

BLUES EPISTEMOLOGY, COMMUNITY RESILIENCE, AND COVID 19 IN THE
MISSISSIPPI DELTA

by

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DEDICATION

To the people of the Delta that welcomed me with open arms and shared with me their stories, histories, culture, and traditions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“When this thing hit, it destroyed everything all musicians could even think about. We never saw anything like this coming” – Big T



Figure 1 – Blues musicians performing outside the Blue Front Café in Bentonia, Mississippi.

I. Introduction

The Mississippi Delta possesses a richness that is difficult to define for many people that I spoke with during my research. The word ‘magic’ was used by multiple participants to describe what the Delta holds. This magic can be experienced through the interactions with the people that live here, who always seem willing to talk and ask where you’re from, as they seem to know their tight-knit communities and can easily recognize an outsider. During a visit to a local liquor store, I was asked by the man behind the

counter, with a thick southern accent, “Where are you from?”, to which I responded, “How do you know I’m not from here?”. He replied, “Because I don’t know you.”. We laughed and chatted about where I was from and what I was doing in the Delta, often being met with ‘yes ma’am’, and ‘no ma’am’. This type of gracious encounter was a common experience at every place I visited, and with every person I encountered during my fieldwork.

The foodways of the region are extremely special and can only be appropriately defined as magic. After meeting with Jimmy “Duck” Holmes at the Blue Front Café in Bentonia, Mississippi at 7 a.m., I asked him where I could get some breakfast. Jimmy told me to walk around the corner to the building next door. There I found a few picnic tables and an African American woman standing behind a window, cooking breakfast. She asked me, “What you want, sugar?” I replied, “I’m not sure, what are you cooking?”. She said to me, “Oh, baby. We got...” and began a long list of staple southern breakfast items. I ordered grits, eggs, bacon, and toast (Figure 2) for a total of three dollars. An older Black man with a cane walked up to the window, the woman cooking asked, “You want your usual?”, and he told her yes. The warmth that I felt from the woman cooking through the window was also evident in the unforgettable breakfast she made me. There was no sign advertising the business, and I was unable to chat with the cook since she was running the kitchen on her own, but this experience encapsulates for me the ineffable feeling of the Delta, the warmth of its people there, and the tight community bonds one finds there.



Figure 2 – Grits, eggs, bacon, and toast in Bentonia

The blues music of the Delta also creates the magic that many participants mentioned. Watching some of the local blues musicians perform creates a unique sense of being closely connected to the early days of blues legends such as Charley Patton or Son House. During an impromptu performance one night in a Clarksdale blues club, local blues musician Big T performed a few songs. He stood on the stage with his nephew on drums, and sang, “Oh baby, you know I’m all alone. You know I ain’t had no love, since my baby’s been gone”. The culture that is created while Big T is performing is rare, because of his family history in blues, and the direct relations he has to Robert Johnson, perhaps the most well-known of all Delta blues forebears. The blues tradition in the Mississippi Delta has been passed from generation to generation, directly including Big T. He is continuing and sharing the tradition that he considers to be his “legacy”.

The Mississippi Delta is known as the birthplace of the blues. Its rich culture evolved from the African Americans that shaped this region through the exchange and sharing of their traditions that were passed to each generation. The origins of blues music can be traced to the early days of slavery, with some of the rhythms used in work songs originating from traditional African songs (Lomax, 1992). Southern Black musicians used blues music as a form of expression that shared their pain, frustrations, desires, hopes, joys, and “in many ways, the Blues as art-form also became an oppositional counter-culture, a form of African American resistance to Jim Crow; to slave-like sharecropping, to starvation wages, and to the hot climate and unsanitary living conditions of the Delta” (Strait, 2017, pg.40). Geographer Clyde Woods has similarly argued that blues is not only a musical tradition, but also a knowledge system that is expressed through cultural, political, economic, and social traditions (Woods, 2012). This distinctive *blues epistemology* (Woods, 2012) allowed African Americans to form a collective awareness when the organization of Black communities and groups were constantly undermined and attacked by white society.

In places that have a deeply rooted culture that has evolved over a long period of time, an economic value develops as cultural forms are commoditized in various ways, including tourism activities linked to the desire of outside visitors to experience cultural authenticity. Geographers have studied such *cultural economies*, broadly described as the “symbolic economy produced by cultural consumption” (Sakakeeny, 2015). In this thesis, I argue that in the Delta, the blues artists that are continuing the blues tradition are creating the culture that attracts outsiders, and the value that supports the economy. The blues-based cultural economy of the Delta figures into the livelihoods of local musicians,

restaurants, hotels, gift shops, record stores, museums and many more businesses in this region. In Clarksdale, Mississippi alone, there are around 60 businesses and other entities located downtown which have a relationship with blues and Delta culture (Henshall, 2012). The city of Clarksdale brings an estimated \$46 million annually from tourism (Foster, 2020). Other studies of cultural economy have shown that revenues are not distributed evenly among various producers of value, with musicians, artists, and other creators of culture frequently benefiting the least from these economic formations.



Figure 3 - Graffiti that reads “strength lies within” and dated 2020 on the wall of a crumbling building in Downtown Clarksdale.

A thriving cultural economy is essential for the citizens in this region where poverty rates are above the national average and the unemployment rate is twice the national rate (Henshall, 2012). According to Brian Foster, “Mississippi is faced with a

wealth of challenges; Clarksdale and the Delta face more than that; and Black residents of Clarksdale and the Delta face the worst of all” (Foster, 2021, pg. 32). The racist history of the Mississippi Delta has created conditions in which Black residents are still experiencing inequalities; even worse inequalities are found in Clarksdale. In 2010, the median household income for residents in Clarksdale was around \$24,700, nearly half the national average (Foster, 2020). In 2017, 73 percent of the Clarksdale residents living below the poverty line were Black residents, earning less than half of the average income of the white residents (Foster, 2020). Many of the blues musicians create streams of income from various sources to support themselves including teaching music lessons and acting as security guards at blues clubs on nights they aren’t performing; but many of the musicians rely solely on live performances as their main source of income.

During the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the implementation of quarantine restrictions, the constant tourism which fueled the blues-based cultural economy came to an end. Blues clubs closed, live performances stopped, and the income upon which most of the local blues musicians depended disappeared. In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, local communities in the Delta came together to support each other. For example, small businesses began hosting live performances allowing musicians to earn tips and sell merchandise. This suggests that local communities are meeting the challenges of the pandemic by relying on what sociologist Monica White has termed *collective agency and community resilience (CACR)*, a notion that captures the ways people from marginalized groups come together to resist oppression and to create social reform.

Viewing the blues as both an episteme that fuels CACR and the basis of a cultural economy in the Delta, however, allows us to recognize the blues as simultaneously a *mediator* of anti-racist struggles and as a *ground* of those struggles, as the benefits and burdens of the cultural economies are typically not evenly distributed.

In the thesis that follows, I use the data I collected from interviews, observations, and textual analysis to understand the impacts of the global pandemic on the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta. I first examine how the ‘revitalization’ of downtown Clarksdale, beginning in the early 2000’s, consisted of mostly white locals and outsiders opening blues related businesses in the historically ‘white’ part of town, leading to the current structure of the blues-based cultural economy. I identify the actors within the cultural economy as the *culture creators* – those that are creating the culture and value supporting the cultural economy – and the *culture sellers* – those that are profiting from the culture being created. Quantifying the uneven distribution of revenue made from the value produced by culture creators exceeds the scope of this study, but my work qualitatively explores this question by examining how the pandemic impacted the blues-based cultural economy of the Delta, how the actors within this economy faced different challenges, and how the socioeconomic position of some of the culture creators prior to the pandemic caused them to face the most severe financial impacts. I will share the personal histories of three Black blues musicians who can be viewed as builders of blues epistemology because of their shared lived experiences, knowledge, and direct connections to a long lineage of blues players and thinkers. Having examined the culture economy and the development of blues epistemology in the Delta, I then present evidence of *collective agency and community resilience* being enacted within the Delta.

My research made three things abundantly clear. The history of white supremacy in this region has led to inequalities that exist within the structure of the blues-based cultural economy. The structure consists of mostly white culture sellers, creating an uneven distribution of the value created by the African American heritage and culture produced by the Black blues musicians that make up a portion of the culture sellers. Secondly, the socioeconomic position of the culture sellers and culture creators prior to the pandemic resulted in these actors experiencing the impacts of the pandemic to different degrees, with the Black blues musicians experiencing the most severe impacts. And finally, communities within the Delta enacted *collective agency and community resilience* to support members of the blues community experiencing financial difficulty during the pandemic. This leads to an important discussion of the racialized structures that exist, creating inequalities for African Americans leading them to experience the most severe impacts of events such as a global pandemic, and the need for actors within these structures to examine their position and contribution in perpetuating these disparities. This research provides a better understanding of the ways inequalities that exist for African Americans generated by the racist history of this region led to the Black blues musicians experiencing the most severe impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic within the blues community.

II. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to develop an in-depth understanding of the how the impacts of the pandemic were experienced to different degrees by the actors within the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi. This research aims to add to our

understanding of the inequalities that exist for African Americans because of the history of white supremacy in the Mississippi Delta. The combination of the pre-existing inequalities for African Americans and the structure of the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta leading to Black blues musician experiencing the most severe impacts of the pandemic has not been examined. Improved understanding of the history and the racial inequalities leading to Black musicians experiencing the most severe impacts within the blues cultural economy can inform our understanding of current social, cultural, and political economic structures in place, which in turn can provide crucial insights for policymakers and community members seeking to address inequities and be better prepared for future shocks to existing social and political economic structures

III. Research Questions

RQ1: How has the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta been impacted by the Covid-19 global pandemic?

RQ1A: To what extent are these impacts shaped by racial disparities within the region?

RQ1B: How do the impacts of the pandemic interact with the existing structures of the blues cultural economy?

RQ2: How are local communities building and mobilizing collective agency and community resilience (CACR) to confront the challenges posed by the pandemic?

RQ2A: How do these extensions and mobilizations of CACR rely on or feed back into the blues epistemology?

2. STUDY BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH DESIGN

I. Literature Review

Throughout the history of the Mississippi Delta, African Americans have been confronted with social, economic, and political oppressive systems that prevented them from thriving in society. Two generations of Mississippians witnessed slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the overthrow of Reconstruction, and the era of sharecropping and disenfranchisement (Woods, 2012). Through these periods, African Americans were constantly moving to establish places where they could be free and Black at the same time (Anthony, 2018). They created communities where they shared and shaped traditions where Black places formed, Black culture was cultivated, and the blues tradition was born. Black communities found strength in the blues tradition as a connection that created a collective consciousness and allowed the development of their own regional reality that was based on “cultural freedom and economic and social justice” (Woods, 2003, pg.25). It is through this blues tradition that the past can be examined, and the current state of the Mississippi Delta can be interpreted.

Throughout the literature we see evidence of African Americans demonstrating the ability and strength to overcome the challenges they were threatened with. During the slavery era, enslaved people that endured inadequate food supplies used gardening and food production as a form of resistance and as a strategy to create autonomy and social relations (White, 2018). By uniting to establish stronger social relations and self-sufficiency, these communities were enacting collective agency and community resilience. Gardening and food production continued into Reconstruction and the Jim

Crow era as a way for Black communities to grow and to maintain their own freedom and power (White, 2018). These Black communities became settlements where emancipated slaves and their descendants resisted the exploitative system of sharecropping, in many cases creating worker-owned cooperatives focused on gaining independence by growing healthy food and providing childcare and education. These ‘villages’ united diverse Africans where practices were shared, reimagined and combined into one knowledge (Anthony, 2018). It was through this exchange of practices and social organization that blues music was born.

Clyde Woods notes that blues has been variously defined “as a form of entertainment, as ontology, as a dead musical genre, as an evolving aesthetic movement, as the ultimate expression of individualism, and as a core African-American institution” (Woods, 2012, pg. 49). All blues music is connected to African heritage and represents the past, present, and future (Woods, 1998). Blues artists believe that you must learn from the past to not make the same mistakes in the future, and they included lessons in their songs. Embedded within blues music is a collection of knowledge that provides insight into African American culture, political economy, social theory, and geographic knowledge; Clyde Woods refers to this system of knowledge and practice as *blues epistemology* (Woods, 2012). Blues music expresses the shared experiences and collective viewpoint of African Americans. Delta blues is described by Alan Lomax as symbolizing the “dynamic continuance of African social and creative process as a technique of adaptation” (quoted in Woods, 1998, pg. 83). Many blues songs contain codes, lessons, and laws designed to uphold traditional values and foster group cohesion

through the examination of personal, and collective experiences, failures, and visions (Woods, 2012).

Popularity in blues music gained the attention of smaller recording studios that started searching the Delta for blues artists to record beginning in 1923 and were soon followed by the major record labels (Woods, 1998). Blues artists were often exploited by these record companies. They failed to pay the artists what they were owed and would lie about record sales, while the record companies were greatly profiting from the blues recordings (Lomax, 1993). The recording and distribution of these songs told the story of the Black southerners and created an awareness around the world of the racist environment that existed for Southern African Americans in the United States. “The voices of the oppressed African Americans and their blues epistemology were now permanently linked to the new communication technologies” (Woods, 1998, pg. 111).

While blues spread across the country and evolved in different regions, blues artists from the Delta created a sound that many consider to be ‘authentic’ blues. When comparing Delta blues to other styles that were recorded, Woods states that, “the songs of many of those working in the Delta tradition were distinguishable by the rhythmic harshness of the beat, by the wincing guitar sounds produced by the knives and the sawn-off bottlenecks, slipped onto a finger and slid over the strings, and by the haunting screams and hollers of the vocalists” (Woods, 1998, pg.110). This unique sound created by the artists of the Delta is what generates a fascination that brings people from around the world searching to experience this authenticity. While the concept of authenticity is a contentious one in scholarly and popular discussions, these debates are not the focus of my research. For present purposes, I employ the notion that the degree of authenticity is

defined by the relationship that exists to an original source (Rudinow, 2001). Defined as such, authentic blues music is a valuable economic resource, the music produced by blues musicians is an asset, and live performances are critical to this region's thriving cultural economy.

In New Orleans, for example, Black musicians performing for entertainment has continuously attracted outsiders for a long period of time. Tourists travel to this city to experience the deeply rooted, community-based traditions that have been practiced by African Americans in New Orleans for generations. Blues epistemology is arguably at the heart of the racialization of New Orleans's cultural economy and the exploitation of the Black musicians that occurs there, for the asset they possess is their creativity and knowledge grounded in this unique episteme. The \$6 billion a year that is produced by the tourism industry in New Orleans is dependent on the Black musicians, and yet it trickles down to them unevenly (Sakakeeny, 2015). Musicians of New Orleans rarely have the support needed to thrive in their careers. They are often required to wear the many hats of the writer, producer, gig-booker, publicist, and accountant, and are then left with no time or money to further their music (Stevens, 2005). The success of the tourism industry is dependent on maintaining a large population of low-wage workers, ensuring there is a range of Black musicians ready to perform for little pay (Stevens, 2005). Black musicians in New Orleans share a collective awareness through their common experiences and the social engagements that unite them. New Orleans is a unique city, but the structure of its tourist economy shares much in common with other cultural economies based on Black cultural forms.

