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Beyond the Boundaries of the Blues: Diane McKinney-Whetstone's Blues Dancing as Middle-Class Blues Narrative
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Diane McKinney-Whetstone's 1999 novel Blues Dancing could, at first glance, be classified as an urban African American romance novel. Told by an omniscient narrator, the novel centers on forty-year-old Verdi Mae, the principal of a Philadelphia school for children with leaming disabilities, and chronicles her struggle to choose between two men. The plot alternates between Verdi's life in the 1990s and the events that lead to her heroin addiction as a college student in the 1970s. As a student at an Ivy League university in Philadelphia (which McKinney-Whetstone never names), Verdi falls in love with Black Student League activist Johnson, a young man from an impoverished Philadelphia neighborhood. Despite his apt analysis of the social realities confronting black students, Johnson turns to drugs to deal with his problems, which include a diificult family life. Verdi joins him for casual drug use and then begs him to give her heroin so that she can better understand his addiction. When Johnson realizes the hopeless situation into which he has navigated himself and Verdi, he sets up a scenario in which the girl, completely weakened by withdrawal symptoms, is discovered and rescued by her favorite black professor, Rowe. Rowe, who is twenty years older than Verdi, nurses her back to health and eventually leaves his wife to live with Verdi.

Blues Dancing centers on the themes of desire and dependency: the young Verdi is easily led by her love for the initially well-meaning Johnson, who then teaches her to desire a drug that overpowers her. Although Rowe seems to rescue her and save her life, Verdi eventually realizes that Rowe only replaced her initial physiological desire for drugs with a psychological dependence on him. He subdues her with a host of controlling behaviors: he prefers her very thin with

straightened, closely cropped hair, and for two decades he checks her arms for track marks whenever she comes home late. Rowe's actions reinforce Verdi's fear that she cannot have any healthy desires, only pathological dependencies. As Nicole Bailey Williams observes, "In reality, [Rowe] is keeping her from discovering herself (27). Essentially, Verdi is unable to discover her self and her autonomy until, at the age of forty, she meets a cleaned-up and healthy Johnson, acknowledges her taboo desires, and begins an affair with him. Thus, Blues Dancing functions as a bildungsroman, centering on a black woman's midlife crisis. As Elisa Gurule has observed in her review of the novel, McKinney-Whetstone "shines at character development" (Bl), and Sybil S. Steinberg calls the novel a "story of self-discovery that moves seamlessly between the early 1970s and early '90s" (69).

Most reviews of McKinney-Whetstone's novel foreground Verdi's romantic relationships. Gurule terms Blues Dancing "a novel that lets the reader into several different dimensions: 1970s political university life, 1990s academic university life, addiction, redemption and ultimately, love" (Bl). Nicole L. Shields sums up the novel as a work that "introduces us to Verdi's unimaginable life of love, lust and drugs," yet she deems it "a notch above contemporary popular fiction" (43).' Opal Moore's review claims that "[t]he novel is overly preoccupied with its romantic and sexual detailing while the other themes drop in and out of the story as the various plot twists require" (X05).

I am suggesting that although Blues Dancing follows some conventions of the romance novel, McKinney-Whetstone's narrative mandates a closer look beyond this deceptive first impression. In fact, the novel primarily draws on the African American blues aesthetic in theme and purpose and offers an innovative form of

the blues narrative. McKinney-Whetstone's literary use of the blues aesthetic to illustrate the popular blues theme of unfulfilled love is not new.^ However, Blues Dancing connects the blues aesthetic with the new social realities and challenges of a steadily growing black middle class. I argue that Verdi becomes the embodiment of a paradox, a middle-class blues woman. In that capacity, she must learn to accept and embrace her own desires to break free of Rowe's regulatory influence on her life and love. By doing so, she escapes (but also understands) her own blues, which exist because of and not despite her middle-class identity.

