eds.), *The Exeter Book*. Translations are my own.
2. Taft, *Blues Lyric Poetry: A Concordance*, 3 vols., of which volume 3 contains “Ranking Frequency List”: “my,” “me,” and “I’m” are ranked, respectively, fifth, seventh, and tenth. “I” occurs 9875 times in Taft’s corpus of over 2000 blues songs.
3. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, pp. 48–54 and see pp. 68–88 for a survey of definitions of Signifyin(g). Signifyin(g) is embodied by the traditional character the Signifying Monkey, the African American cousin of the Yoruba Esu-Elegbara. Gates, p. 54, explains that in black vernacular, “one does not signify something; rather, one signifies in *some way*.” The term encompasses various types of verbal ritual, including boasting and the competitive insult ritual known as “the dozens” (in many respects very similar to medieval *flyting*).
4. Floyd, “Ring Shout,” 275.
5. Rosenberg, *American Folk Preacher*, p. 35.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Traditionally, the occupations of blues singer and preacher were perceived as antithetical: one preaches for the devil while the other preaches for God. However, many blues singers did have religious preaching experience, such as Rev. Rubin Lacy who recorded blues in the late 1920s. For a discussion of interrelationship of blues singing and religious preaching, and the “prodigal-son pattern” of the “reformed bluesman” story, see Keil, *Urban Blues*, pp. 143–148.
8. Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 55. Davis views the blues of the early women recording artists as a site in which feminist consciousness emerged. Through the songs of singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, women could assert their autonomy, gender, sexuality, and desires within an oral tradition.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.
10. “Trust No Man,” in *ibid.*, p. 57.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.
12. The most common variations of “Listen to me” include: “Now listen here (baby/folks/mama),” usually found as a first half-line, and “listen to my song,” utilized mainly in the second half-line.
13. Lyrics transcription in Taft’s *Blues Lyric Poetry*. Throughout this book, blues transcriptions are taken from Taft’s anthology unless otherwise indicated. Taft does not transcribe repeated lines and indicates the caesura with a colon. To identify the song and artist, I cite Taft’s reference in parentheses; (ChatB-19) refers to the nineteenth recording by Bo Chatman—“Bo Carter’s Advice,” on p. 56 of Taft’s *Anthology*. Bo Chatman was also known as Bo Carter.
14. According to Niles, “Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetics,” p. 369, one feature of oral heroic poetry is “invocation of the act of listening, either through direct address to an imagined audience or through asides (such as ‘I have heard tell’

or 'so the story goes') that unite speaker and listener as participants in a common oral tradition that has, as one of its functions, the purpose of imaginative communion with one's ancestors."

15. The *uton we* formula occurs throughout the Vercelli homilies, as in, e.g.: "Uton we nu forð tilian" [Let us now, henceforth, strive, XI.46]; "Uton nu gehealdan georne" [Let us now zealously keep, XIX. 84]; "Uton us nu ealle þe geornor" [Let us now be all the more eager, XX. 19]; "Uton, men þa leofestan, georne leornian eadmodnesse" [Let us, most dearly beloved, eagerly learn humility, XXI. 8]. Text cited from Szarmach (ed.), *Vercelli Homilies ix-xxiii*. The association between homily and lament in *Sfr* and in *XSt* suggests that the lament was performed before an audience; the Anglo-Saxons may have considered the lament as a secular-poetic counterpart to the sermon.
16. For example, the narrator prefaces the second lament with "Eft reordade" [Again spoke, l. 75a]; the second and third lament are separated by "Swa se weregast gast wordum sæde" [Thus the accused spirit in words told, l. 125]; between the third and fourth is "Þa gyt feola cwiðde firma herde" [Then yet keeper of sins said more, l. 159]. The text of *Christ and Satan* is from Krapp (ed.), *The Junius Manuscript*, pp. 135–158. Translations are my own.
17. Finnegan, *Christ and Satan*, p. 151.
18. Text in Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 290.
19. My practice throughout this book will be to italicize formulas under discussion.
20. Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, pp. 9–21.
21. Johnson, "Cross Road Blues," *The Complete Recordings*.
22. Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 227.
23. The speaker of *W&E* refers to "uncer giedd" [our song? l. 19]. For a discussion of the term *giedd*, see Klinck, pp. 244–245. The word appears in a variety of literary contexts; possible translations include song, poem, saying, proverb, riddle, speech, story, tale, and narrative.
24. "Sið" occurs at *WL* l. 2a, *Sfr* l. 2a, and *Rsg* l. 97b; "soð" occurs at *Sfr* l. 1b and *Wan* l. 11b.
25. Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 228. The distinction between the epic and the lament parallels the basic difference between the third-person narrated, public ballad and blues song.
26. For an analysis of the *I woke up* formula, see Taft, *Lyrics*, pp. 563–585. Taft, p. 410, points out that the phrase "in the Morning" is used in black folk preaching with its association to the Last Judgment. The spiritual "Great Gettin' Up Morning" describes the Last Judgment. *I woke up this morning* and *I got the blues* are what Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, p. 21, calls "special formulas" that, like "Once upon a time," function as a "marker of specific genres."
27. Robert Johnson, "Walking Blues," *The Complete Recordings*.
28. The formulaic construction of isolation is discussed in chapter 3.
29. A similar question arises with *The Seafarer* in which an abrupt shift in voice, subject, and attitude occurs at line 33b and again at line 103.
30. Pope, "Dramatic Voices," p. 187. Pope also treats *The Seafarer* in the same manner.

31. Pope, "Dramatic Voices," p. 186. The assertion of two speakers in *Wan* is put forward in 1943 by Huppé, "*The Wanderer*," 516–538, to which Greenfield responded with the counterview of a sole speaker in "*The Wanderer: A Reconsideration*," 451–465.
32. Pope, "Dramatic Voices," p. 171.
33. Greenfield, "The Old English Elegies," p. 147.
34. Greenfield, "Min, Sylf," 214–215.
35. *Ibid.*, Sylf," 219. Further discussions of the speaker(s) of *Wan* include Bolton, "The Dimensions," 7–34; Richman, "Speaker and Speech," 469–479; Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers*, especially pp. 121–138; Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 108, 118, 123–124, 126; and Head, *Representation*, pp. 28–29.
36. For instance, Hollowell, "Identity," pp. 86–87, identifies the Wanderer as a "wodborā," a seer figure who is associated with wisdom and poetry. Woolf, "Genre of *Plantus*," pp. 192–207, proposes *The Wanderer* be regarded as *plantus*. The difficulty of *The Wife's Lament* has also led scholars to assign a specific identity to the speaker and to consider the presence of more than one speaker. For a survey of interpretations see Mandel, *Alternative Readings*, pp. 149–173.
37. Brown, "The Blues," 292.
38. In his study of Patton's lyrics, Fahey, *Charley Patton*, p. 62, states, "the stanzas of each song, taken as a whole, remain disjunctive. Most of them could be interchanged. A difference in their order would not increase (or decrease) their 'rationality.'" In order to make sense of the first stanza, some transcribers, such as Taft, second guess the title and substitute "hammock" for "hammer."
39. Head, *Representation*, pp. 33–34.
40. Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," pp. 78–79; Ellison's statement is made in the context of a review of Wright's autobiographical novel *Black Boy*. In 1977, Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, p. 40, noted, "the assumption that blues lyrics are factually autobiographical remains common in blues scholarship."
41. Barnie, "Jailhouse Blues," 22.
42. Eastman, "Country Blues," 163.
43. Jarrett, "The Singer," 32.
44. *Ibid.*, 536.
45. Gruver, "Dramatic Monologues," 31. See Titon's response to Gruver in his "Autobiography," 79–81; the debate becomes one of genre definition: Titon, p. 80, claims that autobiography is not "discursive," as Gruver states, but is in "fact. . . dramatic, imaginative literature," and, thus, "The 'I' of [the blues singer's] texts must be a persona, even when the lyrics do refer to something the singer has directly experienced." Gruver's rejoinder appears in "Autobiographical Theory," 129–130.
46. Cone, *The Spirituals*, p. 102.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 103. While understood, the principle is challenged by members of the white, middle-class second audience who perform blues.

