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Rural Black Masculinity and the Blues in Not without Laughter

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CHAPTER 8

Rural Black Masculinity and the Blues in Not without Laughter

Andy Oler

In the 1930 novel *Not without Laughter*, Langston Hughes represents a wide range of Black experience in the Midwest – the "picturesque" alongside the horrific, the old-fashioned, as well as the modern.[1] Hughes uses the novel's setting, the small town of Stanton, Kansas, to determine some of the limits placed on protagonist Sandy Rodgers and his family, and their attempts to work through them. According to most reviewers and scholars, however, Sandy's father Jimboy mostly avoids such challenges. Novelist Wallace Thurman focuses on Jimboy's characterization as a wandering bluesman, writing in the *New York Evening Post* that he "is subject to the 'travelin' blues,' and walks off from Annjee and her child whenever the spirit so moves him."[2] Poet Sterling Brown more affectionately refers to him as "a likeable scapegrace, ... guitar plunker and rambling man."[3] Attention to Jimboy's rambling and the attendant feeling that he is slightly drawn persist into scholarship on the novel. Steven Tracy claims that Jimboy "is more of a spirit or a repository of songs than a fully developed character."[4] Kimberly J. Banks discounts Jimboy's influence on Sandy, specifically, arguing that "the novel is not about fathers teaching sons how to be men."[5] Building on Banks's analysis of the public influences on Sandy, this chapter argues that, while Jimboy may not often actively instruct Sandy on how to be a man, he models a Black blues masculinity that draws together multiple aspects of early twentieth-century American culture. By reading the way Jimboy operates within the novel's Midwestern cultural and historical context, this chapter aims to consider him as a consequential figure within both the novel and Sandy's life. Jimboy's demeanor, musicality, and mobility suggest how Sandy might learn to cope with the demands of life in the modern Midwest – though perhaps not as the conventionally respectable figure expected by his female relatives.

This is no small feat because Hughes represents Stanton as a stand-in for his childhood home of Lawrence, Kansas. In his 1940 memoir, *The Big*

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Sea, Hughes wrote that he modeled many of the characters and situations in *Not without Laughter* on people he had known. He also acknowledges that this was not an altogether nostalgic exercise, for he "was unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome, living with my grandmother" (*CW* XIII, 39).[6] Lawrence was founded in 1854 by abolitionists, and longtime residents describe "the steady demeaning of Lawrence into a segregated town," which was its status during Hughes's childhood in the first decade of the twentieth century (*LLH* I, 9). During this time, reports biographer Arnold Rampersad, Hughes's grandmother Mary Langston, along with a group of Black professionals, lived among the white population, and poorer Black residents lived separately in other parts of town, while "the white *Lawrence Daily Journal* made small distinction between criminals and the respectable" (*LLH* I, 9). The newspaper's broad demeaning of the city's Black population is consistent with Brent Campney's description of the foment of racist violence throughout the Midwest. In Kansas specifically, by oversimplifying and romanticizing the state's history of abolitionism, "white Kansans had deployed the Free State narrative to obscure, dismiss, and justify racist violence."[7] In *Not without Laughter*, these historical and biographical details merge to form the picture of a largely segregated Midwestern town in which characters face both the daily indignities and overt threats of white supremacist violence.

Not without Laughter follows Sandy throughout his youth in Stanton, where he lives with his grandmother Hager, his parents Annjee and Jimboy, and his teenage aunt Harriett. After Hager dies, Sandy moves in with his aunt Tempy, and the novel is structured as an episodic version of boyhood development focusing on representative experiences at these homes and places around Stanton like the schoolhouse, pool hall, barbershop, and a local park. Near the end of the book, Sandy moves to Chicago to live with Annjee, and soon after he arrives, Harriett, now a successful blues singer, gives him money so he can return to school. In a review originally published in *Opportunity*, Sterling Brown writes, "We have in this book, laconically, tenderly told, the story of a young boy's growing up. Let no one be deceived by the effortless ease of the telling, by the unpretentious simplicity of *Not Without Laughter*. Its simplicity is the simplicity of great art" (158).[8]