In her landmark study Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, Angela Davis establishes that, in the days of its first recordings, the emerging black middle class often rejected the blues, seeing it as an African American experience primarily illustrating workingclass life. This rejection was particularly strong among "middle-class club women" who "disassociated themselves from working-class women's blues culture" (65). In Blues People: Negro Music in White America, Amiri Baraka offers a historical account of the emergence of the blues as a distinctly working-class African American art form. Baraka states, "Such a thing as a middle-class blues singer is almost unheard of. It is, it seems to me, even a contradiction of terms"

(140, emphasis in original). In "Can't Even Write: The Blues and Ethnic Literature," Paul Oliver remarks, "Blues is not the music of all Black Americans, many of whom consider it of low class and status, lewd, irreverent and unsophisticated. All of which it is, as a folk culture or as a popular culture, from which many middle-class Blacks are, or choose to be, alienated" (9). As Oliver argues, "Blues is an expression of working-class subculture" (9). In its traditional and original form, the blues is, therefore, clearly recognized as an art form exclusively reflecting African American working-class life.

Analogously, the term "blues narrative," as used by Cat Moses in "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye," has traditionally been applied explicitly or implicitly to African American novels with working-class protagonists or prominent working-class characters. The most readily recognized examples include Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (see Batker), Gayl Jones's Corregidora (see Allen; Tate), Toni Morrison's Jazz (see Rubenstein; Sherard) and Song of Solomon (see Wegs), Ann Petry's The Street (see Drake), and Alice Walker's The Color Purple (see Marvin), Although the blues itself must be seen first and foremost as African American working-class music, I argue that Blues Dancing, McKinney-Whetstone's blues narrative, transcends these received class boundaries of the musical and literary blues aesthetic and successfully incorporates blues themes and topics to illustrate African American middle-class life in the 1990s, Thus, McKinney-Whetstone offers a distinct and innovative departure from traditions in African American narrative.

Owing to her innovative approach to the heritage of blues in African American literature, McKinney-Whetstone has written herself into what Houston A. Baker, Jr., has termed the "blues conceived as a matrix." As Baker writes in his poststructuralist description, the "matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network" (3^). Baker further suggests that "[a]s driving force, the blues matrix thus avoids simple dualities. It perpetually achieves its effects as a fluid and muitivalent network" (9), Thus, by insisting on a strong middle-class presence in her blues narrative, McKinney-Whetstone can be seen as a writer who "inputs" new "impulses" into the "blues matrix."

Baker's theoretical work, which builds on European poststructuralist thought, is helpful for situating Blues Dancing in a continuum of an ever-evolving blues tradition. JoAnne Comwell-Giles points out that Baker conceives of himself and "the critic as artist" (95) and that his "goal in criticism is to become creative in the same way fiction writers themselves are creative, by virtue of his fluency in

the Blues idiom" (94). My analysis relies more strongly on Angela Davis's work. An initial discussion of the presence and function of the blues in Blues Dancing benefits from a critical approach that embraces and considers specific, detailed factual information about the blues. In this sense, I seek a post-positivist realist approach to McKinney-Whetstone's narrative.^ Davis's extensive study offers such discussions of practical, performative, and political aspects of the blues.