48. Pearson, *Sound So Good*, p. xiii. It is important to note that interviews with blues singers occurred during the blues revival years of the 1960s and 1970s, when traditional artists were performing before a second audience. See also Siems, “Brer Robert,” 141–157, who discusses the “artistic oral performance” of the bluesmen’s stories in which they typically present themselves as an escape-artist trickster figure.
49. Pearson, *Sounds So Good*, p. 130.
50. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, pp. 73–74, discusses the blues crossroad legend as a version of the Yoruba myth of Eshu-Elegbara.
51. Head, *Representation*, p. 34.
52. Renoir discusses the contexts of history, manuscript, and literary tradition in “Old English Formulas,” pp. 65–79.
53. The story is found in the *Völundarkviða*; see, Krapp and Dobbie (eds.), *The Exeter Book*, p. liii, and Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 161–162.
54. See Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 162–164; Muir (ed.), *Exeter Anthology*, 2: 568. Anglo-Saxon readers of the Exeter Book may not have known “Mæthild” either. Frank, “Germanic Legend,” pp. 88–106 discusses the relationship between *Deor* (and other poems) and the Anglo-Saxon audience; she states, “It is impossible to know how much more (or less) the Anglo-Saxons knew of Germanic legend than we do” (p. 103).
55. For various readings of the “Mæthild” stanza, see Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 162–164.
56. This process will be discussed in chapter 2.
57. For a discussion of how “extrinsic” knowledge informs the text, see Renoir, *Key to Old Poems*, especially pp. 23–26.
58. The antecedents of the statement are ambiguous: if “that” refers to the situation just described, say that of Beadohild, does “this” then refer to the business of Mæðhild? Or to *Deor*’s own situation of unemployment? Or to a situation external to the text known to its original listener–reader? Mandel, “Audience Response Strategies,” 132, argues that the refrain’s lack of referent includes the listener in the suffering of the exempla: “With *bisses swa mæg* (so can this) the poet implies that any misfortune suffered by a listener that is at all similar to the misfortunes of Welund and Beadohild can also pass away.” Also see Mandel, *Alternative Readings*, pp. 109–134.
59. For the consideration of performance in the editing of Old English poetic texts, see Doane, “Editing Old English,” pp. 125–145.

## Chapter 2

1. The oral formula in Old English scholarship is surveyed by Olsen, “Oral-Formulaic Research I,” 548–606 and “Oral-Formulaic Research II,” 138–190; see also Watts, *The Lyre*, pp. 46–72; Foley, *Oral Composition*, pp. 65–74; and for a more general bibliography see Foley’s, *Oral-Formulaic Theory*.
2. For difficulties in the application of the Parry–Lord oral-formulaic theory to Old English poetry see, e.g., Watts, *The Lyre*, pp. 63–125; Quirk, “Poetic

- Language,” pp. 150–171; Rogers, “Crypto-Psychological Character,” 89–102 and a rebuttal by Edwards, “The Parry–Lord,” 151–169; Fry, “Variation and Economy,” 353–356; Miletich, “The Quest,” 111–123; Ogilvy and Baker, *Reading Beowulf*, pp. 137–158; Niles, “Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetics,” pp. 359–377.
3. An early example of the belief that formulaity precluded artistry is Tatlock, “Epic Formulas,” 529, “In Middle English, formulas are rather numerous, but short, inorganic and commonplace, not an artistic feature but a metrical convenience, and do little for an epic effect.” Studies that discern individual style within formulaic composition include Peter, “Old English *Andreas*,” 844–863; and Isaacs, “Personification,” pp. 215–248.
  4. Discussions of literary influence on “oral” texts and vice versa include Schaar, “New Theory,” 301–305; Conlee, “Verse Composition,” 576–585. More recently, Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 124, finds in Aldhelm’s Anglo-Latin hexameter verse flexible systems of formulaic patterns strikingly similar to those of Old English vernacular poetry: “since the same sort of formulaic patterning of phraseology occurs in Aldhelm as in *Beowulf* it seems reasonable to describe both as products of a traditional (and oral-derived) system of versification.”
  5. See, e.g., Renoir, “Oral-Formulaic Rhetoric,” pp. 103–135; and Haymes, “Formulaic Density,” 390–401.
  6. Benson, “The Literary Character,” 335. For a survey and discussion of the debate between the Old English “oralists” and “literates,” see Renoir, *Key to Old Poems*, pp. 49–63.
  7. Wilgus, review of *Singer*, by Lord, 43.
  8. *Ibid.*, 43–44.
  9. The application of the Parry–Lord oral-formulaic theory to blues can be seen in the work of Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, especially pp. 175–189; Taft, “Lyrics”; and Barnie, “Formulaic Lines,” 457–473. For a discussion of the Parry–Lord theory in blues scholarship, see Barnie’s article “Oral Formulas,” 39–52, in which he criticizes the lack of precision in some blues studies, reflected in terms such as “commonplace.”
  10. Blues singers such as Son House, Mississippi John Hurt, and Skip James, who recorded blues records during the years around 1930, performed at folk festivals in the 1960s. Outside of the “folk” context, artists such as Muddy Waters and B.B. King (who, in 2003, was still touring) continued the blues tradition with their electric “urban” style; although he does not treat the formulaic nature of blues, Keil, *Urban Blues* is one of the few writers to study the live performance of blues in its social context. Also, Evans, *Big Road Blues*, bases his study of folk blues on extensive field research.
  11. Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs*, pp. 22–23; they continue, “In the last ten years the phonograph record has surpassed sheet music as a conveyor of blues to the public. Sheet music, however, is still important. In fact, practically every ‘hit’ is issued in both the published and phonographed form.”

12. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 16–24.
13. Lord, *Singer*, pp. 124–125; Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 28.
14. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 28 (emphasis hers).
15. *Ibid.*
16. The term “vocality” was introduced by Zumthor, “The Text,” 67–92; see also Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*. For discussions on performance, “voice,” and reception of Old English and medieval texts, see, e.g. Doane, “Oral Texts,” pp. 75–113, and “Ethnography,” 420–439; O’Keeffe, *Visible Song*; Schaefer, “Hearing from Books,” pp. 117–136. For a comparative approach to performance see Opland, “‘Scop’ ” 161–178; Orchard, “Oral Tradition,” pp. 101–123; Foley, *Immanent Art*, “Performance, and Tradition,” 275–301, and *Singer of Tales*.
17. Orchard, “Oral Tradition,” p. 114.
18. The ideas and vocabulary are found in Schaefer, “Hearing from Books,” especially pp. 120–124.
19. Olson, “Utterance to Text,” 277.
20. The term is offered by Foley in “Performance, and Tradition,” p. 291 and *Immanent Art*, p. 5.
21. Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, p. 90.
22. Robert Johnson was born in 1911 or 1912 in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, and died on August 16, 1938. Relatively little is known about his short life and violent death; the most recent biography is by Guralnick, *Searching*. The 1936 recording session took place in San Antonio and involved three sittings; as per Dixon, Godrich, and Rye, *Blues & Gospel Records* 1997, pp. 476–477, recorded on Monday, November 23, 1936 were “Kind Hearted Woman Blues,” “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” “Sweet Home Chicago,” “Ramblin’ On My Mind,” “When You Got a Good Friend,” “Come On In My Kitchen,” “Terraplane Blues,” and “Phonograph Blues.” On Thursday, November 26: “32–20 Blues,” On Friday, November 26: “They’re Red Hot,” “Dead Shrimp Blues.” “Cross Road Blues,” “Walkin’ Blues,” “Last Fair Deal Gone Down,” “Preachin’ Blues,” and “If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day.”
23. According to Guralnick, *Searching*, p. 37, “One song, ‘Terraplane Blues,’ was a modest hit; perhaps it sold four or five thousand copies. . . .” The 1937 session took place in Dallas and consisted of two sittings. On Saturday, June 19 Johnson recorded “Stones In My Passway,” “I’m A Steady Rollin’ Man,” and “From Four Until Late.” On Sunday, June 20: “Hell Hound On My Trail,” “Little Queen of Spades,” “Malted Milk,” “Drunken Hearted Man,” “Me and the Devil Blues,” “Stop Breakin’ Down Blues,” “Traveling Riverside Blues,” “Honeymoon Blues,” “Love in Vain,” and “Milkcow’s Calf Blues.” Between the two recording sessions, ARC released five 78rpms; see LaVere, “Loose Ends,” 31–33. A 1938 Vocalion catalogue lists twelve titles (six 78s), four of which were from his first session: “Kind Hearted Woman” / “Terraplane Blues” (Vo 03416) and “Sweet Home Chicago” / “Walkin’ Blues” (Vo 03601); for a photo-image

