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Race and Blues Tourism: A

Comparison of Two Lodging Alternatives in Clarksdale, Mississippi by Stephen A. King

I am the blues. I lived the blues. Mother [Z. L. Hill] say you live the blues, walk the blues, talk the blues. Unless you know the blues it's hard to understand the blues. A lot people had to read about the blues. I lived it. --Frank "Rat" Ratliff, owner of the Riverside Hotel

Within the last decade, blues tourism in the Mississippi Delta has become a necessary response to a deteriorating economic situation in one of the country's most impoverished regions. Recurring double-digit unemployment, high rates of poverty, and a declining tax base have for all practical purposes cemented the Delta's reputation as the "poorest region in the poorest state in the nation" (Doolittle and Davis 1996, 10). However, the Delta is certainly not unique in its desire to exploit tourism as a new revenue producer. Indeed, as geographers Stephen Frenkel and Judy Walton (2000, 559) have observed: "The post-World War II era has witnessed the decline of a number of rural, resource-based economies and an increasing turn to tourism as an alternative economy."

Historically, blues tourism in the Delta has been characterized by decentralized efforts as well as fragmentation with each Delta community competing for tourists, money, and prestige. Yet there is evidence that the development and promotion of blues tourism are fast becoming a more organized and centralized phenomenon. For example, Mississippi's governor, Haley Barbour, as reported in the *Daily Journal* of 27 June 2004, approved Mississippi's first state Blues Commission in an attempt to develop a comprehensive plan to market the state's historic blues sites. Writing in the March-June 2004 edition of *Living Blues*, former editor Jim O'Neal (2004, 17) reflected on the burgeoning blues tourism industry in Mississippi:

Whatever ironies may lie in the exaltation of a music born to poverty to boost the economy of

the poorest state in the union, the fact is that Mississippi has finally realized that there is something to this business of Japanese and Norwegians and Californians showing up in search of blues sites and blues artists, buying bouquets at the local florist shop to place on some forgotten grave, or wandering around "across the tracks" with guitars on their backs or cameras in their hands.

As evidence of this expansion, alternatives from traditional sources of lodging (such as motel chains) demonstrate how tourism strategies in small towns often translate into the "commodification of its landscape, turning the place into something to be consumed" (Frenkel and Walton 2000, 559). Located on the outskirts of Clarksdale, Mississippi, the Shack Up Inn offer tourists the opportunity to sleep in one of six renovated sharecroppers' shacks. Blues tourists are especially interested in spending the night in old shacks because many Delta blues musicians lived in these structures in both rural (plantations) and urban (Black neighborhoods) spaces. Tourists also have the choice of staying at the Riverside Hotel, a long-established blues tourist attraction located near downtown Clarksdale. Over the years, a number of well-known blues musicians, ranging from Sonny Boy Williamson II to John Lee Hooker, rented rooms at the hotel. As Jim Auchmutey noted in the *Detroit Free Press* of 12 August 2001, the blues lore associated with the hotel has become a "testament to morbid curiosity and some people's mystical belief that they can master the blues by osmosis." The Riverside Hotel and the Shack Up Inn can be best categorized as examples of cultural tourism. Cultural tourism involves marketing "cultural sites, events, attractions, . . .

as primary tourist experiences" (Craik 1997, 113).

As a subset of a larger international industry, blues tourism encompasses a complex series of often interrelated and multidimensional public and private sector organizations, from blues museums to Chambers of Commerce, which attempt to draw tourists to specific geographic regions (for example, Chicago, Mississippi Delta) to experience the "culture" or "heritage" of the blues. Blues expert Jeff Titon argues that although blues tourism can be traced back to the 1960s, a more mediated, structured, and organized tourism industry (what he refers to as the "New Blues Tourism") emerged in the 1990s in the aftermath of the wildly successful release of Robert Johnson's box set (1998, 5). For example, blues tourists who visit the Mississippi Delta may enlist the services of local guides to visit Dockery Farms, the former workplace of blues legend Charley Patton, or search for the gravesite of Robert Johnson. Tourists can also hear live music at festivals or the various clubs and juke joints scattered throughout the region. A number of travel guides, including the *Delta Blues Map Kit* and *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues*, have been produced to meet the rising demand of blues tourists.

A "blues tourist" is "someone who journeys to experience blues music and, perhaps, something of the society and culture that produce[d] it" (Titon 1998, 5). As numerous observers (Davis 1995; Grazian 2003; Oakley 1997; Wald 2004) have testified, most blues tourists tend to be older, middle-to-upper class Whites, a trend which has its antecedent in the 1950s when Black interest in the blues began to wane and record companies started to repackage blues for White consumers.¹ Many of these White consumers eventually became part of the folk revival movement which helped launch the first blues revival in the 1960s, resurrecting the careers of blues musicians such as Son House, Bukka White, and B. B. King. Grazian (2003, 20) confirms this observation when he argues that since the 1960s, White interest in the blues has intensi-

fied because of the folk revival movement in the 1960s, the appropriation of blues by rock and roll bands such as the Rolling Stones and the Animals, and the "heightened visibility of black culture in the wake of the post-civil rights era." In addition, foreign visitors (e.g., Canadians, Europeans, and Asians) also make up the general profile of the blues tourist. Although it is impossible to trace a singular motive which underpins a growing influx of tourists to the area, many observers have commented that the blues "symbolizes authenticity in a cultural universe populated by virtual realities, artificial intelligences, and a dizzying sense of placelessness" (Grazian 2003, 7).

The creation of "authentic" blues sites, including the Shack Up Inn, also signifies new opportunities for Clarksdale's White community to expand its role in the promotion of the blues in the Delta region. The Shack Up Inn is a White-owned business located on a local plantation, a site where Black fieldhands traded their labor-intensive work for inadequate housing and low wages. Considering Mississippi's long and troubled history of enforced segregation and other repressive measures to subjugate its largely African American population, efforts on the part of Whites to "preserve" and "promote" the blues is both extraordinary and ironic. Yet, the Shack Up Inn also symbolizes how "White" efforts to "perpetuate" and "promote" the blues are often at odds with the "blues experience" in Clarksdale's Black communities. At the same time, these efforts reflect a larger struggle over who has the legitimate right or power to "tell the story" of Mississippi's blues culture to the outside world.