Furthermore, her work emphasizes the African origins of the blues and will prove helpful in this particular reading of Blues Dancing.
McKinney-Whetstone forges a new connection between black middle-class identity and the blues, but she is not the first African American woman writer to challenge the traditional boundaries of the blues aesthetic, Carol Batker has examined Hurston's fluid approach to middle-class and working-class identities in conjunction with the incorporation of the blues in Their Eyes Were Watching God.'* Thus, Blues Dancing aligns itself with some literary forebears that have inspired discussions about the challenge how or if the authenticity of African American experiences in literature should be defined or represented. As Batker cautions: "Privileging the working class not only dismisses middle-class African American experience, it also masks the complexity within each group" (200), This concern seems even more relevant at a historical moment when the black middle class can increasingly lay claim to a solidifying, albeit not uncontested, social position within American culture and society. McKinney-Wbetstone's novel speaks to this historical moment and claims the black middle-class experience in conjunction with the blues as an authentic subject for emerging African American writers.
Blues Dancing strongly foregrounds the impact of each character's class on his or her identity. As Opal Moore claims, the novel "is not about race. It is about the complicated emotional consequences of the integration of members of distinct class categories" (X05). Unlike Moore, I do see race as an important aspect of the characters' identities, because they cannot separate their racial identity from their economic standing. In fact, one often is contingent on the other. However, one could argue that the novel at times threatens to collapse its characters' respective identities with their class background, but only to caution against the reductionist effects of such an approach to identity politics. It is, therefore, no accident that Verdi, the protagonist of this blues novel, is somewhat mockingly introduced as "the pampered only child of a prosperous [Georgia] preacher and his wife" (Blues Dancing 18) with "innocent, middle-class southern blood" (1). The educated, innocent, young, southern, black middle-class woman seems to be a prime target for those intending to corrupt her status that has been constructed as impeccable.^ Ironically, the mature middle-class Verdi will have to discover her own blues as her salvation rather than her downfall, a realization that runs counter to what one might infer from her religious and socioeconomic background.
The men in Verdi's life are also unambiguously marked as representatives of certain classes, and Verdi's social status is highlighted by her relationships with both Johnson and Rowe. The young Johnson was raised in a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia by his mother (the father deserted them) and "w[ears] his poverty around his neck as if it were his heavy silver-toned peace medallion," clearly selfidentifying as a working-class man (Blues Dancing 36), Johnson even feels somewhat awkward about enjoying some of Verdi's middle-class forms of entertainment, such as taking tea or going to the ballet, or at least he pretends to dislike

them to maintain his class identity (99). By contrast, Rowe is clearly portrayed as a middle-class man. The novel introduces him as a "highly respected professor of history at the university with his polite unobtrusive features, and proper academic speech patterns, and mannered pretensions that lent a deliberateness to everything he did" (10).

The identity marker of class has the power to create anxiety in Johnson and Rowe; both experience the fluidity of class identity as disconcerting or even threatening at times. As a student, Johnson feels torn about his position in society: "when he was fully on campus he was sure West Philly was where he belonged, and when he was at home, he was sure his rightful place was on campus" (84). Johnson's inner conflict about his position in society contributes to the identity crisis that eventually drives him to take illegal drugs. Similarly, Rowe, who at first glance seems firmly grounded in his middle-class ways, harbors a secret about his social background that is a source of both anger and shame for him. Rowe never discloses to anyone, not even to his wife or Verdi, that he is originally "from Tunica County in Mississippi, one ofthe poorest in the country" and had a falling-out with his family when he explains that he wants to go "away from their brand of poverty [...] before it got on his skin and stained him indelibly" (118). Rowe is essentially a blues man passing for an established middleclass character, and he is unwilling or unable to acknowledge his working-class roots. Thus, both men in Verdi's life actually share similar backgrounds. It can be argued that both cling to Verdi, who is firmly established as a middle-class black woman, in part, to overcome their own class anxieties. The student activist Johnson may rely on Verdi to affirm his highly politicized working-class status by contrasting his identity with hers, thus highlighting certain differences. Rowe may covet a relationship with Verdi, as it signals his arrival in and possession of middle-class life and values. Rowe's emergence as the savior of Verdi, the fallen black middle-class woman, allows him to position himself as superior to even someone who was bom into middle-class status.^

McKinney-Whetstone pairs her portrayals of class (self-)consciousness with the depiction of specific blues paradigms. The blues aesthetic is, obviously, contained in the novel's literal dimension. McKinney-Whetstone has explained the title, which cites a phrase from the novel, by stating tbat Verdi and Johnson "go through periods where they experience blues" (Thomas ID). Blues Dancing gives many descriptions of Johnson's blues, of the part of him that is "so absent anything that looked like joy, that he somedmes worried that he'd be consumed and taken over by his forlorn self (50). Johnson even worries "that his dispirited self might destroy his round at happiness, and in the process, destroy him. And Verdi too" (51). His severe sadness is rooted in his father's leaving when Johnson was a child, the death of a brother in Vietnam, the incarceration of another brother, and the presence of a clinically depressed mother (27). His problems are compounded by his underprivileged status as a young black working-class man who "was sometimes deeply embarrassed by how lacking were his financial resources particularly sur-

rounded by the relative opulence of the university" (36). This places Johnson's story squarely in the tradition of the quintessential blues man's life. "Departure," "disease and affliction," "injustice, jail and serving time" are typical themes ofthe blues, writes Angela Davis (13). On the literal level. Blues Dancing situates itself in a tradition that expressed the social realities experienced by many African Americans, first in song and later in literature.

