‘Mississippi, My Home’: Songwriting, Identity and Everyday Aesthetics in the African-American Tradition

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Abstract

This article focuses on the analysis of ‘Mississippi, My Home’, a blues composition by African-American singer Lavelle White, which posits key issues about the meanings of home, identity, and everyday aesthetics. Presented as a true story, the song deals with the idea of returning home to Mississippi. It represents everyday life in a plantation through the bond between the narrator and her mother while picking cotton. Therefore, it approaches the listener to an aesthetic of everyday life that combined blues, work songs, and spirituals. Drawing on a personal interview with the artist, as well as on other sources, we will analyse the song as part of a broader interest in the musical discourse of blues. Exploring the song’s text and context, the aim is to reach a complex understanding about the ways in which biography and fiction intertwine with each other in the creative act of songwriting and musical performance.

Keywords: songwriting, identity, everyday life, African-American culture, blues

Introduction

This article explores the musical discourse of blues by focusing on the analysis of ‘Mississippi, My Home’, an original song by African-American singer Lavelle White. A native Mississippi artist born in 1929, Miss Lavelle is one of the most legendary blues and soul artists in Austin, Texas, the self-proclaimed ‘Live Music Capital of the World’. She has reached a level of relative local stardom, yet her significant story and artistic contribution still remains generally hidden and unknown for researchers and audiences. Presented as an autobiographical story, ‘Mississippi, My Home’ posits key issues about the meanings of home, identity, and everyday aesthetics within the African-American musical and sociocultural tradition. It deals with the idea of returning home to Mississippi – a mythical place in African-American history and culture that is often associated with nostalgia and authenticity. Furthermore, ‘Mississippi, My Home’ represents everyday life in a plantation through the bond between the narrator and her mother while picking cotton. In this regard, it approaches the listener to an aesthetic of everyday life that combined blues, work songs, and spirituals, and that allowed citizens to articulate a sense of hope and freedom within the mundane struggle for survival.

Drawing on participant observation conducted in Austin and on a personal interview with Lavelle White, as well as on several scholarly works and specialised music magazine articles, we will examine the text and context of ‘Mississippi, My Home’ in relation to the artist’s own biography and identity.1 The aim is to reach a more

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1 Participant observation was conducted in Austin between March and June, 2016, during our respective research stays at The University of Texas at Austin. During this time we attended Lavelle White’s regular
complex and nuanced understanding about the ways in which biography and fiction intertwine with each other in the creative act of songwriting and musical performance. We approach the notion of ‘musical discourse’ as an articulation of lyrics and music within song, and we assume that the complex production of meaning in music depends on the interrelation between both dimensions. As Simon Frith (1998: 187) has pointed out, ‘the issue is not meaning (words) versus the absence of meaning (music), but the relation between two different sorts of meaning-making, the tensions and the conflicts between them.’ Moreover, this rich and mysterious dialogue can provoke different interpretations and modes of reception from different people, or even from the same person at different moments.

The musical dimension of ‘Mississippi, My Home’ will be addressed in relation to structure, instrumentation and call-and-response patterns. As for the narrative analysis of the song, we draw on the actantial model formulated by Algirdas Julien Greimas (see Greimas 1976, 1987, Greimas and Courtés 1982), who built upon the narrative studies developed by Vladimir Propp (1968) in relation to folktales. The actantial model is based on the recognition of a limited number of interacting actants within a microuniverse, and it allows the examination of narrative structures and actions within all types of discourses. Actants constitute categories, different types of characters, and they are defined by their different actions, positions and roles within the story: subject/object; sender/receiver; and helper/opponent. Organised in pairs, actants interact in three main modalities: desire, which is manifested in the relation between subject and object; knowledge or communication, expressed in the relation between the sender and receiver; and power, which refers to the subject’s ‘being-able-to-do’ in relation to his opponent and with the assistance of the helper(s).