- of the 1938 catalogue listing, see Calt and Wardlow, "Robert Johnson," 50. Vo 04630 ("Love in Vain" / "Preachin' Blues") was issued posthumously.
24. Sante, "The Genius of Blues," review of five books on blues and blues singers in *New York Review*, 49. Today, Johnson has become an icon for the second audience of blues listeners. His influence on the development of popular rock music was recently commemorated with his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and a conference devoted to his work.
  25. See Guralnick, *Searching*, pp. 53–54.
  26. See the brochure for *The Complete Recordings*, for essays by Eric Clapton and Keith Richards on Johnson's influence on their music.
  27. For a description of various performance contexts, see Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 117–189.
  28. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, p. 73. Speir was significant in the discovery of many Delta singers, including Robert Johnson; for more on Speir, see Evans, "Interview," 117–121.
  29. Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 167–168. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, p. 74, states, "These performers regularly use a limited supply of lyrics, melodies, and instrumental figures in various combinations for many of their songs. Therefore, not all of their blues are completely different from each other. In addition, since 1920 thousands of blues had been issued on phonograph records. Folk blues singers eagerly learned many of these blues or added portions of them to their repertoires."
  30. Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 133–134.
  31. Feedback did come eventually but in the form of record sales. According to Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 145–149, few singers relied on recording to make a living, but a successful record could help the singer gain further employment through a renewed recording contract and live performance engagements. For the variety of pay arrangements, see Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, pp. 214–215.
  32. Taft, "Lyrics," p. 166. For a discussion of censorship of race records see Oliver, *Screening*, in which he states, on p. 186, "any assessment of the content of Race records soon reveals the preponderance of sexual themes above all other subjects. It might be even argued that they constitute a third, perhaps more, of all Race recordings. . . some of these may be considered as direct expressions of sexual desire while others have tendencies to obscenity. What constitutes pornography in these terms remains debatable, but the complex evasive tactics employed by some singers to elude the censor suggest that either the singer himself or the recording executives had established in their own minds vague standards of what was deemed acceptable for issue."
  33. For a discussion of Spivey's "My Handy Man," see Oliver, *Screening*, pp. 209–210. Other examples of *double entendre* include Virginia Liston's "Rolls-Royce Papa" and Bessie Smith's "Empty Bed Blues."
  34. According to Brown, in "The Blues," 292, the treatment of sex in blues became less artful in the 1940s; he complains, "Many recent commercial blues strain to get double, even triple meanings, as close to obscenity as the

- law allows. Earlier folk blues were broad and frank, Chaucerian; but many of the belt-line productions are prurient and pornographic.”
35. Taft, “Lyrics,” p. 213.
  36. *Ibid.*, pp. 212–217.
  37. Barnie, “Formulaic Lines,” p. 457.
  38. Taft, “Lyrics,” p. 217. Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs*, p. 19, note that W.C. Handy’s “Memphis Blues” was the first published blues song in 1910. Later, Handy published *Blues: An Anthology*, which featured lyric and music transcriptions of various types of songs, many of which would not be classified as blues today. For the second audience, written transcriptions of recorded blues became an important aspect of reception, serving various purposes: Sackheim’s *Blues Line* presents blues as poetry and attempts to capture vocalicity (e.g., cadence) typographically; Taft’s *Blues Lyric Poetry* is primarily an academic resource tool; and the many books on lyric and music transcriptions are available for those who wish to learn to play established blues songs of particular singers. For example, Ainslie and Whitehill (eds), *Robert Johnson*. Interestingly, blues lyrics defy stability on paper; transcriptions of Johnson’s lyrics, e.g., differ (sometimes quite widely) from one transcriber to the next.
  39. In fact, Johnson’s level of literacy and education remains unclear; information based on interviews with people who knew Johnson are conflicting. It appears that he did attend school: Calt and Wardlow, “Robert Johnson,” 42, write, “Son House’s wife Evie recalled that Johnson liked to play the instrument [harmonica] during lunch recesses held outside the one-room Methodist church schoolhouse near Robinsonville both attended (on a three month basis) in the late 1920s.” Guralnick, *Searching*, pp. 12–13, quotes Johnny Shines, a blues artist who had traveled with Johnson, as saying, “No, Robert didn’t have no education at all as far as I could tell. I never saw him read or write, not even his name. He was just a natural genius” but notes that Shines is also reported as remembering, “Robert had beautiful handwriting. His writing look like a woman’s writing.” LaVere, liner notes to *The Complete Recordings*, p. 11, recounts the story about Johnson retreating to a secluded location and writing in a small black book. Calt, “The Idioms,” 53, reports that Elizabeth Moore, a former neighbor of Johnson’s, remembers that he “wrote the words to his songs on paper.”
  40. Guralnik, *Searching*, p. 38.
  41. Charley Patton’s “Hammer Blues,” presented in chapter 1, is a good example of the seemingly random structure of the blues of earlier male singers. Tilton, *Early Downhome Blues*, pp. 34–36, presents the lyrics to three versions of Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Match Box Blues” as a demonstration of the process of blues composition. Even though two of the versions were recorded on the same day, the texts are quite different from each other apart from beginning with the same stanza.
  42. Eastman, “Country Blues,” 161–176, compares two takes of Tommy Johnson’s “Lonesome Home Blues” to Robert Johnson’s takes of “Kind Hearted Blues” and concludes, on p. 174, “As compared to the more

improvisatory feel of the two takes of 'Lonesome Home Blues,' this song may well have been a highly developed part of Robert Johnson's repertoire by the time he recorded it. The lyrics appear to be better thought out than were Tommy Johnson's, and they present a more 'finished' quality." Springer, *Authentic Blues*, p. 76, states, "While Patton and other rural musicians frequently offered loose or barely structured songs, [Johnson's] own best blues, in spite of their incorporation of traditional stanzas, come across as having been composed and polished by years of work. His more thematic and coherent lyrics, rich in detail and utterly personal, often make use of symbols and allegories."

43. Quoted in Taft, "Lyrics," p. 218.
44. "Identical" duplication allows for minor changes such as the substitution of "girl" for "baby," but overall the lines and sequence of stanzas are unaltered. For the second session, alternate takes exist for "Little Queen of Spades," "Drunken Hearted Man," "Me and the Devil Blues," "Stop Breakin' Down Blues," "Love in Vain," and "Milkcow's Calf Blues."
45. According to Calt and Wardlow, "Robert Johnson," 45, Elizabeth Moore (a neighbor of Johnson's) said that she had heard Johnson perform "Kind-Hearted Woman, Ramblin' On My Mind, 32-20 Blues, Come On In My Kitchen, and Cross Roads Blues" four years before his first recording session.
46. I am indebted to Steve LaVere, who informed me of this matter by email correspondence (July 20, 2004).
47. Taft, "Lyrics," abstract in *Dissertation Abstracts*.
48. For a survey of the formula in blues scholarship, see Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 222-229.
49. See, e.g., Ferris, *Blues from the Delta*; and Fahey, *Charley Patton*.
50. Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 238-239.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
52. For a discussion on meter in blues lyrics, see Barnie, "Oral Formulas."
53. Taft, "Lyrics," p. 241.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 417-418; the corpus he refers to is that contained in his *Anthology*, which contains transcriptions of more than two thousand commercially recorded blues songs.
55. All transcriptions of Robert Johnson's songs are my own, made from the compact disk set *Complete Recordings*. Those of other artists are from Taft's *Blues Lyric Poetry* and *Blues Lyric Poetry: A Concordance* unless otherwise indicated. Taft's transcriptions mark the caesura with a colon, standardize the English, and do not include repeated lines within a stanza.
56. Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 252-257.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
58. The parenthetical citations following each example contain Taft's reference code: (JamJ-2) refers to the second recording by Jesse James, which is "Southern Casey Jones" on p. 122 of Taft's *Blues Lyric Poetry*.
59. Taft, "Lyrics," p. 246.