The novel also offers a symbolic reminder of the blues dimension in the characters of Verdi and Johnson and their dynamic as a couple, a symbolic representation tied closely to the portrayal of Verdi's niece. Sage. Because of a developmental disability. Sage, who is almost eight years old, does not speak (5). Unable to form words. Sage often makes meaning of people's social interactions by imagining that colors are dancing around them, outlining them, and underlining their emotional states. Meefing Johnson for the first time. Sage sees him as "[b]lue. That's what she thought she saw around him [. . .]. A blue that rose up like the inside of the biggest waves she'd seen last summer from the boardwalk at Wildwood that were also mixed with purple and black. She liked colors that moved and showed themselves from every side" (145). The novel uses this color

scheme to indicate the similarity in character between Johnson and Verdi, but also to signal the distress they experience. When Verdi is torn between ending her affair with Johnson and staying with the controlling Rowe out of gratitude. Sage becomes upset because when she studies Verdi, she "[d]idn't like the sharpness of the silver blue that was like lightning pokes to her eyes," and the child acts out "so the silvery blues could settle down" (293). Sage thus intuitively and literally has identified both Verdi's and Johnson's personalities as connected to the blues. The narrative transcends Sage's subjective impressions: it validates the importance of the blues in Verdi's and Johnson's lives and introduces the couple together from the point of view of the omniscient narrator. During their first surprise meeting after many years, the couple is described as "[b]lue: not Sage's blue that danced and showed itself in all its variations. But a still sad blue as if symbolizing all the abbreviated trumpet notes that had sagged and then fallen at their feet" (155-56). At first, Verdi and Johnson relate only indirectly to one another: "They both looked down and watched the space between them that did appear to be moving now and rising up from the floor like a smoky-blue cloud and then separating into two distinct forms that teased and gyrated and danced to the beat of Louis Armstrong's trumpet now" (157). Sage's perception of Verdi and Johnson and the novel's description of their dynamic as a couple—sagged, fallen trumpet notes and blue smoke as substitutes for their actions—relate directly to idioms of the blues aesthetic and tradition.

The novel combines its incorporation of the blues aesthetic with a clearly identifiable middle-class perspective. The music described as a backdrop for Verdi and Johnson's encounter is Louis Armstrong's, whose jazz and blues performances, it can be argued, were more accepted by middle-class audiences (both black and white) than were those ofthe earliest blues performers. Davis points out that "when

Bessie Smith auditioned at Black Swan, she was rejected because of her grassroots sounds" (Davis 152). Blues Dancing does not construct a scenario that presents an unproblematic relationship between the blues aesthetic and the history of the black middle class. Instead, it presents a situation that allows for the careful development of moves that transgress both class and blues traditions.

Reflections on the blues aesthetic in the novel also transcend the personal dimensions of the theme of love. It adopts a traditional perspective of the blues aesthetic in depicting Johnson's and Verdi's experiences as more than personal expressions of sadness or private experiences of love. In the blues, the link between the personal and political is close:

If it is true that the linguistic origin of the term "blues" is in the eighteenthcentury English term "blue devils," referring to a psychological state of depression, then it underwent a significant transformation in the context of black culture. Black people's inflected appropriation of this term did not make such a rigorous distinction between a subjective, psychological state of depression and an objective, socially defmed status of oppression. Indeed, it seems likely that in the African-American consciousness of the period of their origins, the blues were considered to be both a subjective state and an objective phenomenon. (Davis 113)

Following this tradition, the novel's portrait of Johnson's and Verdi's blues opens up a political dimension by closely connecting their individual worries with African American communal experiences.