In addition to the musical texts, we acknowledge the importance of considering the musicians’ biographies, identities and verbal discourses when examining the musical discourse of popular genres such as blues. This perspective is in sync with the key role played by biography and life stories in anthropology, folklore, blues, jazz and popular music studies. This bond is particularly strong in many significant blues studies (Charters 1975, Lomax 1993, Oliver 1997), as well as in jazz studies (Gabbard 2016, Gebhardt 2001, Lomax 1973). Nonetheless, we cannot assume a direct or unequivocal relationship between songs and life experiences of singer-songwriters, even if the expressive or ‘first person authenticity’ (Moore 2002: 214) of certain artists and genres conveys the impression that musical stories are merely reflective of their experience – that theirs is an unmediated form of communication with the audience. Instead, we argue that the contrast between storytelling through song (often taken as biographical in the blues) and the actual biography of authors reveals a notion of popular music and song as a space for play, imagination, and stylisation of everyday life experiences.²

Sunday shows at the celebrated blues club Antone’s. The fact that she remained professionally active as a veteran artist allowed a closer examination of her style, repertoire, performance and attitude within the live music experience. We were able to repeatedly interact with Miss Lavelle, with her manager Deborah Lerner and with other band members such as the experienced saxophonist Mark ‘Kaz’ Kazanoff. This type of participant observation was pivotal in order to introduce ourselves, develop certain rapport, and gain access to a personal interview with Lavelle. The interview was conducted by Pedro at Miss Lavelle’s house in Austin on March 30, 2016. ² The analysis of songs and songwriting in relation to creative process that involve the stylisation of experience is inspired by Albert Murray’s (1995: 65-107) discussion of blues, art and literature.
First, we will introduce Lavelle White’s lifetime and musical trajectory by focusing on three main stages: her early musical learning with her mother in Mississippi; her professional initiation in Houston’s rhythm & blues urban music scene; and her ultimate relocation to Austin, where she has become a beloved mainstay and an outspoken, down-to-earth diva. Then we will proceed to analyse Miss Lavelle’s signature song ‘Mississippi, My Home’, included in her second album, It Haven’t Been Easy (Antone’s Records, 1996). While its narrative takes us back to the early 20th century Jim Crow era in the deep south of the United States, the song’s original composition and recording is situated in the mid-1990s, and Miss Lavelle continues to perform it regularly to date³. In this case, the intimate relationship between song and artist is highlighted by the realism associated to blues music, and by the racial and gender implications that have impacted the artist’s identity.

Miss Lavelle White: biography, style and dedication to fans

Miss Lavelle’s music career spans for more than 50 years. She is mostly associated with blues and soul music, but she has shunned stylistic categorisations by insisting on her eclecticism through musical performance and verbal statements. In our personal interview she stated: ‘They class me as a blues singer. I’m not a blues singer, I am rhythm & blues, and funk, and soul. You’re not gonna see me up there singing blues all night. Blues is cool. That’s where we originated from. … But just singing blues all night it gets me… I can’t do it’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016). While she talks about blues as a tradition that symbolises her collective origins (‘that’s where we originated from’), she also stresses her ability to perform a variety of genres and feelings. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Miss Lavelle occasionally raps within a funk setting, and that she has also reinterpreted country & western songs such as ‘Today I Started Loving You Again’ (Merle Haggard). Lavelle has expressed similar ideas about her eclecticism in interviews with other authors (Govenar 2008, Hudson 2007).

Lavelle White’s early musical memories are intimately tied to her mother and to the Baptist church: ‘When I grew up to be 12 years old I was in church. My mother would play piano, I would sing in church, and we would travel around different little towns like Belzoni, Mississippi, and Arcola, Mississippi. We would travel around the different churches’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016). Therefore, the African-American church provided not only a place for religion and worship, but also for musical performance and even ‘touring’. This was particularly important for citizens like Lavelle and her mom, Melissa Hampton (Govenar 2008: 497), as they did not have a piano at home (Bock 2014: 18), and they were able to travel and broaden their horizons. One of the songs that Lavelle recalls singing is the 19th century Christian hymn ‘Nearer My God to Thee’, written by the English poet and writer Sarah Flower Adams.

Lavelle White’s early appropriation of spirituals contrasts with her scarce knowledge of blues music while living in Mississippi:

I didn’t know anything about blues then. I was too young, my mother didn’t like me to go sing no blues. I was a kid, 12 years old, knew nothing about no blues. I didn’t know nothing about blues until I got 14 or 15 when I came to Houston. That’s when I started trying to sing, still trying (personal interview, 30/03/2016).

³ In the summer of 2019, Miss Lavelle celebrated her 90th birthday with three shows and celebrations in one week: at C-Boys Heart & Soul (Wednesday, 3 July), at the Skylark Lounge (Saturday, 6 July), and at Antone’s (Sunday, 7 July).
On the one hand, Miss Lavelle’s discourse illustrates the traditional opposition between the church and the blues within African-American everyday life and culture. On the other hand, it shows the association between blues music and the emerging postwar blues scene in cities such as Houston, where Lavelle moved in with her older brother. Gradually, she was able to develop as a singer within the local club circuit, and she recorded six singles for the historic Houston-based rhythm & blues label Duke-Peacock Records: ‘Teen-Age Love / If (I Could Be With You)’ (1958), ‘Yes, I’ve Been Crying / Stop These Teardrops’ (1959), ‘Stolen Love / You’re The Most’ (1960), ‘Just Look At You Fool / Tide Of Love’ (1961), ‘Why Young Men Go Wild / Run To You’ (1963), and ‘Everybody’s Got Somebody / The Best Part of Me’ (1965).

