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White Man Tells the Blues: The Power of Music and Narrative in Patrick Neate's *Twelve Bar Blues*

Abstract: Patrick Neate's 2001 novel *Twelve Bar Blues* is in many ways an intriguing text: Written by a white male English author, the novel utilizes the blues form in order to stage the historical impact of the 'Black Atlantic' (Gilroy) on late-20th-century affairs. Steeped in the jazz mythology of New Orleans, it nevertheless manages to transcend these myths by paying close attention to the pragmatic (and historical) contexts in which music and narrative exist as cultural practices. In view of the thematic scope of the present volume, the article addresses the three dimensions of its title ("White Man," "The Blues," and "The Power of Music and Narrative") in order to answer the following questions: What exactly is the cultural validity ascribed to blues and early jazz in the world of the novel, and in what way is the mode of storytelling employed in the novel implicated in these assumptions?

The blues, it seems, has come to represent musical authenticity more strongly than any other musical genre. It stands for *real* music, for playing from the heart and letting it come naturally. Even beyond its existence as a musical genre in its own right it serves as a basic ingredient of the Romantic ideology which pits 'authentic' rock music against 'commercial' popular music on the one hand (cf. Keightley 2001) and 'artificial' classical music on the other (cf. Cook 2000, 6-14), an ingredient which guarantees a sense of community, tradition and continuity with the past and links current musical practices to an older folk culture of supposedly unalienated sincerity. Beyond this appropriation by mainstream Western (popular) culture, however, the blues remains one of only few cultural practices which are generally recognized as being genuinely black. As such, it is the 'roux' in the 'gumbo' of 'true' jazz, as Wynton Marsalis (2000, 117) points out in the influential but rather conservative stocktaking of the history of jazz which took place under his auspices in both film and book form at the end of the 20th century (cf. Burns and Ward 2000). Marsalis's metaphorical reliance on a French term ('roux') in combination with an Americanized French term of Bantu origin ('gumbo') is deeply rooted in his home town New Orleans: the city of New Orleans is the pot in which the aftermath of slavery and the onset of American history created a gumbo of African and European influences

which was thickened by the specifically black roux of the blues into jazz, a completely new and uniquely American art form.¹

All this and much more is stirred into Patrick Neate's novel *Twelve Bar Blues*, which was published in 2001. While it may at first glance be surprising that a white British author opts for a novel in blues form, a second glance reveals a more plausible context: after all, it was the British Blues Revival movement of the 1960s which established the blues as an artistic genre not only in Europe, but even in the U.S., and performers like Eric Clapton and Van Morrison have gained the respect of their black idols in spite of their greater commercial success. In terms of literature, on the other hand, there has been a slow but fundamental change in attitude after World War II: the Englishness of English literature is no longer taken for granted but rather questioned in terms of "Contemporary Britishness: Who, What, Why and When?", and the answers to these questions acknowledge the existence of "Multiplicities and Hybridity" (cf. Tew 2004, 28-58 and 150-79).² This acknowledgement entails a new perspective on the importance of what the sociologist Paul Gilroy has called *The Black Atlantic*. According to Gilroy, the dynamics of modern culture has for a long time been fueled by that hybrid mixture of African, American, Caribbean and British influences that resulted from the flourishing slave trade between England, West Africa and the Caribbean islands or the South of the U.S., respectively (cf. Gilroy 1993). Patrick Neate's *Twelve Bar Blues* tackles this 'counterculture of modernity' (Gilroy) in all its breadth: the novel's plot begins in the year 1790 in a fictional country called Zambawi located in southern central Africa and roughly co-extensive with today's Zimbabwe. Its most prominent strand is set in early 20th century Louisiana, and there are two late 20th century plots set in London, New York, Chicago and New Orleans on the one hand and Zambawi again on the other. The 'orchestration' of these multiple strands of action is facilitated with the help of the blues form, so that the novel at large amounts literally to a white man telling the blues. This, of course, opens up a whole field of questions which may perhaps be narrowed down as follows: What exactly is the cultural validity ascribed to blues and early jazz in the world of the novel, and in what way is the mode of storytelling employed in the novel implicated in these assumptions?

1. White Man

Patrick Neate was born into a white middle-class family in Putney in the southwest of London in 1970. Faced with the prospect of unemployment after earning a degree in social anthropology from Cambridge University, Neate decided to work as a teacher in Zimbabwe for a year and stayed there for a while after his contract ran out. After his return he studied journalism at City University, London, founded (and sold) an

¹ For a critical assessment of the myths that surround New Orleans as the cradle of jazz cf. Starr 1988, on the political adoption of jazz as a uniquely American art form in the Cold War cf. Von Eschen 2004.