This aspect of the blues aesthetic is important, especially in the episodes illuminating Verdi's and Johnson's college years. Among the "communal blues" portrayed in Blues Dancing are tbe couple's sense of heightened scrutiny on a primarily white college campus or the pressures of succeeding under adverse circumstances. Verdi, for example, experiences her time as a student as follows:

She'd gotten into the habit of sitting up front in the large lecture hall so that she wasn't looking on the backs of the heads of the continuous tides of white people

that sometimes made her feel as though they might rise up in a great wave and have her flailing around struggling not to drown, and the feeling was so intense that sometimes her chest would even go tight and from then on she was severely distracted from the lectures, so she was always right there within two feet of Rowe's lectem for this course called the Crisis of the Union. (93)

Verdi's sense of panic and increased anxiety on a college campus specifically concerns the black middle class or those afforded the privilege of partaking in the educational experience traditionally reserved for the middle and upper classes. The description of Verdi's anxiety also connects her to the working-class blues tradition: the "tide" of white students is implicitly likened to the "troubled waters" often sung about in the blues. Although the threat to Verdi is neither immediate nor physical, this allusion makes clear that it is no less real than the threats experienced by the subject confronted with troubled waters in a blues song.

Verdi goes through her panic as an individual, but her experience is not an isolated one, as shown by Johnson's observations as he is about to join a party:

They were loose and laughing with abandon in the way that people do when they've spent all week fighting to be seen as more than a special case, a slot, aid recipient, the product of a partnership with the city, state, feds. At least that was how Johnson felt most of the time; for all of his rhetoric about not allowing the racist tactics to make them have a diminished view of themselves, he often did. (37)

Blues Dancing has a transgressive quality. Introducing, from a distinctly African American perspective, a communal and political dimension to the experiences of the two main characters, it pushes the boundaries of the traditional genre of the romance novel, which typically focuses on the individual. Furthermore, it extends the reach of the blues aesthetic by pointing out that Verdi's and Johnson's blues are, in many ways, the blues of a new black middle class. Their challenges are often rooted in the fact that both characters are seen as representatives of a race rather than as individuals.

Eventually, this situation takes its toll on both Verdi and Johnson. Of the two characters, it seems that Johnson emerges from his college years and his druginduced social descent stronger and more intact than Verdi, in part because he is more conscious of his personal blues. He sees himself as "a restored version of his better self" and is able to use his personal blues (24). That is, his experiences of private and communal problems help him forge a new, strong middle-class identity that ties back in with his working-class roots. At the time of his return to Philadelphia, he is the "advance man for a Chicago-based Institute for Human Potential that raised funds for nonprofits" (24). In Philadelphia, Johnson is working for a "from-the-grounds-up program benefiting boys at risk, like he'd been a boy at risk, even though he'd been fmger-pointed as a boy with promise" (25). Significantly, Johnson wants to rename the organization to "Troubled Waters Foundation" (25). Johnson's choice of the classic blues motif as an organizational name and his profession clearly link the successful man to African American working-class concerns. He wishes to address and improve working-class conditions, not from the distant perspective of his new middle-class life, but on the basis of a lived personal and communal history frequently addressed in and by the blues.

Like Johnson, the adult Verdi finds herself in a secure middle-class position, as the principal of a school for children with disabilities. Despite her numerous accomplishments, however, Verdi still faces a number of challenges, which, ironically, originate in the relationship that is supposed to protect her from failure: her life with Rowe. Fearing that his control over Verdi is weakening, Rowe addresses her as "Pet," a "twenty-year-old nickname that was almost insulting now that she was forty" (116). This controversial nickname clearly aligns the couple with middle-class discourse about women's subjectivity; it recalls the

diminutive animal nicknames—"squirrel," "skylark," and "pet"—with which Torvald Helmer addresses his wife Nora in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House (296; act 1). Beyond his verbal control, Rowe subdues Verdi by secretly monitoring the mileage on her car (112), expressing his dislike for Verdi's working-class cousin Kitt (116), and insulting Kitt's soul food with a derogatory and racist remark (113). To liberate herself from the constraints of this relationship, Verdi must first acknowledge and embrace her blues, a move that runs counter to Rowe's traditionalist middle-class value system.