60. Examples of r-phrases ending in “see” include

I’m broke and disgusted : with every man I see. (Simp-1)

Black snake is evil : black snake is all I see. (JeffB-58)

But I’m too good a woman : you just wait and see. (SpiV-11).

61. Johnson’s awareness of balance is evident in the employment of “about” (rather than “for”) in both formulas. In other words, he is not using and revising formulas haphazardly.
62. For the list, see Taft, “Lyrics,” p. 406; for his analysis of the major formulas see the Appendices of “Lyrics,” p. 521.
63. The interrelationship of these themes is more closely examined in chapter 3.
64. For the sake of clarity, I have revised Taft’s generalized form “I come to some place” to “I go to some place”; according to his analysis, in “Lyrics,” p. 526, my change does not alter the basic meaning of “movement towards.” Confusion can arise with manifestations that generate the verb “come,” as in *Says you coming back baby* and *Just come here*. Taft states that this formula is “the most frequently occurring formula in blues, but at the same time, the most diffuse.” It produces a number of stable subformulas, such as *I go to the station*, *I go to the mountain*, *I go to the river*, and *I go downtown*.
65. Taft, “Lyrics,” p. 406, lists the formula as “I go away from some place.” It differs semantically from *I go to some place* in that, here, the idea is “movement away from.” Again, confusion can arise with a number of manifestations that generate the verb “going,” as in *I’m going away*.
66. This formula could be treated as an element of the travel theme, as Taft does, but the idea is similar to that of the x-formula *I quit my woman*.
67. Of this formula, Taft, “Lyrics,” p. 409, suggests, “It emphasizes that change and disruption will come soon, that time is short, and that the ‘threat’ of something new and perhaps unpleasant is just around the corner.”
68. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
72. Ainslie and Whitehill, *Robert Johnson*, p. 12, suggest that Johnson auditioned for H.C. Speir with this piece.
73. In Taft’s *Concordance*, the word *love* occurs a total of 768 times and *loving* 321 times. In contrast, *hate* occurs 68 times.
74. Brown, “The Blues,” 289.
75. Calt, “The Idioms,” 58, suggests that the term “kind-hearted woman” is an “obsolete black slang phrase for a woman who keeps a gigolo.” Calt, p. 53, further states, “Robert Johnson’s songs were unusual for 1930s blues in their frequent use of slang terms and idioms, which gave them a 1920s cast and projected an image of Johnson as a barrelhouse habitué. . .The idiomatic character of his songs is all the more remarkable in light of Elizabeth Moore’s [a Robinsville neighbor of Johnson] recollection that Johnson customarily wrote the words to his songs on paper.”

76. Interestingly, “good-hearted” women appear only in the blues of female singers; the formula *I’m a good-hearted woman* is employed by Ma Rainey in “Slave to the Blues” (Rain-23), Memphis Minnie, “Don’t Want No Woman” (MemM-8), and Ida Cox, “Lonesome Blues” (CoxI-7).
77. Oster, “The Blues as a Genre,” 262–263; Oster continues, “The result of these elements in combination is a quotable verse, complete in itself; often aphoristic, rhythmically appealing as the words trip easily off the tongue, and readily remembered—roughly analogous to the heroic couplet of the eighteenth century, if we disregard the repetition of a line in the blues.”
78. Taft, “Lyrics,” p. 300.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
80. The r-formulas *man, they will not let me be* (stz.1) and *can’t stand to leave her be* (stz.2) are manifestations of the same basic formula *I let you be*.
81. The shift occurs musically as well: Ainslie and Whitehill, *Robert Johnson*, p. 12, state, “The third stanza functions musically as a bridge, establishing a very different feel and harmonic rhythm before returning to the verses.”
82. Taft, *Blues Lyric Poetry*, p. xiii. Other stanzaic structures found in blues include the unembellished AA couplet, the older 3AA form (first line repeated twice), and ABAB.
83. “Mister So-and-So” is a common label for a competing lover; it occurs twenty-six times in Taft’s *Concordance*.
84. Instrumental interludes may very well have been a feature of Johnson’s live performances—his guitar playing is legendary. Guralnick, *Searching*, pp. 36–37, explains, “Johnson’s walking bass style on guitar, adapted from boogie woogie piano, while it may not have been entirely original with him, popularized a mode which would rapidly become the accepted pattern. As Johnny Shines has said, ‘Some of the things that Robert did with the guitar affected the way everybody played. In the early thirties, boogie was rare on the guitar, something to be heard. Because of Robert, people learned to complement themselves, carrying their own bass as well as their own lead with this one instrument.’” For Son House’s often quoted story of Johnson’s sudden technical improvement, see House and Lester, “I Can Make My Own Songs,” 41–42.
85. Blind Lemon Jefferson: “I want you to stop and *study* don’t take nobody’s life” (“Blind Lemon’s Penitentiary Blues,” JefB-33). Willie McTell: “Sit here and *study* with your eyes all red” (“Southern Can is Mine,” McTW-15).
86. Evans, “Pact with the Devil,” p. 12, finds the opposition between the “kindhearted woman” and the “evil-hearted women” of the third line problematic and interprets the “evil” as sorcery, stating, “there is a distinct possibility that Johnson simply hadn’t thought out his composition very carefully.”
87. There exists an x-formula *I got some thing*, but it requires a noun to fill “some thing,” as in *I got a nickel* or *I got a letter*.
88. Spoken asides are common in blues; Johnson uses the device often and effectively. In songs such as “Preaching Blues,” Johnson’s interjections

function as audience response (spoken words are within parentheses):

The blues is a low-down shakin' chill (yes, preach 'em now)

. . .

Well, the blues is a achin' old heart disease

(Do it now. You gon' do it? Tell me all about it)

Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 44, states, "many Delta guitarists mastered the art of fretting the instrument with a slider or bottleneck; they made the instrument 'talk' in strikingly speechlike inflections." Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, pp. 214–216, discusses the instrumental imitation of train sounds as a traditional feature of African American music.

89. Ferris, *Blues from the Delta*, p. 53, explains that in competitions between blues singers, "blues verses are used as a form of verbal competition somewhat like the 'dozens.' The singers face each other and sing until one is unable to continue in verses. Apparently this form of verbal competition is traditional, as it was observed before 1940 by John W. Work during fieldwork with black blues singers in Nashville, Tennessee."
90. Repeated stanzas also occur in the single extant take of "Believe I'll Dust My Broom," "Sweet Home Chicago," "32–20 Blues" (a repetition that does not occur in Skip James's earlier version "22–20 Blues"), "They're Red Hot" (first and last), "Last Fair Deal Gone Down," and "I'm a Steady Rollin' Man." In "Stop Breakin' Down Blues" the identical first and last stanzas of take 1 are changed in take 2.
91. For the "stall" in the sermons of African American preachers, and suggestive possibilities for Old English poetry, see Rosenberg, "Formulaic Quality," 3–20. See also Orchard, "Oral Tradition," pp. 111–112.
92. Of the twelve occurrences of *forgive*, eleven are configured as *forgive me*; the twelfth is "Now the preacher told me that God will forgive a black man" (Smj-1).
93. Conventionally, the line is used as a stanza opener, as is the case in nine of its ten occurrences in Taft's corpus. Johnson's "anymore/so" rhymes aurally: Furry Lewis also rhymes "tell me so" with "no more" in "Jellyroll" (LewF-1). Of interest are the first two stanzas of Joe Linthecome's "Pretty Mama Blues," which exhibit a similar collocation to Johnson's:

Listen here pretty mama : *what's on your worried mind*

How come you treat me : *so unkind*

*If you don't want me mama : why don't you tell me so*

I can beat ??? : getting down the road. (Lint-1)

94. Taft, "Lyrics," p. 308: "Formulas and lines often develop into a loose association with a small group of other formulas and lines."
95. The folded arms formula is a favorite of Son House: it occurs also in "My Black Mama—Part 2" (Hous-2) and "Preachin' the Blues—Part 2" (Hous-4).
96. Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 271–273, identifies this type of phrase as an extraformulaic "locutionary element," but in this cluster of images, it appears to be expected.