² See also the final volumes of the recent *Oxford English Literary History* with the titles *The Last of England?* (Stevenson 2004) and *The Internationalization of English Literature* (King 2004).

internet company, and began to work as a part-time disc jockey and freelance music journalist in London. The African experience, however, proved to be productive: it consolidated his earlier interest in black culture and history, stimulated a journalistic book project on hip hop (cf. Neate 2004a), and led to his first novel, *Musungu Jim and the Great Chief Tuloko* (Neate 2001), a hilarious satire on the plight of a young white teacher, Jim Tullloh, in 1990s Zambawi, the fictional country in southern central Africa somewhat similar to Zimbabwe. Guided by the witch doctor Musa, Jim Tullloh is possessed by the spirit of the legendary Great Chief Tuloko and manages to unite the various factions of opposition against the increasingly corrupt and totalitarian first postcolonial regime of Zita Adini, the Eunuch. *Musungu Jim* won a Betty Trask Award, but it did not create much of a stir otherwise. So it was quite a surprise to both Neate and his at that time rather small audience when his second novel, *Twelve Bar Blues*, won the renowned Whitbread Novel Award against competition from Ian McEwan (*Atonement*) and V.S. Naipaul in the year of its publication, 2001.³ Since then Patrick Neate has established himself as a successful novelist, though neither *The London Pigeon Wars* (2003) nor *City of Tiny Lights* (2005) have met with praise as undivided as the praise for *Twelve Bar Blues*.

The novel's exceptionality lies in its seemingly authentic 'blackness.' As Neate himself recounts somewhat amazed: "Sometimes I go into a bookshop to ask for *Twelve Bar Blues* and am told to look for it under Black Writers. It's very odd. I am white, middle class and from Putney."⁴ In creating this sense of authenticity, *Twelve Bar Blues* goes beyond the recent string of successful 'white' novels on 'black' experience such as Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) or Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortresses of Solitude* (2003). Even more than the latter two, which also use the medium of music for approaching 'black' experience, Neate's *Twelve Bar Blues* pulls off a feat of formal assimilation which is so convincing that it failed to provoke charges of an illegitimate appropriation of black culture.⁵ The medium for this successful formal assimilation is the blues, which is employed by Neate as the central structuring device in his narrative, as will be traced in the following section.

2. The Blues

The twelve bar blues is, as the novel itself acknowledges in a definition prefixed to the main text, "the most common harmonic progression in all jazz; it comprises twelve bars based on tonic (I), dominant (V) and subdominant (IV) harmonies, or-

³ For coverage of the event cf. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/1741198.stm> (January 12, 2005).

⁴ <http://www.arts.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2002/01/04/bovhit04.xml> (March 16, 2005).

⁵ To my knowledge the only hostile review is by a white professor from Australia who views the book as "the literary equivalent of a black-and-white minstrel show." Cf. <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/06/21/1023864491396.html> (March 16, 2005). On the complexities surrounding the issue in general cf. Ostendorf 2000.

ganized in the simple pattern I I I I V I V I I.⁶ It is also clear, however, that this formal definition fails to account for eight bar and sixteen bar variants of the blues as well as for numerous harmonic deviations within the twelve bar scheme (cf., for example, Blesh 1976, 98-148 and Dauner 1983, 172-213). In fact, there is considerable debate as to whether the form mentioned above is the most widely used blues form at all, as, in a typical deviation from the rules of Western harmony, the final four bars are perhaps even more frequently found to be V I V I. What is more, the blues is less characterized by its sequence of harmonies or a particular scheme of bars but rather by elements of rhythm, melody and timbre (cf. Schuller 1986, 34-62) as well as by the world views articulated in its lyrics and musically staged in its performance (cf. Miller 1988). In its characteristic negotiation of all these factors the blues is generally regarded as the result of a process mixing elements of African rhythm and melody that were preserved in the field hollers, street calls and work songs of the slaves with the harmony of religious songs from the European tradition. A central principle that was maintained throughout this process is the community-oriented African pattern of call and response which amounts to an in-built dialogical principle. In a typical twelve bar blues, for example, the lyrics consist of a call which is presented in the first four bars, repeated (with variations) in the second four bars and then finds its response in the final four bars. The musical performance of these lyrics then adds another layer of responses in the instrumental (or sometimes vocal) commentary on each line that is provided either by the singer/player himself or by an accompanying instrumentalist or by a chorus or even the audience. Accordingly, the typical lyrics of a twelve bar blues are embedded in the following musical structure:

4 bars call + commentary (a-b)

4 bars repetition of call + commentary (a' -b)