The Riverside Hotel and Shack Up Inn: Historical Overview

The Riverside Hotel was originally the G. T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital, a care center which served Clarksdale's Black population during Mississippi's Jim Crow era. For many blues fans, the building serves as an important tourist destination because of its association with the death of Bessie Smith. In 1937, Smith was involved in a two-car acci-



Exterior of Riverside Hotel. Photograph by Stephen A. King.

dent on Highway 61 and transported to the hospital where she died. After Smith's death, John Hammond Sr. reported in *Downbeat* that Smith was refused treatment at a White hospital and bled to death as a result. Although the story was later discredited, the report's "indictment of a racist system was so tantalizing that it hung on in popular mythology for years, despite Hammond's admission of error" (Cheseborough 2001, 81).

In 1940, the hospital was closed. Four years later, Z. L. Hill purchased the hotel and several surrounding lots for \$15,000 and subsequently transformed the hospital into a hotel. Although the hotel has undergone some internal structural changes (additional rooms were added; the lobby was once a small cafe), the building has not changed significantly in its sixty-year history. Hill died in 1997, and her son, Frank Ratliff--who prefers to be called "Rat"--is the hotel's current proprietor.

Located across town on the outskirts of Clarksdale, the Shack Up Inn is situated on the Hopson Plantation, one of the oldest plantations in Mississippi. Founded by Howell H. Hopson in 1852, the nearly 4000-acre compound gained considerable international attention in the mid-1940s for two technological innovations in farming. In partnership with the International Harvester Company, Hopson showcased the world's first mechanical cotton picker and the first mechanically planted cotton crop. At the same time, according to James Butler, one of the owners of the Shack Up Inn, the plantation also pioneered the first aerial application of pesticides in the world. These twin technological advances revolutionized agricultural production and undoubtedly "spelled the end of the old system and sent plantation workers off to the big cities" (Murray 2001, 2).

After Hopson's death, the plantation

remained under family control. The grounds were eventually distributed to descendants of the Hopson family. In the 30 October 2001 edition of the *Clarksdale Press Register*, Rebecca Hood-Adams reported that Cathy Butler—a descendant of Hopson and the wife of James Butler—purchased the plantation’s headquarters, known as the commissary, in 1988. Subsequently, a partnership developed (Cathy’s husband James Butler, Tommy Polk, Bill Talbot, Guy Malvezzi, and Jim Field) in the wake of increased interest in turning the property into a tourist destination. Evoking the “crossroads myth” (where blues musician Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the devil), the five owners who call themselves the “Shackmeisters” described the “birth” of their organization:

The shackmesisters wound up at midnight, on the same night, at the same crossroads. There the deal was made. As lightning flashed in the delta skies and thunder rolled across the moonlit cotton fields, the five shackmeisters, cypress prophets all, forged a bond stronger than old oak and new rope. Their mission, to bring the blues home to the cradle and the rock tourists in the process. Like hellhounds on their trail, the shacks have overtaken the Shackmeisters, to the benefit [of] millions of blues lovers from around the world. (FAQ 2003)

Interestingly, the original impetus to purchase and renovate old sharecropper shacks was not motivated by a desire to create a new destination for blues tourists. In the late 1990s, Tommy Polk, a singer-songwriter from Nashville, Tennessee (and the cousin of Butler) believed the rustic ambience of a sharecropper shack would fuel his songwriting aspirations. Butler and other interested parties raised \$400 and purchased a shack, eventually naming it the “Cadillac Shack.” “[T]he boys come down [from Nashville] to write,” remembered Butler in the 18 November 2001 edition of *Blues News*, “but it was just too small, so we went out looking for another one and found the Robert Clay shack out by Rich, Mississippi.” In the 28 October 2001 edition of the *Commercial Appeal*, reporter Jennifer Spencer revealed that Polk, inspired by his

“shack” experience, wrote “Tell Me Sweet Jesus” and encouraged other songwriters to attend informal weekend retreats at Hopson. According to Talbot, the shacks were rarely occupied (except during songwriting retreats) until tourists began to inquire about the possibility of renting the shacks for overnight stays. By 2002, the owners purchased four additional structures, moved them to Hopson and subsequently advertised this new tourist attraction as a “six pack of shacks” (Gillette 2003, 16).² The “six-pack” shack theme complements the Inn’s claim that it is the state’s oldest B&B (Bed and Beer) establishment.

Riverside Hotel and Shack Up Inn: A Comparative Analysis

“Black” Urban Neighborhood v. “White” Rural Spaces

The Riverside Hotel is located in a largely impoverished African American residential community (in the southern section of the city) and near the center of Clarksdale’s downtown area. Clarksdale’s south side has historically suffered from high rates of unemployment, decaying housing, crime, gang activity, and other socio-economic problems associated with poverty and neglect. According to Ratliff, some tourists are so paralyzed with fear that they refuse to enter the premises, preferring instead to snap pictures of the hotel from the comfort and security of their locked vehicles. Despite this public perception, the Riverside Hotel has historically been relatively free of vandalism and theft, and the police, according to Ratliff, have rarely been called to settle an interpersonal dispute or arrest those involved in criminal activities.

Nevertheless, the hotel’s physical context has played a significant role in the development and implementation of “house rules.” Unlike the Shack Up Inn, the Riverside Hotel almost resembles a “rooming house” because it houses long-term tenants (whose rooms are in the basement) as well as guests (who stay on the first floor). Ratliff interviews all potential long-term tenants and will not hesitate to refuse service to individuals he deems “unsuit-

able." During my stay, Ratliff turned away three men wishing to rent rooms for four weeks.

Overnight guests are often required to undergo the same "interviewing" process, albeit a less obvious and rigorous one. Arriving guests are ushered into the lobby (which resembles a living room), asked to sign a guest book, and participate in a 30- to 60-minute "interview." The interview resembles an extended monologue rather than a traditional question-and-answer format. This initial interaction serves a number of important functions: it allows the owner to discuss the historical importance of the Riverside Hotel to the development of the blues in the area; it also allows guests to become acquainted with Ratliff and the memory of his mother, Z. L. Hill; finally, the initial conversation allows Ratliff to evaluate each guest's ethos. Although the rules mostly apply to long-term tenants, Ratliff did not hesitate to discuss the importance of rules during our initial encounter:

In order to live, you have to live by mother's rules. And those rules are pretty rough. If you live by the rules, you live here. If you can't live by the rules, you go. It's no problem. . . . You break a rule, there are no three strikes in this business. One strike and you're out. I give the rules to you and explain them to you. And I got it in black and white. I can give it to you or read it. Three strikes, ain't no three. Break one rule and you're out of here. And don't come back. I don't need you.