Jimboy first appears in *Not without Laughter* in absentia, when his wife Annjee laments that he has not sent a letter in the three weeks since he most recently left home. Soon after, when a neighbor says that Sandy takes after his father, Sandy's grandmother Hager grumbles, "I'd rather he'd be ugly 'fore he turns out anything like that good-for-nothing Jimboy what

comes here an' stays a month, goes away an' stays six, an' don't hit a tap o' work 'cept when he feels like it" (*CW* IV, 29). Her dislike is well known throughout Stanton: the neighbors have all heard her say he's "lazy" (95), he's always making excuses, and that his backyard blues playing is shameful. Hager's complaint that "Jimboy ain't no good" (33) most directly comments on how little money he contributes to the household, but it also demonstrates concern about his influence on Sandy – that Jimboy's good-timing will surpass her own lessons of hard work and religious discipline.

Hughes shows, however, that Jimboy is not entirely "good-for-nothing" (29), even according to Hager's standards. When Sandy is caught lying about stealing a nickel from the church collection plate, he expects Jimboy to support him, but "his father's usually amiable face was stern this time" (93). Jimboy then scolds Sandy for lying: "I'm not much, maybe. Don't mean to say I am. I won't work a lot, but what I do I do honest" (94). Even while Jimboy admits his work ethic is not equal to Hager's demands, he supports her in teaching Sandy to behave ethically. Even so, he contradicts her teachings in other ways, such as his admission that he's "not much, maybe," a comment that seems to preclude greatness achieved, as Hager would prefer, through self-discipline and hard work. Jimboy's potential lies in his self-definition according to a different kind of manhood: an honest everyman with neither great achievement nor great fault.

Hager's vision for Sandy rests on respectability, combining Christian teachings with the dream that he will become a great race man:

> "Colored boys, when they gets around twelve an' thirteen, they gets so bad, Sandy," she would say. "I wants you to stay nice an' make something out o' yo'self. If Hager lives, she ain't gonna see you go down. She's gonna make a fine man out o' you fo' de glory o' God an de black race. You gwine to 'mount to something in this world. You hear me?"
>
> Sandy did hear her, and he knew what she meant. She meant a man like Booker T. Washington, or Frederick Douglass, or like Paul Laurence Dunbar, who did poetry-writing. Or maybe Jack Johnson. But Hager said Jack Johnson was the devil's kind of greatness, not God's. (139)

According to Hager, it's centrally important that Sandy "stay nice" so that he can become a "fine man." In this formulation, boys' changing nature causes them to lose the potential for greatness. Sandy understands Hager to approve of Booker T. Washington, Douglass, and Dunbar, but not boxer Jack Johnson, as Hager stakes an indirect claim on Sandy's development through these approvals and disapprovals. She knows, however, that Sandy must do the work, so she implores him to "make something out

o' yo'self" (139). Hager's acknowledgment of Sandy's responsibility reflects discourses of self-made masculinity, especially when paired with Washington's name. In some ways, then, the passage rests on the performance of a masculinity that prizes individual success. Still, Hager's teachings, along with the role models she promotes, are tied up with communal models of masculine achievement, which Hazel Carby discusses in the context of intellectual reproduction and mentorship among race men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[9] Read through this history, Hager acts as a conduit to Sandy's development as a respectable intellectual, in opposition to Jack Johnson's flamboyant physicality as well as Jimboy's intermittent labor and scandalous guitar playing.