4 bars response + commentary (c-b)

A typical example for the most basic twelve bar pattern (not, in fact, particularly easy to find in the unadorned form of the novel's definition), is Bessie Smith's "Foolish Man Blues" as recorded on the 27th October, 1927 in New York City. On this recording, Bessie Smith, 'the Empress of the Blues', is accompanied by Fletcher Henderson on piano, June Cole on tuba, and Tommy Ladnier from New Orleans on trumpet.⁷ Not only does Smith's piece, which, in contrast to many of her other recordings, was actually composed by herself, illustrate many of the typical features of the blues. Its sequencing, which frames four twelve bar choruses performed by Bessie Smith with a four bar instrumental prelude and a four bar instrumental coda, can also serve to introduce the structure of Patrick Neate's novel *Twelve Bar Blues* in which two twelve bar choruses are framed by a prelude and a coda. What is more,

6 Unpaginated page before table of contents. All page references given in the text will be to Neate 2002 [2001] unless otherwise specified.

7 In contrast to the trumpet (or rather cornet) player Lick Holden, the protagonist of Neate's novel, Tommy Ladnier was a much-lauded blues specialist who has found his place in jazz history, but like Lick Holden he will forever be in the shadow of the giant Louis Armstrong.

the final stanza anticipates the climax of Neate's novel, in which Lick Holden finally finds his beloved Sylvie only to be tracked down and murdered by her white pimp:

[4 bars instrumental prelude]

Chorus 1:

Men sure is deceitful and they's gettin' worse ev'ry day [a-b]
Men sure is deceitful and they's gettin' worse ev'ry day [a'-b]
Actin' like a bunch of women, they's just-a gab, gab, gabbin' away [c-b]

Chorus 2:

There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't understand [a-b]
There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't understand [a'-b]
A mannish actin' woman and a skippin' twistin' woman actin' man [c-b]

Chorus 3:

I used to love that man, he always made my poor heart ache [a-b]
I love my man, he makes my poor heart ache [a'-b]
He is crooked as a corkscrew and evil as a copperheaded snake [c-b]

Chorus 4:

I knew a certain man who spent years runnin' a poor gal down [a-b]
I knew a certain man who spent a year runnin' a poor gal down [a'-b]
And when she let him kiss her, the fool blabbed it all over town [c-b]

[4 bars instrumental coda]

Each stanza of Bessie Smith's recording shows the typical lyrical pattern of repeated calls (a/a') and response (c), while the instrumental commenting function is throughout assumed by Tommy Ladnier's trumpet playing (b) which adds the distinction between the female vocals and an implicitly male commentary (there are no female trumpet players on record in early jazz history) to the dialogic principle built into the pattern of the lyrics itself. This distinction links up with the theme of "Foolish Man Blues" which is concerned with the inexhaustible topic of the difference between men and women and treated by the singer with the rebellious fatalism spiced up with a dose of humour that is characteristic of the blues. In spite of the fact that men's deceitfulness is actually presented as a female characteristic in the first chorus, the lyrics at length construct a position of female authority which allows for a characterization of 'woman actin' man' as 'foolish,' but does not mean that women can do without men, as the shift from past tense to present tense in the calls of the third chorus indicates. There is a sense of inescapability and open-endedness in the lyrics that is also captured in the way the harmonic closure of the coda is counterbalanced by the final blue note of Ladnier's trumpet, a device that, as will be seen, Neate copies neatly at the end of his narrative.

So how does Patrick Neate adapt formal features of the blues to his novelistic purposes? The following chart provides an overview of the elaborate structure of the novel:

Patrick Neate, *Twelve Bar Blues*

⊕ Prelude	1790-1806	Africa (Maponda, Zambawi) ➤ New Orleans, Louisiana
Chorus 1 (Book One: Polyphony)		
♯ Ch. 1-4 (I)	1899-1911	US (Mount Marter, Louisiana)
⊕ Ch. 5-6 (IV)	1998	Africa (Zimindo, Zambawi)
♯ Ch. 7-8 (I)	1912-1915	US (Mount Marter/New Orleans)
➔ Ch. 9-10 (V)	1998	GB/US (London/New York)
♯ Ch. 11-12 (I)	1917-1920	US (Mount Marter, Louisiana)
Chorus 2 (Book Two: Dissonance)		
➔ Ch. 1-4 (I)	[1968-]1998	[GB (London)] US (NY/Chicago)
⊕ Ch. 5-6 (IV)	1998	Africa (Zimindo, Zambawi)
➔ Ch. 7-8 (I)	1998	US (New Orleans, Louisiana)
♯ Ch. 9-10 (V)	1920-1924	US (Mount Marter, Louisiana)
➔ Ch. 11-12 (I)	1998-1999	US/GB (New Orleans/London)
♯ Coda	1926	US (New York)