Texas blues artists Clarence Hollimono (1937–2000) and Johnny Copeland (1937–1997) were two of Lavelle White’s main musical friends and mentors in the urban scene. Hollimon, who recorded with blues and jazz musicians such as Bobby Blue Bland, Junior Parker, Charles Brown and Arnett Cobb, helped her with her timing (Hudson 2007: 149), and Copeland introduced her work to the influential African-American impresario Don Robey, head of Duke-Peacock Records (see Donell Kohout 2013 and Wood 2003 for more). Lavelle White explained:

‘If I Could Be With You’ – I sang it for Johnny Copeland and he put it on tape. …. So, he took it to Robey and they listened to it and they liked it and they recorded that and I wrote more songs. I had to deal with Robey to get a recording deal. You have to. I got paid a little bit. That’s the way it was. He was a gangster, he always carried a pistol. But, I guess he liked my songs. He recorded them!’ (Bock 2014: 19).

Lavelle White’s comments about Don Robey as a gangster are significant, as he is well-known both for his pioneering role as an African-American record producer during the Jim Crow era, and for his firm command of the company and business. In his insightful discussion about the importance of rhythm & blues labels and black radio within the post-WWII context, Nelson George summarises:

They benefited by the power to entertain, and from the exploitation of black music, and were crucial to its growth. You might not like all their methods – Robey’s ‘songwriting’ is particularly objectionable. Still, as urban models for balancing black capitalism with the realities of a white-dominated society (white of course even owned most of the black labels and stations), this ‘rhythm & blues world’ had real merit (George 2004: 56–57).

Lavelle White recorded her own songs at Duke Records as Miss LaVell, and her songwriting is acknowledged in early records such as ‘Teen-age Love’, ‘If (I Could Be With You)’, ‘Stop These Teardrops’, ‘Why Young Men Go Wild’, and ‘Run To You’. Yet she also witnessed how Robey systematically included his pseudonym (Deadric Malone) as a songwriter of many of the songs he produced. The single ‘Everybody’s Got Somebody’ / ‘The Best Part of Me’, for instance, is credited to Malone, White and Shakesnider (unknown). In addition, Lavelle White has claimed the authorship of ‘Lead Me On’, a song about her mother (Curtin 2019), which was originally recorded by Bobby Blue Bland (Duke, 1960), credited to Malone (Robey), and recorded by White in her first LP, Miss Lavelle (1994).

Lavelle White’s association with Duke Records and with their booking agent Evelyn Johnson also allowed her to tour throughout the south and to share stage with a variety of well-known rhythm & blues and soul artists, including The Drifters, Little Willie John, Otis Redding, Etta James, Bobby Bland, Junior Parker (Bock 2014: 19), James Brown, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Aretha Franklin, The Isley Brothers, and
Sam and Dave (Hudson 2007: 147). In addition, she lived in Chicago for approximately ten years between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, performing regularly at clubs such as Kingston Mines. Lavelle White started coming to Austin in the 1960s, when she participated in the African-American eastside scene. Consider her description of the after-hours club Ernie’s Chicken Shack as an approximation to the everyday construction of the neighborhood’s blues scene:

Ernie’s Chicken Shack – that was a rockin’ place, and I was a rockin’ girl. That place was so jumpin’, and the best food – mmm, mmmh – you ever ate in your life! That fried chicken and fish was just mouth-watering. It was really hoppin’, I’m telling you.

Everybody went there, every weekend night. You could hardly find a place to sit. Dancing and music. Gambling going on in the back room, yes there was. They had bootleg liquor and Blues Boy Hubbard & the Jets. It was wonderful (Moser 2003).

Miss Lavelle emphasizes the lively and intimate bond between live music venues, dancing, typical food, gambling and bootleg liquor in the Austin’s African-American blues scene before racial integration or desegregation. For more on the construction of the Austin blues scene and its sociocultural and racial implications see Pedro (2017).