For Hager – as well as most of the novel's reviewers – Jimboy and the other men in Stanton are the wrong kind of men. Sandy's aunts and grandmother encourage self-discipline as an antidote, though Harriett and Tempy favor education over a combination of education and manual labor, which is Hager's preference. The novel therefore recapitulates the debate between Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, seen when Harriett gives Sandy school money and in Tempy's scorn: "Du Bois wants our rights. He wants us to be real men and women. He believes in social equality. But Washington – huh!" (170–71). Like Hager, Tempy and Harriett see Sandy as a potential link to the great race men of the period, and he functions as a figure of possibility who can surmount the perceived failures of his father. Their ideological argument splits along generational lines, with two separate visions of how to overcome past and present racial inequalities to secure Sandy's future. Hughes's intervention is that he does not force Sandy to choose. Instead, Sandy thinks, "I guess they are both great men" (171), which suggests that Sandy's masculine identity development hinges on balancing competing viewpoints – or at least on accepting their coexistence.[10]

Jimboy functions the same way. For instance, as he tells Sandy, he doesn't work a lot, but he does work "honest" (94). And his guitar playing may be alarming, but even Hager finds some of it "right decent" (51). Sterling Brown's description of Jimboy captures him in a combination of stereotypes: "a likeable scapegrace . . . guitar plunker and rambling man" (158). Each of these – the charm, the skill, the wandering – matches the ways we commonly think of the bluesman. Jimboy first arrives in the flesh at the beginning of the "Guitar" chapter, in a scene of back-porch guitar playing: "Jimboy was home. All the neighborhood could hear his rich low baritone voice giving birth to the blues. On Saturday night he and Annjee went to bed early. On Sunday night Aunt Hager said: 'Put that guitar right

up, less'n it's hymns you plans on playin'. An' I don't want too much o' them, 'larmin' de white neighbors'" (47). Each of Brown's three types is evident in this passage: Jimboy performs for and plays with the family, though Hager is wary of his guitar playing (partly because of the Sunday evening sensitivities of her white neighbors), and Hughes highlights his rambling by noting that Jimboy is at home this weekend.

Because this scene takes place in Hager's backyard in a mixed neighborhood, the family is subject to the religious, racial, and communal pressures of small-town Stanton. By calling attention to this context and Jimboy's performance of a blues masculinity within it, Hughes destabilizes the sense that Jimboy functions as a simple stereotype. Since Hager remarks that Black music – even hymns – could be problematic for their white neighbors, Jimboy playing the blues is especially notable. In this chapter, he sings some fairly bawdy verses – including "yo' windin' an' yo' grindin' / Don't have no effect on me" (48) – a lack of decorum resonating with scholarly arguments that Black male agency disrupts the social order of Jim Crow America. According to Marlon B. Ross, Black masculinities claim both relation to and distance from the patterns and expectations of white men.[11] One instance of this is Jimboy's thwarted attempt to join the all-white bricklayers union. Their rejection of him is consistent with early twentieth-century Kansas history, in which "white businessmen and workers conspired to push blacks to the margins of the economy" (Campney, *This Is Not Dixie*, 157). Throughout the novel, Hughes presents the competing demands for Black behavior under Jim Crow. In this case, Jimboy wants to work, and is expected to contribute, but he cannot. In the backyard, Hager would prefer he play hymns, but not too many of them, suggesting there is the threat of violence underlying the white neighbors' alarm.

Jimboy, then, while appearing to be a layabout "guitar plunker," disrupts the order of Jim Crow by playing the blues, which allows him to create a sense of manliness in opposition to the disciplinary demands placed on him by Hager and others. Houston A. Baker articulates such performances of Black masculinity through the trope of "the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song . . . Polymorphous and multidirectional, scene of arrivals and departures, place betwixt and between (ever *entre les deux*), the juncture is the way-station of the blues."[12] In *Not without Laughter*, one of those junctures is Hager's backyard, which Hughes composes as a place where Black Kansans can share their experiences of oppression and occasionally transmute them into

moments of communal care and joy. Still, John P. Shields writes against seeing the novel as a "celebration of the blues form as an emancipation from the dreary misery in the lives of Hughes's characters."[13] Even in this nominally private space, bolstered by the energies of Jimboy's singing and Harriett's dancing, Stanton's white population looms over the scene, made present through Hager's attempted regulation of their performance.