The novel opens with a prelude entitled "Because stories are forgotten." The scene is the Land of the Moon (⊕), a province of that region in central southern Africa which will later accommodate Neate's fictional Zambawi and the historical Zimbabwé. There, at the turn from the 18th to the 19th century, the gifted singer Zike and his friend Mutela, a future *zakulu* (witch doctor), compete for the attention of the beautiful Vacheke, the chieftain's daughter whose head is crowned by an extravagant head-dress of sea shells. The conflict ends when Mutela abuses his magical powers to spirit Zike away to the west coast of Africa where he is captured by slavers. After surviving the notorious middle passage Zike is sold to the Frederick family in New Orleans who christen him Ezekiel Black. Shortly after marrying Elizabeth Langford, a fellow slave from the Gold Coast who carries his child, Zike dies, and, as the narrator points out, his wife does not keep her promise of telling the story of Zike, Vacheke and Mutela to their child, a story which, it can be added, also comprises Vacheke's suicide by drowning herself in a lake and Mutela's future life as a *zakulu* and unhappy marriage – as the son of a *zakulu* he was not allowed to marry a chief's daughter anyway – which nevertheless produces a son who keeps up the dynasty of witch doctors. The prelude ends with the following enigmatic comments by the narrator:

So the story of Zike, Mutela and Vacheke was lost to history – only preserved in the imprecise metaphors of a folk song in the Land of the Moon – and the debt went unpaid for the best part of two centuries. But fate is a perverse trickster with no sense of timing. Catch his eyes and you can bet he'll reel you in like a fish on a line. Even after 200 years. (12)

And this is where music comes in: in addition to its obvious but frequently useless attractiveness in everyday life as epitomized by Zike's fate it is also a medium of

preservation which, however, condenses human experiences to the point of unintelligibility.⁸

After this prelude, the two main parts (choruses) of the novel, which consist of twelve chapters each, artfully interweave three stories. The most prominent of these stories, which is harmonically associated with the tonic (I) in the first chorus and the dominant (V) in the second before it finds its conclusion in the coda, covers the life story of the legendary trumpet player Fortis James 'Lick' Holden from 1899 to 1926 in eleven (i.e., 8 + 2 + 1) chapters (♯). Lick Holden is a late descendant of Zike's, a 'six-out-of-seven negro' who never made it beyond New Orleans and into jazz history, but at his best in the early 1920s he was well able to hold his own against Louis Armstrong (with whom, the novel insists, he played for a while in the days before recording). This story skilfully merges elements from Armstrong's biography⁹ with Buddy Bolden's legendary status as 'the first jazz man' (cf. Williams 1976, 1-25). It establishes Lick Holden convincingly as a character taking his place right next to Bolden, Armstrong and many other jazz greats (many of whom turn up, like Louis Armstrong himself, in the novel), a character unjustly forgotten by the records of cultural history because he didn't make the transition from the "Music for All Occasions" characteristic of New Orleans (*That's Jazz*, 77) to jazz as a recorded form of entertainment and, later, art as it evolved in Chicago and New York from the 1920s onward: On a more personal note, Lick's love for his music is complemented by his love for his half-sister Sylvie Black, who is no blood relation and who, as a *quadrone* with no more than one quarter of 'black' inside her, ironically appears to be white in spite of her name, which helps her a lot in earning her upkeep as a prostitute. Sylvie's special qualities as a singer of blues and spirituals, however, seems to testify to her black soul, and this is the special bond between Sylvie and Lick. It is a pity, then, that fate does not condone their relationship and has no ear for the outstanding contribution the pair of them could have made to jazz history: they lose track of each other fairly early on, and when they finally come together in 1925, Lick is brutally murdered by Sylvie's pimp, a descendant of the slaver family Frederick.