The celebrated Austin venue and record label Antone’s, founded by the influential white Texan impresario and blues disseminator Clifford Antone allowed Lavelle White further musical opportunities. She finally relocated to Austin due to her involvement in the Antone’s club scene and the recording of her long awaited full album debut, Miss Lavelle (1994): ‘It was because I recorded for Antone’s label. That’s why I had to come back here. … Clifford Antone appreciated me. He knew Evelyn Johnson of Duke Peacock Records and she sent me here to work down on his club’ (Bock 2014: 19). Lavelle White then released two more albums with Antone’s Records: It Haven’t Been Easy (1996) and Into the Mystic (2003), in which she covers the homonymous song by Van Morrison. In addition, she has participated in the album Texas Soul Sisters (2003), in compilation albums such as Antone’s Women (1992) and Antone’s 20th Anniversary (2012), and in Paul Oscher’s latest album, Cool Cat (2018). But, above all, Lavelle White has earned her reputation by performing live throughout the decades. In her regular club appearances she is cheered by close friends, enthusiastic fans, and more casual music aficionados. Actually, White has expressed gratitude and love to her fans, emphasising the true feelings involved in her singing and dedication to them:

I sing from my heart, and I sing to please other people, and I sing about real life. A lot of people come to see me – they have troubles when they come, and when they leave they smiling. Because this is what I do: I sing for the audience. I sing to make people happy. I sing to lighten the trouble off of their lives. I sing for life to be a better thing, and make people happy (personal interview 30/03/2016).

White expressed her desire to transform the everyday lives and experiences of her audience. Thus she insisted in the healing dimension of music, particularly of live music experience, and on the immediate impact it can have in liberating people from their problems and troubles—at least provisionally.

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4 A Brooklyn native, Oscher is well-known for being the first white musician in the Muddy Waters Blues Band – he joined it as a harmonica player in 1967, at 17 years old (Stegall 2014). He relocated to Manchaca, Texas (a small town south of Austin) in 2012, and he has regularly performed at the south Austin club C-Boys Heart & Soul, inviting Lavelle White to sit in when present.
In addition, Lavelle White thanked the club owners and booking agents that currently hire her (personal interview 30/03/2016), making evident that the endurance of veteran artists depends on their participation in the everyday construction of the scene. However, she has also expressed her dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition for black music and for women in music, as well as with the decreasing African-American population in Austin. In 2003 she stated: ‘If you’re a skinny white boy with a guitar, you got a gig. … But no one wants to see a black woman with talent’ (Moser 2003), and she has recently reaffirmed the statement (Curtin 2019). As a veteran black woman and artist, Lavelle White points out both race and gender as two key discrimination factors that intersect with each other. In terms of sexism, Lavelle stated: ‘For some reason, women are put on the back burner. This is one thing that I really do not like. … It just makes you feel so doggomed angry because of the things you know you are doing, and you don’t get anything for it’ (Hudson 2007: 147). Regarding racism, she explained that ‘everybody wanna put the white people over us black people, and that’s not right. … I think we’re supposed to be respected a little more than we are. Because we once started this black stuff’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016).

Analysis:
Nostalgic Homecoming and the Malleable Nature of Autobiographical Songs

‘Mississippi, My Home’ has a traditional 12-bar blues structure with an AAB lyrical form. While very variable in terms of texture and rhythm, this is arguably the most defining structure of blues music. The song showcases constant dialogic interactions between Lavelle’s voice as the singer and leader, and the instrumental voices of the rest of the band—the lead guitar stands out in the foreground, while the saxophone, trombone and trumpet take a more secondary, backing role. Thematically, ‘Mississippi, My Home’ shows the vital connections between several key issues within the African-American and popular music traditions: home and identity, travel, love relationships, blues as a genre and disposition, and politics. It is a first-person narrative built upon the affirmation of one’s own identity, and it communicates a nostalgic discourse of homecoming that emphasizes the sense of belonging and longing. As advanced, there is a clear autobiographic dimension in ‘Mississippi, My Home’, which relates to the singer’s early life experiences in Mississippi and to her relationship with her mother. ‘It is about my early childhood,’ Miss Lavelle explained. ‘It means a lot to me, a whole lot. Because I used to ride on my mother’s sack, and she would pick cotton while I would ride her on the back. It’s really a true [story]’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016).

Consider the lyrics of the song below.