According to Ratliff, all tenants must be employed and refrain from either consuming or selling drugs (what he calls "dope") on the premises. Moreover, tenants are required to keep their rooms clean, observe quiet hours, and avoid entering another tenant's room uninvited. During my stay, Ratliff evicted a tenant (who had lived there for approximately three months) because he perceived the tenant's "alcoholic" girlfriend as a threat to the viability of his establishment.

Beyond enforcing the rules, Ratliff maintains a highly visible presence at the hotel. Although he owns a house in Clarksdale,



Blues Gallery in First Floor Hallway at Riverside Hotel. Photograph by Stephen A. King.

Ratliff prefers to spend most of his time at the hotel, and his room is conveniently located on the same floor where his guests reside. His hands-on management style includes performing the duties of a security guard, assisting guests with parking (he insists that all guests park in front of the hotel and close to the curb), directing (or sometimes driving) tourists to different points of interest in Clarksdale and the surrounding area, and instructing his guests--especially international travelers--to leave their valuables (e.g., large amounts of cash, credit cards) in their room before venturing out to enjoy Clarksdale's somewhat unpredictable musical offerings. In a 2003 interview, Ratliff summed up his philosophy of customer service: "You're not on my time. I'm on your time."

Rooted in the Black community, the owners of the Riverside Hotel developed a list of rules as a way to maintain a "safe" and profitable business. The initial interview session and Ratliff's desire to assist and, in some cases, protect his guests and tenants have been shaped, in part, by the hotel's physical location. The success of this strategy is obvious:

the hotel has recently celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, making it one of the longest-running Black-owned small businesses in Clarksdale.

The Shack Up Inn is situated on the Hopson Plantation, a roughly 4000-acre farm which sits on the outskirts of Clarksdale. The plantation contains six sharecropper shacks, Bill Talbot's house (which acts as a hotel lobby), a commissary, seed houses, and various other agricultural buildings. The Shack Up Inn's physical surroundings contrast sharply with its crosstown counterpart. While the Riverside Hotel is located in a working-class, urban Black neighborhood, the Shack Up Inn's physical location can be characterized as essentially pastoral. Although Hopson is no longer a "working plantation," tourists are offered the opportunity to consume the visual trappings of plantation life. According to the Inn's own promotional materials, tourists will

find authentic sharecropper shacks, the original cotton gin and seed houses and other outbuildings. You will glimpse plantation life as it existed only a few short years ago. In addition, you will find one of the first mechanized cotton pickers, manufactured by International Harvester, as you stroll around the compound. (Shack Up Inn 2003)

The promotional materials also draw attention to another distinctive and important aspect associated with the Inn's physical location. In some ways, the Shack Up Inn resembles an all-inclusive resort in which tourists are contained within a remote enclave, completely isolated from the surrounding community. Within the safety of this self-contained compound, guests can, indeed, "stroll around" the premises (day or night) without anticipating danger from real or imagined threats. Although the chances of encountering crime while staying at the Riverside Hotel are extremely low, Ratliff locks the hotel's front door at night and some tourists drive (rather than walk) to nearby attractions, especially at night. Thus, at the Shack Up Inn, tourists experience the "illusion of adventure" because all the "risks and uncertainties of adventure

are taken out of his [or her] tour" (Cohen 1972, 169).

Given the physical location of the Shack Up Inn, it is not surprising that guests are not required to undergo an initial screening. In fact, the Inn's "check-in" procedure is extremely casual and informal, certainly more expedient than at most commercial hotels. Guests are directed to "Bill's House" (the Inn's lobby), where they are handed a "shack key" and a map of the compound and directed to their new living quarters. During my initial encounter, Talbot's narrative was brief, certainly in contrast with Ratliff's extended monologue, and he did not mention any of the Inn's rules. Finally, while most of the owners of the Shack Up Inn are generally accessible (especially Talbot) to guests, they do not need to assume Ratliff's role as "security guard" to "protect" their guests from external threats. The difference in location, particularly the contrast between the Shack Up Inn's isolated, rural landscape and the Riverside Hotel's urban environment, has indeed created two very different tourist experiences.

Finally, both establishments reflect, in many ways, the history of Jim Crow and the self-segregation practices which still permeate much of present-day Delta society. The Riverside Hotel is a Black-owned and operated small business with close historical and cultural ties to the surrounding African American community. While the hotel's clientele is remarkably culturally and racially diverse, the Riverside Hotel's long-term tenants and staff are mostly Black. The Riverside Hotel is, indeed, firmly rooted in the experience of Black America. In stark contrast, the Hopson Plantation has been owned and operated by a prominent White planter family, one of many such families which continue to "enjoy a pampered and gracious lifestyle," while the region's large Black majority "continue to live in poverty that was difficult to imagine" (Cobb 1992, 324). Thus, the Inn is a White-owned business, employing a mostly White staff. Initially, many African Americans were reluctant to stay at the Inn, and according to an article published in the 29 July 2001 edition of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* by Jim

Auchmutey, the Shack Up Inn was open for three years before the first African American guests arrived. Yet, in recent years, the Inn's customer base has become more culturally and racially diverse. In a 2002 interview, Guy Malvezzi, one of the owners of the Shack Up Inn, explained this new demographic shift: "You know, it tells them that we don't have an ax to grind. If somebody has an ax to grind over some kind of racial problem that happened in the past, they can drive it down the road. . . . [W]e're not trying to make a buck off a part of history that was Black."

Historical Memory of the Blues

For blues tourists, the Riverside Hotel and the Shack Up Inn are particularly attractive destination spots. Both establishments offer tourists the opportunity to inhabit temporarily the interior, private spaces which inspired the emergence and development of the Delta blues. Yet each establishment presents the history of the blues in radically different ways. Located in the heart of Clarksdale's Black community, the Riverside Hotel served as a temporary refuge for blues musicians during Mississippi's Jim Crow era of enforced segregation. In contrast, both the Hopson Plantation and the Shack Up Inn personify the "birth" of the blues as well as the asymmetrical relationship between the White planter class and a Black underclass.