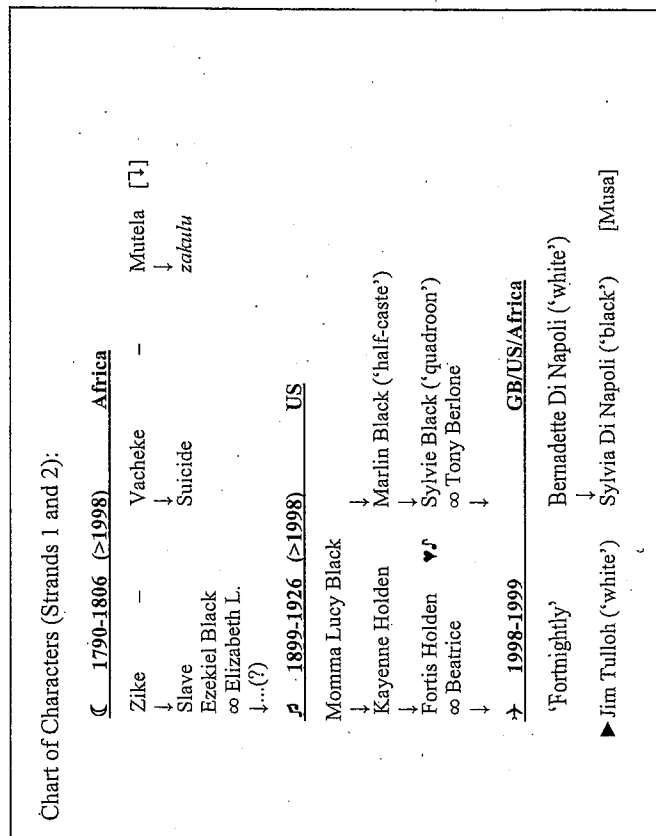
However, the reader learns about this tragic outcome only at the end of a complementary second strand of narrative, which is associated with the dominant (V) in the first chorus and with the tonic (I) in the second. These ten (2 + 8) chapters tell the story of Sylvia Di Napoli, a retired prostitute from London at the end of the twentieth century (➔). After a life which has so far been determined by the disturbing fact that Sylvia Di Napoli, whose family background seemed to be purely Italian, is 'coffee-coloured,' she decides to search for her origins in 1998. In this she is aided by the young white Englishman Jim Tulloh, a global drifter, whose life story has parallels to Patrick Neate's, and who has already figured prominently in *Musungu*

⁸ On the other hand, slavery is an acknowledged component of the (pre-)history of jazz.

⁹ In his acknowledgements Neate points particularly "to Laurence Bergren for his remarkable biography of Louis Armstrong" (n.p.). For Armstrong's own autobiographical writings beyond the well-known *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (1954) cf. Brothers 1999, an edition which nicely illustrates the idiosyncratic oral thrust of Armstrong's writing. In particular Armstrong's 1969 account of "Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, La., the Year of 1907" (Brothers 1999, 3-36) seems to have influenced Neate's description of Lick Holden's youth.

Jim and the Great Chief Tuloko. Sylvia and Jim meet accidentally on the plane to New York, and, having nothing else to do and quite fascinated by her, Jim decides to accompany Sylvia on her quest which will lead them from London via New York and Chicago to New Orleans. There they finally meet the old blues man 'Fortnightly' who turns out to be the son of Lick Holden and his wife Beatrice. As it happens, Fortnightly has done some research on the life of his legendary father in the 1930s which enables him to solve the riddle of Sylvia's skin colour. It turns out that Sylvia is with Lick's child when he is murdered. Shortly after his death, she marries the Italian Tony Berlone in New York, and is lucky that her daughter Bernadette is as white as her mother and thus accepted by her husband. Bernadette Berlone later marries an Italian called Luca Di Napoli, and to their astonishment which leads ultimately to the family's relocation to London, their daughter Sylvia turns out to be 'coffee-coloured.'

The personell of the preceding strands is summed up in the following chart:



Now obviously it is not very likely that a woman in search of her origins could just take a plane to America only to find at the end of a long odyssey in an Irish pub in New Orleans the one run-down blues man who can tell her about her identity. Neate's novel knows this, too, and accounts for it in its third strand of narrative. This third strand, which is associated in both choruses of the novel with the subdominant (IV)