II. Conceptual Framework

This research approaches the Delta using geographer Clyde Woods's conception of *blues epistemology*, which allowed African Americans to form a collective standpoint during a time when assaults from Southern society attempted to disrupt any organization, social practices, or cultural growth within Black communities. The blues tradition is an entry-point through which to view the history of the Mississippi Delta and to interpret the current crisis. Furthermore, I examine the connection between the collective awareness that forms from blues epistemology and Monica White's theory of *collective agency and community resilience* (CACR) as a form of resistance against oppressive systems. In particular, I am interested in understanding how the codified knowledge of blues epistemology informs and animates collective forms of agency and increases the resilience of Black communities in the Delta. As the blues is not only an episteme, but has also been commoditized in various ways, it is also critical to understand how these economic elements of the blues figure into both CACR and the ongoing obstacles to Black empowerment posed by white supremacist social and political economic structures. For this, I turn to the concept of *cultural economy* to understand how the creativity of Black musicians is exploited to support the tourism industry and how this racialized system depends on low-wage musicians. Ultimately, my research asks how the blues epistemology informs community response to the pandemic as the latest in a long history of structural marginalization. As such, in addition to providing empirical evidence of current challenges facing Delta communities, this research provides the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the dynamic interplay between cultural economy and collective agency and community resilience.

While blues moved far beyond the Delta, eventually traveling around the world, and influencing the creation of many other music genres, the Delta remains a central site for blues tourism, as Delta blues artists create an undeniable sound that many consider to be ‘authentic’ blues. While authenticity itself is a heavily contested political terrain, tourists travel to the Delta from all over the world to hear this sound and to experience the rich culture that evolved from the deep roots of blues history and from the music still being created today by Delta blues musicians. The resulting cultural economy supports many Delta musicians and local businesses, raising questions about the impacts of the pandemic on these communities. If we view the blues as a distinct epistemic formation, however, our attention is drawn to the ways that the blues is more than simply a generator of tourism revenue.

Blues Epistemology

In *Development Arrested*, Clyde Woods defines blues epistemology as the social organizations and the intellectual traditions through which African Americans lived, understood, and created their own reality that transpired in spite of, and in resistance to, plantation powers. (Woods, 2012). He defines the two foundations on which blues epistemology is established. The first foundation is a need for “constant reestablishment of collective sensibility” to overcome the constant attacks from the racist structures in place, along with facing daily community life that he describes as often deadly and turbulent (Woods, 2012). The second foundation is the social relations in the south as being the defining factor that shaped African American culture. The blues tradition of establishing a collective sensibility and the development of social relations reappears

throughout the literature as a tool for African Americans to overcome any challenges they faced. Through blues epistemology, African Americans of the South created a highly developed tradition of social interpretation as a way to combat the constant surveillance and attacks on their independent thought and cultural expression (Woods, 1998). The blues tradition provides a worldview that is embedded within the communities of the Delta which creates a collective awareness (Woods, 1998).

Collective Agency and Community Resilience

The practice of unity and collectiveness that is the foundation of blues epistemology is also found within Monica White's theory of collective agency and community resilience (CACR). Collective agency provides a way for groups of people to join together with a purpose of driving social reform. When people are involved in a movement, they develop a sense of unity that includes "willingness to give up individual rewards granted by hegemonic power of the social hierarchy and to find rewards in movement participation" (White, 2018, pg.7). Community resilience and "community-based forms of social organizations" emerge as a way to collectively manage the impacts that are felt as a result of environmental/climate change, including other forms of natural and human disasters (White, 2018). CACR encompasses community engagement, and understanding "types of indigenous knowledge, emotional experiences, and intraracial/interracial exchange that communities need in order to adapt to unforeseen conditions" (White, 2018, pg.8).

The three primary strategies to enact CACR and to produce the ideological-social, political, and economic aspects of community resilience as tools for liberation and

freedom are commons as praxis, prefigurative politics, and economic autonomy. Commons as praxis functions as a strategy of organization that emphasizes the well-being of the community and benefits all within the community by creating a shared social status. It is “based on the premise that pooling resources can transcend the limitations of individual strength in oppressed communities” (White, 2018, pg.9). Prefigurative politics begins with the realization that group members have been excluded from the political process. It introduces new way of being and generates a sense of independence and freedom. This builds the strength to move from conditions of oppression to self-sufficiency and self-determination. Economic autonomy creates a platform for working that ends social, economic, and political oppression by helping community members move from being dependent on oppressive systems to becoming independent. These three strategies reflect the foundations of blues epistemologies by creating collective awareness through shared experiences of oppressive or exploitative systems.

Cultural Economy

Culture can be described as a shared collection of traditional knowledge and skills that evolve as an important part of the lives of the people and the societies they encompass (Stevens, 2005, pg.2). The culture that evolves in a place over time becomes a part of the fabric of the everyday lives of the people that shape it. The traditions that shape culture can involve music, art, food, entertainment, and social gatherings that are specific to that place only. Places that have a deeply rooted culture, perceived as authentic, and that has evolved over long periods of time become an attraction for outsiders who seek to experience the traditions that have developed in these locations.

Experiencing places that have an authentic music culture and witnessing first-hand the musicians that create this music has long been an attraction of tourists. “The juncture of the tourism and culture industries uncovers a dimension of the artist’s role in society that receives little scholarly attention: a musical performance, in addition to being a creative endeavor, is also a service provided by a worker (musician) to a client (curator), both of whom are catering to a customer base (the audience). This art world is driven by economics as much as creativity; more precisely, creative production is inextricably bound to economic production” (Sakakeeny, 2015, pg.13).

In places where a specific genre of music originated, the residing musicians are considered a part of the “cultural workforce” that attracts tourists and are responsible for producing music and live performances to maintain the desired authenticity which fuels the cultural economy (Sakakeeny, 2015). Cultural economy can be described as the economic value that develops in a place as a result of the existing cultural significance. “Culture is linked with the economy through symbolic interaction and broadly, through human history. This broad inquiry begins with primitive symbols and rituals and moves forward through history to include today's market system” (Stevens, 2005, pg.1). In places where music is deeply rooted within the culture, a tourism and a thriving cultural economy might not exist without the musicians’ creativity, and yet the musicians are nearly the last to reap the benefits of their own talents. “Culture begins with culture workers who originate content, but cultural economics ends with these same workers, who are the last to receive any financial return. There is no cultural economy without their labor, but the bulk of the finances they generate accumulates elsewhere” (Sakakeeny, 2015, pg.4).

III. Methodology

Site and Situation

I spent 14 days traveling throughout the Mississippi Delta region to conduct my research, visiting different towns, but focusing mostly on Clarksdale and Bentonia. I spent most of my time in Clarksdale because of this town's wealth of blues history, and because of the community's effort to remain active with blues performances throughout the pandemic. Clarksdale was still promising live music seven days a week; I believed this would also be the most active area for tourists.

Clarksdale is located within Coahoma County (see figure 4). Clarksdale was established in the mid 19th century, and quickly grew after the construction of the railway in 1879 that connected Clarksdale to Memphis and Vicksburg, causing this small town to evolve into a transportation hub for the Delta's agricultural economy (Motely, 2018). Many blues artists were born and raised here including Sam Cook, Son House, John Lee Hooker, Ike Turner, and the Grammy Award-winning artist Christone "Kingfish" Ingram.

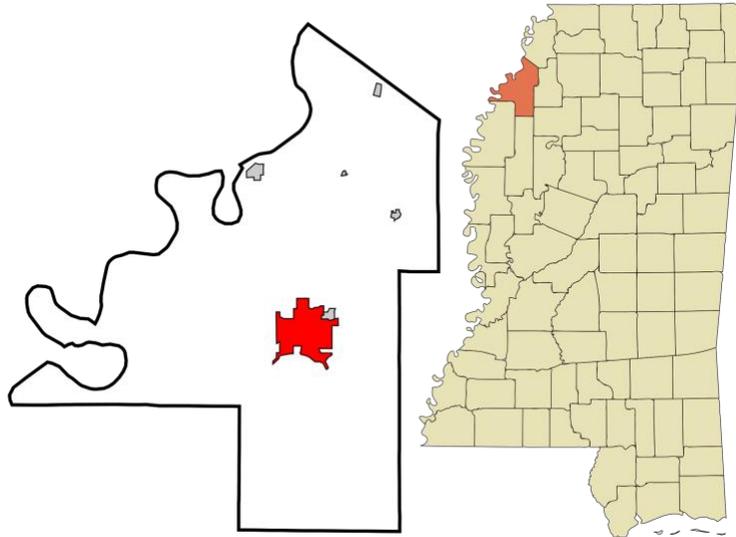


Figure 4 – Coahoma County, City of Clarksdale

Clarksdale is located at the intersection of the famous blues Highways 61 and 49. This is the ‘crossroads’ where legendary blues singer Robert Johnson is rumored to have sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for his master blues guitar skills. Clarksdale is also home to Stovall Farm, where McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters) lived, worked, and was first discovered for his blues playing ability. Blues tourists also visit the Riverside hotel (Figure 5), where blues performer Bessie Smith passed away after a car accident while traveling to a performance on Highway 61. This history, along with the abundance of blues clubs, blues museums, and folk gift shops creates a thriving cultural economy that is based on blues culture.



Figure 5 -Riverside Hotel in Clarksdale, Mississippi

Data Collection

To gain a better understanding of the impacts of the pandemic and quarantine restrictions that have been felt throughout the Delta region and situate those impacts within the structure of the region’s cultural economy, blues epistemology, and CACR, I relied on two primary research methods: interviews with community members and participant observation. Interviewees included several groups of participants, with groupings selected to help me gain a sense of the structure of the blues cultural economy. I conducted interviews with 1) the owners of the local blues clubs including Red’s Lounge, Ground Zero, Hambone and the Blues Front Café; 2) Local business Cat Head Folk Art and Blues shop; 3) Local blues musicians that rely on live performances as part of their income; 4) local business owners that might not be directly associated with blues culture but benefit from the year-round business of blues visitors including Grandma’s

House of Pancakes and Barbie's One Stop Shop; and 5) blues tourists. I also interviewed personnel from the Clarksdale Tourism Commission and a former mayor of Clarksdale.

I observed the ways in which blues music is functioning within this region with safety restrictions still in place but beginning to lift. I conducted observations by attending 11 live performances that were held during my time in the Delta. I examined the ways in which blues has changed during the pandemic by observing how the safety restrictions have changed the blues clubs, listened for any songs that might be related to the pandemic, and way in which blues is now being spread geographically through the introduction of live stream performances. I also visited the local gift shops and restaurants to observe how these businesses are being impacted by the reduction in tourism and are finding ways to support their business. For 14 days, I resided at the Shack Up Inn, which is considered a popular lodging location for blues tourists and has been hosting live streams of local musicians' performances. Here, I was able to observe blues performances, observe the capacity of the inn, and talk to tourists to gain an understanding of their experience.

To collect my data, I used a voice recorder to record the interviews, which were stored onto my computer with a protected password. Outside of the interviews, I also visited with local community members and tourists to gather their thoughts and experiences during the pandemic. During my data collection, I allowed the people that I met to have the freedom to discuss their own thoughts, stories, and experiences from before and during the time of quarantine to understand how they have been affected. I conducted face-to-face interviews that were informal and semi-structured. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were beneficial to this study since in finding some key

points that focused on the participants observations and experiences during the pandemic to gather an idea of how different actors within the blues cultural economy were impacted, while still allowing my interviewee to discuss what they feel is important. These key points aimed at gaining an understanding of what life was like before the presence of COVID-19 and how it has changed during the pandemic.

Musician Interviews

I conducted 11 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with local musicians. Knowing there are musicians that relocated to the Delta to pursue music and musicians that were born and raised in the Delta, I began by asking questions about their family history and music background. This portion was more unstructured to allow each musician to tell me their story of growing up, becoming a musician and performing to get a sense of what life was like for these musicians prior to the pandemic. I then focused on how the life and careers of these musicians have changed from the time before the pandemic, to during the quarantine restrictions, and currently.

Local Business Interviews

I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with local businesses aimed at understanding how their business has been impacted by the pandemic, and how they are working to overcome the impacts of the pandemic and the decline of tourism. Four of these interviews were with blues club owners and one blues club manager. Two interviews were with blues related businesses including Deak's Mississippi Saxophones and Blues Emporium, and Cat Head Folk Delta Blues & Folk Art. I conducted three

interviews with local businesses that are not related to blues including Our Grandma's House of Pancakes, and Barbie's One Stop in Friar's Point.

Tourist Interviews

I held eight informal discussions with tourists at live performances to gain an understanding of their travels, how many visits they have made to the Delta, what drew them to this region, and any changes they've noticed if returning to the Delta.

City Official Interviews

I met with a former mayor of Clarksdale, Mississippi, along with members of the city's tourism commission to gain some insight on how this city has been impacted by the pandemic. My questions were aimed at understanding the significance of blues tourism in Clarksdale, and steps that have been taken to support this economy during the pandemic.

Data Analysis

After collecting my data and conducting my interviews, I used the Otter transcription program to transcribe all the conversations. I coded each interview using NVIVO, first by group, to search for any common words, or overlapping themes that might lead to a better understanding of the impacts of the pandemic. I then searched for these overlapping themes throughout all the groups. Some of the overlapping themes that I searched for included any discussion of the virus, the decline of tourism, the decrease in income, the structure of the blues cultural economy (i.e. how is value produced and distributed), the resiliency of this community, expressions of collective agency, the benefits of the live streams, the return of tourism, the practice of socially distant

performances, and how blues as a cultural form and episteme has changed during this pandemic.

I also examined my field notes collected during my participant observations at any live performances, visits to local businesses, or attending the live streams. During these observations I focused on ways in which live performances have changed due to the pandemic, the implementation of the quarantine restrictions, how tourists are treating the situation, how businesses are trying to attract more customers, and other ways these places have been impacted by the pandemic. I coded my field notes to look for common actions and themes that might exist.

3. BORN INTO THE BLUES: CULTURAL ECONOMY AND COVID-19 IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

*People in the Delta have stories, music, love and deep care for their community, irrespective of the hardship they endure. I was drawn to the people I encountered. They were unlike most I had known. They allowed me to slip into their midst as if they had known me for a long time, and we could share stories, laughter, sorrow and silence. This didn't happen one time, it happened every day in every town.
'Cottonland – The Mississippi Delta', Magdalena Sole, 2011*

Throughout my time in the Delta, I heard people use the word 'magic' to describe what can be experienced in the region. The warmth that I felt from the people in the Delta is extremely unique, and something I have not experienced elsewhere. It's a Southern spirit that provides the sense of being welcomed into a loving family. The rich culture and traditions that have been shared for generations can be experienced in different ways: by watching a blues performance at Hambone, socializing with the locals and musicians as they tell stories and laugh on the benches that line the front of club; by making the short drive from Clarksdale to the quiet town of Friar's Point for the rib tips at Mrs. Barbie's One Stop Shop, a small gas station that sells hot food, barbecue, cold drinks, and gasoline; by visiting with living blues legend Jimmy "Duck" Holmes at the Blue Front Café in Bentonia on a Saturday night where there will absolutely be live music on the front porch and cold beer inside; or by searching for and visiting the original intersection of famous blues highways 49 and 61, to pay homage to legendary blues artist, Robert Johnson.

The rich and welcoming culture of the Delta today evolved from generations of African American traditions being learned and shared. It was through these shared traditions that blues music was born (Lomax, 1992). Many blues musicians that I spoke with consider the blues tradition a legacy or a torch that has been passed to the Delta blues artists performing today. One can witness the ongoing creation and performance of this culture inside local blues clubs. Desire for such experiences has drawn outsiders to this region creating a blues-based cultural economy.

In this chapter I discuss the structure of the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta and explain how the differently situated actors within it were impacted by the global pandemic, sometimes in divergent ways or to various degrees. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the ‘revitalization’ of downtown Clarksdale that occurred in the early 2000’s and led to the cultural economy structure that exists today. I then define the structure of the blues-based cultural economy, based on the distinction between *culture creators* and *culture sellers*. In the subsequent section, I will describe the impacts of the pandemic on the cultural economy, specifying how different actors within this economy were impacted.

I. 'Revitalization' of Downtown Clarksdale

The old brick buildings that line the downtown streets in Clarksdale are a combination of restored structures occupied by functioning businesses and vacant edifices with boarded up windows, broken glass, and crumbling walls. Extant businesses include hair salons, cafés,

flower shops, gift shops, blues clubs, and restaurants. The

downtown area has experienced many transitions over the last several decades.