I suggest that the act through which Verdi acknowledges her paradoxical middle-class blues is deeply rooted in the magical or spiritual dimensions of blues traditions. The first aspect of this dimension, as Angela Davis explains, is that "Blues music performs a magical—or aesthetic—exorcism of the blues, those things that lead to unhappiness and despair" (129). Within this tradition, Davis proposes, we must see "the blues as both feeling and song, and song as emancipatory process" in which it becomes possible "[to confront] the blues with the blues, and us[e] the blues to drive the blues away" (135). Put differently, "The transformation of lack, loss, and grief into poetic catharsis is the constitutive task of the blues singer" (Moses 629). Blues Dancing invokes this power, albeit in the carefully controlled environment of a diner. Verdi sits in a booth that is, to underscore the novel's intent, upholstered in "a wispy blue color" (196). Here Verdi's individual blues fuses with African American communal experiences of autonomy and desire, ultimately allowing her to access memories hitherto shunned as taboo. Aided by the blues, Verdi has a key realization, the cathartic and hitherto repressed remembrance that Rowe did not accidentally stumble on her when she suffered unspeakably from her withdrawal symptoms, but that Johnson, in a last act of responsibility, told Rowe where he could find his helpless object of infatuation. Verdi had never allowed herself to recognize that Rowe knowingly took her over from Johnson and then claimed the role of accidental savior (202).

Verdi's name recalls classical European music, traditionally favored by the middle class, and seems indicative of her preferences in life and failure to face the music that truly matters, that is, her own blues. Johnson ends Verdi's lifetime of denial when he causes her to face her repressed memories, by playing the song "You Go To My Head" twice in a row on a diner jukebox :

He [...] said a silent thank-you to Louis Armstrong and his trumpet for softening her up so. Though she hadn't heard any of the selection that was just beginning to play for the second time. Not the blaring, melodic trumpet, not Louis singing the part about a sweet Merlot, she'd heard only this as she sat there melting in the luminous booth in the back: Rowe calling her name from the other side of that bathroom door over and over again. (205)

The blues underlines Verdi's exploration of her most painful memories.' Interestingly, it is only the blues that allows Verdi to face the complete truth, as even in sessions with her therapist there were parts of her memory that "she'd kept frozen

because it was simpler for her that way, cleanly preserved, because then she could hate Johnson for leaving her, and love Rowe for saving her" (202). Psychoanalysis, the classical therapeutic tool of the (white) middle class, fails Verdi. By contrast, the blues forces her to admit for the first time her most painful memories.

Verdi must perform a paradoxical move: she must acknowledge and embrace her deeply personal blues, her forbidden memory, to be able to move forward with her life and overcome her blues. Before Verdi can become a fully emancipated subject, she must recognize her own current position as Rowe's object.

Ironically, Johnson, who initially caused her to experience the horrors of drug addiction, aids Verdi in acknowledging her personal problems, her own blues. This is possible because the novel presents Johnson as a man who has embraced his own past and now has full control over his life. By contrast, Verdi is depicted

as a forty-year-old woman who takes a minor's approach to life and does not trust herself. In an angry conversation with Johnson, Verdi reveals that she has relied on Rowe, rather than herself, to fight her addiction (273). Johnson responds with a shocked outburst:

His presence kept you from getting high? Whew! [. . .] Yeah, you're right, you better stay with him, I damn sure can't promise you that I can control your desires. 1 know I don't have that kind of power, wouldn't want that kind of power over another human being [. ..] Damn, the power to control someone else's desire. (273-74)

Johnson feels alienated by the dynamics of Rowe and Verdi's relationship, and this further solidifies his function as a blues character in this novel. Batker has observed that the song, "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues," like a number of other blues songs, "critiques the whole notion of policing desire" (204). Batker's observation about the blues refers primarily to the sexual autonomy of black working-class women. However, the same dynamic is at work in Rowe and Verdi's relationship. Rowe's authoritative claim to be the sole master of Verdi's healthy or destructive desires calls for a move of liberation from his regulatory function. This move is grounded in the blues tradition; to break free, Verdi must become a "wild woman" of sorts. Similarly, Batker suggests that the narrative of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God shows that "focusing on victimization and respectability result in stifling African American women's agency and sexual subjectivity" (206). Although Rowe is not much interested in controlling Verdi's sexuality (presumably, he takes this control for granted), he carefully controls all her other desires, including nutrition and her supposed cravings for drugs. His insistence on seeing Verdi as a helpless victim of her desires is evidence of this. Verdi's father, supporting her decision to leave Rowe, eventually tells her, "you never were the broken-legged sparrow he made you out to be" (288).