and thus covers only four chapters, takes place in late twentieth-century Zambawi in Africa, i.e. in the region in which the novel located the origins of its plot in the prelude (C). Somewhat parallel to its harmonic function as subdominant this strand functions as an integrating subtext for the two main strands of narrative by linking both to their mutually constitutive past. The main protagonist of this third strand is Chief Tongo Kalulu, a direct descendent of the line which also brought forth princess Vacheke at the end of the 18th century. Tongo, who has a degree in African history, is disturbed by the tensions between his traditional rôle as Chief and the post-colonial present of his country, and in this respect *Twelve Bar Blues* reaches the same satirical sharpness as its predecessor *Musungu Jim and the Great Chief Tuloko*. On a more private note, however, Tongo is temporarily dissatisfied with his marriage. He is seriously tempted by an attractive professor of archeology from Chicago who calls herself Olurumbunmi Dorojowu. 'Bunimi' asks him for an export permit for a head-dress of sea shells which she found in a dried lake and points out that her find would spectacularly vindicate her theory that central African tribes had far-reaching connections of trade in the late 18th century. As every reader of the novel knows, Professor Dorojowu's theory is correct, at least as far as the fictional world of *Twelve Bar Blues* is concerned. There can be no doubt that the sea shell head-dress is Vacheke's, described in the prelude as "imported from many miles away" (3), and it continues to fulfill its integrative narrative function in the shape of the folk song from the Land of the Moon mentioned at the end of the prelude. This folk song plays an ever increasing rôle in the dreams and visions of Tongo and his *zakalu* Musa, until it unfolds the mythical dimension of the novel as formulated in the words of the song, which Musa translates as follows: "The boy with the voice sounding over the water sings meanings that no person hears. And the girl wearing seashells, the greatest chief's daughter, has drowned in a lake of her tears" (327). So it comes as quite a surprise when, at the end of the novel, scientific tests date the head-dress to the 1920s so that Professor Dorojowu's theory is shattered (388). At this point, however, the characters and the reader are so much caught up in the story that they would tend to accept Sylvia Di Napoli's rejoinder to Professor Dorojowu's morose observation "So the facts don't fit the story. So two years' work goes right down the drain." "What have the facts got to do with a story?" Sylvia asks, and goes on: "Who's to say you're wrong? Who's to say there isn't another head-dress out there? Truth doesn't prove anything but itself. Stories are about people." To which Bunimi drily replies: "I guess so [...] Anyway, since when did an archeologist let the facts get in the way of a good story?" (388)

As it turns out, there are no loose ends in the mythical universe of *Twelve Bar Blues*. Just as Lick is murdered by a descendant of the owner of his ancestor, so Bunmi Dorojowu is actually Coretta Pink, the granddaughter of one of Lick Holden's sisters and thus a cousin of Sylvia Di Napoli's. Musa, finally, the descendant of Mutela, the evil *zakalu*, is the one who sets out to pay the debt of his ancestor. Driven by increasingly disturbing visions and dreams he uses his magical and spiritual powers to meet Sylvia and Jim in Chicago, and the three of them continue Sylvia's search until Musa identifies Fortnightly as the answer to Sylvia's questions

at exactly the moment when Jim Tulloh realizes that he has fallen in love with Sylvia Di Napoli only to spoil everything by improvising a blues driven by self-pity and jealousy, a blues which, the novel makes this very clear, is antithetical to the spirit of the blues in its genuine forms. However, both the outcome of this "White Boy Blues" (Jim gets Sylvia in the end) and Musa's role as a narrative *deus ex machina* testify to the power of music and narrative which will be dealt with in the next section.

3. The Power of Music and Narrative

The preceding analysis illustrated the ways in which Patrick Neate's novel *Twelve Bar Blues* utilizes the blues form in order to integrate various time levels and strands of action.¹⁰ Against this musical background, the relationship between these strands can be construed in terms of traditional Western functional harmony.¹¹ The 1920s plot about Lick Holden and Sylvie Black on the one hand and the 1990s plot about Sylvia Di Napoli and Jim Tulloh on the other are caught up in a reciprocal dominant-tonic relation to each other while both are under the influence of a subdominant reaching back from the late 20th to the 18th century and out to Africa, thus embedding both Lick's tragic search for fulfilment and Sylvia's successful search for her origins in a long-term historical perspective which makes both the tragic and the happy ending appear to be contingent and historically determined at the same time. Against this uncontainable complexity even the blues loses its integrative power: The novel ends with a coda which picks up the 1920s strand right after Lick's death. In this coda, whose title "Because stories are untold" complements the prelude's "Because stories are forgotten," the narrator proceeds to construct the final chapters in the life of Toothless Naps, Lick's friend and protector, from what little evidence there is – which means that the coda is largely based on conjecture and construction. For a long time Naps, who really likes Lick's music though he himself is an unmusical as can be, has managed to protect Lick through his position of authority based on physical strength and "a way with words," but he turns out to be powerless against the mob, gathered by Johnny Frederick, that beats Lick to death. He avenges Lick, however, by bestially murdering Johnny Frederick later, and sets out but fails to find Sylvia in New York. In an ironic final twist Toothless Naps is then killed in one of the territory skirmishes of gangland New York by Fabrizio Bertone, the brother of Sylvie Black's husband Tony Bertone, who at the time, unbeknown to Naps, takes care of Sylvie and her daughter after Tony's death. With this twist the novel picks up the final loose end of its arduous knot – Fabrizio Bertone will be contacted by Sylvia Di Napoli and Jim Tulloh seventy years later – and displays an ironic awareness of its own constructedness which acknowledges the proverbial insight that 'life is

¹⁰ For a general approach to the link between blues and jazz on the one hand and narrative on the other in terms of their respective handling of time cf. Rausser 2000.