The population of Clarksdale peaked in 1950 at 50,000 residents, with two-thirds of the population living outside of the city and in rural areas.

After the mechanization of cotton farming in 1944, the population declined when the

unemployed, mostly African

American residents fled Mississippi for urban areas in search of new opportunity

(Henshall, 2015). The city of Clarksdale was a segregated city; the Sunflower River side of the train tracks was considered the 'blues district' and the African American part of

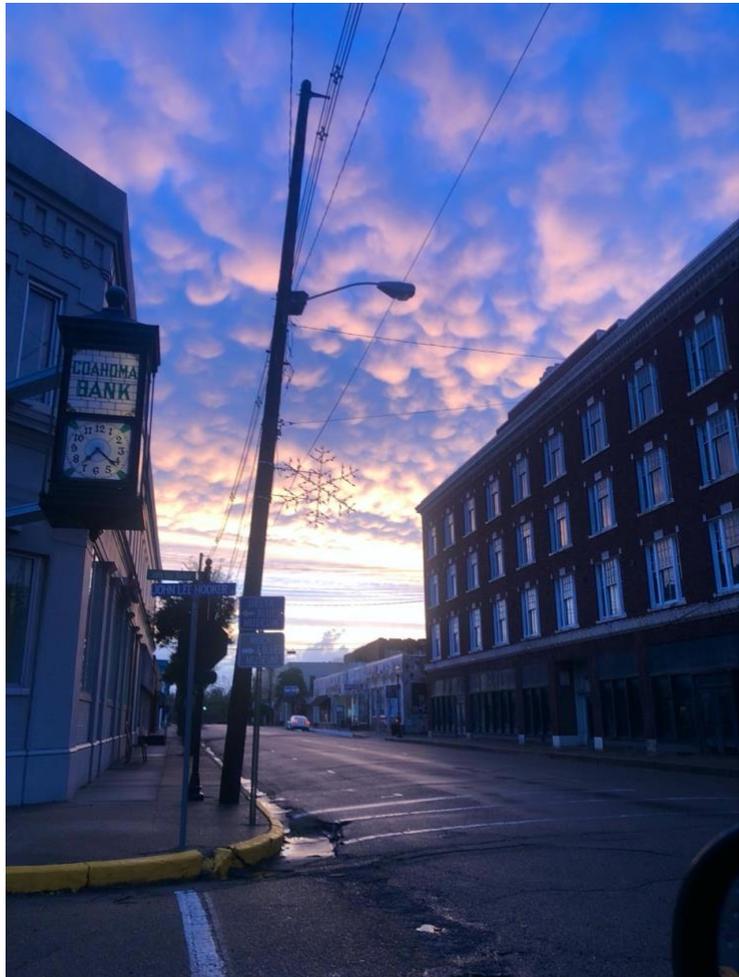


Figure 6 - Downtown Clarksdale

town, while the downtown side of the tracks was considered the white part of town (Motely, 2018). Today the city's population is around 15,000 residents. Henshall (2018, pg. 31) explains that people living in Clarksdale and Coahoma County, on average, tend to have a lower socio-economic profile than the median levels for Mississippi and the nation:

This situation is reflected in census data relating to education, household income, housing value, poverty levels, and other indicators. Clarksdale/Coahoma is one of the poorest localities in the nation in socio-economic terms, although, paradoxically, it is also one of the richest in terms of its Delta culture and intrinsic relationship with blues music. This richness is critically important in contributing to downtown revitalization and growth in business and employment.

Since segregation ended, the remnants of this history have remained visible. The African American side of town was considered to be the only place where blues music could be heard in Clarksdale. Local blues artist Mississippi Marshal described what he remembered of the blues district growing up, naming the blues legends that walked the streets of Clarksdale including Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Howlin' Wolf:

I remembered as a kid when everything across the street in front of Ground Zero, [...] it was all juke joints, little restaurants. I mean it was hopping, man, when I was a kid. And people from all over the world come here to see what was so magical. And you can't really see it. You got to feel it. You really got to feel it, man.

The blues as a localized cultural economy did not begin to grow until around 2000 when residents realized people were traveling to Clarksdale to experience blues culture (Motely, 2015). During this time, only a few small blues clubs were open, and the town had only limited tourist lodgings. As Henshall notes (2015, p. 39).

While the downtown businesses have been experiencing tough economic conditions over the past two or three decades, in very recent times a renaissance in downtown business activity has commenced. Much of this is directly related to Clarksdale's close association with blues music. [...]Those coming to live in

Clarksdale over the past decade have largely been drawn to the place by the blues, having attended the Sunflower Blues and Gospel Festival or the Juke Joint Festival, or simply discovering the place through happenstance. And they return, with investments in new businesses and (for some) the opportunity for a ‘sea change’.

Henshall acknowledges local residents Bill Luckett and Bubba O’Keefe as the trailblazers of revitalization in the downtown area, who began restoring the crumbling buildings. Ground Zero was opened in 2001 by Luckett along with Clarksdale residents Howard Stovall, Eric Meyer, and actor Morgan Freeman.



Figure 7 - Buildings located in downtown Clarksdale

Many of my participants shared stories that resonate with Henshall’s argument. Bluesberry Café was opened by Art and Carol Crivaro, who moved from Florida. Deak Harp relocated from New Jersey to open his harmonica shop after touring the world and making a name for himself as a blues harmonicist. Roger Stolle left his career in marketing and moved from Ohio to open Cat Head Blues and Folk-Art Gallery. In

discussing the conversation he had with his former boss about leaving his job to open a folk shop in Clarksdale, Stolle made a point of emphasizing that his decision to relocate was not driven by a desire to “make money”:

So, he's opening drawers, I'm just sitting there. He finally comes out with a piece of paper and a pen. He's like, “Okay, now tell me your square footage of the building you're buying.” (I was) like, “Oh, you think I'm doing this for money?” You know, he's gonna show me how I could never make money. It's like, I'm moving to Mississippi. It can't be about the money. But I bought this building off Bubba. I opened up in July of 2002.

Stan Street, originally from Rochester, moved from Florida to open Hambone. He discussed his decision to move to Clarksdale after visiting during the Sunflower Festival:

I decided I wanted to buy a building in a downtown area somewhere that was about the blues, or about music. Have a gallery a stage, and have a bar, just what I'm doing now. One of the stops was Clarksdale during Sunflower Festival, and, you know, it didn't seem like there was really a lot going on at the time. Then I met the guys from the Shack Up Inn, and they said ‘Look, man, you need to move here. You know, the art works great.’ And I said ‘Well, you know, I was thinking of getting a gallery buying, a building and then living in it. And they said, ‘Well, there's plenty of buildings here.’[...] So, 2003 when I did that trip, and then 2004 I moved here in 2005. I bought the building and moved into the building.

Most of the new businesses in the downtown area have been opened by white residents, locals and outsiders. The white residents opening businesses in this area came with enough capital to support themselves, restore their business space, and start their businesses. Most of these businesses are in some way related to blues culture. Motely describes skepticism among the Black Clarksdale residents after this new fascination of blues from the white population began to evolve: “As white Clarksdalians have taken an increased interest in the blues, some of its black residents have suspicions, rooted deeply in historical memory and lived experience, that today’s blues tourism is a new twist on the familiar Delta story of white people capitalizing off of black labor and culture”

(Motely, 2018, pg. 87). Thus, “As whites own most businesses catering to blues tourists, some African American residents question their motives. These suspicions are exacerbated by the fact that most of these businesses are located in the historically ‘white’ part of downtown, the only part of Clarksdale where one would never have heard the blues until relatively recently” (Motley, 2018). While my participants did not explicitly discuss the racialized dynamics of recent economic development in the region, the brief sketch of revitalization I have outlined here allows us to recognize some of the divergent economic, social, and cultural positionalities that structure the current cultural economy of the Delta. I turn now to consider this structure in greater detail.

II. Cultural Economy Structure in the Mississippi Delta

Sakakeeny (2015) argues that the structure of a cultural economy is composed of two primary types of actors, broadly understood: those that are creating culture, and those that are selling culture. Culture creators originate content and produce the value that supports the cultural economy. Sellers of culture are not producing culture but are profiting from its existence and the content originated by the culture creators. The work of Sakakeeny and others demonstrates two important points: that culture creators are often the last to profit from the content they originate, and that cultural economies are often characterized by racialized structural relationships. In his research on the cultural economy of New Orleans, Sakakeeny illustrates how the heritage of Black musical performers is commodified and supports cultural workers:

Ethnicity is both commodified, made into the basis of value-added corporate collectivity, and claimed as the basis of shared emotion, shared lifestyle, shared imaginings for the future [...] In New Orleans, black musical performance provides a basis for shared identity while also providing income for culture workers, curators,

and brokers, who profit directly from the production of heritage, and a host of others (property owners, retail operators, college professors), who benefit indirectly (Sakakeeny, 2015, pg. 4).

This example of the heritage of Black musical performers in New Orleans being used to support cultural workers can help us to understand the commodification of the blues tradition in the Delta to support culture sellers, often leaving the culture creators to benefit the least from the culture they are creating. In the Mississippi Delta, the culture creators are the people that are continuing the traditions that have been learned and shared for generations, including the blues tradition. The culture sellers in the Mississippi Delta are the owners and operations of blues clubs, art galleries, tour companies, and hotels, among other businesses that profit from blues tourism. Moreover, in Clarksdale, most of the culture sellers are white, while all the musicians that are connected to blues history and are continuing the blues legacy they were born into, are Black.

According to one of my participants, local blues musicians are often paid between fifty to one hundred dollars for a performance by the club owner, which will be split between the band members. The musicians depend mostly on the tip bucket being filled by the audience for the majority of their pay for performances. The club owners on the other hand, make their profit on the cover charge paid at the door which will vary depending on the performer and club capacity, along with the sale of alcohol, food, and souvenirs. Despite this uneven distribution of profit made on the culture, Delta musicians are passionate about their craft and eager to share the tradition they've learned. The Black blues musicians of the Delta that were *born into the blues* expressed a deep connection and passion for the torch they were passed, the legacy they are continuing, and their love for sharing their culture through their music for others to enjoy.

Culture Creators

The culture creators in the Mississippi Delta are the blues musicians that are continuing the blues tradition and originating content. There are two groups of people creating blues music that I observed. Some of the Black musicians explained that they were *born into the blues*, have been passed a torch, and have ‘lived the life of a real blues man’. These are the Delta musicians that were born into a long family line of blues musicians, trained ‘the old way’ by blues legends, and have connections to early blues musicians. The musicians that I describe as those that *learned the blues* are musicians that are not directly connected to the historical blues legacy that has been passed to the Black musicians I spoke with, but have learned about blues history and culture, and studied blues music. Most of these musicians are outsiders that relocated to Clarksdale to establish themselves as musicians. This distinction between the two groups of culture creators is relevant because those that were *born into the blues* should be acknowledged for continuing the shared African Americans traditions that they have inherited.

Culture Creators - Born into the Blues

The musicians that were born into and are continuing the blues legacy, who grew up around and were trained by blues legends, and have family roots and connections to blues legends are the originators of the culture that outsiders come to the Delta to experience. Local blues legends, Super Chikan, Big T, Iceman, Lee Williams, and Big A are all related to each other. Big T’s and Iceman’s father, Big Jack Johnson, and Super Chikan were first cousins with well-known blues musician Robert Johnson. Lee

Williams, and Big A are the nephews to Big T and Iceman. These musicians share many connections and learned to play blues music the “old way”.



Figure 8 - Lee Williams performing at Hambone

Nearly all the Black musicians that I spoke with talked about blues being a legacy, their destiny, a torch being passed, or a promise being fulfilled. Big T described becoming a real blues man as his “destiny”. Super Chikan explained to me how his blues life was a result of an unfulfilled promise his grandfather made to Robert Johnson. Lee Williams has been labeled by many locals as “the best drummer in the Delta”. Lee discussed visiting his mentor, famous Jelly Roll Kings drummer Sam Carr, in the nursing home, “Sam Carr was our mentor, drummer too. He passed away. I went to visit him in a nursing home, and he told me ‘It’s your turn, boy.’ Yep.” These musicians possess a desire to share the tradition that has been passed to them to keep their blues legacy alive. For instance, many of these musicians teach music lessons to students at the Delta Blues

Museum in Clarksdale. Big T described his feelings about passing his skill on to his students:

I hated see a lot of them go when they graduate man. I'm like, Man, I'm losing (them). And they'll come to me, feeling the same way like, "Oh, Mr. Big T, man." It has its great moments; you know what I mean? Where you have no regrets with passing. My skills are not for me to go. I have to pass them on just like it was passed on to me.

Culture Creators - Learned the Blues

There are also musicians living and working in Clarksdale that were not born into the blues, but nevertheless are creating culture and have established themselves within the blues community. These musicians come from different parts of the country with different musical backgrounds, but all ended up in Clarksdale because of their love for blues and in pursuit of livelihoods. They are influenced by various strands of blues styles but have developed their own unique styles and original songs. Most have traveled the world playing blues music, and their fans travel from all over the world to see them perform in Clarksdale. Although these artists might not have the direct connections to the blues legacy those born into the blues have, these musicians are dedicated, talented, and have earned the respect of Black musicians in the Delta.

Most of the local musicians that learned the blues and relocated to Clarksdale are white. While race was rarely mentioned when interviewing white musicians, the comments I heard reflected a range of views on the importance of race to one's ability to play the blues. One white musician expressed that race should not matter when playing the blues, as long as the musician has passion for the music they play. This stands in stark contrast to the comments offered by Lala Craig, who moved to Clarksdale and began playing the piano in Super Chikan's all-woman backing band, "the Fighting Cocks". Lala

discussed her experience as the only white person in the band, and being a white woman performing blues music in general. She defines and promotes herself as a “blues inspired artist” rather than a blues artist, adding, “I am infinitely aware and admit freely, that blues as an art form came solely from the pain and labors and unfairness of the Black situation. You know, and I would never want to walk on that.”

When visiting with one of the Black blues musicians, one on one, at Hambone on a slow night, I asked him if he believed when white musicians play blues music, they are playing ‘authentic’ blues music. He explained to me that while he has met many talented white blues musicians that he has much respect for, he does not believe the blues music they perform can be considered truly authentic blues music because of the fact that they do not share the same lived experiences that blues music was born from, that Black musicians share. Debates about authenticity and the blues have a long history in popular and scholarly realms (eg. CITE); while such discussions exceed the scope of my inquiry, the range of viewpoints expressed by my participants on the topic is significant in two ways: it demonstrates that the culture creators in the Delta think about the relationship between authenticity and race in nuanced ways, and it highlights the often racialized distinction among culture creators between being *born into* and *learning the blues*.

Culture Sellers

The richness of the African American traditions that developed in the Delta influenced some locals and outsiders to open blues related business after coming to understand the value of blues culture, much of which – in terms of economic values – was perhaps not fully exploited. There are many Black owned businesses in the city of

Clarksdale, including Our Grandma's House of Pancakes, Riverside Hotel, and Red's, but most of the businesses relying on blues culture are owned by white residents. Motely makes an important point about this structure, noting "While it is true that white folks own most businesses dependent on blues tourism, this is less the result of overt racism or political machinations than it is of structural inequality that persists" (Motely, 2018, p. 89). Within this overarching racialized structure, each of the music venues and other blues related enterprises in Clarksdale has its own character and place within the cultural economy.

As noted above, Ground Zero Blues Club opened its doors in 2001. It is the largest blues club in Clarksdale and the most visited, some speculate because of the Morgan Freeman name. The club offers live music with a full bar and food menu and is located downtown in a restored old brick building next to the railroad that runs through town. The inside of Ground Zero has a warehouse appearance and an eclectic scheme with mismatched floral print sheets as table covers, messages and names written all over every surface by visitors, and flags from international tourists hung all over the walls and from the ceiling.