97. "If I Had Possession" borrows yet a second stanza and the tune from "Roll and Tumble Blues"; the song was also recorded by Garfield Akers as "Dough Roller Blues" (Aker-3).
98. But not unique: Buddy Boy Hawkins uses the closing line "I couldn't do anything partner : *but fold my little arms and cry*" in "Number 3 Blues" (Hawk-2).
99. "Ramblin' " continues the idea of departure and travel introduced in the first recording "Kind Hearted Woman" ("Some day, some day, I would shake your hand good-bye") and continued in "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" ("I believe, I believe, I'll go back home") and "Sweet Home Chicago" ("Oh baby, don't you want to go"). The thematic associations may have influenced Johnson's song sequence.
100. The song appeared on *Robert Johnson: King*.
101. The word *sympathize* occurs in Clifford Gibson's "Levee Camp Moan" (GibC-13).
102. *I'm sorry* is an established x-formula.
103. "My enemies they have betrayed me, have overtaken poor Bob at last."
104. My attempt roughly agrees with that of LaVere, liner notes to *The Complete Recordings*, p. 28, who hears the r-position half-lines as "but I can't make that agree" and "but what can we can't agree," respectively.
105. Taft, *Blues Lyric Poetry*, p. xiii: "On rare occasions, the singer might sing only a partial blues stanza; that is, there would be no rhyming line to complete the couplet. These partial stanzas could take any number of forms, depending on the repetitions and refrains which the singer used: A, 2A, 3A, Ar, 2Ar: AA, and so on. In theory, these partial stanzas should not be considered blues couplets at all, but they generally occur within the context of a song where the other stanzas conform to the texture of blues poetry. . . these stanzas seem to be 'implied couplets' in which the singer and listener agree to break the rules in a song."
106. Ainslie and Whitehill, *Robert Johnson*, p. 28. Ainslie and Whitehill, p. 28, quote Johnny Shines who recalls a live performance of "Come On In My Kitchen": "[Johnson] was playing very slow and passionate, and when we had quit, I noticed no one was saying anything. Then I realized they were crying—both women and men."
107. Ainslie and Whitehill, *Robert Johnson*, p. 28, comment, "Johnson's second take is remarkably different in text and feel, and while it is done well enough, it seems sloppy and improvised when compared to the first take. What happened to the carefully honed guitar and vocal interplay? The tight narrative pacing and the plaintive slides of the first take?"
108. Zumthor, *Oral Poetry*, p. 128.
109. Taft, "Lyrics," pp. 266–268.
110. The extended growling "mmmm" of "Preachin' Blues" adds emphasis to the hard-driving quality of the song and also echoes the style of Son House who recorded his own "Preachin' the Blues" (Pts. 1 and 2). In "Hellhound On My Trail," the "mmmm" of the opening stanza affects a plaintive moaning quality, which creates the eerie atmosphere of approaching despair so

- noted and admired by Johnson commentators. However, in “Terraplane,” the wordless line is the first line of a stanza that fails to continue the elaborate sexual metaphor developed in the preceding five stanzas. Johnson salvages the stanza by repeating in part the first stanza and then goes on to a new final stanza that reflects the earlier poetry. A second take of “Terraplane” does not exist, but I think the text reveals a momentary lapse in memory.
111. See the appendix for examples.
  112. Of the established line *A nickel is a nickel a dime is dime*, Taft, “Lyrics,” p. 312, states, “One may say that, in blues performance, the two formulas have ‘ossified’ into an indivisible line.” Barnie, “Oral Formulas,” 47–48, writes, “A singer who begins with ‘The sun’s gonna shine in my back door some day’ will almost invariably conclude with ‘The wind’s gonna rise, blow my blues away.’ . . . No doubt the widespread dissemination of blues via gramophone records hastened this process of ossification; but it is probably inherent in the lyric structure of the blues itself, which makes it easy and natural for memorable lines and stanzas to achieve a set form.” Both writers note that the convention does not prevent the singer from inventing a new variation. Barnie, in “Formulaic Lines,” 457, points out that “a singer will often show a preference for a particular coupling of formulas, so that in *his* blues that coupling becomes ossified—a set piece committed to memory.”
  113. The motif contributes to the larger premise of social isolation, which is discussed further in chapter 3.
  114. Calt, “The Idioms,” 59; Calt explains that barrelhouse proprietors and prostitutes wore nation sacks.
  115. For example, LaVere, liner notes to *The Complete Recordings*, p. 29, defines “dry long so” as “a dialectic description of an impoverished condition. In this case, it relates specifically to not having enough necessities to last through the winter.”
  116. Calt, “The Idioms,” 56; for the citation, see Hurston, *Watching God*, p. 42. Calt offers the translation “For no reason; for nothing” and concludes, “Johnson’s couplet apparently implies that a homeless girlfriend will find it necessary to trade sexual favors for shelter.”
  117. For example, *I received a letter* : that my man was dying (SmiC-10).
  118. For example, *I’d go up on the mountain : call my baby back* (MooP-2; Virg-1; and JefB-45).
  119. Groom, “Standing,” 11.
  120. Of Johnson’s “Phonograph Blues,” Oliver, *Screening*, p. 188, writes, “the Vocalion company chose to censor it and it was unissued. . . Perhaps it was the specific reference to Beatrice that occasioned the rejection of the recording. . .”
  121. Johnson also employs extended sexual metaphors in “Dead Shrimp Blues,” “Milkcow’s Calf Blues,” “They’re Red Hot,” and, possibly, “Stones In My Passway.”
  122. Take 2 is also different musically; Groom, “Standing,” 11, states, “The two takes of *Phonograph Blues* provide an interesting example of Johnson trying out different guitar accompaniments to the same lyrics. The first

- take is at a slower tempo than the second and uses a guitar accompaniment similar to the slow boogie of 'Dead Shrimp Blues' whereas take two has a recurring 'Dust My Broom'-like phrase adding urgency to the performance."
123. For example: "When I get down and out : sing this lonesome song" (WillJ-8).
  124. Here, the explicit call to God significantly contrasts with the presence of the Devil in Johnson's later work such as "Me and The Devil Blues" and "Hell Hound On My Trail," both recorded in 1937. Johnson's demonology receives much attention from today's blues audience; see, e.g., Evans, "Pact With The Devil," 21 (1996): 12–13; 22 (1996): 12–13; 23 (1996): 12–13.
  125. *Poor boy* occurs thirty-nine times in Taft's corpus.
  126. Johnson is the only singer to name himself in this way; "poor Bob" recurs in "Preaching Blues"—"Travel on, poor Bob"—and "Stones In My Passway": "My enemies have betrayed me, have overtaken poor Bob at last." The device leads writers to believe his songs are autobiographical.
  127. Willie Brown is thought to be the Delta blues singer who recorded, in 1930, "M&O Blues" and "Future Blues" and who sometimes accompanied Johnson's mentor Son House.
  128. Occurring 563 times in Taft's *Concordance*, *morning* is the 83rd most frequently used word; it is most often found in the major x-formula *I woke up this morning*.
  129. Groom, "Standing," 12, states, "The second take is slightly slower-tempoed, a less separate but more ominous ('dark gonna catch me here') performance than take one."
  130. Lord, *Singer*, p. 13.
  131. Barnie, "Formulaic Lines," 457.
  132. Taft, "Lyrics," p. 404.
  133. O'Neil, "Oral-Formulaic Structure," p. 75.
  134. *Ibid.*, p. 72. O'Neil also includes statistics for *Beowulf* as comparison in terms of poem length and genre: *Beo I* is 79% formulaic and *Beo II* is 70%.