¹¹ With its mixture of explicit thematizations and imitations of the blues form on the one hand and implicit imitations on the level of voice, tone, attitude etc. the novel covers a wide range of the forms of musico-literary intermediality catalogued in Wolf 1999, 51-70.

stranger than fiction.' Accordingly, all narratives are constructions which have to hold their own against the twists of fate.

After all this, the novel ends with the following words which combine determination and contingency by short-circuiting the closure-oriented thrust of narrative with the open-endedness of the blues:

So fate spins its pattern like a spider spins a web. And a hornet scoffs until he's stuck fast and then he's too busy saying prayers to his maker to be cursing bad luck. Most likely, a careless duster will take down the web before too long and fate will begin to spin again, in a similar corner of a similar room, a similar pattern but no two webs are ever the same. So we shake our heads at the story of Toothless Naps and we can't help but comment of fate's taste for an ironic twist. But humanity's begging you, though you don't hear it: don't restrict the untold story of a flawed hero to one meagre adjective. Please. Because the tale of Toothless Naps is the coda to the most beautiful twelve bar blues that Lick Holden ever played and it fills our guts with an emptiness to swell souls. And the horn hits the final note and flattens it blue. And the song is ever incomplete and it leaves us wanting more. (401)

With this ending, the novel stages a typical blues coda, just like the instrumental one in Bessie Smith's "Foolish Man Blues," in narrative. Now, if the blues is as prominent as that in the novel's overall design, the question arises to what extent other constitutive features beyond the twelve bar form are worked into it: What about rhythm, melody and timbre? In other words: what about the (singing/telling) voice of the novel?

The story of *Twelve Bar Blues* is told by an 'invisible' authorial narrator in a seemingly oral and casual way.¹² As the passage just quoted illustrates, this mode of narration creates a sense of community between the narrator and an implied audience ("we shake our heads," "we can't help," "it fills our guts") based on the simulation of a dialogue between narrator and reader ("humanity's begging you," "Please"). At the heart of this implied narrator-reader-interaction is the precarious relation between a fate that can never be foretold even if one acknowledges that it is largely historically determined on the one hand ("fate's taste for an ironic twist") and the benefit of hindsight employed by narrators and offered to listeners and readers on the other. The emergence of a surplus value of meaning in narrative is explicitly marked by the narrator. Phrases like "Truth be told, [...]," "Truth is, [...]" "Now the fact of the matter is [...]" or "Fact is, [...]" abound throughout the text and establish themselves, as it were, as the most prominent leitmotif of the novel. However, this celebration of the potential for meaning and truth inherent to the act of story/telling is framed by the insight that the truth of a story is basically only the truth of that particular story while other stories might present a different version or remain forgotten or untold altogether, as the prelude and the coda of the novel remind the reader. Thus, in typically postmodernist fashion, the omniscient narrator in *Twelve Bar Blues* employs his privileged position and plays with the limits of omniscience at the same time. This results in a mode of narration that might be called 'reflexive omniscience,' a mode

¹² On the alternative tradition of oral and aural (as opposed to written and visual) forms from the perspective of mainstream Western culture, and its importance in African American literature (and culture) cf. Jones 1991.

that stages its own narrativity as a medium for producing knowledge and truth in communication. Accordingly, the narrator in *Twelve Bar Blues* employs a retrospective perspective in order to pit individual and collective horizons of experience and knowledge against each other in a process of meaning production which acknowledges its own contingency but nevertheless affirms its informational and emotional validity. It displays, in short, just the kind of rebellious fatalism spiced up with a dose of humour that was identified as characteristic of the blues earlier in this essay.

The integration of various strands of narrative into the novel illustrates not only the irredeemable contingency of each story (which could also have been told differently, or at another point in time, or somewhere else to someone else, or not at all), but also that each story has a communicative dimension unsolvably linked to the specific pragmatic context of its telling. This communicative dimension is most strikingly realized when Jim Tulloh re-capitulates Sylvia Di Napoli's life story for Boomer, a black pastor who might know something about her family background. Jim's version of her story manages to instil a sense of the meaningfulness of her life into Sylvia for the very first time:

As Jim spoke, Sylvia raised her head a little. She couldn't believe how much he remembered of what she's told him. Had anybody – anybody – ever listened to another as generously as that? [...] It was strange to hear someone else recount her life story. It was as if the various twists and turns suddenly slotted into place like the jigsaw chapters of a book. And, for the first time, she felt a sense of inexorable progress towards a conclusion, a denouement that was already written, committed to the page, waiting for her to choose to read it. For a brief moment, Sylvia felt comfortable with who she was. Or comfortable with the question anyway, because she was sure it had a definite answer, however difficult. But then Jim had finished her story and the pastor spoke up and the moment was lost.