Hambone Gallery, owned by musician and artist Stanley Street, is a smaller club that has a warm and welcoming feel with an almost living room setting. Blues themed paintings and prints along with Stan's original art lines one side of the club. Stan hosts live performances for many local and traveling blues musicians. Hambone is where most of my interactions with local blues artists took place. Stan often performs at his club along with others in Clarksdale. Many local musicians come to watch their friends'

performances, drink whiskey and smoke cigarettes late into the night on the benches outside, until Stan turns off the lights and locks the door.

Bluesberry Café is owned and operated by Art and Carol Crivaro from Florida. Bluesberry Café hosts live performances throughout the week serve and host a “Blues and Brunch” every Sunday morning. The Crivaro’s offer a small variety of Italian dishes along with beer and wine. The atmosphere is calmer compared to the other clubs in town that have a ‘whiskey and hell-raising’ vibe.



Figure 9 - Back alley behind Bluesberry Cafe where live performances take place

Roger Stolle moved from Ohio to open Cat Head Folk Shop. His shop is filled with blues and Clarksdale related merchandise including books, records, CD’s, art prints, magnets, t-shirts, mojo bags, and other souvenir items. There is always blues music

playing throughout the store, while Roger and his dog sit behind the counter. Motely refers to Roger as one of the key people who originally visited Clarksdale as a tourist and returned to open a business, referring to him as the “town’s chief blues promoter” (Motely, 2018, p. 91). Roger is very involved within the Clarksdale blues community. He helped establish and is a current member of the committee for the annual Juke Joint Festival; he is a member of the tourism commission; he also arranges performances around town and assisted in organizing specific days for the local blues clubs to host performances, establishing live music seven days a week in Clarksdale.

Red’s Lounge is located ‘on the other side of the tracks’ in the old blues district of Clarksdale. Aside from Morgan Freeman being part owner of Ground Zero, Red’s is the only Black-owned blues club I visited in Clarksdale. Red’s has its own unique atmosphere. Many describe Red’s as a truly authentic blues experience. Bubba O’Keefe described Red’s as “the kind of place your mother told you don’t ever go, but you went anyway”. It’s a small, dark room that holds only a small crowd of people. The lights strung along the walls give the room a red cast. There is no stage but just an area across from the bar where bands play. Red is always present in the club, often wearing dark sunglasses. His bartender, Charles, serves a small variety of beer out of a cooler, and there is a cover charge at the door.

These varied enterprises – and the racial identities, socio-economic positionalities, and personal histories of their owners – illustrate some of the ways that music, individual livelihoods, and economic development intersect with racialized political, economic, and social structures in the blues based cultural economy of the Delta. Examining the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on this region enables us to gain greater understanding of this

complex web of relationships and histories and their implications for people occupying distinct positions therein.

III. The Global Pandemic Impacts on Cultural Economy

While both the culture creators and the culture sellers were impacted by the pandemic when businesses were forced to close and live performances were canceled, my findings indicate that the culture sellers are generally in less precarious socio-economic positions than the culture creators, which created disparities in the ways the different actors were impacted by the pandemic. Many of the business owners were able to benefit from the federal assistance that was made available including Paycheck Protection Program federal loans. Some of the musicians were also able to benefit from federal assistance that was made available to workers that are considered self-employed. Several participants explained how some Black musicians, after generations of mistrust in the government, make an effort to remain ‘off the radar’ by not filing taxes and not having bank accounts, which had the effect of making them ineligible for any assistance made available.

Impacts on Culture Sellers

During my visit, the impacts of the pandemic on local businesses were present throughout the city. Many businesses remained completely closed, and the businesses that were open had few customers. The blues performances I attended had only a small number of people in the crowd who were mostly locals, with few tourists. Some businesses in Clarksdale were able to survive the pandemic by building their websites to

fulfill online orders; opening and following the reduced capacity mandates and offering to-go meals. Some businesses decided to completely close while restrictions were still in place, including Ground Zero.

Tameal, the manager of Ground Zero, told me she was hesitant to cancel performances at the start of the pandemic since the club was booked far in advance with local musicians that were depending on the money they would earn, and musicians that were traveling to fulfill their dream of performing on their stage. She talked about getting the call from one of the owners of Ground Zero that it was time to close their doors:

So now here it is March. And I'm thinking 'Oh, nothing ever happens in Mississippi' you know, it's not gonna come down here, we country folk. That's what I'm thinking. And then we started getting cases. The very last Saturday we were open, we were jam packed. [...] I had to help bar tend. I'm cooking food, face to face with people trying to get their order because my band played an hour longer that night, because I kept the door open for them. So, I'm face to face with people. It's a pandemic. At the time, I didn't even know what a pandemic was. Because I mean, I didn't think that I would live through something like that. So then came the conversation. Bill Luckett ,one of our owners, [...] sent me an email, said to me, "Tameal, you might need to look into canceling some bands." I'm not gonna lie Mandy, I literally bullshitted for almost 24 hours before I started it. Because some of these bands, this would have been their first time playing here. Some of these bands are routed through. Some of these bands, this is their lifelong dream.



Figure 10 - Ground Zero stage with new plexi-glass partition for their re-opening

Ground Zero holds performances throughout the week where many local blues musicians perform regularly. Lockett, who is also a former mayor of Clarksdale, described to me the atmosphere of the club and the reputation it holds, and explained why it would remain closed for the duration of quarantine until they could once again offer the experience that blues fans come for:

We have actually closed as of April 1, 2020. Even doing takeout food, because we're not in that business. We tried to do some takeout lunches and stuff just to keep some cash flowing, keep some employees working. But we're just not known for that. We're known for blues music, hell raising, and having fun at the bar or dance and carrying on. That's what we're known for. And we closed because we couldn't offer the experience at our club that people from all over the world were used to experiencing there. And that would be a good fun time, like I described, and we don't want to give them less than

that. With all the pandemic restrictions, mandates and laws and all the rest of it and just common sense, we elected to do the right thing we believe, and we just simply closed.

Stanley Street, the owner of Hambone Art Gallery, was able to supplement a portion of the income he lost through the sale of his art on his website when his club closed. As quarantine restrictions began to lift, Stan opened Hambone to sell a few beers to the locals that were ready to get out and socialize. Roger Stolle, the owner of Cat Head Folk Shop, also began selling his merchandise online. Once the restrictions had been lifted, Roger opened the doors to Cat Head, providing masks to visitors and hand sanitizer at the door.

Club owners were faced with making the decision to continue paying the electricity bill in order to keep the beer cold or shut off the power and let the beer sit. Many lost food and beer that will need to be restocked before opening their doors again. The uncertainty of how long the pandemic and quarantine restrictions would last lead to some businesses paying months of utilities with zero business.

Impacts on Culture Creators

It was evident through my interviews, observations, and socializing with the people in the Delta that the musicians truly endured the most severe financial impacts of the pandemic of those within the blues-based cultural economy. With blues clubs closed, and performances canceled, the musicians that play blues as a part of their culture, tradition, and for the sake of their livelihood were left with no income.

Prior to the pandemic, Big T had just closed a blues club in Clarksdale after some financial issues. His friend and part owner of Ground Zero, Howard Stovall, convinced Big T to move to Memphis where he was living and working for a corporate

entertainment company, promising Big T some gigs. He describes how his life changed once the pandemic hit:

I'm gonna move on up there because I just opened a club over in my old neighborhood. I dumped a chunk of change into that. It was a dying cause. I lost it. And Howard says "Man, just move on up here, man. I'll keep you busy", you know, with the company that he was working for. So, he started booking me these corporate gigs, man. These corporate gigs kept me working round the clock. I'm constantly working strong, you know. And it lasted clean up until the pandemic hit. When this thing hit, it destroyed everything, all musicians can even think about. We never saw anything like this coming. All of a sudden [...] the gigs start slowing down. All of a sudden, they just stop. [...] The cost of living between Mississippi and Tennessee is totally different. Whereas your cost of living in Mississippi would be dirt cheap. But it doubles that (in Memphis). [...] I tried to snap back from that, and it was a hard pill to swallow. So, I ended up loading up the truck up and moving back to Clarksdale. Like Jed Clampett, you know? But Jed Clampett got rich. I couldn't get so lucky.

All the blues musicians that I spoke with discussed the loss of income they experienced during 2020 after their performances and tours were canceled. One musician remarked that on average, he performs eighty to one hundred times over the course of the year; he only performed seven times in 2020. The local blues musicians perform regularly in Clarksdale and throughout the Delta region, but benefit the most financially from larger festivals, especially overseas. All of the musicians I spoke with travel overseas for festivals and tours, where they make a substantial amount of money that constitutes a major portion of their yearly income. Many musicians described not only the pay but also the treatment they receive when traveling out of the country and why it is so lucrative for them. Tameal discussed the financial loss these musicians experienced when these international tours were canceled at the beginning of the pandemic:

So, we closed now. I got some of my bands that like "Tameal, I don't know what I'm gonna do." A lot of these bands weren't even supposed to be here. They had European tours lined up. And if anybody knows how those European tours go; they don't pay for

flight. They don't pay for food. They don't pay for lodging. And they come home with a check. A nice check, a nice check. So, in my mind, I'm calculating how much these people have lost. A lot of these people, I know, that first month they lost over \$10,000. Some of these bands, that first month that's what they lost.

Lee Williams had just returned from a European tour right as the first COVID-19 cases were showing up in the U.S. Lee performs live as his main source of income, along with teaching music lessons at the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale. He had plans to tour overseas in 2020, which were canceled along with his music lessons at the museum. Lee described his experience when touring overseas:

It's like a red carpet. It's like invisible red carpet. You walk in and red carpet around there. [...] They do. They really take care of you. [...] If you're going to make five grand, you're gonna come back with five-grand, [...] they take care of everything. They're expensive travels, you have to spend nothing, they even give you money to spend.

I play music for a living. [...] Now I'm a teacher at the Delta Blues Museum, which can't teach right now, because of the pandemic thing here. And the pandemic, it messed up a lot of people, especially musicians. Like I was telling you, we're supposed to be gone 2020, was going France and Colombia and Norway. When I heard, [...] we were getting ready to go. And [...] you know what? They cancel all the shows. [...] Before [the] pandemic, I told you, I was over in Europe, for a whole month, January, February. I got back about time in March, it was like, Yeah, we got this COVID-19 virus here.

Mississippi Marshal was born and raised in Mississippi. He performs all over the country and has a large following in the Midwest in particular. He discussed the impact the pandemic had on his income after his performances and tours were canceled:

When this pandemic come along, I will tell you for me personally it's like somebody reached in my pocket and pulled seventy-five grand out of my pocket because all of my big festival stuff in a blink of an eye was gone. All of my even just local, I mean yeah even local touring and nationwide touring. Zero, shut it off.

Roger described the impact the pandemic had on the musicians, and told me about one local musician that worked multiple jobs that were lost when the pandemic started:

He'd built it up so he had enough sources of income, all based off of blues music. So, he was teaching at the Delta Blues museum. He was playing gigs under his own name or backing up other people that hired him. And then working security Ground Zero Blues Club, occasionally playing there too. But I mean, all those things existed because of blues tourism. So, it was working within this industry, even the stuff that seemed more day job like, all of those things went away.

These examples demonstrate not only the profound financial impact faced by Delta musicians, but also an understanding of their socioeconomic position as culture creators compared to the culture sellers. Many musicians are unable to financially support themselves on live performances alone and piece together various streams of income. The loss of income from live performances was the primary issue for most musicians, but as the example of Lee Williams losing his income from teaching demonstrates many of these supplementary income-generating activities were also dramatically reduced by the pandemic.

Secondary Jobs

On my second visit to Bluesberry Café, Lucious Spiller was performing in the evening. The performance was on the back patio, with customers sitting at tables that were scattered throughout the back alley. As I waited to order wine, I noticed local blues musician, Watermelon Slim, emerge from the back exit of the café. He walked right up to my table and asked me what I would like to order. He brought me my red wine and then continued serving the rest of the customers. Initially a bit surprised by seeing this well-known musician waiting tables, I soon recognized that while some blues musicians that live in Clarksdale solely depend on live performances for their main source of income, others perform while working additional jobs. A few musicians teach music students as

another source of income. When the pandemic began and their live performances were canceled along with any music classes, some blues musicians were forced to find secondary jobs to generate an income while they were unable to work. Lee Williams began working in the Delta Blues Museum for maintenance and cleaning to supplement his income.

I was doing a lot of maintenance around the museum, you know. Cleaning up, cleaning out the front and stuff like that. That was my job. [...] When it's been snow and ice, I can't work outside. I'm worried. Can't be clean around in the area, which didn't take like one or two hours to blow, you get the blower and blow the leaves. [...] I actually rake the leaves and put them in a bag and take them to the trash.

Before Super Chikan became a professional musician, he supported himself by truck driving. Prior to the pandemic, he was able to support himself through live performances alone. He would play around two to three well-paying shows a month. After the pandemic began, Super Chikan was forced to start driving trucks again in order to support himself and his wife:

Things went downhill. I mean, I felt this pandemic, you know. It just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger and kept getting worse and worse. I'm thinking like, this thing's gonna be over in just a short while, you know? But it never did. It kept getting worse and worse and bigger and bigger. Couldn't go nowhere. Couldn't work nowhere. We couldn't do nothing. We spending what little we had, you know, because I wasn't prepared for it. And all of a sudden, all of a sudden, here I am, man, I gotta go find me a job. You know? So, I got me a job driving a truck and it wasn't too good, just kind of part time because you got to work in between weather. [...] But at least I get two to three dollars in and I signed up for unemployment. That along with the job I could, you know, I could creep along a little bit, but I don't know if it'll ever be the same again. It put me in the hole.

The impacts of the pandemic caused musicians to lose their primary source of income along with the additional income sources they have pieced together. Some musicians were forced to find secondary jobs to supplement their lost income and to

financially survive the pandemic. Along with secondary jobs, some of the musicians that lost their income were eligible for government assistance.

Assistance and Unemployment

Some musicians were eligible to receive federal aid that became available to unemployed workers. Many musicians that I spoke with expressed the stress they felt not knowing how they would survive financially without receiving the aid. Lee told me that he was down to his last one hundred dollars when he received his unemployment aid. As noted above, some musicians were unable to apply for the federal aid that was made available or were not eligible. According to several participants, this was a result of the region's history of racial oppression and exploitation that created a shared distrust in the government among some of the Black musicians. These musicians make an effort to remain as undocumented as possible by not opening bank accounts, filing tax returns, or having a permanent address. One participant discussed how this was a common historical trend among some of the Black bluesmen in the Delta, noting that Robert Johnson, for instance, was not said to *live* Clarksdale, but rather the town was "where he *stays*":

[T]hat's the terminology here, by the way. They don't say, 'I live in Clarksdale.' It's 'I stay in Clarksdale.' [...] In other words, it's not quite as permanent. Which is interesting. [...] And that's more within, I would say, the Black culture here and blues culture that I hear [...] I started really thinking about it. And, you know, in (a bluesman's) case, he's always lived wherever his girlfriend was, kind of thing. [...] It makes it hard. It's the same thing about bank accounts. I mean, most of the real deal blues guys that I've known did not have bank accounts and would not get a bank account. [...] They're just living off the radar as much as possible. [...] In my world that I grew up in, I would have thought, 'well, that just seems almost criminal' or something. But here, it's kind of like, Well, you know, the system has really just screwed generations of your family.