‘Mississippi, My Home’ (Lavelle White)

Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi is my home
Oh, Mississippi, Mississippi is my home, well

5 According to the album credits, the following musicians participated in the recording: Clarence Hollimon and Derek O’Brien (guitars), Riley Osbourn (piano, Hammond organ), Larry Fulcher (bass), George Rains (drums), Brannen Temple (drums), Joel Guzman (percussion), Mark ‘Kaz’ Kazanoff (tenor and baritone saxophones), Jon Blondell (trombone), Gary Slechta (trumpet), Alicia Jones and Judy Arnold (background vocals).
Oh, I’m gonna leave here, ‘cause I’m tired of being alone

Somebody told me that my old love is looking for me
Oh, somebody told me, that my old love is looking for me
Oh, I’m going back to Mississippi ‘cause that is where I wanna be

I got a lot of friends in Texas, this I swear
But the man I love is way back there
I gotta get back to Mississippi, Mississippi is my home
Oh, I can’t found no love around here and this woman is tired of being alone

That’s right! Yeah!
[Guitar solo]

I was born in Mississippi, down on the farm
I went to Louisiana when I was real small
I would ride on my mother’s sack
While she picked cotton I was runnin’ on her back

I’m gonna get back to Mississippi, ‘cause that’s where I belong
Oh, I got some people in Louisiana, oh and I’m tired of being alone
Oh yeah!

Mississippi, I’m going back to Mississippi
Mississippi, here I come, here I come, here I come
Coming right down and get back home, yeah
Oh, you know I’m gonna get back to Mississippi, oh because I’m tired of being alone

Mississippi here I come, yeah

At the beginning of the song, the first-person narrator affirms that Jackson, Mississippi is her home. This is a true fact that comes from Lavelle White’s own biography, despite the existing confusion in publications regarding her birthplace. A feature article in the British music magazine Blues & Rhythm (Bock 2014: 18) states that White was born in Amite City, Louisiana, and so do several online biographical profiles (for instance, Wikipedia and AllMusic). Instead, Govenar’s (2008: 497) book about the development of Texas blues indicates that she was born in Jackson, MS. Miss Lavelle confirmed this during our stay in Austin, Texas: ‘I was born in Jackson [Mississippi], and raised up in Amite [Louisiana]’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016). In addition, Lavelle has mentioned other towns in Mississippi such as Arcola, Hollandale, and Greenville, as well as Greensburg, Louisiana, as places of residence, family ties,
music and singing during her childhood (Bock 2004: 18, Govenar 2008: 497, personal interview 30/03/2016).

In the second stanza, the protagonist introduces a second unidentified character who shares some news about an ‘old love’: ‘someone told me that my old love is looking for me’. This character plays the actantial role of the sender, as he communicates a particular knowledge to the protagonist (receiver), which is decisive in her subsequent actions. In response to the sender’s revelation, the protagonist asserts her homecoming by saying that Mississippi is where she wants to be. Thus, Mississippi is identified both with her home—defined as birthplace—and with the place where she can meet her old love and stop feeling alone. Again, love and home are associated with Mississippi in the third stanza. Musically, it is marked by the traditional use of stop-time silences or breaks within the 12-bar blues, a rhythmic emphasis that brings dynamism and intensity to the song. The narrator explains that she has many friends in Texas, but that the man she loves is ‘down there’ in Mississippi. She seems determined to return back home, and she concludes by stating that she cannot find love in her current place of residence and that she is tired of being alone. The phrase ‘this woman is tired of being alone’ shows the use of the third person singular form to refer to herself. A guitar solo follows her affirmative interjection: ‘That’s right!’

The fourth stanza repeats the stop-time breaks. The narrator provides more details about her life and childhood, synthetically elaborating a chronological account of her biography. For the first time she explicitly affirms that she was born in rural Mississippi and that she moved to Louisiana when she was ‘real small’, just like Lavelle. At this point, the confusion between the narrator of the song as a musical story and the physical singer-songwriter—composer and performer of her own compositions—reaches its highest peak. Almost inevitably, listeners and audiences assume that, by performing the song, Miss Lavelle is naturally sharing her personal story through it. After all, blues is often thought as a personal chronicle of everyday life and overcoming. According to Banfield (2010: 105), ‘the philosophy or ethos of the blues is found in its insistence and focus on the life, trials and successes of the individuals on earth; it is a manifestation of the whole concept of human life.’ Moreover, Lavelle has referred to the realness of her songwriting and to the importance of experience in expressing feeling and emotion: ‘the things I write about is real life. … It means a lot more when it’s my own thing. … I’ve been singing long enough to have that feeling’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016). Nonetheless, despite the intimate bond between blues, life experiences, everyday aesthetics and popular culture, we cannot forget that the creative processes of singer-songwriting and performing music are inextricably bound to transformative elements of stylisation. Being a professional singer is bound up to certain forms and strategies of presentation of self (Goffman 1956) within society and music scenes, and the acknowledgment of genre conventions and artistic masks is key.6