### Chapter 3

1. Examples include Springer, "Regulatory Function," 278–287 and Ottenheimer, "Emotional Release".
2. Cone, *The Spirituals*, p. 112.
3. The poetic expression of the Old English *Wulf & Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* is constructed somewhat differently from that of the male-spoken poems; likewise, the blues songs of female singer-speakers, which predated and thereby greatly influenced the recordings of male singers, are quite different in many respects in terms of composition and style. Therefore, I have elected to treat exclusively the poetry of male speakers here. In keeping with my study of Robert Johnson's work in chapter 2,

all examples are from songs recorded before 1937, the year of Robert Johnson's second, and last, recording session.

4. *Deor* l. 35 and *Wan* 8–9a. The introductory cluster is discussed in chapter 1.
5. Greenfield, "The Formulaic Expression," 200–206.
6. *Earmne anhogan* occurs verbatim in *Beo* l. 2368a and *Max III* l. 19a. A variation, *enge anhoga*, appears in *Glc* l. 997a.
7. *Wineleas urecca* appears in *WL* l. 10a and *Res* l. 91a. Greenfield, in "The Formulaic Expression," 201–202, notes that the substitution of "guma" in the *Wan* "avoid[s] alliteration in the off-verse."
8. *Lonesome* occurs 185 times in Taft's *Blues Lyric Poetry: A Concordance*, ranking 174th in frequency.
9. On the deprivation formula, see Greenfield, "The Formulaic Expression," 202.
10. For more on type-scenes, see Fry, "Old English Formulaic," 48–54.
11. Edwards, "Exile, Self," pp. 24–25, uses *Wan* and *Sfr* as examples in his discussion of memory in exile literature as a "mode of transformation."
12. Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking*.
13. Similarly, at the very end of *Wan* the "narrator" reconfigures, in Christian terms, a lost past of stability as a future state sought by the faithful: "Wel bið þam þe him are seceð, /frofre to fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð [Well be it for him who seeks grace, consolation from the Father in heaven, where for us all stability resides, ll. 114b–115]. Within the Wanderer's memory of the lord resides, for the Christian narrator, spiritual hope; the external conflation of past and future within the lord–thane scene seeks to console the Wanderer's despair of earthly transience.
14. See Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, pp. 132–146.
15. Greenfield, "The Formulaic Expression," 204.
16. See Oliver's chapter, "Railroad for My Pillow," in *Blues Fell This Morning*, pp. 43–68, for a discussion on the railroad and travel in blues. He sees the association of escape and freedom with the railroad as a tradition surviving from the days of the Underground Railroad.
17. House, "The Jinx Blues."
18. Greenfield, "The Formulaic Expression," 203.
19. Another collocation occurs in *Juliana*, when the devil states, ". . . ic sceal feor þonan / heanmod hweofan, hropra bidæled, . . . [ . . . I must go far from there, wander downcast, deprived of pleasure, . . . , ll. 389b–390].
20. The other available option for dealing with problems in blues is physical violence, evident in songs such as those known as Caliber Blues. The idea of working things out in a quiet, rational manner does not exist in the blues of the 1920s and 1930s; Keil, *Urban Blues*, p. 73, states that "attempts to understand and patch up conjugal bonds and other problems" arises later as a thematic stance in the lyrics of postwar urban blues.
21. *Home* ranks sixty-eight in Taft's frequency list, one place higher than *blues*.
22. "Ain't No Tellin'," *Mississippi John Hurt*.
23. For commentary on these lines, see Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 115.
24. *Mind* occurs 533 times in Taft's *Concordance* and ranks 86th in frequency.

25. According to Jackson (ed.), *Wake Up Dead Man*, pp. 29–30, worksongs are sung specifically to accompany work: “The aesthetic has always been one of *participation*, not performance; . . . The songs differ from all other folksongs in one regard: they do not posit an audience.” Worksongs “supply a rhythm for work,” help ease the boredom of work, and “offer a partial outlet for the inmates’ tensions.” The complexity of a song’s lyrics and melody depends upon the work it accompanies: the less structured the work, the more highly structured the song. The solo songs used when picking cotton sometimes take the structural form of blues, and many in Jackson’s collection, compiled in the 1960s, contain lines and phrases found in the blues of the 1920s and 1930s.
26. Jackson, *Wake Up Dead Man*, p. 37.
27. The formula is often found in conjunction with another full-line, which blames the lover:

*I’m lying in jail : with my face turned to the wall  
And that woman I’m loving : she was the cause of it all.* (Wilk-1)

28. Lacy uses the stanza in his “Mississippi Jail,” which is an extended “groan,” void of humor.
29. Jackson, *Wake Up Dead Man*, p. 39.
30. For a discussion of *ham* in *XSt*, see Sleeth, *Studies in Christ and Satan*, pp. 93–97.
31. “Æce æt helle duru dracan eardigað” [Forever at hell’s door the dragons dwell, *XSt* l. 97]. “Hær is nedran swæg” [Here, is the sound of snakes, l. 101b].
32. *Niðer under næssum* is a formula that occurs at *XSt* l. 90a and in *Glc* l. 563, also in reference to the location of hell.
33. *X gebunden* [x bound] occurs over twenty times in the *Concordance ASPR*.
34. A variation of the formula occurs later in Eve’s speech as “*beorned ð in bendum*” [burns in bonds, *XSt* l. 412a]. The formula is found also in *Chr I* at l. 147a and *DHell* at l. 88a. The *XSt* poet did not take advantage of *bendum fæstne*, a bondage formula that elsewhere occurs verbatim four times.
35. For a comparison of the two Satans, see Finnegan, *Christ and Satan*, pp. 48–49.
36. Greenfield, “Spiritual Exile,” p. 324, sees the sequence of exile imagery marking the phases of “man’s spiritual history.”
37. Rendall, “Bondage and Freeing,” 505, states, “a principle way in which the expanding relevance of the poem’s subject is brought home is through the expanding application of the image of bondage.”
38. Of the ninety-five occurrences of *luck* in Taft’s corpus, eighty-five or so pertain to *bad luck*:

Bad luck and trouble : and the blues without a dime. (GibC-15)

Hard luck and trouble : meets me at the door. (GreLi-13)

May bad luck overtake you : pile up on you in a heap. (Whea-31)

*Hard time(s)* occurs twenty-nine times, referring, in most cases, to a general economic state:

Hard times here : everywhere you go. (JamS-4)

Hard times don't worry me : I was broke when it first started out.  
(JohLo-17)

But hard times : is knocking on everybody's door. (DaviW-3)

39. In Taft's *Concordance*, the opening line occurs only in the songs of Bracey, but it occurs much later in Holiday's 1954 "Stormy Blues." The closing line is formulaic and often paired with, or in close proximity to, the line *If you don't believe I'm sinking : look what a fool I've been* (ThoH-7).
40. As in "Oh, Lord, Oh, my Lord, Oh, my good Lord! / Keep me from sinking down," 31B in Dixon, *Wesen und Wandel geistlicher Volkslieder Negro Spirituals*.
41. Occurring 201 times, *worried* ranks 166th in frequency. After *blues*, to be "worried" is the next most common expression of mental distress. *Trouble* is not far behind *worried*, ranking 173rd with 186 instances in Taft's corpus.
42. Of the twenty-nine instances of *bothered*, sixteen occur within this formulaic line. Blind Lemon Jefferson has a slightly different version: "She keeps me worried : and bothered in the mind" (JefB-28). *Worried* and *bothered* are also paired in the x-formula *I'm worried and bothered*.
43. In, respectively, "My Black Mama, Pt. 2" (Hous-2) and "Walking Blues."
44. Robert Johnson, "Come On In My Kitchen" (take 2).
45. Trouble can also be found with bad luck:

Bad luck wakes me every morning : trouble follows me all night long.  
(GibC-10)

Bad luck is my buddy : and trouble is my friend. (LewN-9)

46. See Siems, "Brer Robert," 141–157.
47. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 6, states, "Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane."
48. The devil, sometimes known as Legba, plays a significant role in the lore of blues, especially in connection to the receipt of musical skill at the crossroads. Both Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson were said to have undergone the ritual.
49. *Good morning x* is an x-formula often used to begin a song. The addressee is most commonly the Blues, or the judge of prison songs, and one instance of "Mr. Devil."
50. For example, "Me and the Devil Blues":

Early this mornin' when you knocked upon my door  
Early this mornin' ooo when you knocked upon my door  
And I said, "Hello Satan, I believe it's time to go."