Until Mississippi's segregation laws were effectively repealed in the late 1960s, the Riverside Hotel served as the one of the few commercial housing options for African Americans in the Clarksdale area. Consequently, the hotel attracted Black musicians, including Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Robert Nighthawk, and Sam Cooke. According to Ratliff, the basement often served as an ad-hoc practice or recording room. In the early 1950s, for example, Ike Turner cut a demo of "Rocket 88" in the hotel's basement. Many music critics acknowledge this song as the "first" rock and roll record.

From 1944 until the late 1960s, the Riverside Hotel was an indispensable source of

security for blues musicians who still were struggling to build their careers, musicians who would later become international recording stars. According to Ratliff, the Riverside was "a starting place" for these largely unknown musical talents: "Ike [Turner] started here. John Lee Hooker had his start. He was playing around. King Biscuit Boys, Sonny Boy [Williamson II], all of them stayed here in the fifties, all them stayed right here with my mother." Ratliff's mother would cook for the musicians (when the cafe was still in operation) and frequently joined her musical guests for late-night talks that often lasted well into the early morning. "She always was involved with the blues, into the blues, with all the blues musicians. She met them all," recalled Ratliff.

Although the hotel no longer attracts blues musicians in the way that it did during its heyday, Ratliff has created a memorial of sorts for blues musicians and other famous celebrities who have visited or stayed at the hotel. The hotel's dimly lit main hallway serves as the hotel's main gallery. Both sides of the hallway are adorned with photos, drawings, newspaper articles, handwritten letters, and other personal artifacts. Interspersed with pictures of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy Jr. (who spent a week at the hotel in 1991), and Ratliff's mother are photos of some of the genre's greatest musicians: Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Ike Turner. Ratliff's memorial also celebrates the music of such Clarksdale natives as Big Jack Johnson and James "Super Chikan" Johnson as well as country-blues artist Jack Owens and Roosevelt "Booba" Barnes. Other pictures feature unidentified and unknown musicians playing on front porches or in juke joints.

Yet for many tourists, the hotel's main attraction is undoubtedly the Bessie Smith Room. In 1937, Smith died on an operating table in the hospital's emergency ward. After the hospital was converted into a hotel, the emergency ward was transformed into a small bedroom and christened the "Bessie Smith Room." Although he proudly shows the room to guests, they are often denied their request to stay in the room because Ratliff believes the



Bessie Smith Room at the Riverside Hotel
Photograph by Stephen A. King.

bedroom is a "special" place. The dimly lit room contains a full-size bed, a night stand, and a small dresser. A large painting of Smith (with the title "Empress of the Blues" inscribed at the bottom of the frame) hangs over the bed. On an adjoining wall, guests can view a large painting which depicts an oversized Black angel hovering over two small children who are trying to cross a bridge during a storm. Jim Auchmutey of the *Detroit Free Press* described the room as "silent and gloomy as a mausoleum."

Finally, while the hotel's main hallway and the Bessie Smith Room inform visitors of the Riverside's historical link to the development of the Delta blues, the hotel's close proximity to the New World District further accentuates the intimate relationship between the hotel and the blues. The New World District is located south of the railroad tracks (which served as the dividing line between the Black community and the downtown area, which was traditionally reserved for Whites), and its importance to the development of the blues cannot be overestimated (Cheseborough 2001, 74). In the 1930s and 1940s, the district was alive with bustling restaurants, street vendors, blues clubs, and prostitution houses. Even today, despite the area's general disrepair, the New World District is still the "liveliest part of town" in the evenings, primarily

because numerous clubs such as the Red Top Lounge are still in operation (Cheseborough 2001, 75).

While the Riverside Hotel has been in operation for over sixty years, the Shack Up Inn's connection is in fact longer in duration because it is located on a plantation, arguably one of the primary geneses of blues music. Blues expert Paul Oliver (2001, 730) argued that the origins of the blues were rooted in the "collective unaccompanied work-songs of the plantation culture." For the slave, music--whether in the form of field hollers, group work songs, or drumming--served to communicate hidden messages, protest working conditions, create solidarity within the Black community, or act as a vehicle for personal catharsis. On the plantation, the slaves were largely responsible for picking cotton and other forms of labor-intensive work such as preparing meals. Uncooperative slaves were whipped, beaten, starved, and subjected to other forms of barbarity "unparalleled until Auschwitz" (Oliver 1998, 10). Most assuredly, the Delta's plantation culture "secure[d] the firm establishment of modern capitalist slavery on the Old Southwest frontier" (Woods 1998, 48).

In response to this violent environment, Blacks created what would later be codified as "the blues" to express the hardships and alienation of second-class citizenship. Although the blues is rooted in slavery, most scholars agree that the blues was not classified as a musical genre until the late 1890s. Many of the genre's early stars were born and lived on plantations (e.g., Charley Patton), and the titles of several blues songs--"Plantation Song" (Son House), "Old Plantation" (Fats Waller), and "Working on Stovall's Plantation" (Muddy Waters)--revealed how the rigors of plantation life continued to influence the direction of these more topical blues songs.

While life improved for Blacks after the Civil War, many workers endured a world still marked by "hard labor, institutional discrimination; the threat of violence, death, and imprisonment" (Cobb 1992, 282). Typically employing between 600 to 1000 workers, plantation owners habitually exploited workers

with the hope of securing huge profits at the conclusion of a harvest season. As Oliver (1998, 10) correctly observed, conditions on the plantations "varied widely," and apparently Hopson was far more generous than other plantation owners of his time. According to Talbot, he was one of the first plantation owners in the area to offer workers health benefits and a retirement program. Despite Hopson's virtues, the working conditions on his plantation and other farms in the area provided musicians the impetus to write songs about despair, pain, and release. Obviously, even the best plantation systems reinforced an asymmetrical relationship between a powerful White minority and a powerless Black majority.

Ironically, the Hopson plantation would dramatically influence the shifting socio-economic conditions in the Delta. As stated earlier, in 1944, the Hopson Plantation featured the first aerial spraying of pesticides and the first mechanical cotton picker. This invention accelerated the migration of southern Blacks from the cottonfields to the urban centers of Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit. Blues musicians, including blues pianist Pinetop Perkins, who lived at Hopson, left the plantation for new employment opportunities. Although crops are still grown on the property, Hopson resembles an agricultural "museum." Tourists can view a rusted cotton picker and tractor as well as an old fuel tank, cotton gin, and grain silos. As Hopson has transformed itself into a tourist attraction, the symbols of oppression have all but vanished. Thus, tourists who have little knowledge about the history of southern plantation life may not even recognize the relationship between plantation life and social inequity, nor identify the connection between plantation life and the blues.