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6 The mask is a particularly important object in the African-American tradition. Consider the poem ‘We Wear the Mask’ by Paul Laurence Dunbarn (1896). It provides a highly-expressive early example of the mask as a strategic and embodied everyday attitude regarding presentation of self within society. In this case, smiling and singing despite tribulations is seen as part of a cheerful mask that hides the suffering of ‘tortured souls.’ In her discussion about folklore, anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (2008: 2-3) referred to the African-American mask by explaining that they offer ‘a feather-bed resistance. That is. We let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot o’ laughter and pleasantries.’ Furthermore, the use of masks also relates to Bakhtin’s (1984) discussion about folk culture and carnival –celebrations
‘Mississippi, My Home’’s fourth stanza concludes with an image of the first-person narrator as a child, riding on her mother’s back while she picks up cotton. During slavery and the Jim Crow era, cotton-picking was a harsh and common daily activity for many southern African-Americans. Accordingly, cottonfields were often mentioned in songs and they became a significant part of blues imagery. Cottonfields may be understood as a chronotope (Bakhtin 1981: 84) of blues music and history, as they represent a constitutive time-space category of the genre. Chronotopes refer to ‘the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships’ (Bakhtin 1981: 84) that are creatively expressed in literature, as well as in music and film. Thus, by identifying cottonfields as a chronotope of blues we acknowledge its mythical connection with a southern rural past that frames the genre within a particular authenticity logic related to realism, hard work and overcoming. Drawing on her own experience, Lavelle White adheres herself to an intertextual network of songs that represent the early 20th century African-American experience in relation to cotton as a southern symbol of manual labour, resistance, song and place. Consider, for instance, ‘Song from a Cotton Field’ (Bessie Brown, 1929), ‘Pick a Bale of Cotton’ (Leadbelly, 1935), and ‘Cotton Field Blues’ (Lightnin’ Hopkins, 1972), which emphasize in their own way the hard physical work involved in cotton picking, as well as the racial dynamics in which it was framed. ‘Song from a Cotton Field’ is particularly striking due to its explicit racial commentary and reflection about work and life, as the narrator tells her story of accommodation and resistance to cotton-picking for white folks over the years.

Lavelle White has recalled the harsh living conditions for African-Americans in Mississippi, as well as her lack of a father figure during her childhood:

Down there – there were a lot of horrible things. I grew up where we were sharecroppers – cotton and corn. We were really sort of like slaves. I was with my mother. I wasn’t with my dad because my dad walked away and left me when I was five days old. And, that is a thing that really affects a person’s mind all their life. You can’t change it. You just have to live with it (Bock 2014: 18).

Coming from a large family that worked as sharecroppers, Lavelle was exposed to the exploitation that defined early 20th century southern rural economy. She mentions ‘horrible things’ without going into details, and she explains that she lived in several plantations across Mississippi and Louisiana. Lavelle also expressed her dislike about the occlusive environment of both plantations and church life, as intimacy was lacking: ‘The way it was in our church, everybody knew everybody. On the plantation everybody knew everybody. It wasn’t cool to me. Everybody knew everybody’s business. I was a kid and I didn’t like it. I left when I was about fifteen.’ In contrast, Lavelle’s subsequent move to Houston, Texas provided her more anonymity and freedom to develop a professional career within the urban music scene.

Driven by the intensity of the voice and instrumental accompaniment, the fifth stanza begins with force. The narrator reaffirms her desire to return to Mississippi, as she emphatically declares her firm sense of belonging – ‘that’s where I belong.’ In addition, she explains that she has ‘people’ in Louisiana – friends and/or relatives –, and she reiterates that she is tired of being alone. Musically, the stanza is contracted in two verses instead of three. This irregularity provides greater dynamism, reinforcing the sense of urgency for the longed return home. Then, in the final stanza, the narrator that involve new modes of relation, a relaxation of rules, and an embracement of freedom and transformation.
definitely announces the immediacy of her homecoming: ‘Mississippi, here I come.’ The emphatic phrase ‘here I come’ prepares the ground, perhaps warning the state and its inhabitants that they must be ready for her arrival. It is a popular expression in American speech, and also a familiar phrase within the blues tradition, most famously used in the standard ‘Kansas City’ (Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, 1952), recorded by a wide variety of blues, rhythm & blues, and jazz artists.