One participant provided additional details about the situation of musicians that were unable to apply for unemployment:

You see, some don't have an earnings record. And that's a little bit their fault, too. I encourage all our musicians to have bank accounts, that's just being prudent and financially responsible. A lot of them don't like that. They want to just get cash and avoid the consequences of showing income, which is paying in taxes, typically, or having their wages garnished for child support or something like that. And those are all issues we face all the time here [...] But they've had a tough way to go. Anyway, most musicians just don't have a lot of staying power and a lot of savings, or they're kind of day to day, you know, that's just the nature of the business. They're artists, they don't have some best administrative skills going. And they just have to get by as best they can. Until they really get management, gigs going, routinely. So, it's tough on them, but we depend on them. And we try to help them out.

These stories illustrate the extent to which culture creators and culture sellers experienced the impacts of the pandemic to different degrees. After hearing the stories of the culture creators and gaining a better understanding of their socioeconomic position prior to the pandemic compared to the culture sellers, it is evident that the culture creators went into the pandemic in an already precarious position creating more financial difficulty for them during quarantine. This can be said to an even higher degree for those that were *born into the blues*, since some of these musicians demonstrate the shared distrust in the government and were unable to benefit from federal aid.

In this first part of this chapter, I discussed the revitalization of downtown Clarksdale, which was driven primarily by white locals and outsiders opening blues related businesses in what was historically known as the 'white part of town' where blues would never be found historically. I explained how this revitalization led to the current structure of the blues-based cultural economy, which is composed of culture creators and culture sellers. I identified those that were *born into the blues* as the musicians that are continuing the blues legacy that was left to them, and the culture creators that *learned the*

blues as those who aren't connected to the blues legacy but are passionate musicians and are established as artists in Clarksdale. In the third section of this chapter, I discussed how the impacts of the global pandemic forced businesses to close and live performances to be canceled, leaving musicians without an income. I then discussed the socioeconomic position that some of the musicians were in prior to the pandemic, and how this created a financial struggle during quarantine. I explained the federal aid that became available for unemployed workers that some musicians were able to benefit from, and how some musicians have a shared distrust in the government as a result of the racial history of oppression in this region.

4. LIVING A 'BLUES LIFE'

On the nights I spent at the blues clubs during my time in the Delta, local musicians would show up without fail to support the performer of the night. They would gather together, order drinks, or sometimes share a bottle of whiskey that someone brought. I would sit and drink with them, listening to their conversations while they caught up, shared stories, brought up old memories, and talked about blues. Some of the Black musicians would often discuss their blues training with Mr. Johnnie Billington, or performing with Big Jack Johnson. When sharing these memories together, one musician would begin telling a story, another musician would soon jump in, adding what he recalled, another would then join in, and they would erupt into laughter while continuing to reminisce. They told stories about learning to play blues from Mr. Billington and being forced to practice the same portion of one song for months until it was mastered, one musician claiming he was made to practice the same song for three years. They shared memories about growing up around and performing with Big Jack Johnson. They emphasized how Big Jack never missed or was ever late to a performance, and joked about him showing up two days early to a performance. They talked about the time their van broke down on the road and laying on the hot concrete in their three-piece suits on a sweltering day to make the repairs, and still arriving to the venue with plenty of time to spare. The memories, lived experiences, and traditions these musicians share are a part of who they have become, and have shaped their identity as blues musicians; these experiences and shared traditions can be seen as part of the broader experiential fabric of African American life, which has created a specific way of knowing or system of knowledge referred to as blues epistemology.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the concept of blues epistemology, following the work of Clyde Woods and Brian Foster. I will revisit portions of Chapter One using blues epistemology as a lens to view and understand the revitalization of downtown Clarksdale, the structure of the blues-based cultural economy, and how differently situated actors have experienced different impacts of the pandemic. I then share the life histories of three African American blues musicians born into the blues, stories that I was fortunate enough to have shared with me by Super Chikan, Big T, and Jimmy “Duck” Holmes. I focus on these personal histories for the knowledge they impart, the stories they contain, their lived experiences, their family histories, and the deep connection they have to the African American culture and tradition that developed in the Mississippi Delta. Finally, I argue that these musicians can be considered builders of blues epistemology, and I place their knowledge, stories and actions within the blues epistemology tree discussed by Brian Forster.

I. Blues Epistemology

The origin of blues epistemology is found within African American cultural construction and resistance to the antebellum plantation regime (Woods, 1998). African Americans during this period united against white supremacy and built strong communities as a form of resistance and empowerment that created a shared understanding and a collective knowledge system. As Clyde Woods puts it in *Development Arrested*, African Americans in the “Black Belt South have constructed a system of explanation that informs their daily life, organizational activity, culture, religion, and social movements. They have created their own ethno-regional

epistemology. Like other traditions of interpretation, it is not a monolith; there are branches, roots, and a trunk” (Woods, 1998, pg.16). Developing these ideas further in *I Don't Like the Blues*, Brian Foster discusses the meaning of the blues epistemology tree analogy. The roots are considered to be the anchor of the tree, or the starting point; the roots of the blues epistemology represent “Black Southerners’ desires for ‘humanistic autonomy’” (Foster 2020, pg.19), the desire to be seen as human and deserving of the opportunity to establish a life for themselves. The trunk of the tree allows the roots to grow; in the blues epistemology tree, the trunk represent the methods developed and enacted by Black southerners to create their own freedom and power. Collective action, individual protest, and community building, along with despair and hope for a better future are included within the trunk of the blues epistemology tree. Foster states that, “just as the trunk of a tree produces branches, the blues epistemology has produced many cultural and political traditions. One of those traditions is blues music” (Foster 2020, pg. 20).

Blues Epistemology– Revisiting Chapter 1

Blues epistemology can be used to examine the key themes I discussed in Chapter One -- the revitalization that occurred in downtown Clarksdale, the structure of the blues-based cultural economy, and the most severe impacts of the pandemic within the cultural economy being felt by the Black musicians. As I noted, Motely discussed the suspicion and skepticism shared by Black residents after white residents began showing an interest in blues, opening blues related businesses on the ‘white’ side of town where blues would have never been found before. The train tracks that run in between Red’s and Ground

Zero are referred to by a local in *I Don't Like the Blues*, as “The Great Divide”, Foster states, “Clarksdale’s downtown square [...] was for white folks. If Black folks were seen on the square, they faced both formal and informal sanctions; harassment from white residents, violence at the hands of local police, blacklisting from local businesses and financial institutions, and arrest” (Foster, 2020, pg. 41). This is the section of town that has become the center for blues tourism with most of the businesses owned by white residents, leading to the structure of the blues-based cultural economy that is present today, and creating the shared concerns and skepticism among the Black residents.

The structure of the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta shows reflections of the history of whites profiting from the culture developed by African Americans, along with remnants of the plantation system. Motely states that this is “less the result of overt racism or political machinations than it is of structural inequality that persists” (Motely, 2018, pg. 89). Most of the blues-based businesses, culture sellers, in Clarksdale are white-owned; while the culture creators that learned the blues consists mostly of white musicians, it is the legacy and tradition being shared by the Black musicians born into the blues that is creating the value that supports the cultural economy of the Delta. This inequality within the structure of the blues-based cultural economy has led to the Black musicians, born into the blues, being the last to benefit from the heritage and culture they share.

There were inequalities within the socioeconomic position of the culture creators and the culture sellers prior to the pandemic, and as stated in *I Don't Like the Blues*, “If you say it three times in Clarksdale, say it four or five times for Clarksdale’s Black residents” (Foster, 2020, pg. 32). The inequalities that existed prior to the pandemic were

felt to different degrees by the culture sellers and the culture creators, with culture creators feeling the worst impacts and Black musicians born into the blues experiencing the most severe impacts. Some of these musicians were unable to qualify for federal aid because their livelihoods were based in more informal economies and practices that developed over generations of white supremacy creating a shared a mistrust in the government. These collective behaviors and shared actions are reflections of blues epistemology.

II. Born into the Blues

During my research, I encountered numerous expressions of blues epistemology while observing the impacts of the pandemic on the musicians, the closeness of the strong community, and through the culture produced inside and outside of the blues clubs. Three of the blues musicians I interviewed shared stories, lived experiences, and family histories that exemplify and extend blues epistemology, demonstrating these musicians' shared connections to the traditions, knowledge, and culture developed by African Americans in the Delta. These musicians are culture creators that were *born into the blues*. The stories told by these musicians and the lived experiences they share are woven within the rich African American culture that outsiders come to experience. The legacy they are continuing, the culture and the tradition they share while performing blues music creates the value that supports the cultural economy of the Delta.

Super Chikan

My first encounter with Super Chikan was after a two-hour drive from Clarksdale to Tupelo to see him perform at a private birthday party. I interviewed Red earlier in the day, who described Super Chikan as a “real blues man”. Super Chikan’s performance was full of energy with long guitar solos on extravagant customized guitars. Super Chikan danced around, often leaving the stage to perform his extended guitar solos



Figure 11 - Super Chikan

while getting close to audience members and allowing them to give his guitar a strum, myself included. It was hard to grasp that Super Chikan is 70 years old. He performed a song called ‘The Untold Story’, about “Black power”, framed in terms of hoodoo and voodoo dolls, to which the song attributes the skills of bluesmen. I joined the band for their set break outside the venue, where I introduced myself to Super Chikan. He was extremely warm and welcoming, and remembered my name from the phone call made to him on my behalf by the manager of Ground Zero. His keyboard player, Lala, suggested that he show me his workspace at home where he customizes guitars, to which he agreed, inviting me to come by the next day.

James Johnson, better known by his blues name, “Super Chikan”, is considered by locals to be a true blues legend in Clarksdale. James was born on February 16, 1951 in Darling, Mississippi. “I was born left-handed, left legged, left minded, left brained and left out. I’m one of the most unfortunate,” James told me while sitting relaxed in his chair across from me in his workshop. James was raised by his grandmother, Pearl, and his grandfather, Ellis Johnson. James described growing up around many blues legends and

hearing them perform together as a child. This was a challenge, he told me, because children were not often allowed around adults who were socializing: “Oh, they were hard on kids back then. So, I say that you know, back in those days, a kid couldn't walk through a crowd of old people. Now old people can't walk through a crowd of kids”. This was a common theme between some of the older Black musicians I interviewed. But James found ways to take in the adult culture around him as a child, hiding in different spots to watch these blues legends play, often crawling under the porch and laying on his back under the musicians to watch them between the cracks of the wooden boards:

They start stomping on the floor real hard, make the dirt fall down in my face. So next time they had one, I climb the branch of the tree by the porch and now I look in that tree just above him where he couldn't see. And when they started playing, I started playing my diddly bow. I was rocking the can and I fell out a tree right in front [of them].

James's exposure to blues extended beyond the music itself, and his understanding of his place in blues culture draws on the long lineage of players in his immediate and extended family. He described his grandfather, Ellis Johnson, as an “evil man” that was mean to his grandmother. Blues legend Honey Boy Edwards expressed to Super Chikan, “that was a mean man, that was the evil man, that was an evil man, he was a devil... that man will kill you if you look at him the wrong way” when discussing his grandfather. His grandfather had an enormous influence on James, teaching him to play blues and holding parties on the front porch when James was young. On the frequent fishing trips he and Ellis took together, his grandfather would talk about his first cousin, Robert Johnson, perhaps the best-known Delta blues artist, whom he called “Robert Lee.” Ellis Johnson often played guitar with Robert Johnson. His grandfather explained to James when he was a young child, that he had made a promise to Robert Johnson that he

didn't keep after witnessing the way Robert lived and died. According to James and the stories told to him by his grandfather, Robert Johnson would hang around juke joints, hoping to become a blues musician. But when Robert would try to play the guitar, people "would laugh, because he didn't play very well." The legend of Robert Johnson claims that he sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads of Highways 49 and 61, for his blues guitar skill. According to James, after reappearing in the juke joints with his new blues guitar talent, shocking those that were aware of his skill level before, they began saying, "well he must've made a deal with the devil." Ellis Johnson would play in Greenwood with Robert Johnson and Honey Boy Edwards. Robert would draw the attention of the women in juke joints, angering their husbands. One jealous husband poisoned a bottle of whiskey and told his wife to go give it to Robert. Robert fell to his knees, coughing and "barking like a dog", and foaming at the mouth making people believe he had turned into the devil. The life of Robert Johnson kept Ellis Johnson from fulfilling the promise he had made to Robert. James did not disclose what this promise was that his grandfather made to Robert Johnson but did not keep. Ellis Johnson told James as a young boy that he was now depending on him to fulfill this promise:

As I grew and got older, some of that stuff started ringing back in, when I started reminiscing and understanding some of it. When I learned about Robert Johnson "Oh, so that's what he was talking about. Oh, my goodness." And he talked about him quite a bit. It was his cousin. And so, when I learned our story by Robert Johnson, they scare me. The reason he didn't keep his promise because it spooked him.

Despite whatever reservations he may have had about fulfilling the family promise, James went on to become a professional musician. Like many blues musicians, he has had to contend with exploitative and crooked people in the music business. He described being sent to play a few gigs by his booking agent and after paying the

manager, paying for gas, food and a place to stay, he would often return home with no money. He was also nearly trapped into a contract with his manager that, in his words, would have made him a “slave”:

He had two pages of a twelve-page contract and made all this good stuff sound good. [...] So, I took it, while he would walk around the room. [...] Something just came over me and said, “Don't sign it.” I didn't sign it. [...] I kept that sucker. I still got it sticking up there. [...] It was like a slave contract. He owned me. Even if I changed my name, he owned me. He said my wife was allowed to make money at home, when she did, he would deserve half of that. [...] I mean, if I would have signed it, he would have owned me, just like I was a slave. [...] I had somebody else read it. They said this guy owns you. He's going to own you, your name, and anything that you own, he own. He said, “You sign this?” I said, “No...the good lord came to me doing that. That was one bad time in my blues life that the good Lord stepped in and told me not to sign it.” He said, “You'd have never gotten out of this.” It was a 12-page contract, but I only saw two pages of it.

Throughout blues history, there has been a history of cultural extraction within the Delta, record labels would scour the Delta to record “race” records. These musicians were lied to, taken advantage of and tricked out of the rights to their own songs while rarely being paid what was owed. James's story about his crooked manager and booking agent shows that exploitation of Black blues artists is ongoing, but also illustrates the capacity of these artists to overcome such predatory practices.

James told me the stories he was told by his grandfather about Robert Johnson, including the mystery of where Robert Johnson is actually buried, since there are said to be three possible gravesites. James spoke of witnessing his grandfather's death and the curse he believes was left on him by his grandfather in his dying moments that led to James living a “blues life”:

I don't like telling this story, but he was the only daddy I know, but he was the first man I saw die. I saw him get shot, got his head blown off. And as I'm going, he was laying there dying, his eyes

were still open. His neck was blown off with one little string holding his neck to his body. His eyes was still open and he look right at me and I walked up there and look down on him. He looked right at me and it was started gurgling noises out of his throat, there was a message coming from his eyes, from wherever you know, because I could feel something. But I didn't know what it was, kids, you know? He was giving me some kind of message. It stayed with me. Could always remember that he said I had to fulfill his promise. But he also cursed me. I think he put a curse on me, because I lived like Robert Johnson. I've always had hellhounds on my trail. My life has always been up and down. I can be doing good one minute and the next minute, I'm all the way down to the bottom again. I never stay down [...] I always find a way to work back up. So, you know, I say I'm living a blues life. And a lot of people, a lot of people have said they want to know the blues. They won't like the blues. They want to know blues music. You don't like the blues. The blues is a struggle it's hard times. Bad times. Serious bad times. So, you know what, but you have to be strong. You got to pull through it.