Meanwhile, many tourists who visit the plantation's commissary may not associate that building with its historical role as a "center of exploitation" of Black workers. For many Black field hands, the commissary was a symbol of both survival and exploitation. As reported by Bill Minor in the 20 January 2001 edition of the *Clarion-Ledger*, commissaries served as "early self-contained shopping malls"

where members of a community, including tenant farmers and field workers, collected their paychecks and purchased groceries, clothing, and other supplies. Goods were available on credit, albeit extremely high interest rates were charged as a means to keep workers "in debt" to their employers. Many Black field hands and tenants were illiterate and forbidden to develop rudimentary mathematical skills. Often, plantation owners would distribute food and clothing in lieu of cash, although Blacks sometimes received "Christmas" bonuses. "From the standpoint of the planter," wrote historian James Cobb (1992, 103), "the optimum strategy in dealing with tenants was to keep them economically dependent enough to ensure that they would be ready to work whenever labor was needed without creating a sense of hopelessness and frustration great enough to cause them to seek employment elsewhere."

Nowadays, the Hopson commissary functions as a restaurant and lounge, and occasionally local blues bands such as the Deep Cuts will perform for guests. In a move to preserve this building, the Hopson Preservation Corporation was created by Clarksdale area business leaders to keep the Delta heritage "alive" because the building, with its antique items, continues to "create a nostalgic atmosphere reminiscent of the deep south Delta" (Hopson Genealogical 2003).

Interestingly, the six sharecropper shacks offer visitors perhaps the plantation's most visible representation of oppression. After the end of slavery, a variety of working relationships developed between the land owners and the working class. One such arrangement was called "sharecropping," wherein "laborers farmed a specified acreage in exchange for a share of the crop from which the costs of varying levels of support in the form of food, clothing, and supplies had been deducted" (Cobb 1992, 55). Many Black laborers (as well as poor Whites) lived in "sharecropper shacks" or "shotgun shacks" located on the plantation grounds. During my stay at the Shack Up Inn, I stayed in the "Robert Clay Shack," touted as the establishment's "flagship" shack. Before the shack was purchased in the late 1990s,

Robert Clay worked as a farmhand near Lula, Mississippi, raising seven sons in the 800 square foot wooden dwelling without the benefit of running water or electricity. Despite his sons' efforts to relocate their father from his shack into more comfortable housing, Clay died there in 1998.

Of course, blues musicians were among many who endured the intolerable living conditions one typically associates with a sharecropper shack. For example, Muddy Waters' formative years were spent in a small shack on the Stovall Plantation, located on the outskirts of Clarksdale. In developing names for each shack, the owners of the Shack Up Inn formally acknowledged the relationship between the blues and sharecropper shacks. The "Crossroads Shack" plays on Robert Johnson's alleged encounter on the "crossroads" (U.S. Highways 49 and 61) where he "sold his soul to the devil" in exchange for extraordinary musical skills, monetary gain, and fame. In another example, the "Perkins Shack" is a nod to former cotton picker driver, blues legend Pinetop Perkins.

To further accentuate the relationship between blues music and sharecropper shacks, the owners decided to decorate the shacks with a variety of blues paraphernalia. In the Robert Clay Shack, for example, guests can find an old red "Platter Pax" box which contains a collection of 78 records. Old vinyl records are displayed near the kitchen and in the bathroom. Photos and drawing of blues musicians can be found in the living room and the back bedroom. In the bedroom, guests can leaf through recent editions of *Guitar Player*, *Big City Blues*, and *King Biscuit Time* magazine. In addition, each shack is outfitted with a fully functioning stereo system (typically located in the kitchen) and a TV/VCR (viewers can rent movies from the front desk). Moreover, each shack also includes an assortment of musical instruments. Guests who stay at the Clay shack, for example, can strum an electric guitar or pick out notes on an old piano while listening to music on the stereo. These artifacts may help satisfy the demands of some blues tourists who want to recreate the fantasy image of the downtrodden blues musician sur-

living in seemingly inhospitable surroundings.

In all, the Riverside Hotel and the Shack Up Inn present very different "histories" of the Delta blues. The Riverside served as an indispensable source of temporary housing for Black musicians during Mississippi's era of enforced segregation. Many of the genre's greatest artists stayed at the hotel, and the main hallway serves to immortalize and memorialize those blues musicians who inhabited the hallways and bedrooms of their newfound home. On the other hand, the Hopson Plantation and the Shack Up Inn may remind some tourists of the origins of the blues and the difficult working and living conditions that many blues musicians endured. Yet it can also be argued that the plantation's transformation from a working farm to a tourist attraction may conceal or radically reconstruct the meanings of some of the establishment's more obvious symbols of oppression. Ironically, at the same time, the Inn's own promotional materials emphasize the theme of "authenticity."

The Question of Authenticity

Geographers Stephen Frenkel and Judy Walton (2000, 560) argue that "tourists gain status from the types of trips they take and the landscapes and cultures they consume." Status is often determined by the degree of one's "authentic" experiences. The term "authenticity" is a "polyvalent concept, presenting different meanings to different people" (Frenkel and Walton 2000, 568). In the article, "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience," sociologist Ning Wang (1999, 349-350) concludes that much of the conceptual confusion rests on the inability of scholars to distinguish between three different types of authenticity.

The first type, experiential authenticity, focuses on how specific activities can activate the personal feelings of tourists (Wang 1999, 351). Thus, tourists who engage in tourist activities (e.g., participating in a traditional dance ritual) will subjectively evaluate their experiences as "authentic" based on the degree they are "engaging in non-ordinary activities,

free from the constraints" of daily life (Wang 1999, 352, 359). The second type, constructive authenticity, spotlights the role tourist intermediaries play in constructing images to satisfy the expectations and prejudices of tourists. In particular, travel brochures and other textual artifacts present an "alternative, distorted view of people and place . . . in order to create a particular image of a place designed to attract potential tourists" (Young 1999, 375). In the end, many tourists who travel to new and exciting "exotic" locations actually experience a "marketed representation" of authenticity, not a "genuine appreciate for another culture" (Silver 303). The third type, objective authenticity, refers to the "authenticity of originals" or whether objects are "genuine" or "fake." This type of authenticity implies that genuine objects are imbued with a "fixed" or "static" essence of originality (Wang 1999, 355). Objects which lack "objective authenticity" are classified as "false" or "contrived." In sum, while experiential authenticity focuses on "tourist experiences," both constructive and objective authenticity refer to "toured objects."