In this way, the narrator concludes a story of self-affirmation and desire to return home while joining a nostalgic and mythologizing tradition about Mississippi and the American south as an authentic and almost magical place of origin. In this case, the mythical place potentially allows a reencounter with the beloved one – to whom a greater importance is attributed in comparison to friends and relatives in other states such as Texas and Louisiana. Thus, along with Mississippi, the old love is the object of desire within the story. In this case, there is a strong association between the protagonist’s home, her childhood memories with her mother, and the hope of not feeling alone, which is resolved through the quest of her old love. However, the discourse of the first-person narrator in the song presents a clear and fascinating contradiction with the discourse of the empirical speaker, Lavelle White.

On the one hand, Miss Lavelle has stated that writing songs means a lot to her because she writes about her life. She also confirmed in our personal interview that ‘Mississippi, My Home’ is about her ‘early childhood’, when she accompanied her mother while she worked in the cotton fields. Moreover, the vital journey from her native Jackson, MS to Amite City, LA is autobiographically correct, as well as the general mentions to friends and family in different states in the south of the United States. However, her opinion about Mississippi and her willingness to return are very far from those conveyed in the song. Miss Lavelle explained that she has not returned to Mississippi since she left – in more than 70 years: ‘I wrote [a song] about it because that’s what happened. I used to ride on my mother’s sack, while she picked cotton I was riding on her back, you know. Like I gotta get back to Mississippi, but I’m not going back to stay’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016). Unlike what she sings during musical performance, Lavelle explained that she will not return to Mississippi, and that she included it in the song as part of the creative process:

That will not happen, that will not happen. But I put it in the song to make everything rhyme. When you write a song you have to improvise some things. Well, the truth is that I was born there but you know that I’m not going to return, nor do I think about it. ... Mississippi is very prejudiced. Jackson is very prejudiced against black people (personal interview, 30/03/2016).

In contrast to the frequent idealisation of Mississippi as the ‘home of the blues,’ Lavelle referred to its history of racism and discrimination against African-Americans, noting that ‘it’s still prejudice, it’s not a good place for blacks to live, being factual’ (personal interview, 30/03/2016). Among the extensive bibliography on the topic of Mississippi, race and racism, we may mention Anne Moody’s (1968) classic autobiography as a black woman growing up, Hendrickson’s (2004) examination of the legacy of racism, and Gussow’s (2012) study about southern violence, murder and the blues tradition. Miss Lavelle made clear that, aside from this composition, she does not like to remember what happened in Mississippi during her childhood. What she wants and needs is to move forward:
You know what’s back there, but you don’t wanna go back there. You wanna go to something different, and something new. I look at a lot of people living in the old stuff, and you cannot live something that has happened, unless you’re going back in time. So you gotta look forward in life. Life is forward, life changes every day. There’s something in life every day—it’s a different medicine, it’s a different time, it’s a different thing, it’s a different age... And you got to live like that. You can’t live in what happened last week. That’s over. You gotta keep moving, and that’s what I’m doing (personal interview, 30/03/2016).

Lavelle’s insistence on moving forward and leaving the past behind contrasts with the nostalgia of ‘Mississippi, My Home’. This discursive dissonance between the first-person narrative song and the writer’s life-story evidences the distance between the narrator as a protagonist character framed within a particular genre, and the performer as an empirical speaker that performs for an audience. Genres are defined by sets of conventions that involve rules, logics and possibilities, and these allow mutual understandings between musicians and between musicians and audiences (see Faulkner and Becker 2009). By following a more conventional nostalgic narrative of returning home to Mississippi, Lavelle adheres to a tradition of nostalgia that is particularly powerful and effective within the blues world, and she completes a signature tune that works perfectly as an introduction to the audience and blues world. Nonetheless, the analysis evidences that she is wearing an artistic mask. Ultimately, we acknowledge that songs constitute a space for play, for the representation and creative reformulation of identity, and for the interrelation and confusion between autobiographical and fictional facts, events, and life dispositions.

**Conclusions**

Through its story of longing and nostalgia, ‘Mississippi, My Home’ highlights the centrality of home in the construction of personal identity. It illustrates the double meaning of home as a place of vital origin, and as a place to seek refuge from bewilderement. It shows the way in which having a home is having a shelter that acts as protection, and also as a platform to observe the world (Peñamarín 2007: 169). Yet the meaning-making process about home is also marked by the expressed ambivalence. On the one hand, it defines personal identity and it is missed. On the other hand, reminiscing is shunned and felt as painful for memory and everyday life experience. This apparent contradiction is very present in the African-American tradition, as the community has been historically marked by a notable instability of its home.