Perhaps it is best to read this scene as not an emancipation but rather a reprieve. Mike Chasar highlights the moment's ephemerality through an emphasis on sound: "Homecoming for Jimboy means more than returning to a house; it also means reentering and reclaiming a space in a local soundscape."[14] The racism marginalizing Jimboy in the workplace limits his ability to participate equally in the soundscape of public life. Even tucked away in Hager's backyard, he does not have the freedom to play his guitar whenever he wants – Sunday is for hymns only, and quiet ones at that. On Monday, though, he can play the blues and teach his sister-in-law dances from across the country. He takes requests and while Hager scolds him, Harriett, and the children, she also "settled back against the pump to listen to some more" (49). At least on some days, and at least to some extent, Jimboy has the ability to put his own mark on what Chasar describes as the "local soundscape."

As Jimboy settles into a more subdued song, however, the soundscape he creates is not particularly local. Hughes writes this small Midwestern town as a blank space that can be filled in by Southern mythologizing:

> In the starry blackness the singing notes of the guitar became a plaintive hum, like a breeze in a grove of palmettos; became a low moan, like the wind in the forest of live-oaks strung with long strands of hanging moss. The voice of Annjee's golden, handsome husband on the door-step rang high and far away, lonely-like, crying with only the guitar, not his wife, to understand; crying grotesquely, crying absurdly in the summer night. (50)

Hughes's patron Charlotte Mason praised "Guitar" as "distinctly one of the most poetic chapters" in the manuscript (quoted in Shields, "Never Cross," 609). Certainly, passages like this one contribute to that valuation. In addition to the guitar's moaning and Jimboy's grotesque crying, references to palmetto groves, live oaks, and Spanish moss – which do not grow in Kansas – give this passage a distinctly lyrical, Southern feel. Notably, Hughes began writing *Not without Laughter* soon after touring the South with Zora Neale Hurston, a trip in which they visited the plantation that inspired parts of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (*LLH* I, 152–53). Hughes facilitates this Southern turn by beginning the paragraph with the night's "starry blackness." Of course, because Jimboy is a migrant laborer who has

traveled throughout the South, even this moment of Southern lyricism makes sense in the context of both the character and this Midwestern town (not to mention, according to Hiram Nall, in the history of the blues).[15] Jimboy not only reclaims space in the local soundscape but also creates it in his own image – which includes those wanderings.

Jimboy is, after all, "the prototypical 'downhome' blues singer," and Barbara Burkhardt shows how he incorporates aspects of multiple Southern blues traditions.[16] Linguistic play is one of those, and the narrator notes that "some of the blues lines had, not only double, but triple meanings" (63). H. Nigel Thomas argues that such wordplay allows Hughes to present Jimboy's essential naïveté. In this sense, those double and triple meanings mean that Jimboy "employs blues metaphors to mediate the abuse stemming from racism and thus saves himself any conscious analysis of their effects."[17] Thomas likens Jimboy's wordplay to Hager's religiosity, suggesting that each represents a primitive fatalism that may have satisfied white audiences' preference for simplistic portrayals of Black characters. Such writerly characterization joins with the book's easily accessible episodic narrative to validate much of this criticism. But because Jimboy's every action in this scene challenges what is acceptable for Black men in small-town Kansas, it becomes clear that he is not simply a "picturesque" stereotype. Read this way, Jimboy shows how Hughes unsettles those simplistic expectations, offering an uneasy balance of stereotypical behaviors that don't, in the end, add up to a stereotypical character. Elsewhere, I have argued that the complex of influences on Sandy represents a kind of accumulative modernity that structures *Not without Laughter*.[18] Those accumulations are also visible in Jimboy, both in his own performance of multiple stereotypical traits and in the way he models for Sandy an ability to navigate modern life as a Black man in Kansas.