For many blues tourists, the Riverside Hotel satisfies the demand for "objective authenticity"; the hotel's toured objects are "real" not "contrived," original not fake copies. Although each room contains a television and window unit air conditioner, the hotel looks much like it did when Ike Turner cut "Rocket 88" in the hotel's basement during the early 1950s. Each room contains most of the hotel's original furniture, which was purchased in the early 1940s, and the iron beds and the bedroom suites (sans the mattresses) are all original items. Some rooms even contain the original floor heaters which existed during the time the G.T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital was in operation.

I stayed in the Kennedy Room (named after its famous occupant), the same room John Lee Hooker occupied during his short stay in 1961. Similar to other rooms on the guest floor, my room included a bed with green quilt which matched the window curtains, two dressers, an iron shelf unit (which contained magazines such as *Big City Blues*), a wooden

nightstand, a TV, and a small refrigerator. Since guests must share a communal bathroom, each room also is supplied with towels and toilet paper. Reflecting on the hotel's furnishings, Ratliff makes a pitch to tourists who want to discover the "Home of the Delta Blues":

If you want to live like we lived in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and like we're living now in 2003, you'll have a chance. If you come here, you're going to sleep in the beds; you're going to see the same furniture, some of the same furniture, we had here at that time. You can't change it.

Not surprisingly, journalists and travel writers have commented on the hotel's objective authenticity by referring to its furniture as "original" and "old" and its floors as "rolling." Meanwhile, other published reports warned that the hotel's "authenticity" may be too "realistic" or "startling" for tourists who may be accustomed to all the conveniences and amenities associated with newly-built commercial hotels. For example, *Gentlemen's Quarterly* called the hotel a "proto-funky flop-house-cum-motel" (Edge 2001, 126). In the tourist guide, *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues*, the author argued that although the hotel is "well past its prime," the building's location and convenience to tourist sites supersedes its "shabbiness" (Cheseborough 2001, 81). Writing in the *Detroit Free Press*, Jim Auchmutey commented that the hotel continues to attract blues followers despite accommodations that "Mobil probably wouldn't give one point of a star."

Interestingly, the term "authenticity" also has been used to characterize the Shack Up Inn. Although the shacks have been modernized to alleviate suffering, meet local health department codes, and ensure comfort for tourists, published accounts of the Inn repeatedly use the term "authenticity" to bolster the Inn's credibility. For example, Shelia Byrd, writing in the 3 March 2002 edition of the *Kansas City Star*, urged tourists, looking for "some authentic blues inspiration," to seek out the Inn. Despite structural and interior modi-

fications, the "aura of authenticity remains," according to Brad Wheeler, as noted in a 8 June 2002 article published in *The Globe and Mail*. According to the Inn's own promotional material, blues fans "should not miss the unique opportunity to . . . stay in an authentic cultural icon--the shotgun shack." This theme is reinforced and repeated on the company's website: "[The shacks'] corrugated tin roof and Mississippi cypress walls will conjure visions of a bygone era. Restored only enough to accommodate 21st century expectations . . . the shacks provide comfort as well as authenticity" (The Shack Up Inn 2003).

Underscoring the theme of authenticity, tourists can actually experience--according to some published accounts--the otherworldly presence of Delta blues musicians who seemingly appear either in sound or visual hallucinations. Some of the shacks are reportedly haunted. "You can sit on the porch, sipping bourbon and fanning yourself against the heat and the mosquitoes," according to the *Guardian*, "before eventually drifting off to sleep to the sounds of Robert Johnson and Son House" (Murray 2001, 2). Commenting on the Inn's "rustic" ambiance, reporter Jim Auchmutey of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, claimed that tourists should not "be surprised to see an old man in bib overalls playing harmonica." According to the Inn's promotional materials, tourists are encouraged to "listen closely" in order to "hear the echo of the last chord Pinetop Perkins played on his last visit to the shack."

Except for some minor repairs on the roofs, the shacks' exterior are in their original condition. Thus, the shacks are "objective authentic" in that the exterior contains the original cypress wood. The owners even preserved old wooden outhouses which are located near the back of some of the shacks. In a 2002 interview, Guy Malvezzi commented on the issue of authenticity: "I think the core is still there. The walls are there, the cypress walls on the outside . . . the tin roof, just giving them a glimpse of what it was." In a 2001 interview with National Public Radio, Talbot echoed his partner's sentiments: "Well, it--we didn't change the appearance on the outside.

We just worked on the inside. And for the most part they look like they did 100 year ago" (National Public Radio).

While the exterior has been left "'au naturel,'" as the Inn's promotional materials promise, there have been extensive renovations to the structure's interior design. For example, the Robert Clay Shack's original floor plan (two large bedrooms with a kitchen located in the back) has been reshaped to include a living room/den, kitchen, bathroom, and back bedroom. The interior walls have been pressure washed and cleaned, some sections were replaced with wood from moving crates, and insulation has been added to the walls and the ceiling. Moreover, the linoleum flooring was removed, revealing the original wooden floor. Signs of modern conveniences (e.g., water heater, air vents, thermostat, even electric lights) will most likely alleviate the concerns of some tourists who may find the experience "too authentic." Before the shacks were renovated, they did not contain an interior bathroom, air conditioning, a water heater, or even running water.

Even to the casual observer, many of these "modern conveniences" (e.g., bathroom, television, stereo system) appear at odds with one's image of a sharecropper shack. Yet the owners have skillfully added other imported items (purchased from flea markets and estate sales or donated from the community) which blend in with the rest of the decor. For example, in the Robert Clay Shack, tourists will find a bottle of corn whiskey and Knob Creek bourbon, an old Fleischmann's Yeast box, a "Daisy Mix" wooden barrel, and a white wash pan. The walls in the hallway are covered with drawings depicting life in pre-World War II America. In the living room, tourists can find an old photo album which, at first glance, appears to belong to the original owner. However, the photo album is empty, except for a few pictures of an anonymous White family. Moreover, most of the kitchen appliances, the wooden furniture, the black stove, and even the cracked toilet in the bathroom, appear to "belong" in the shack. Writing in the 22 February 2002 edition of *USA Today*, Jayne Clark described the interior as a "creative

mishmash of recycled materials." Similarly, Jennifer Spencer of the *Commercial Appeal* depicted the shacks' imported items as "sentimental" and "downright tacky." Nonetheless, each shack has been carefully reconstructed to increase its "authentic" look.