Alan Lomax described the lives of many young African American children in the Delta, stating that “The world of the blues was no child’s garden of verses. It was a frontier, it was ghetto; it was shaped by old African tradition” (Lomax 1992, pg. 379). Lomax explained how it was common for African American children in the Delta to grow up with a grandparent after losing parents as well as for children to witness and experience traumas and violence. James refers to his life as cursed, living as Robert Johnson did, always having ‘*Hellhounds on my Trail*’. This is a song written by Robert Johnson which has been interpreted in various ways. The lyrics Robert sings are dark and filled with dread:

I've got to keep moving
Blues falling down like hail [. . .]
And the days keeps on worrying me
There's a hellhound on my trail [...]
I can tell the wind is risin', the leaves trembling on the tree

Karlos Hill claims that blues historians interpret this song as Robert’s agony of waiting to fulfill his promise made to the devil, the hellhound representing the devil chasing him.

Another interpretation acknowledged by Hill claims that the lyrics are partially biographical and “can also be understood as a lynching ballad that describes grassroots responses to lynching, such as flight and the anxieties that arise from perpetually fleeing lynch mob violence” (Hill, 2015, olemiss.edu). Here again, James’s experiences and understanding of his family history and biography as a bluesman resonates with the stories passed on to him by his forebears, informed directly by ties with earlier progenitors of blues as both musical form and episteme.

Big T

The night I met Terri “Big T” Williams, his nephew, Anthony “Big A” Sherrod, was performing with his cousin, Lee Williams, on drums at Hambone Gallery. He stood out among the crowd, not only because of his size, but by his warm personality and energy that filled the room. His deep, booming voice could be heard over the sound of the band playing, and the talking of the crowd. During the band’s breaks, the majority of the crowd flocks outside for a cigarette, or four. He stopped me as I passed, concerned that I was leaving and would miss the rest of the show. I assured him that I was staying for the entire performance. We sat and spoke for a while over cigarettes and whiskey about his life as a blues musician in Clarksdale. Soon, the crowd made their



Figure 12 – Big T

way back into Hambone to watch Big A start his next set. After a few songs, Big T stepped on stage, strapped on Big A’s guitar making it look tiny, and played two songs. Big T learned to play blues from his famous blues musician father, Big Jack Johnson, and

his legendary blues teacher, Mr. Johnnie Billington, who taught him the 'old way'. This training was apparent through his style of singing and guitar playing.

Big T was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1960. He discussed growing up in the South, and what life was like for his family as sharecroppers, and the hard times they experienced:

It was a lot of rough times for my parents, maybe. But they made sure we didn't feel like it was hard times at all. Because we ate good. I mean, we were well taken care of, went to school every day clean. You know, I mean, that kind of stuff. So even though they was going through some hard times, we never knew. You know, I mean, as a kid, all we saw, we knew nothing of the struggle. Not until we got older, you know.

His family lived and worked on a plantation in Farrell, Mississippi near Stovall. Even though Big T referred to the farm as a plantation, he explained that as kids, they didn't refer to them as plantations and that term was more from his dad's time. He became close friends with the boss's son and discussed the awareness that occurred within his friend as he became older about the history of the region and the plantation his father owned:

As a kid, I grew up only knowing about the boss of the plantation's son. Growing up with him, knowing about the only difference in me and him was that we wanted to be so close friends. But we both had to come to a conclusion that, "Hey, my dad works on the plantation that your dad owns." You know, I mean, and his dad also came from a generation of people that have a family that was former slave owners and that kind of stuff. And the older that he became the more he didn't want to have anything to do with the plantation. Really, it had blood on it that he didn't want to have anything to do with it and he always voiced that and said that to me. Even after we both had grown, he went to college, the best universities, where have you. My life turned out to be designed to go in the direction of a real blues man. Because it was destined.

Eventually, Big T's parents moved from the plantation and into Clarksdale, or as Big T referred to it, "the big city". Big T's dad was legendary blues musician, Big Jack Johnson of the Jelly Roll Kings. Big Jack Johnson has his own marker on the Mississippi Blues

Trail located outside of Red's, where he performed regularly. Big Jack bought Big T his first guitar at age nine. Big T described the role of blues in his life and the long history of musicians throughout his family's lineage:

I live for it. It was actually a torch that was passed on from all of mine, you know, who graced in front of me, that died and left his legacy behind. And I'll try to be more aware that this is where it came from, [...] I try to live up to the legacy. My dad, Big Jack Johnson, he passed his torch to me. As well as a lot of the old greats that died in Clarksdale. I can name a many one, I'm gonna name a few. Robert Bilbo Walker, Sam Carr, Frank Frost, Big Jack Johnson, David Porter, these were all the Jelly Roll Kings.

Frank Frost (born in 1936), Sam Carr (born in 1926), and Big Jack Johnson (born in 1940), started playing blues together in 1962, eventually forming the famous blues band The Jelly Roll Kings. Big T began hanging out with the Jelly Roll Kings at age 12 (msblustrail.org), and later became the youngest member of the Jelly Roll Kings at the age of seventeen. He discussed learning what life was like for a real blues man through his experience of being in the band, and from his dad, Big Jack Johnson:

These guys were sharing their life histories, and ordeals that they ran into along the way with women, wine, and whiskey. Then I started seeing this stuff first-hand. I'm like, "Oh, now I know what the blues is all about." And Big Jack would lean over say, "blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad, thinking about the good woman he once had." He would say that. Then I really read up on the real legacy that blues history has, you know? That was the legacy that came with all blues men. A blues man, is a good man feeling bad, thinking about a good woman he once had. At that point, whiskey played a big part. All that to say, "Hey, man, it's gonna be alright. Get you enough whiskey in you. And you can play through the night. Yeah, and everything's gonna be all right." [...] further on down the line Big Jack started teaching me these blues histories. A lot of times I used to tell them, "Y'all have given me the blues, and I want to give him back." He said, "now a deal is a deal." Then he shook my hands and said that we got a deal. And me being amongst them, it almost felt like I was reliving their lives, you know? Because at that point in time, it's like I'm getting the hard times that they went through. Like getting off a tractor after driving a tractor all day. You get off tractor, the only thing you can wind down on is good whiskey and some music. And a good woman.

Big T discussed encountering the hard times that he had mentioned and described this period as ‘the blues really hitting him’. He explained that he began making bad decisions and was eventually incarcerated in Parchman Penitentiary, Parchman Farm is a historically violent prison, where, in its early history, inmates served their sentence as slaves working the prison’s farm. African American men were arrested in large numbers for minor offenses and made to serve extended sentences for years to keep Parchman farm staffed and profitable (Lomax, 1992).

I had my times to, you know, when you want to call it the blues [...] I grew up, I had some more growing up to do. I became involved with drugs. I did, you know, I started making some bad choices. Those bad choices led me down a road that I didn't think, I thought I had seen the blues already. Or had the blues already. Little did I know the blues was yet to come. I had gotten married, I had family. I mean, I was doing good. God was blessing me every day, you know, to become good in my craft, didn't have a full education. I was a high school dropout. And I made some bad choices end up doing some prison time here in Clarksdale at the Mississippi Department of Corrections, which was Parchman. I guess six years [...] like I said, I miss my guitar more than I did my woman. This was true. I had a preacher one night, one Sunday, they used to always come by our compound [...] and they would have church service. This one preacher was a white guy. The way he delivered his message was with a guitar. He would always bring the guitar. He had an acoustic guitar. I'm sitting in his audience. I'm drooling over his guitar, man. I'm sitting there with dreamy eyes on his guitar man. And he's like, he noticed me. But he didn't stop doing his (service). Then once he stopped. He ended his service. He looked at me he said, “Mr. Williams, you play?” Oh my God. He know, he said “you want to play?” Because he knew I was drooling over his guitar and I'm like, “Oh my god, man. You don't know. You don't know me.” Got his guitar man. It was tuned in some tuning called cross Spanish. And it was like the Spanish tuning. I remember from the Gospel days, in just about every gospel group, you had a guitar player that was prone to that tuning. So, I re-tuned it to natural standard tuning, and he saw me do that. I did it really quick. Oh my god, when I cut loose on the guitar. He was like, “Man, I knew the way you was looking at my guitar”, you know?

Big T expressed the sadness he felt while spending six years in Parchman without touching a guitar until that moment and talked about the changes that occurred within him after his time at Parchman, leading him to make what he called “positive life decisions”. These experiences were part of his broader life trajectory of “learning the blues,” as he put it:

I had some great times, man, learning the blues. I mean, my experience in this music world, this blues world has been really good to me. I have no regrets. Even though hard times came about, those hard times [...] they came with the learning process. It's me being a kid making decisions. When I became a man, when I grew up to be a man, all those decisions became positive, because they was all life decisions. You know, from there on out, it was all life decisions.

Big T told many stories about his life and would always end his story with the lesson he learned or how that specific story shaped him. He expressed passion for this legacy that was left to him and the desire to pass his skill on to a new generation of blues artist to continue the blues tradition.

Jimmy “Duck” Holmes

I met Jimmy the Saturday night I drove into the Delta. I was about two hours from my destination in Clarksdale, but realized I wasn't too far from Bentonia. I had read about Jimmy, his café, his Grammy nomination, and Bentonia blues. I called the Blue Front Café to see if they were even open. Jimmy answered the phone and was yelling over the live music in the background. I asked if they were open, he shouted back, “We have live music right now!”, and hung up the phone. When I arrived at the Blue Front Café at 9 p.m., I felt as though I had stepped into a different world, in a different time. The Blue Front Café was an old structure that sat next to a railroad track. Two men were playing guitars in chairs and singing blues on the front porch of the café. People had set up

chairs in the dirt parking lot, and a few were dancing in front of the musicians. I watched until the men finished playing their song before making my way inside. The inside of the café looked as though it has never had any renovations or gone through any changes since it opened in 1948. I recognized Jimmy standing by a bench talking to what appeared to be locals by the way they were telling stories and laughing together. When they were finished with their conversation, I introduced myself to Jimmy and let him know why I was visiting. He was soft spoken, warm, and friendly. He pointed me in the direction of the woman running the cash register to set up an interview with him.



Figure 13 – Jimmy “Duck” Holmes

Jimmy “Duck” Holmes was born on July 28, 1947, in Bentonia, Mississippi. Bentonia is a rural town, two hours south of Clarksdale, with a population of 440. Jimmy’s parents worked as sharecroppers in Bentonia and opened the Blue Front Café the year after Jimmy was born. The Café sold hot food, sodas, and bootleg corn liquor. Jimmy described growing up on his family’s farm and at the Blue Front Café:

Typical country boy living on a farm in my younger days. We was based in cotton fields. I did chores around the house. We had livestock, we feed them and take care of them. We'd pen them up at night. This time of year, off of school, you know. In my younger days, young kids couldn't come here. Mama allowed us to come here through the side door. Adults only. Not just my mom and dad. There wouldn't be kids socializing with adults. Kids had to socialize with kids. You couldn't sit around adults while they were talking. If there was a conversation in our house, kids couldn't be involved in that. That was a no-no. Like we're sitting here talking now, the young kids knew better. They couldn't just come in and listen in. Not just my family, that's all families. There's not a kid that could socialize with adults. It was a bad influence. Especially if someone was drinking that whiskey. That was a no-no for a young child. Absolutely. Kids back then was a lot more different than kids now. It was 'yes ma'am, yes sir', no matter if they was black or white. Absolutely, I said yes ma'am. You had to, because if you didn't honor an adult, and your parents found out about it, you'd get your butt whooped.

This tradition of respect and courtesy that was taught to children at a young age is still present in this culture today. This is part of the warmth and kindness that is felt when visiting with the people in the Delta.

Jimmy was given his first guitar by his father when he was ten years old. Jimmy was recorded by folklorist and ethnographer Alan Lomax in the 1970's and was not recorded again until 2006 when he created his first album featuring blues drummer, Sam Carr. Bentonia blues is considered to be its own unique style of blues, different from Delta blues. According to an article on the Mississippi Arts Council website (Barretta, n.d.),

The "Bentonia school" style blues is characterized by "distinctive tuning, the use of falsetto, dark lyrical themes, and an overall "eerie" quality" (Barretta, n.d.). Jimmy is said to be the last artist that plays this style of blues. Jimmy discussed Bentonia blues and how this style of blues differs from all other blues. Clyde Woods discusses how there has always been great of diversity in blues especially in the distinct regional schools, stating

that “constant movement and migration ensured both continuity and further differentiations. The local traditions were created and maintained by individual performers and audiences who shared and built upon, a set of foundational songs, sounds, techniques [...]” (Woods, 1998, pg. 36). Jimmy explained how original Bentonia Blues was not played to a beat, Jimmy gave it an “upgrade” and put the same Bentonia style to a rhythm: “And I know that blues play is played from a scale. So many counts here, so many counts there, open, closed. I don’t do it from that perspective. First of all, I don’t read music. It don’t help if you can’t read and you can’t write.” Jimmy explained that he plays what sounds good to him, and when tuning his guitar, he tunes it to his ear. He pointed out how many of the best blues artists were blind, and how these artists tuned and played by ear.

His most recent album *Cypress Grove* was nominated for a Grammy in 2021, for Best Traditional Blues Album. This album covers classic blues songs such as *Little Red Rooster*, *Rock Me*, and *Catfish Blues*, performed in the ‘eerie’ Bentonia school style. When discussing his Grammy nomination and the success of his latest album during our interview, Jimmy explained how he only plays blues for himself, as a form of expression and storytelling:

I’d never considered or set out to be an entertainer. I feel the same way right now. I don’t play to entertain people. If they so happen to get entertained, that’s what I’m really inspired by. I don’t play to entertain though. I don’t play to compete. I just play. That is my intent. Because no matter how hard you play, somebody’s not gonna like it. Or how bad you play, somebody like it. Because to me, the old blues makes good music. Yeah, that’s what I do. And that’s how I look at it.

At one point in our interview, Jimmy was discussing blues and how old blues music conveys stories of blues men’s life experiences. “It’s an individual thing,” he said. “You

cannot see your life through me, and I cannot see my life through you.” This reflects a fundamental aspect of blues epistemology, as I understood Jimmy to be saying that without sharing the same lived experiences, it is not possible to fully grasp how someone has lived, what that person has experienced, or the individual or collective significance of those lived experiences.

Jimmy began running the Blue Front Café in 1970. The Blue Front Café is now considered to be the oldest extant juke joint and is included on the Mississippi Blues Trail. Jimmy talked about the history of the café and what the Blue Front Café is like today on a Friday and Saturday night without a global pandemic. The counter in the café is stocked with jars of pickles, pickled eggs, pickled items I could not identify, and pickled pig’s feet. He explained to me the history of pickled pig’s feet, and why pickled foods were an important part of blues and juke joint culture,

There’s a plan behind that. Back in the day the pickled pig’s feet, or anything pickled would kind of dilute alcohol if someone had had too much moonshine. Not so much the pig’s feet itself, meat wise. It’s the way they process it in the vinegar that would kind of help dilute that. That’s why, by tradition, almost all juke joints sold pickled pig’s feet. So, if someone got a little too much alcohol in their system, that pickled pig’s feet would suck it out. Once that vinegar got inside of them, it wouldn’t let them have a real bad hangover the next day. If that’s the truth, I don’t know. But I know all juke joints sold them, especially juke joints that sold alcohol. If someone sat and drank four or five beers back in the day along with moonshine, I can imagine they got annihilated. And they say the pig’s feet take care of that.

The nights inside the juke joints in the Delta shaped African American culture and the blues tradition. Juke joints allowed African Americans to escape the racism and exploitative work they endured day to day, and created a place to come together, drink whiskey and dance to blues. Monica White describes the need for ‘free spaces’, where oppressed communities can unite freely to share traditions and ideas (White, 2018, pg. 9).

Jimmy described the culture and community of the Blue Front Café. He talked about the connection people feel to each other when they spend time together at his café. I told him about the night of my arrival. I had only been at the café for two minutes before a local named Bobby left the dance floor and invited me to dance with him. I let Jimmy know that I felt welcomed and a part of the Blue Front community.