As an ethnic minority that was captured during slave trade, African-Americans have been systematically discriminated against, and its originally forced settlement in the United States has generated mixed feelings of rejection and belonging. In this sense, blues scholar Paul Garon (1996: 86-87) has rightfully pointed out that for every song dealing with the idea of leaving home there is another about returning to it: ‘I’ll be home someday’. Therefore, ambivalence and ambiguity are often inescapable. Personally, Lavelle White seems to have resolved the dilemma of going back or not to Mississippi. However, while she is certain about not returning to her native state in ‘real life’, the narrative of ‘Mississippi, My Home’ serves as a way of imagining and performing other possibilities and paths, which involve retrospective reflection, nostalgia, homecoming and performance. In this regard, we understand songs both as produced objects that have been recorded, and as processes related to musical and sociocultural performing practices. Songs are rooted in particular situations, but they also are in constant movement and interaction due to its multiple renditions over time.
The use of a first-person narrative may be seen as a predominant characteristic of the musical discourse of blues that is also very present in other popular music genres. Regardless of the de facto relationship between the sung stories and the lives of the writers and/or performers, the first-person narrative in song contributes to the confusion between tale and life, urging analysts to be cautious, and to acknowledge that songwriting involves a strategic enunciation process that is creative and malleable. As a result, the analysis of ‘Mississippi, My Home’ leads us to problematize the categorical opposition of biography and fiction. We cannot simply oppose them, nor understand first-person narratives in song as an unmediated reflection of everyday life experience. Instead, this type of mixed analysis focused on the textual and the biographical illustrates that the universe of blues songs is neither fictional nor fully autobiographical. Therefore, the use of a first-person narrative may be seen as a narrative strategy that allows the stylisation of everyday life through the creative act of songwriting and a general system of genre conventions, between the individual and the collective voice and identity.

Another characteristic of ‘Mississippi, My Home’ that is representative of the musical discourse of blues is its open ending. In contrast with the conventional closure of the classical narrative structure, the endings of blues stories tend to be provisional. Blues songs certainly have a performative ending as popular texts and objects, but their narrative is often partial, synthetic, suggestive and mobile, rather than closed or fixated. In this regard, these musical stories tend to highlight the tension between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations (Koselleck 1993) of the characters and narrator. In narrative terms, ‘Mississippi, My Home’ may be categorised as a significant example of action-driven blues songs marked by the announcement of the action to be carried out –in this case, the protagonist’s homecoming to her native state, Mississippi. The acknowledgement of this first-person narrative category allows us to identify intertextual bonds with well-known blues songs such as ‘I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom’ (Robert Johnson, 1936), ‘I Can’t Be Satisfied’ (Muddy Waters, 1948), ‘Kansas City’ (Little Willie Littlefield, 1952), ‘Going Back to New Orleans’ (Joe Liggins, 1952), and ‘Soulful Dress’ (Sugar Pie DeSanto, 1964), among others. In all of them the narrator announces a seemingly immediate action through the present continuous tense. Thus the narrative often unfolds as an expression of desire and imagination linked to everyday actions and aesthetics, although the announced actions are rarely undertaken or fulfilled within blues narratives of this type.

As expressed by Stuart Hall (1992: 25), ‘popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies, and local scenarios.’ ‘Mississippi, My Home’ vividly illustrates this by representing the relationship between home, love, memory and identity within the musical story. Employing personalisation and approximation strategies, Miss Lavelle performs a first-person narrative that deliberately confuses the identification and distance between the author (extra-textual) and the narrator of the story (intra-textual), contributing to blur the frontier between everyday life and its creative stylisation. In fact, ‘Mississippi, My Home’ may be seen as a genre-driven song that imagines a metaphorical escape from the pain of memory and the asphyxiating racism that still troubles Lavelle White. While home is longed for and associated to love and family in the song, the racism associated to Mississippi remains a personal and collective tragedy for her. Ultimately, the musical discourse of blues appears as a complex and contradictory construction, which is capable of
harbouring contradictions. It participates in the strategic contestation that defines black popular culture (Hall 1992: 26), and it urges us to understand and problematize the interrelation between reality and fiction, as well as between lived experience and imagination, when addressing songwriting and everyday aesthetics in blues, jazz and popular music.

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