Jimboy confronts Hager's and Stanton's proprieties simply by playing songs in the backyard and acting as a "likeable scapegrace." Coupled with this general scene setting, certain aspects of this scene unveil the modernity of his blues masculinity. Indeed, while he may be a "downhome" blues singer performing folk songs and evoking stereotypical Southern scenes, his wandering has also exposed him to a wide range of blues subgenres, encouraged his creativity within the structure of the songs, earned him a compliment from famous bluesman W. C. Handy, and allowed him to learn dances from all across the country (and teach them to Harriett) – an accumulation that challenges any attempt to read this backyard as a provincial space. In this scene, Jimboy infuses small-town Kansas with

the sounds and feelings of the South, a hybridized geography that enthralls Sandy.

When Jimboy begins to swap "man-verses and woman-verses" (51), the scene's modernity emerges through gender play. Here, he performs a different kind of Black masculinity than was often expressed in literature – rather than being, as Marlon Ross sees Sandy, "stranded between feminine and masculine" (330), Jimboy alternates between them. The song then closes with these lines:

> O, I done made ma bed,
> Says I done made ma bed,
> Down in some lonesome grave
> I done made ma bed.
>
> (51)

When Jimboy finishes this song, Hager says, "That's right decent," then again requests some hymns (51); she never comments on his performing both the men's and women's parts. This lyric's multiple meanings are central to understanding Jimboy's character. The expression "I made my bed" appeals to Hager's sense of personal responsibility, and the line also plays off the earlier, more bawdy lyrics to deliver a hint of sexuality. Because he is a "guitar plunker and rambling man," he's also able to be that "likable scapegrace" – a modern man, winking through the double meanings and showing how to live one's own life in this place that wants to regulate Black men's every move.

The song's final couplet, however, complicates what might have been an oversimplified, emancipatory reading. Because Jimboy evokes the grave, the lyric ends solemnly, even fatalistically. Fred Moten's analysis of Amiri Baraka's "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets" from *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* suggests how to read this lyric, as well as the scene at large and Jimboy's place in the novel:

> Perhaps it is this: that the tragic-erotic end that the blues seems always to foreshadow is supplemented not only by the transformative effect of improvisation but the ghostly emanation of those last records, the sound that extends beyond the end of which it tells. Perhaps it is this: that the sonic image of a death foretold contains not only the trace of an early and generative beauty but the promise of a new beauty – song coming out of, song for . . .[19]

Moten's closing possibility provides an opening for how to read Jimboy's effect on Sandy. While he may not often actively teach Sandy, Jimboy's backyard performance extends "the promise of a new beauty," as the song's

emanations offer Sandy a way of seeing and experiencing the world that exceeds the limitations of his place and of the expectations placed on him by other family members. All of this starts with Jimboy's performance of the blues. The multiple meanings in Jimboy's repeated line, "I made ma bed," substantiate the tragedy and eroticism that Moten sees in the blues, and the three versions of the line show a kind of "ghostly emanation" in miniature. In the first two lines, "O" indicates that Jimboy is telling a story, and "Say" emphasizes the repetition, while in the closing couplet "I made ma bed" is modified by a meaning-shifting prepositional phrase.[20] Jimboy's lyrics not only evolve within the song but also implicitly call out to the audience, implicating Sandy, Hager, Annjee, Harriett, and the next-door neighbor girl, Willie-Mae. In this way (perhaps it is this), Hughes shows the larger emanations of the blues, which extend the sounds of this scene beyond the death foretold in the song, beyond the soundscape created in this backyard.

Jimboy's death foretold is beautiful in its own right – lyrical, cosmopolitan, modern – and reading it this way suggests how Sandy may develop a similar beauty. If Sandy is a figure of possibility in *Not without Laughter*, one who incorporates the many dynamic influences of his upbringing in Stanton, then Jimboy's example is an important one. Song coming out of Jimboy, song for Sandy. As much as any character in the novel, Jimboy represents the multiplicities of American modernity – his improvisation, his use of old and new forms, his willingness to push the boundaries of acceptability. The valences of his character show how he copes with the injustices and contradictions of Black life in Stanton, Chicago, and beyond. So, after all, perhaps it is this: Jimboy is a key role model for Sandy. Sandy gets his instruction from his grandmother, his aunts, and from other men in the community, but Jimboy's blues masculinity offers him a way of being – embracing the double entendres, the gender fluidity, the conflicting expectations – that allows Sandy to make sense of himself and his place in twentieth-century American life.