Me and the devil was walkin' side by side  
 Me and the devil ooo was walkin' side by side  
 And I'm goin' to beat my woman until I get satisfied.

51. Culler, "Apostrophe," p. 139.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143: "The poet makes himself a poetic presence through an image of voice, . . . A phrase like 'O wild West Wind' evokes poetic presence because the wind becomes a *thou* only in relation to a poetic act, only in the moment when poetic voice constitutes itself."
54. *XSt*, l. 39a.
55. The hunger of the mind is emphasized later in line 62 when the speaker's thoughts travel "gifre ond grædig."

## Chapter 4

1. Krapp and Dobbie (eds.) *The Exeter Book*, p. ix. Leofric was appointed bishop to Crediton in 1046 and then moved the bishopric to Exeter in 1050. While it is possible that Leofric brought the Exeter Book with him from Crediton, Conner, in *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, p. 94, concludes that it was produced at Exeter along with two other manuscripts written in the same hand: London, Lambeth Palace, MS. 149 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley 319. See also Muir, "Watching the Exeter Book," 3–22.
2. For the dating of the manuscript, see Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts*, item 116, p. 153. Muir (ed.), *The Exeter Anthology*, pp. 1 and 27–30, offers the period "circa 965–75." Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, p. 76, concludes a slightly earlier time frame of "ca 950 x ca 970" and in "The Structure," 238, believes that "[o]ne scribe probably did write the manuscript, but at different times."
3. See Sisam, "The Exeter Book," p. 99; for a discussion of Exeter during the Benedictine Reform, see Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, pp. 21–32.
4. Krapp and Dobbie (eds.), *The Exeter Book*, p. xi.
5. Förster, "The Preliminary Matter," p. 44, explains that the first 7 folios contain records of Leofric's and Canon Leowine's donations to St. Peter's, Exeter, a Latin abstract of Leofric's donation list, and twelfth-century legal transactions such as manumissions and conveyances of land. It has been determined that these preliminary folios belong to Cambridge University Library MS li. 2. 11 but, as Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, p. 3, states, "were probably removed from that codex and bound with *The Exeter Anthology* when the former manuscript was given to Archbishop Parker in 1566." Thus, the Exeter Book proper consists of 123 folios. For a detailed codicological examination of the Exeter Book, see Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, pp. 95–147; Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, pp. 3–16; Krapp and Dobbie (eds.), *The Exeter Book*, pp. ix–xvi; and Pope, "Palaeography and Poetry," pp. 25–65.
6. Conner, "The Structure," 234–235.
7. Muir, "Watching the Exeter Book," 11–12.

8. Conner, "The Structure," 236–237, finds that four of the seven drypoint drawings contained in MS 3501 were written over. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, p. 16, finds four more drawings in addition to Conner's seven.
9. Krapp and Dobbie (eds.), *The Exeter Book*, pp. li and 174, treat this fragment as the conclusion of *Ptg* ll. 1–2a, but there is probably a leaf missing; Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, pp. 276–277, separates the texts, naming the second *HmF* 3.
10. Conner, "The Structure," 233–242.
11. *Ibid.*, 234.
12. Conner's theory that the first booklet was written last is based on the progression of the ligatures with long-s and the initial *eth*; see his *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, pp. 110–128.
13. Krapp and Dobbie (eds.), *The Exeter Book*, pp. xiv–xv; Muir, "A Preliminary Report," 277, finds goldleaf traces on ninety folios: "The presence of these traces in a manuscript lacking illumination indicates that at some stage after the Exeter Book was copied, and probably when the texts were no longer understood, it became a repository for sheets of goldleaf used to decorate other manuscripts produced in the scriptorium."
14. The runic signature of Cyn(e)wulf appears within the texts of *Chr* 2 (797–807a) and *Jul* (704–708). On Cynewulf, see Anderson, *Cynewulf*; Sisam, "Cynewulf and His Poetry," pp. 1–28.
15. Each riddle is begun on a new line with a large initial capital and finished with end punctuation. However, there is no break (i.e., end punctuation or capitalization) in the manuscript between the riddles Krapp and Dobbie number 2 and 3, 42 and 43, 47 and 48. Within *HbM*, lines 12 and 25 are treated in the same manner as a closing line: the final words are wrapped and followed by end-punctuation, and the next line is begun with a large capital letter. See Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, 2: 357. The fact that the scribe treated *Deor* similarly does not seem to bother editors: each section begins with a large capital and is end-punctuated.
16. Sisam, "The Exeter Book," pp. 98–103. For instance, the nonword "swist" appears three times for "swift" and is corrected only once.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–103: "It seems unlikely that the latest scribe is responsible. His highly schooled, monumental hand, the frequent confusion of similar letters. . . , and slips like *Azarias* 148 *sacerdos sadfaest* for *sacerdas soðfaest*, all point to a mechanical copyist." But, see also Doane, "The Ethnography," 420–439, esp. 429n.
18. Frank, "Germanic Legend," pp. 88–106.  
Notably, English poetry anthologies were around in the mid-ninth century; in his biography of King Alfred, Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, p. 75, tells us that the young Alfred won a book of English poetry from his mother by being the first of his brothers to learn and recite its contents.
19. Frank, "Lexicography," p. 210, notes that the Exeter scribe's confusion over the language suggests that it had "early fallen into disuse."
20. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 202.

21. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 202.
22. Sisam, "The Exeter Book," p. 98.
23. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 202.
24. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, p. 25.
25. Anderson, *Two Literary Riddles*, p. 3.
26. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, p. 148; on pp. 158–159, Conner offers Walahfrid Strabo's "Elegy on Reichenau" as an analogue for *Wan*, *Sfr*, and *Rim*, all of Booklet II. While his booklet theory makes sense, I am not convinced that the *Chr* and *Glc* poems reflect a development in style, mainly because the last extant lines of this booklet contain exactly what Conner identifies as pre-Reform poetry: *Glc B* 1346b–1356a contains a lament of exile, spoken by Guthlac's disciple, which is similar in tone to *Wan*. Exile passages can be found as late as the 1065 chronicle poem "The Death of Edward": "Wæs a bliðemod bealuleas kyng, / þeah he lange ær, lande bereafod, / wunode wræclastum wide geond eorðan," [The blameless king was always blithe in mood / though he, long before, deprived of land, endured the exile-paths widely throughout the earth, ll. 15–17]. The poem appears in MS. Cotton Tiberius Bi and MS. Cotton Tiberius Biv.; I have cited from the edition of Dobbie (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*.
27. Frank, "Lexicography," p. 215.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 215–216.
29. Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, p. 14.
30. See Howe's discussion of *Wds* and *Deor* in *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, pp. 166–201.
31. The convention of the *sum* list is alluded to in *Deor* at lines 31–34: the Lord changes frequently showing favor to many and "sumum weana dæl" (to some a share of misery, l. 34b).
32. *Max* 1 35: "Dol biþ se þe his dryhten nat, to þæs oft cymedð deað unþinged" [Foolish is he who does not know his lord, so often comes death unexpectedly].
33. *Phx*: "wundrum wrætlice" (l. 63a), "Wrælic is seo womb neoþan, wundrum fæger" (l. 307), and "aweht wrætlice wundrum to life" (l. 367).
34. "Noldan hi þa torhtan tacen oncnawan / þe him beforan fremede freobearn godes, / monig mislicu, geond middangeard" [They would not acknowledge the splendid signs which the Son of God performed before them, many and various, throughout the earth, *Chr* ll. 642–644].
35. Head, *Representation*, p. 12.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
37. *Ibid.*
38. The other instance of overlap between poetic codices is Exeter *Soul and Body II* and the Vercelli *Soul and Body I*. The differences exhibited in both cases of shared text give rise to many questions with regards to exemplar and scribal intervention; see Sisam, "The Authority," pp. 29–44.
39. Head, *Representation*, p. 109.
40. *W&E*, l. 19; *WL* l. 1a.
41. "Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America," 1324.