These seemingly "authentic" objects easily merge with some of Robert Clay's original belongings. In the bathroom, some of Clay's old medicines are on display, including a can of Sulfate 7.20 Diuretic (used for those suffering from kidney problems) and a bottle of 666 Preparation with the number emblazoned on the front of the box. For blues fans, this item is of special interest because it highlights the long-standing association of the blues with the occult. In addition, the owners also found and preserved Clay's iron, wooden ironing board, and dresser drawer. In the hallway leading to the back of the shack, guests will find a picture of Clay standing on the front porch of his shack. As reported by Bill Minor in the *Clarion-Ledger*, Talbot was quoted as saying that he believes that the Robert Clay Shack serves to both preserve history and honor Clay: "To me, Robert Clay was a real hero. We're honoring blacks, not making fun of them. Robert Clay was a thinker, we find evidence of that everyday. He's an example of what makes America great."

The Shack Up Inn's "authenticity" is also enhanced by its relationship with its surrounding rural landscape. Although local farmers have destroyed many shacks, some of these structures still exist on farms throughout the Delta region. Thus, the six shacks easily merge with Hopson's cotton gin, grain silos, and open fields. Cohen (1985, 298) has suggested that "the distinguishing characteristic of covertly staged tourist attractions, however, is precisely that they are not . . . so separated from the surrounding environment--rather they are, or are made to appear, an integral part of it."

As we can see, however, while the Riverside Hotel is "objectively authentic," the Shack Up Inn blends both objective authenticity (external) with "contrived" authenticity (internal). However, the careful blending of both original artifacts (Robert Clay's iron) and imported items may makes it difficult for some

tourists to distinguish between "real" and "fake" toured objects. Moreover, the Shack Up Inn's contrived nature is further minimized by its almost seamless relationship with its surrounding environment.

Perhaps, Ratliff's critique best sums up this difference between objective and contrived authenticity: "What'd he [James Butler] got? He [just] got started. I've been here. This was built in 1944. I'm living on history. They're trying to survive on history. . . . I got the history."

Conclusion

Despite some minor external and internal modifications, the Riverside Hotel has maintained its (objective) authenticity for over half a century. In contrast, the Shack Up is located on a local plantation, for some a visible reminder of the difficult working and living conditions that many blues musicians and their families endured. Yet the plantation's transformation into a tourist attraction has radically reconstructed the meaning of some of its more obvious symbols of oppression. Finally, although each shack sports its original outer frame, the interior has been almost completely restructured in order to provide tourists, unaccustomed to living without running water and electricity, all the "comforts of home." While the Shack Up Inn is largely a contrived affair, its owners have blended some original artifacts with imported items to diminish the shack's staged appearance.

Yet the Shack Up Inn's lack of objective authenticity does not explain why this establishment is becoming an increasingly popular place for tourists. According to Malvezzi, Baby Boomers from the United States and abroad, especially Europe and Asia, are interested in staying at the Inn. At the same time, however, the Inn has attracted a diverse array of patrons, from former Mississippi governor, Kirk Fordice, to blues legend Pinetop Perkins.³ More recently, the success of the Shack Up Inn has motivated the Shackmeisters to develop a new tourist haunt called the Cotton Gin Inn. Located on the same plantation as the Shack Up Inn, the owners have turned an old

cotton gin into a new lodging experience for tourists.

Perhaps the popularity of the Shack Up Inn is based on the notion that tourism, especially cultural tourism, emphasizes "the uniqueness of a place" (Leong 1989, 360). In their study of a Bavarian tourist town located in Washington State, the authors concluded that difference, not authenticity, was the main attraction for tourists: "Tourism, in fact, is said to be most successful in such places of difference. . . . [I]t is all about finding new environments in which to consume" (Frenkel and Walton 2000, 574-575).

Yet while the novelty aspect of "difference" may explain, in part, the steady flux of tourists to the Inn, it does not entirely reconcile the irony associated with tourists seeking "authenticity" in a decidedly contrived, objectively inauthentic lodging destination. Yet rather than dismissing the Inn as a manufactured tourist trap, contemplating the material realities common to many underprivileged blues musicians, or even criticizing the Inn as a morally reprehensible act of "packaging" and "selling" poverty for profit, blues tourists (particularly those who conform to the profile discussed earlier) may be attracted to the Inn's ability to satisfy the curiosity of the myths associated with blues culture. In *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, Elijah Wald (2004, 3) explains the origins of the blues as myth:

There has probably been more romantic foolishness written about the blues in general, and Robert Johnson in particular, than about any other genre or performer of the twentieth century. As white urbanites discovered the "Race records" of the 1920s and 1930s, they reshaped the music to fit their own tastes and desires, creating a rich mythology that often bears little resemblance to the reality of the musicians they admired. Popular entertainers were reborn as primitive voices from the dark and demonic Delta, and a music notable for its professionalism and humor was recast as the heart-cry of a suffering people. The poverty and oppression of the world that created blues is undeniable, but it was the music's up-to-date power and promise, not its folkloric melancholy, that attracted black records buyers.

Thus, it can be argued that despite the owners' efforts to promote the Inn as an objectively authentic blues site, the Shack Up Inn's allure lies in a decidedly different type of authenticity--constructive authenticity. While objective authenticity implies that genuine objects are imbued with a "fixed" or "static" essence of originality, constructive authenticity suggests that authenticity is not a fixed quality but "a projection of tourists' own beliefs, expectations, preferences, stereotyped images, and consciousness onto toured objects, particularly onto toured Others" (Wang 1999, 355). As discussed earlier, tourist intermediaries are largely responsible for the construction of "toured objects," including material objects, visual images, and narratives, necessary to satisfy the expectations of tourists. From its visually impressive website to the blues artifacts which are carefully positioned in each shack, the Shack Up Inn is steeped in blues lore.