Notes

1 In reviews, "picturesque" was a common description of *Not without Laughter*; see V. F. Calverton, "This Negro" (1930), in *Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Tish Dace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 147–48; Constance M. Green, "A Negro Boy's Childhood" (1930), in ibid., 144; and "*Not without Laughter* and Other Recent Fiction" (1930), in ibid., 146–47.

2 Wallace Thurman, "Books in Review" (1930), in Dace, ed., *Langston Hughes*, 143.
3 Sterling Brown, "Our Book Shelf" (1930), in Dace, ed., *Langston Hughes*, 158. Reviewer comments on Jimboy range from Aubrey Bowser's harsh assessment that "Jimboy loves his guitar more than his wife" (136) to Walt Carmon's more neutral *New Masses* review that focuses on his labor: "a transient worker, restless, always moving" (164). See Aubrey Bowser, "Invincible Laughter" (1930), 135–36, and Walt Carmon, "Away from Harlem" (1930), 163–65, both in Dace, ed., *Langston Hughes*.
4 Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 121.
5 Kimberly J. Banks, "Gender Performance and Sexual Subjectivity in *Not without Laughter*: Sandy's Emergent Masculinity," in *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 86.
6 Hughes's loneliness may have been exacerbated by the religious expectations placed on him. In *The Big Sea*, he describes a failed salvation at his Auntie Reed's church in Lawrence that left him feeling ashamed, an experience that, Wallace Best argues, "became the crucial backdrop for much of his writing" (Wallace D. Best, *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* [New York: New York University Press, 2017], 3).
7 Brent M. S. Campney, *This Is Not Dixie: Racist Violence in Kansas, 1861–1927* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 165.
8 Among the thirty-nine reviews of *Not without Laughter* in Dace, ed., *Langston Hughes*, most are favorable, though some include complaints like Elizabeth Lay Green's that the book is "merely episodic" (145) and Alain Locke's that it displays some "immaturity of narrative technique" (170); see Elizabeth Lay Green, "The Literary Lantern" (1930), 45, and Alain Locke, "This Year of Grace" (1931), 170, both in Dace, ed., *Langston Hughes*.
9 Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 25.
10 In this vein, I have elsewhere linked Sandy's masculinity to Hughes's representations of jazz performance in the rural Midwest, arguing that modern life for Black Midwesterners "depends upon the accumulation of people, places, and stories" (Andy Oler, *Old-Fashioned Modernism: Rural Masculinity and Midwestern Literature* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019], 135).
11 Marlon Bryan Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 2.
12 Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 7.
13 John P. Shields, "'Never Cross the Divide': Reconstructing Langston Hughes's *Not without Laughter*," *African American Review* 28.4 (1994): 609.
14 Mike Chasar, "The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes," *American Literature* 80.1 (2008): 75.

15 Hiram Nall, "From Down South to Up South: An Examination of Geography in the Blues," *Midwest Quarterly* 42.3 (2001): 306–19.
16 Barbara Burkhardt, "The Blues in Langston Hughes's *Not without Laughter*," *MidAmerica* 23 (1996): 117.
17 H. Nigel Thomas, "Patronage and the Writing of Langston Hughes's *Not without Laughter*: A Paradoxical Case," *CLA Journal* 42.1 (1998): 58.
18 See "'A Dreamy-Eyed Boy': Chicago, Race Records, and Regional Black Masculinity," in Oler, *Old-Fashioned Modernism*, 134–66.
19 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 119–20.
20 Patrick Maley argues that such repetition-with-a-difference mimics the call-and-response structures of the blues, which gestures to audience participation even within a solo performance; see Maley, *After August: Blues, August Wilson, and American Drama* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).