42. *Ibid.*, 1325. For an account of Lomax and Leadbelly at the MLA see Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, pp. 133–136; see also Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, pp. 342–343, who comments that the event “surely rates high in the all-time annals of cultural collisions.” The program for the smoker also included “Elizabethan Ayres to the Virginals, sung by Mary Peabody Hotson” and “Songs and Chantees by the diners, with Leslie Hotson as Master of Singing.”
43. According to the “Proceedings of the Semi-Centennial Meeting,” 1429 and 1442, for the 1933 MLA in St. Louis, Lomax presented “Songs from Negro Convict Camps” for a Comparative Literature session and “The Folk Songs of Negro Convicts” for the smoker held after the “Old Guard Dinner.” Of the presentation at the 1933 MLA, Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, p. 130, state, “This was the first time that recordings of black vernacular music had been heard at the MLA meeting. . .”
44. Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, p. 135.
45. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, p. 112.
46. See Dawidoff, “Prologue,” pp. 3–19, who states that contrary to the belief that country music is “pure white,” it developed as a “hybrid form conflating many extant styles of popular and religious music with whatever individual innovations people like Rodgers brought to it,” and many well known country musicians had “black musical mentors.”
47. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
48. Richardson’s “T and T Blues” was recorded on February 13, 1928 and is the earliest usage of the line “T for Texas. . .” listed in Taft’s *Concordance*. The others include Frank Stokes’s “Nehi Mama Blues” (August 1928; Stok-16), Billy Bird’s “Alabama Blues—Part 1” (October 1928; BirB-2), Willie Brown’s “Future Blues” (1931; BrowW-2), and Bo Chatman’s “Shake ‘Em On Down” (1938; ChatB-23). Regardless of where or with whom “T for Texas, T for Tennessee” originated, I assume that the success of Jimmie Rodgers’ “Blue Yodel” (which later gained the subtitle “T for Texas”) had a lot to do with the line’s inclusion in the repository of blues formulas.
49. Lomax and Leadbelly were featured in a *March of Time* newsreel: see Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, pp. 164–168; and Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, pp. 354–356.
50. Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, pp. 158–159, recount the conflict between the commercial “sensibility” of the ARC officials and Lomax’s insistence on “folk” music during the recording sessions. Leadbelly did record “Irene” (the song made famous by the Weavers in 1950), but it was never issued.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 159. “Governor Pat Neff” is the legendary song said to have motivated the Texas Governor to release Leadbelly from prison, a story much publicized in the media. Two months later, ARC made one more attempt; six more songs were recorded, and one record was released. Unfortunately, that too failed and ARC wrote off the venture.

52. Lomax's son Alan, who was affiliated with the left, and family friend Mary Barnicle, a professor of folklore and literature at New York University and social activist, were instrumental in helping Leadbelly obtain singing jobs at labor movement events.
53. Wright, "Huddie Ledbetter." See also Wolfe and Lornell, *Life and Legend*, pp. 200–202.
54. Wright, "Huddie Ledbetter."
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*
57. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 91.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
59. For a study of the blues of the Piedmont, see Bastin, *Red River Blues*.
60. Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, pp. 139–140, explains that a number of people were associated with the Almanacs, which was more of a singing organization than one fixed group: the "informal mixing actually resulted in several Almanac groups, sometimes answering different bookings simultaneously on a given night."
61. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
63. The observation is attributed to Richard Reuss in *Ibid.*, p. 147.
64. Asch, "Birth and Growth," p. 94, owner of Folkways Records, explains that Smith, like himself, bought up large numbers of 78s during the war when a shellac shortage forced the record companies to buy back discs from their dealers: "New York Band and Instrument and all the other dealers I used to pick up records from had tables full of this stuff—the greatest music in the world that New Yorkers knew nothing about."
65. Smith, foreword to Handbook for *Anthology*.
66. Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, p. 204. Of the original cover, Marcus, *Invisible*, p. 93, observes, "[The hand of God] divided creation into balanced spheres of energy, into fundaments; printed over the filaments of the etching and its crepuscular Latin explanations were record titles and the names of the blues singers, hillbilly musicians, and gospel chanters Smith was bringing together for the first time. It was if they had something to do with each other."
67. Marcus, *Invisible*, p. 93n. The recent (CD) reissue of the *Anthology* returns to Smith's original cover.
68. Cohen, "Rare Interview," [p. 126]. Smith does not elaborate upon his criteria for evaluating the quality of the performances.
69. The Handbook presents examples of typical record sleeves and catalogue covers, some illustrated with racial and rural stereotypes. Smith's caption on p. 23 of the Handbook reads, "The advertising on these envelopes gives a good idea [*sic*] of the companies['] attitude toward their artists."
70. Cohen, "Rare Interview," [p. 134].
71. Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, p. 193.
72. This would be especially true in 1952 when the *Anthology's* sounds were truly new to most of its audience members. In contrast, by the late 1990s

- the Handbook was of less importance to new listeners as an orientation tool, mainly because the *Anthology* was instrumental in opening up a market for reissues of early recordings. As a result, the blues and country tunes like those in the collection are now easily available and thus familiar. But the latest release of the *Anthology* on CD features *A Booklet of Essays, Appreciations, and Annotations Pertaining to the Anthology of American Folk Music*, which augments Smith's notes with updated information on all aspects of each song including updated research on the performers. The *Booklet of Essays*, along with the vast number of literary publications on blues and country music that have appeared in the last forty years, attests to how the second audience experiences the oral texts through reading.
73. For example, selection 5: "Old Lady and the Devil / by Bill and Belle Reed / Vocal solo with guitar. / Recorded in 1928. / Original issue Columbia 15336D(wi472ii). // MEDIEVAL WOMAN DEFEATS DEVIL DESPITE HUSBAND'S PRAYERS // The motif of a wife who terrorizes daemons is widely distributed in Europe and Asia. Child's two versions (no. 278) are both quite similar to the present recording. / See also other British versions in Alfred Williams' *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* p. 211 and H.R. Hayward's *Ulster Songs and Ballads* p. 32. // Discography: *Battle Axe and the Devil*. Bill Cox and Cliff Hobbs. Vocalion 04811. . .Bibliography: Barry-1-325; Barry-11-60; Belden-94; . . ."
  74. Smith, Handbook, notes to selection 41.
  75. *Ibid.*, notes to selections 42, 43, and 56.
  76. "Run and tell Aunt Sally that her old grey goose is dead / The one she's been saving to make a feather bed."
  77. In order, the songs are "Poor Boy Blues" by Ramblin' Thomas, "Feather Bed" by Cannon's Jug Stompers, "Country Blues" by Dock Boggs, "Ninety-Nine Year Blues" by Julius Daniels, and "Prison Cell Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson. In his Handbook notes to selection 71, Smith explains that the songs themselves display little overlap in lyrics, but in each "most of the verses are selected from a general stock of about 800 frequently heard couplets dealing with prison."
  78. Smith, Handbook, notes to selection 74.
  79. Fahey, "Untitled," p. 9, states, "The White and Black folks found [in the *Anthology*], despite the persistent protestations of many white artists. . ., listened to and drew from each other's musics in a landscape of musical interchange nonexistent during this same period between any other traditions to be found under the rubric of 'American' music."
  80. Harry Smith's words in Cohen, "Rare Interview," [p. 127].
  81. Marcus, *Invisible*, p. 87.
  82. For example, "When That Great Ship Went Down" is about the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, and, according to Smith's notes, the Child ballad "Fatal Flower Garden" recounts events that occurred in 1255.
  83. See note 26 earlier for the exilic portion of the 1065 chronicle poem "The Death of Edward."

**Conclusion**

1. Lunney, "Deor," *The Margaret Annas*, Big Deal Records, 1998.
2. Guralnick, *Searching*, p. 5.
3. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 257.
4. Marcus, *Invisible*, p. 113. For Dylan and blues, see also Gray, *Song & Dance*, especially ch. 9.

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