Blues tourists intrigued at the possibility of sleeping in a renovated shack may search the Shack Up Inn's website and read journalistic accounts of patrons lounging on the front porch of their respective shacks sipping whiskey (a drink commonly associated with blues musicians) and watching the sun slowly dip below the horizon. During their stay, tourists can strum a guitar or pick out notes on a piano while listening to a CD of Robert Johnson or Muddy Waters, all the while romanticizing the image of a solitary, tragic blues figure creating brilliant compositions in a world largely absent of material prosperity. Or tourists can leisurely stroll through the plantation grounds and gaze upon tractors, farm equipment, and a cotton gin, an experience which may excite many interested in finding the blues genesis, the literal "root" which served as the catalyst for much of the blues created in Mississippi prior to World War II. These constructed toured objects work to meet the expectations of blues tourists as well as provide an opportunity for "play," a term sociologist Erik Cohen has suggested is an integral part of many tourist adventures. "Tourism is a form of play," according to Cohen (1988, 383), that "has profound roots

in reality, but for the success of which a great deal of make-believe, on part of both performers and audience, is necessary. They willingly, even if often unconsciously, participate playfully in a game of 'as if,' pretending that a contrived product is authentic, even if deep down they are not convinced of its authenticity."

On a final note, the ability of the Shack Up Inn to satisfy the demands of blues tourists also symbolizes a larger issue related to the production of culture for tourist consumption: historical revisionism. While the Riverside Hotel has been turned into a tourist destination for many blues fans, the hotel has changed very little since the days Sonny Boy Williamson and Ike Turner resided at the hotel. In addition, the Riverside Hotel's "blues gallery" underscores the specific historical role the hotel played during the era of enforced segregation. Moreover, the hotel's physical proximity within a poor Black neighborhood will easily remind tourists of the depressing and startling realities of grinding poverty and economic neglect which still engulf many Black communities in the region. As one commentator put it: the Mississippi Delta is an "urban ghetto spread over a rural landscape" (Davis 1995, 50).

In stark contrast, some critics have charged that the Shack Up Inn embodies attempts to "whitewash" the historical realities of plantation life in Mississippi: slavery, racial bigotry, White supremacy, economic exploitation, and sanctioned extermination (e.g., lynching, convict-leasing system) of African Americans. In separate interviews with James Butler and Guy Malvezzi, both underscored the fact that poor Whites also resided in sharecropper shacks. According to Malvezzi, "it [is] absolutely amazing the White people that have been through here. Parents and grandparents lived in these things. No electricity, no running water. . . . You just associate it with just being a Black thing. Poverty was rampant, and it didn't discriminate through the years." In an interview with National Public Radio, Bill Talbot suggested that many former inhabitants of these dwellings have offered their unconditional approval of the owners' deci-

sion to convert sharecropper shacks into a tourist destination:

Simon. Has anyone suggested to you, Mr. Talbot, that they're just a little uncomfortable about this? Not--and I don't mean to draw any hysterical analogies, but, you know, for example, the scene of some of the death camps in Eastern Europe has been preserved, but we don't turn it into a hotel

Talbot. . . . we've had a few people that expressed a little, you know, concern about what we're doing. And questioned why. But then, you know, they're in such the minority. I mean, 99.8 percent of the people who have come here love what we've done. And even--we've had people here that grew up on the plantation that left, you know, thirty years ago, moved to California, and have come back, and loved it, and talked about what a wonderful life they had here, which really surprised me. But I think it probably goes back to the family unit. You know, they just remembered fond memories of having a wonderful life with their family. (National Public Radio)

While it is the case that poor Whites in Mississippi did live in sharecropper shacks and some former shack dwellers have responded favorably to the creation of the Shack Up Inn (the guest book in the Robert Clay Shack provides some anecdotal evidence to this effect), these justifications should not overlook the fact that sharecropper shacks symbolize in a very real way the poverty and misery which inflicted its residents and Mississippi's institutionalized mistreatment and exploitation of its Black labor force. In the end, the Shack Up Inn and the Riverside Hotel reflect two very intriguing, often contradictory, historical narratives about Mississippi's blues culture. Most important, however, both establishments present two competing visions of how to preserve and promote the Delta's musical legacy to the outside world.⁴▲▼▲

Notes

⁴In the late 1950s when Black audiences--energized by the emerging civil rights movement--began to find alternative, newer Black music forms

such as R&B more appealing because the blues became associated with the Jim Crow era of "sharecropping and shanties, cornbread and corn whiskey, and Saturday night juke joints" (Kinnon 1997, 92). Moreover, R&B labels, such as Chicago's legendary Chess Records, realizing that White audiences were larger and more lucrative than their Black counterparts, began to promote Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley as "crossover" artists, subsequently contributing to the "retrenchment for blues artists" (Filene 2000, 112). In response, Willie Dixon, legendary blues songwriter and musician and an influential figure at Chess, began to write songs such as "Back Door Man" and "The Red Rooster" that helped transform urban blues from "commercial popular music" to "roots music." This new "roots music" was packaged for "largely white audiences as both an alternative to and the progenitor of rock and roll" (Filene 2000, 113).

At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that Black audiences today have "abandoned" the blues, especially in the South. In particular, many southern Black audiences are interested in a relatively recent addition to the blues "family," soul blues. Soul blues artists such as Bobby Rush, Marvin Sease, and Nathaniel Kimble play an eclectic musical mix of blues, funk, soul, and rap.

²The owner's initial financial investment included purchasing the shacks from local farmers, transporting the structures to the plantation, and renovating the shacks in order to satisfy the tourist's need for electricity and running water. For example, the owners purchased the Robert Clay Shack for \$600, but spent an additional \$2,500 in transportation fees. Once moved to the plantation, a shack is pressure-cleaned and repaired before being made available to the public. According to Talbot, each shack represents a sizeable investment, ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000 dollars.

³In addition, most of the press coverage has been positive (Dupree 2003; Gillette 2003). Observers, including Bill Minor of the *Clarion-Ledger*, who expressed reservations about the owners' decision to transform dilapidated, poverty-ridden hovels into "chic hostleries for nostalgia-hungry patrons," were--on balance--neutral or favorably impressed. Proclaiming the Inn as "one of the most spectacular examples of a Delta Renaissance," the *Guardian* claimed that the restoration of old sharecropper shacks "is an act of cultural reparation, part of the protracted and painful healing

process of the old south" (Murray 2001, 3). Striking a similar note, the *Blues News* contended the Inn is playing a significant role in eroding "the daunting poverty of the region."

⁴The author would like to thank P. Renee Foster for her significant contributions which improved the overall quality of this manuscript.

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