The thing that I have experienced here at the Blue Front, and it's always been that. Once you come and visit at the Blue Front, it becomes a brotherhood. Somebody local that comes here, some of them are relatives to each other, some of them are not. But they love each other from the Blue Front perspective. They become a brotherhood for each other. And guess what? You start visiting the Blue Front, they don't see no skin color. If you noticed something when you were here at the celebration, everybody loves everybody. Not saying they don't love each other afterwards. But the Blue Front, I don't know what it is, it touches people, it binds people. It's always been that way. Again, like I said, the Blue Front becomes a brotherhood. I can't give you a reason why, I don't know, it makes good music. Yeah, that's what I do. And that's how I look at it.

Community building is included within the trunk of the blues epistemology tree as a form of resistance. Jimmy discussed the Blue Front Café and how it has always provided a sense of community and togetherness, especially when his parents ran the café. The Mississippi Blues Trail Marker outside the Blue Front Café describes how during segregation, the Holmes family operated the café and served their community under a tangled set of local rules to the Jim Crow laws:

The Blue Front was subject to a 10 p.m. town curfew, but at the height of cotton gathering and ginning season, the café might stay open 24 hours a day to serve shifts of workers around the clock. The Blue Front could not serve Coca-Cola, nor could black customers purchase it or other items reserved for whites anywhere in Bentonia; African Americans were allowed only brands such as Nehi and Double Cola. Still, white customers regularly bought bootleg corn liquor at the back door of the café. After integration, the Blue Front boasted its own Coca-Cola sign.

In Chapter three, I discuss the small, everyday acts of resistance or protest enacted by individuals or small groups against oppressive systems, and how these small acts can make a significant difference. The Blue Front Café defying Jim Crow laws to serve the cotton farm workers by staying open twenty-four hours a day could be considered a small act of resistance and posting a Coca-Cola sign could be seen as an act of protest.

III. Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Commenting on blues epistemology, Brian Foster explains that the blues to African Americans in Clarksdale is about knowing; it is their identity and lived experience. He describes blues as a map, and as a method. Blues epistemology is a way they “claimed who they were, explained what they had been through in their lives, and hoped for what would come of it all” (Foster 2020, pg. 9). The stories these three musicians told are their personal lived experiences that have shaped their knowledge and identity. Each musician discussed having a positive outlook on life, despite enduring ‘hard times.’ This aligns with Foster’s discussion of being hopeful, which is included within the trunk of the blues epistemology tree. The history and stories these musicians shared can be seen as examples of builders of blues epistemology.

In James’s story, his upbringing of being raised by his grandparents, and experiencing the trauma of witnessing his grandfather’s death is an example of what Lomax describes as a common way for African American children to grow up in the Delta. James’ experience with the crooked manager and the exploitative contract reflects the history of cultural extraction and the shared experiences of Black musicians being

culture being stolen throughout blues history. Despite claiming to always having hellhounds on his trail, James expressed positivity and the need to “be strong...[and] pull through” the hard times. This positivity and strength during times of despair are included within the trunk of the blues epistemology tree.

Big T also expressed this tradition of strength and positivity during hard times, after spending six years in Parchman and leaving with a new outlook on life and hope for a positive future. A desire to create a life of freedom are within the roots of the blues epistemology tree. Hope and positivity grow from this desire within the trunk of the tree. Big T has lived the life of a ‘real blues man’. He was learned and observed what it means to be blues man while playing with the Jelly Roll Kings. Big T is continuing the blues legacy he was passed, and the tradition he learned. He continues to create culture through the traditions and legacy he shares, which is included within the branches of the blues epistemology tree.

The knowledge, thoughts, and stories Jimmy shared with me seemed to be connected to a time in the south more distant than the other musicians. He talked about children respecting adults, midwives, juke joints, and “old” blues songs telling the stories of the bluesmen. These are the stories and traditions that have shaped Jimmy’s identity and the knowledge he holds. Aside from continuing Bentonia style blues, Jimmy continues to run the Blue Front Café, a place where culture is created, traditions are shared, and community building takes place. Community is included within the trunk of the blues epistemology tree as a form of resistance against oppressive systems (Foster, 2020).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed blues epistemology and the tree analogy devised by Woods and explained by Foster. I revisited portions of Chapter One to use blues epistemology as a lens to view the revitalization of downtown Clarksdale, the structure of the blues-based cultural economy, and the disparities in the ways the actors were impacted during the pandemic. I then shared the stories of three different African American musicians who were born into the blues and whose stories, lived experiences, and family histories can be understood through blues epistemology. And finally, I used the blues epistemology tree to understand the knowledge shared and actions of these musicians.

The musicians born into the blues, including Super Chikan, Big T, and Jimmy “Duck”, can be considered builders of blues epistemology by continuing their legacy, through their collective knowledge, and through sharing the traditions and culture developed by African Americans that they have deep connections to. Witnessing and feeling the strong connection shared between the musicians outside of hambone that night, hearing them share stories and bring each other to laughter is part of that ‘magic’ that is often discussed. This strong sense of community can be felt throughout the city of Clarksdale and throughout the Delta.

5. COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA



Figure 14 - Jimmy "Duck" giving a speech at his Grammy party outside of the Blue Front Cafe

There is a palpable and strong sense of community in the Mississippi Delta. I witnessed numerous examples of the close-knit community that my participants described to me in interviews and conversations. At the Blue Front Café, where people were dancing, drinking beer, and laughing together, I recalled what Jimmy said about that spot: “Once you come and visit at the Blue Front, it becomes a brotherhood.” In various clubs, I witnessed musicians supporting one another by encouraging audience members to tip the performer as they walk the tip bucket around from person to person shouting, “tip the band!” I saw excited and warm welcomes and embraces between locals at blues clubs and restaurants, where they would ask about each other’s families and about any news to be shared. I saw the waitress at Our Grandma’s House of Pancakes stop everything she was doing, even though she was the only person working, to hold hands with a family as they prayed over their pancakes, grits, and eggs. I not only witnessed this strong community

that has developed and evolved for generations, but I was also welcomed into it with open arms by nearly every person I encountered.

In this chapter, I explore practices of community building in the Mississippi Delta, practices that I argue enact Monica White's conception of collective agency and community resilience (CACR). Such practices can be seen as a form of resistance against the impacts of the pandemic alongside other forms of marginalization, and as avenues through which residents of the Delta work together to manifest and advance their visions of the place they call home. I begin with a brief explanation of my working definition of 'community', which links the concepts of *blues epistemology* and CACR. I then explore how the community in Clarksdale enacted collective agency and demonstrated community resiliency by creating an alternative economic system when the musicians lost their income due to the pandemic. And finally, I explore ways that community members have also enacted collective agency in the form of what Monica White describes as 'small acts of resistance' in the actions of some community members.

I. Community Building and CACR

Building a strong community is included within the trunk of the blues epistemology tree, as I discussed in the previous chapter. The need for a strong community grows from the roots of the blues epistemology tree, which is the desire of oppressed Black communities to be seen as human and deserving of the opportunity to establish lives for themselves. Since slavery, building a strong community has been an essential part of African American tradition as a form of resistance to white supremacy (White, 2018). The tradition has continued for generations as a way to strengthen African

American identities and to expand the scope of Black freedom and power. In my research, the term ‘community’ encompasses these ideas, and refers to individuals that are socially connected through practical engagements to a specified area or group (i.e. blues musicians, Clarksdale, Blue Front Café, etc.). This approach joins anti-racist understandings of Black community-building with anti-essentialist, relational notions of community as contingent upon practice and thus subject to change and the need for constant maintenance and re-creation (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

In *Freedom Farmers*, Monica White describes the concept of collective action and community resilience (CACR) as the everyday actions undertaken by oppressed groups that are considered forms of protest and resistance against racist systems. Some of the earliest acts of resistance to white supremacy, for example, include African women hiding seeds in their hair before being sent on slave ships to America (White, 2018). In the face of the Southern plantation regime, African American communities grew their own food as a small form of resistance, an act that created independence and power for Black communities. The actions and protests of larger organized social movements, while crucial to bring about change, can sometimes overshadow the smaller, less confrontational forms and strategies of resistance that are enacted by individuals and small groups. White states that these acts “are not disruptive but rather constructive, in the sense that the aggrieved actively build alternatives to existing political and economic relationships” (White, 2018, pg. 6).

Community Resilience and the Development of Live Streams

When the pandemic began, and quarantine restrictions were implemented live performances were canceled, leaving musicians without an income. The tourism commission in Clarksdale began establishing a plan, using a portion of the federal money they received to hire Colleen Buyers to help solidify and put the plan into action. Colleen is an entrepreneur with a background in nonprofit and corporate strategy. Once contracted by the tourism commission, she came from California to Clarksdale to assist in developing Live from Clarksdale, a platform that live streams blues performances on Facebook. Since Clarksdale is known to host live music seven nights a week, Live from Clarksdale has been hosting live streams seven nights a week as well. Roger Stolle, the owner of Cathead Delta Blues & Folk Art, shared some background about contracting with Colleen and organizing this platform with Bubba O'Keefe, the director of tourism in Clarksdale:

She came with the concept of doing the daily live streams. And then we're like, tourism, [...] well, if you can [...] quantify it, you can put a plan to it. What does it cost? What do you do? [...] Then we could perhaps fund it. So that's what we've done. \$3500 a month, every month since the pandemic started to keep it going. [...] But it sort of [...] allows her to be here, and then [provides] musicians a payment structure.

In addition to organizing the live streams and arranging PayPal accounts for musicians to collect virtual tips, Colleen assisted older musicians by supplying them with the equipment and instruction needed to host their own live streams from home. Live streaming equipment was also provided to local musicians that could not afford the necessary equipment. Tameal, the manager of Ground Zero Blues Club, expanded on this point:

Most of these artists are older men who don't do the social media, or their daughters run their social media, agents or whoever runs their social media. Colleen Buyers, god send, girl, this lady, she's from California, and she comes here with her crew, and she says 'Listen, where can I help?' She started actually helping the artists going virtual and going live. [...] And so, we just had to be creative.

Taking these first steps to ensure that the musicians who wanted to be included in the live streams were able to do so aligns with one of the strategies to enact CACR, the notion of 'commons as praxis'. White explains that "Commons as praxis engages and contests dominant practices of ownership, consumerism, and individualism and replaces them with shared social status and shared identities of race and class" (White, 2018, p.8). Ensuring that all musicians were on an equal level when it comes to equipment and capability of hosting live streams created a shared status and identity among the blues musicians wanting to be included in this alternative economic system being developed.



Figure 15 - Big A with Lee Williams on drums performing a live stream (Live from Clarksdale Facebook page).

Live from Clarksdale also helped facilitate a pandemic version of the tradition of gathering together at blues clubs to socialize and share thoughts, a practice of local community building and an important part of blues culture, according to Big T and Iceman. While many musicians didn't view the live streams as a replacement for live performances, they were ready to perform and share their music again, even if it would be without the energy of an in-person audience and the interaction between friends. Big T was born into the blues, grew up around blues, and has performed blues live for most of his life. He described how he and other musicians felt when they were initially unable to share their passion with others, saying, "When the pandemic hit, we all became, it almost feel like being locked down, you know? [...] I think a lot of musicians started feeling the same way I did." While he was initially hesitant about the development of the live streaming platform, and was forced to learn new skills, he soon came to recognize its potential for at least partially filling the cultural and livelihood gap created by the pandemic:

All these things became a great opportunity for a lot of musicians to come out of the woodshed. [...] When me and Colleen first got introduced, I had no idea this is what her intentions were or ideas. Me being, I guess, slow with technology. .Because we were musicians, we're not computer techs and all that kind of stuff. [...] I had to step it up a little bit when it came to technology, cuz I wanted to understand where and how to become a part of this. Colleen came [...] with the live stream from Clarksdale, I think that was one of the best things to happen during the pandemic. It allowed a lot of us to at least keep playing.

Roger Stolle, who was instrumental in establishing *Live from Clarksdale*, described a similar initial skepticism from local musicians, particularly those that he refers to as 'real deal blues guys':

You know, it's interesting because during the shutdown, April and May, we were completely shut down. We did some live streams from here, with the kind of guys that I always worked with, [...] they were a little suspicious of the whole thing. These aren't guys who have PayPal or live stream, you know what I mean? Real deal blues guys. They're willing to come and do it, try it, almost think they're doing me a favor.

Roger did not clarify who the 'real deal blues guys' were, but he spoke often during our interview of working with many of the older black musicians that are from the Delta. These players shared a common skepticism of a white business owner approaching them to share their culture and tradition on a platform they were unfamiliar with. This skepticism could be associated with the history of cultural extraction and exploitation encountered by Black blues musicians for generations, shared knowledge of which has long been incorporated within the blues epistemology.

Despite early reservations, *Live from Clarksdale* started hosting live streams on Facebook seven days a week shortly after quarantine began. Each day a different musician would be featured, giving those who were willing to participate an equal chance to perform from the *Live from Clarksdale* platform and earn virtual tips. Each musician is also paid fifty dollars for their performance by the non-profit *Live from Clarksdale*. This arrangement aligns with the economic autonomy strategy for CACR where each member within the community benefits equally within an alternate economic structure. In addition to the \$50 stipend, nearly every participant that I spoke with described how beneficial virtual tipping through the live streams became during the beginning portion of quarantine. Viewers from all over the world follow the *Live from Clarksdale* Facebook page, and many were initially willing to tip the musicians. Roger Stolle told me, "You know, if you're sort of one of the approved musicians, for lack of a better description, like

every two weeks, maybe they get a \$50 paid live stream. Otherwise, it's for tips. But we promote, and that has kept things going.” He added that Deak Harp, local musician and business owner, expressed to him how helpful the live streams were, concluding that “It makes a difference.” According to Roger, some local players may have even fared better financially from streaming gigs than their average in-person performances: “I shouldn't name names, but one of the musicians made four hundred some dollars an hour here. And that's pretty great for here. I mean, if you have a live show [in person], you're not going to (make) four hundred bucks an hour.”

While the live streams started out as an extremely productive alternative economic system for the musicians the tipping began to decrease as the months of quarantine dragged on. The musicians were still earning the fifty dollars provided by *Live from Clarksdale*, but only biweekly. Soon, the abundant tipping during the early months dwindled to nearly nothing for some performances. Lala has been performing live streams regularly on *Live from Clarksdale*, often performing solo but also as a duo with other musicians including Stan, from Hambone, and with her band, Element 88. She discussed the support of blues fans from around the world, the success of the live streams, and the decline of tipping,

It's been a godsend. It truly has. We've had our *Live from Clarksdale* people here who came and coordinated all of that for us and gave us an opportunity to get a little pay. Then on top of it, the tipping. When it first started, it was amazing. I mean, the tipping was amazing. But of course, people got tapped out. You had people at home who were starting out going, “Wow, I'm going to give them \$100 donation”, but then these people are realizing they're only going back to work half time, the spouse isn't getting their job back at all, the business is not opening up again, kids are home all the time doing zoom school. So now one of them can't work and needs to be home. Whatever effect that had on the audience, who was still super faithful, but not everybody could just tip like they want to do. Or they were tipping so many that they had to spread it out. And it was understandable that it started out to be a really lucrative thing, and

then sort of died out some. I have done several now where there were no cash tips. [...] Nobody tipped.

Live streaming expanded opportunities for musicians, and in my view enacted and extended CACR. And even despite the decline in tipping, some musicians continued to appreciate simply having the opportunity to perform, even if the audience was virtual. In Lala's words, "I would rather they watch you [...] and be there [...] if they can't tip, that's fine. I'd rather they listen anyway. [...] The blues audience has been incredibly supportive. I know I wouldn't have made it through the year without them. Even though the live stream tipping has gone down a lot, there's still this core of people."