When presenting a second crucial moment of Verdi's self-recognition. Blues Dancing appropriates another mythical dimension of the blues. One integral aspect of the blues, according to Angela Davis, is "the West African practice of

nommo, which conjures powers associated with things by ritually pronouncing their names" (128). Davis explains further, "The blues preserve and transform the West African philosophical centrality ofthe naming process. In the Dogon, Yoruba, and other West African cultural traditions, the process of nommo—naming things, forces, and modes—is a means of establishing magical (or, in the case of the blues, aesthetic) control over the object of the naming process" (33). We must understand the second scene central to Verdi's finding of her subjectivity within the framework of the blues aesthetic.

Rowe discovers Verdi and Johnson's affair and confronts Verdi. Because his strength is largely contingent on Verdi's dependency, he first attacks her, then tries to sexually assault her, and finally leaves her with a bag of heroin, hoping to induce her to take drugs and again become the object of his control (285-87). He refiects on the situation as follows: "He'd bought it just to shock her, to insult her, but a piece of him really wanted her strung out again, dependent, a piece of him was ready to save her all over again. [. . .] That he wanted, needed for her to do that bag right now was more than he could stand about himself (287). Thus, Rowe attempts to humiliate and disempower Verdi completely.

This scene sets the stage for an illustration of the performative powers of the blues. Verdi, who has never learned to trust herself and control her own desires in the absence of Rowe, now feels abandoned by Johnson and punished by Rowe, and she gives in to the drug's temptation. However, at perhaps the most suspenseful moment of the novel, she is stopped by her niece, who finally utters her very first word:

"Veerrdi," Sage said in a husky voice that should come maybe from an adolescent boy who's trying to sound grown.

And maybe if Verdi had already shot up once or twice in the recent past, and
had reacquainted her physiology with the rush, and the nod, she would have
yelled at Sage [...]. She ran to Sage with her arm still tied. Grabbed her and
Stooped to her level, her eyes spilling out tears she said, "Sage, do that again,
please do that again for Verdi." (300-01)

Sage then proceeds to pronounce Verdi's name several times in a row. The
moment of the previously silent child's first words, coupled with the moment of
Verdi's deepest despair, does not represent romantic or sentimental traditions, as
might be suggested, but connects Blues Dancing to the aesthetic practices and purposes
of the blues tradition. By naming Verdi through Sage, the narrative performs
a ritualistic reinscription of Verdi's dependent and desolate self, whose development
was arrested in her college years, with the full and autonomous self of a
woman. Pronounced by a mouth that does not speak, the protagonist's name
receives heightened attention and empowers her to overcome her dependencies
without a controlling figure. This is all the more relevant as it was Verdi who
taught Sage the basic skills needed to pronounce her aunt's name. In a way. Sage
allows Verdi to name herself and become aware of her own strengths and abilities.

Thus, Blues Dancing draws on the concept of nommo to establish and reclaim
power over circumstances that otherwise seem beyond anyone's control. It is
important to note that Sage's performance of nommo is a result of years of Verdi's
middle-class professional life and her work as a special education teacher.

I want to examine one more dimension, the aspect of motion, which grounds
Blues Dancing in the blues aesthetic. McKinney-Whetstone has said that "[t]he
dancing part of the title was because I wanted to be hopeful and that's what
motion is, hope" (Thomas ID). Cat Moses points out that there is "a pattern common
to traditional blues lyrics: a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a
concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion" (623). I suggest
that, paradoxically, the blues aesthetic, more than the romance novel tradition,
moves Blues Dancing toward its positive ending. McKinney-Whetstone uses the
blues aspect of motion from the moment when Kitt unexpectedly reunites Johnson
and Verdi, and "they touched fmgers and then entire hands, palm against
palm, and now they were dancing too" (157), to the moment when Rowe, in an
inversion of the blues travel motif, "called, said he had driven all night, was
halfway to the Mississippi Delta to the spot where he was born" and "would call
when he returned to civilly dissolve the holdings they shared" (292). As in the
blues, resolution in Blues Dancing comes through motion.