Nevertheless, the detached experience of performing over the internet could not entirely replace the embodied experience of performing before an audience. As Big T put it:

Only part about it that wasn't so much fun, is, we didn't have an audience. Know what I mean? I think all musicians would agree with me when I say [...] it's so, so good to play to our live audience. People you can walk out maybe touch, and have a nice old time, you know? Those days was like, almost gone, man. It's like being taken away from you. It's like giving a kid a toy and then take it away.

Moreover, after the early success many of the artists experienced by performing through the *Live from Clarksdale* platform, some musicians began hosting their own live stream from their homes, through their own personal Facebook pages. Some of my participants believed some musicians abused the live stream platform, went live too often, and undermined the value of the experience. Many believed the live streams would have sustained their early success and retained the excitement they first created if the live streams remained organized and consistent, giving people something to look forward to, rather than having multiple artists performing multiple times sporadically throughout the day on their individual personal pages. One musician told me, "But now, they've been

doing it so long like that, some musicians don't give it a break. They see your face every day. They don't want to see that. You have to take a break, you got to take a break with that live virtual thing. [...] That's probably the way it work, because they seen you all the time. They like, [...] we saw this show already.” Another musician that I spoke with about the live streams shared a similar perspective, telling me:

But some people, they spoiled that. There's [some] that [...] mess it up for everybody [...] because they see [them] too much on there. They have to know how to space it out, like *Live from Clarksdale*. You'll play one week, then you'll play two weeks later. That's the way to do it. We won't be seen so much. People be dying to see you again. [...] If you go every day, every day or I'm gonna go live here, live today, and then live tomorrow, [they] ain't gonna make nothing. Hopefully you make ten dollars.

Monica White discusses the need to work as a unit to enact CACR, stating “Commons as praxis is a critical transition in the ways that members of oppressed communities think and organize [...] It emphasizes the shared ideology and the cooperative/collective behaviors that arise in response to the conditions of oppression” (White 2018, p. 9). After the live stream performances began occurring too frequently and on too many platforms, the organization and consistency that artists abided by in the beginning of the live streams ended, and the ‘collective behavior’ of the musician community was broken, upsetting some of the musicians.

In this section, I have demonstrated how the organization and subsequent development of *Live from Clarksdale* as a way to create an alternative economic system in the wake of the pandemic reflects several key elements of CACR. Creating a shared identity within the community through commons as praxis is evident in the program’s provision of equipment and knowledge to older musicians and players in need. Arranging the live streams so the musicians perform biweekly and are each paid fifty dollars for

their performance reflects the CACR strategy where each member of the community benefits equally from the alternative economic system. However, once the musicians began using their own platforms for live streams and began streaming too often, many musicians believed viewers became oversaturated with the live streams and the once-productive virtual tipping declined to nearly nothing. This can be viewed as abandoning a critical tenet of CACR, the need to share a collective behavior within the practices of community-building.

Collective Agency and Other Forms of Resistance

As a part of CACR, *collective agency* refers to a community's ability to create and enact social actions to achieve a shared goal. These actions can be small, everyday acts of resistance by individuals that are often overlooked by larger organized social movements (White, 2018). But these small acts of resistance can create a significant change. Some of my research participants provided examples of community support that occurred outside of the development of the live streams. The participants expressed how much these small acts helped them in that moment of need, and how much they appreciated the support they received.

Stan Street, the owner of Hambone Gallery, for example, told me about a man who is a part of the Clarksdale community and who was aware of the difficult situation many of the local musicians were facing after losing their income and virtual tips. This man contacted Stan to make a donation of funds to give to anyone in need. Stan explained:

It was tough for a lot of people. I'll just tell you one thing that I thought was pretty incredible. I had a guy who, and I was honored that he would choose me to give the money to, he gave me like five-

grand. He said, "Look, this is for anybody that really needs it." I still have some left. I just kind of asked people, "How you doing? What's going on?" Or somebody say, "Well, so and so's not (doing good)" I'll just (say), "Well come over." I've been giving money as needed out of that money. I mean, how cool is that? You know. (It's from) somebody that comes here, lives maybe about an hour away. He comes here, he's retired. He was an accountant, obviously has enough money to be a philanthropist like that. For some people, it's nothing. Five-grand is really nothing and for other people, it's a lot of money. [...] Nobody's coming back to me and say, "I need more money." No one really, I know that. I've had to call in sometimes and go, "Look, I know how you doing? Come on over, I'll give you something.", you know? And I'll tell them, "Tell me what bill you got, pay your bill with this?"

Stan was able to take the donation and turn it into small acts of support for the local musicians that sometimes found themselves in extremely difficult situations. These small acts were able to make a significant difference in many musicians' lives by paying bills that possibly kept their electricity on for another month or bought groceries. Stan's observation that not a single person had returned to him for extra money demonstrates that nobody was trying to get more than they needed out of Stan, which we might view as an example of collective behavior in ways that transcend individual agency.

Another form of collective action could be seen when local businesses around Clarksdale began hosting live performances outside of their business, which allowed the musicians to earn tips in person and sell their merchandise. Many businesses that began hosting performances are not directly connected to blues culture but wanted to support local musicians by giving them a platform to perform. Tameal explained to me:

I also do weekends at Hooker Grocery, and the amount of support the artists have gotten over there, it's insane. These are solo, duo acts that are over there, because it's a smaller place. They might not necessarily ever have music in front of their places. Willow Botanicals, [...] They have live music in the front of that botanical store. I call it a flower boutique, because it's beautiful. They do beautiful, beautiful arrangements. But it's not a place that you would necessarily hear live blues on a Saturday afternoon, but they've been

hiring bands to play in front of her store. Just simple stuff like that. If a band made 20 bucks, guess what, it's 20 extra bucks. [...] So, it's little things like that where they support the artists, I don't care if they shared something on Facebook, that's another support that literally takes 30 seconds if they just press the share button. I mean, it's just little things like that. This is literally keeping us going, you know, just little things.

The local people began supporting the musicians in small ways as well. According to Tameal, some musicians experienced an increase in merchandise sales at their live performances in town. She described the different ways people within the community found to support the musicians:

I think a lot of venues and a lot of locals are very accommodating and sensitive to the fact that these people, a lot of these artists pretty much lost everything. They have supported them in ways that they never cease to amaze me. They've come up with not only the live streams, but I've seen them when an artist is just in front of a venue or in front of a store playing. I've seen them get [...] their chairs out the trunk of their cars and sit down and listen to them [...] or record them [...] tip them or buy a CD or a T shirt or something. I've seen that. [...] The community, the locals really come out to support these artists. I think that's simply amazing. Because a lot of times I know the locals, they're probably sick of hearing the blues.

Tameal began gaining new blues fans following her personal Facebook page after going live to Ground Zero's 30,000 followers. She began using her personal page as a platform to promote local musicians and support the other businesses in town to ensure they were receiving support as well.

If there's anything I can do personally to help them, I don't care if you're playing over here (Ground Zero), or Hambone. I'm going to show up that night. Not only am I gonna show up, I'm going to tip you. Not only am I gonna tip you, I'm gonna go live and tell people "Hey, if you're in town or if you plan on coming to town, make sure you come to Hambone, make sure you check out Jessie Pine Stone" or whoever. Because that little bit helps. You never know who's watching you. We share the same customers. Why wouldn't we share? We have the exact same customers. [...] So, why not?

These examples reveal that different members of the Clarksdale community showed support for the musician communities in different ways, with a collective goal. Stan

dispersing the large donation in small increments to individual musicians that needed a little extra help; small local businesses allowing musicians to perform in front of their store to provide them with a chance to sell merchandise and earn some tips; the local people showing up to these performances to purchase the musician's merchandise and tip them; and Tameal using her personal Facebook platform to promote for local musicians. These small, everyday examples of support for the musicians can be viewed as small acts of resistance to the effects of the pandemic on the musicians. Monica White explained how collectively, these small acts of resistance can make a significant impact. The actions of this community can be viewed as exercising collective agency.

During my time in the Delta, there were other forms of protest and resistance that were evident within my interviews and through my observations that intersect with the blues epistemology. The shared knowledge, ideas, culture, traditions, and that's evolved from the lived experiences of African Americans for generations could be witnessed through the acts of resistance that I witnessed. The Black musicians attempting to remain 'off the radar' by not having bank accounts, filing tax returns, and only making cash transactions is a form of resistance against a government that has not been trusted by their families for generations. The Black musician who refused to interview with me unless I paid for his time was a form of protest against the history of cultural extraction by whites that his family experienced for generations. One local Black blues artist completely refused to meet with me at all. When the musician refused to interview with me, he stated that "us musicians stick together". This showed a shared agreement or collective understanding within their community, which would ensure that if they decide to share their culture, they will all benefit. Monica White defines economic autonomy as another

strategy for CACR. The establishment of economic autonomy is in response to “economic exploitation, and in opposition to a resource extraction” (White, 2018, pg. 10) and is designed to benefit all members of the community equally. These forms of protests were learned and engaged as a result of the shared lived experiences of the generations that came before them.

In this chapter, I explored practices of community building in the Mississippi Delta, using Monica White’s concept of collective agency and community resilience to understand the organization and cooperative action that occurred within the Clarksdale community to bring support to the blues musician during the pandemic. I first found that the community of Clarksdale enacted community resiliency by creating an alternative economic system during quarantine through the development of the live streams. I then looked for what White describes as ‘small acts of resistance’ in the actions of some of the community members and identified ways individuals within the community worked together to extend collective agency. With the shared goal to support the musician community during the pandemic, locals began showing support in small, everyday ways that collectively made a significant difference. Lastly, I identified other forms of protest through my interactions with some of the Black musicians that can be connected to history of exploitation and cultural extraction that their families experienced for generations and connected to blues epistemology.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I. Discussion

As a part of this research, I looked to Clyde Woods' reference to viewing blues epistemology as a tree, and Brian Foster's explanation of this analogy, to understand the way blues epistemology functioned within the blues community during the pandemic, as well as a way to view and understand the stories of the musicians that were *born into the blues*. Blues epistemology can be viewed through the blues musicians, the culture they create and their position within the structure of the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta. The Black musicians' desire to 'create a life for themselves' as musicians within the structure of the cultural economy that consists of mostly white culture sellers profiting from their heritage would be encompassed within the roots of the blues epistemology tree. The Black musician declaring to me that "us musicians stick together; we don't give nothing away for free" showed the strength within the community they have built together as Black blues musicians, which is included within the trunk of the blues epistemology tree. The legacy they share and are continuing, their passion for the music, their collective actions and behaviors including 'sticking together', drinking whiskey and sharing stories – all of these are a part of the rich blues culture that these musicians create. This culture is found within the branches of the blues epistemology tree. Brian Foster quoted Clarksdale resident Urchel Dilworth as saying, "What you say once for Mississippi, say it twice for the Delta; And if you say it twice for the Delta, say it three times for Clarksdale; and if you say it three times for Clarksdale, say it four or five times for Clarksdale's' Black residents" (Foster, 2020, pg. 32). I found this to also be true within the structure of the blues-based cultural economy when examining the degree

to which each actor felt the pandemic impacts; what was felt for the culture sellers was felt twice by the culture creators; what was felt by the culture creators, was felt “four or five times” by some of the Black musicians.

During the pandemic, there was evidence of *collective agency and community resilience* within the communities of the Delta. While Monica White identifies CACR as a tool of resistance used by African American communities for generations, there was a reflection of these tools and actions that were visible within the mixed-race communities of the Delta. Community members establishing *Live from Clarksdale* as a platform for unemployed musicians to perform and earn fifty dollars, along with virtual and in person tips, showed community resiliency which White defined as a community’s ability to overcome and resist the impacts of events such as a global pandemic. Collective agency was also visible within the actions of individual community members and the efforts they made in small ways to support the local blues musicians. White defined collective agency as the small acts of resistance or protest against systems of oppression, that are often overlooked by larger organized social movements, but can make a significant impact. The small actions of individual community members supported these musicians during the pandemic, and according to Tameal, it was the small things that got them through.

II. Conclusion

While I identify the actors within the blues cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta, it should be acknowledged that these characterizations are for the purpose of this thesis only and some of these actors play multiple roles within this cultural economy structure, and some businesses that could be considered creators of culture are not

mentioned. This study explains how pre-existing inequities within the Mississippi Delta led to Black musicians experiencing the worst impacts within the blues-based cultural economy, and can assist policy makers in understanding ways African Americans in the U.S. are disproportionately impacted by events such as a global pandemic as a result of the underlying racist structures this country has been founded on.

Within the blues-based cultural economy of the Mississippi Delta, both culture sellers and culture creators experienced impacts of the global pandemic. But it was the culture creators that experienced the most severe financial impacts, with Black musicians facing the most extreme impacts. According to Foster, the inequalities experienced by African Americans are felt to an even higher degree by the Black residents in Clarksdale. This remained true within the structure of the blues-based cultural economy where these inequalities resurfaced within the impacts felt by the actors within this structure. The disparities that developed were a created by at least two factors that I identified: 1) a result of the socioeconomic position of the Black musicians prior to the pandemic, as a result of the Delta's history of white supremacy creating a region with a large Black population living below the poverty line, and 2) as a result of some of the Black musicians having a shared mistrust in the government, as a part of their blues epistemology, after generations of their families being exploited.

Monica White's concept of *collective agency and community resilience* as a tool to combat oppressive systems could be viewed through the actions of the communities within the Mississippi Delta as a tool against the impacts of the pandemic. The love and support that the communities in the Delta have for the blues musicians was evident through their small actions, showing up to their live performance, tipping, buying a CD

or T-shirt, buying the performer a drink. The examples of collective agency I provided showed how these small individual actions shared a common goal, and collectively made a significant impact on the musicians. The strength and closeness of the communities can be seen and felt through the people of the Delta and the warm Southern spirit they project, the “magic” mentioned throughout my research.

APPENDIX SECTION

Semi-Structured Interview Questions -

Musicians:

1. Where were you born and raised?
2. What was life like growing up?
3. When did you start playing blues music?
 - a. How did you learn?
 - b. What musicians did you listen to growing up?
4. Can you describe what life was like before the pandemic?
 - a. Did you perform live often?
 - b. Were live performances your main source of income?
 - c. Can you describe the inspiration behind your songs?
5. What were your initial reactions when hearing about the spread of the pandemic?
6. How did life change when quarantine restrictions went into place?
 - a. How has your livelihood been impacted?
7. How are blues artists adjusting to the “new normal”?
8. Have you started performing again?
9. Have people in this area worked together to help each other out during this difficult time?
 - a. Are the live streams helping musicians with lost income?
10. How has the pandemic changed or shaped the blues community?
 - a. Have you or anyone you know written any songs about the pandemic?
 - b. Have you participated in the live streams that have been occurring throughout the pandemic?

Business Owners:

1. Where are you from?
 - a. How did you end up in Clarksdale? (for outsiders)
2. How long have you owned this business?
3. Does your business heavily rely on blues culture?
4. Can you describe what business was like before the pandemic?
5. Can you explain what happened when quarantine restrictions began?
 - a. How was your family impacted?
 - b. How was your business impacted?
6. How has business now compared to when the restrictions began?
7. Have you noticed people and businesses in this area coming together to help support one another? How?
8. Have you started to see tourists returning yet?

Tourists:

1. Where are you from?
2. Is this your first time in the Delta?
 - a. If yes, what made you decide to travel here now?
 - b. If no, describe what your past trips consisted of.
3. What are some things you are planning to do while you are here, or things you have already done?
4. How has COVID-19 impacted your trip?
5. Have you attended any live performances?
 - a. How many people were there?
 - b. Who performed?
 - c. Were people practicing safety measures?

City Officials:

1. How has this city been impacted by the pandemic?
 - a. Who has endured the most severe impacts?
2. How has the decline of tourism impacted this city?
3. How has the city supported those that have been impacted the most?
4. Who arranges the live streams?
 - a. Are the live streams helping the musicians with lost income?
 - b. How are the businesses benefiting by hosting the live streams?
5. Are tourists starting to return to the Delta?

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