Cat Moses writes, "The subjects of blues narratives achieve, by their narrative's
close, an ironic distance—and often physical distance—from the lack and
loss expressed in the narratives' beginnings. Indeed, the construction of ironic
distance and open-endedness is a primary function of the blues, which codify a
means of resistance to oppression and a call to 'move on' up and out" (633).
McKinney-Whetstone ends her narrative on such an open-ended note by uniting
Verdi's family and Johnson in Rowe's former fortress of detached middle-class
existence. Verdi and Johnson appear fmally to have overcome the sense of loss
evoked in the beginning of the novel. However, the novel transcends classic blues
themes by ultimately stressing the reunion, not separation, and the success, not
failure, of African American relationships. McKinney-Whetstone's novel claims
that African American relationships are in no way less authentic if depicted in literature
as decidedly untragic. Here the novel departs from other blues narratives
that have focused largely on depicting the sometimes insurmountable challenges
in relationships between African American male and female characters. This
includes the blues narratives mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. The
Color Purple, Corregidora, Jazz, Song of Solomon, The Street, and Their Eyes
Were Watching God. Verdi and Johnson's relationship is far from unproblematic,
but it promises a positive future, which sets it apart from other blues narratives.

As the novel concludes, Johnson addresses Verdi's father with these words: "Sir, it's an honor and a pleasure to meet you. My name is Johnson and I've been in love with your beautiful daughter for the past twenty years" (307), thus affirming the possibility of a satisfactory solution for African American literary characters in love. Johnson's address is clearly a nod in the direction of romance fic-

tion, but it is also McKinney-Whetstone's attempt to expand on the blues aesthetic and allow it to include a larger number of positive and successful relationships between African American men and women.

Diane McKinney-Whetstone's Blues Dancing uses familiar blues themes such as troubled relationships, emotional and actual separation from family and partners, and the search for an autonomous self. In so doing, the novel successfully transcends the conventional boundaries of romance fiction by insisting on viewing the personal problems of the protagonists through a more potent, political lens. Furthermore, the novel also expands on the typical incorporation of the blues aesthetic in African American fiction by appropriating it to illuminate the life of a black middle-class woman, a character traditionally not addressed in the blues. Lastly, the novel employs and elaborates on the blues aesthetic in such a way that it opens up the discussion surrounding the authenticity of the black middle-class experience in literature while simultaneously situating promising relationships between African American men and a women within, rather than outside of, the blues aesthetic. Blues Dancing thus adheres to its program of progress and motion by moving the blues aesthetic—and the blues matrix—into new directions.

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NOTES

1. Shields does not elaborate on her basis for comparison, but possibly she is thinking of the urban African American romance novels written by authors such as Terry McMillan.
2. Roberta Rubenstein has examined Toni Morrison's use of the blues to illuminate tragic love.
3. For a detailed discussion of a renewed critical interest in realism in regard to multiethnic literature, see Moya and Hames-Garci'a.
4. Batker argues that in Their Eyes Were Watching God, Nanny embodies both working-class experiences (on the basis of her socioeconomic status) and middle-class values (on the basis of her plans for and influence over her granddaughter Janie) and must be understood as a multifaceted hybrid character (201, 205-06).
5. One might be reminded here of Nella Larsen's Quicksand and the novella's protagonist, Helga Crane, who leaves behind the confinements of her middle-class life in the south only to find herself in a completely hopeless situation by the narrative's end.
6. A study of the novel with a focus on the fluid class identities of Verdi's partners may benefit from a closer consideration of Stepto, which considers cultural ascent and immersion in African American narratives in relation to the class of characters and Evora Jones, who looked at cultural aseent and immersion in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Because Verdi's class identity remains consistent throughout the novel, I will not pursue this critical approach at length.
7. Although Armstrong's song is not classic blues, his performances grew out of the classic blues tradition.

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