The church was as silent as religion. (257)

Stories, one can clearly see here, are a medium for negotiating experience in the process of communication, and it is this feeding of experience into communication which forms and stabilizes it so that it is re-presented for a more detached view – and even more so when the re-presentation is performed by other people. The novel, it becomes very clear from the many ways in which it thematises and stages it, values this kind of pragmatically embedded life-world story-telling very highly, but it finds an even greater significance in those cultural practices which mediate between individual experiences and larger frames of meaning production, and the novel's practice of choice in this respect is the blues which combines the promise of transference ascribed to music with the promise of meaning constructed in pragmatic contexts provided by narrative. On the whole, the novel is also full of enthusiasm for the purer forms of musical transcendence as experienced by musicians and audiences alike¹³ and frequently associated with religion,¹⁴ and one of Lick Holden's rare

¹³ Throughout the novel the cultural validity of music as such is presented in terms of sexual abandon (24), escape route (35, 45), safety ring (52), transcending contradictions (56-7), love (62), nature (66), food (106-7), its unifying power ("the tonk was just one body" 112) and pure emotionality as represented by laughing and crying (391).

¹⁴ Most clearly so in the words of Professor Hoop, the band leader at the Mount Marter Correctional School for Negro Boys (clear traces of Louis Armstrong's biography here) where Lick learns to

moments of fulfilment and happiness arrives when he manages to embody his innermost soul in his performance of the spiritual "On the Far Banks of Jordan" (which he associates with Sylvie, with whom he is, as it turns out but as he doesn't know yet, to reunite shortly).¹⁵

Lick played with his eyes tight shut. He played until his head was full of joy and sadness, his chops hummed with anger and sympathy, his heart pumped with love and hate, and his groin ached with lust and revulsion. He took that simple melody and he twisted its hope inside out [...] He upturned its melancholy until the clarity of its minor key sang hope to the desperate. And his brow was sweating buckets and his lungs burst with exertion and his prayer joints shook with emotion until he didn't know where he was or who he was or when he was no more. Lick felt his music transcend his person and he wasn't sure what he felt but he knew that he was more than a disempowered, dislocated, disrespected third-generation slave nigger! Or maybe that's exactly what he was but he claimed such identity as his own! (338)

However, the novel is equally clear about the limits of the power of music,¹⁶ as Lick's death brutally illustrates, and with its down-to-earth attitude the novel manages to avoid "the ways jazz was mythologized, colonialized, demonized, and ultimately neutralized by white Americans and Europeans," in short: the pitfalls of "the white invention of jazz as a subject and object" (Meltzer 1993, 4). Instead, it is the situationally grounded and experience-saturated speaking (or singing) position of the blues which is combined with the convention of omniscient narration as established in modern fiction from the 18th century onwards. And it is this speaking position which is enlisted in a project of making the narrative achievements of modern fiction in its post-modernist pluralist guise available for each and every reader's project of making sense of his or her life.

This project of transgressing the boundaries of fiction is quite literally staged in the novel through the rather arbitrary insertion of Jim Tulloh, a character who has no link whatsoever with the otherwise intricately woven net of characters except for his chance meeting with Sylvia Di Napoli. What is more, Jim Tulloh clearly points, via the autobiographical elements in *Mzungu Jim and the Great Chief Tuloko*, to the author figure Patrick Neate, whose telling of the blues in the novel *Twelve Bar Blues* is then ironised by Jim's "poor (and abusive) white-boy blues" (333), which is, and this is very untypical for the blues, full of self-pity:

play the cornet: "To hold a cornet, [...] it's like holding God hisself in your hands [...] 'Cos when God speaks, he speaks with the sound of the horn [...] So when you take up the horn, you talkin' God's language. You talkin' directly to God" (50).

¹⁵ It seems, then, that his performance conjures her up, as it were, just like narrative can sometimes make things happen. However, it seems highly ironic that if you look for this traditional spiritual, which serves as a marker of Sylvie's inner blackness in the novel and which is centred around the symbol of the river Jordan (which is frequently evoked in spirituals and central to their theology, cf. Lehmann 1965, 309-13), on the internet, you find that it has been famously recorded by the (white!) Carter family and by Johnny Cash and June Carter and that a (white!) country and bluegrass musician called Terry Smith claims to be the composer (!) of a smoothed-out country version of the song.

¹⁶ Cf. Lick's despair after the deaths of his sisters and his mother: "But Lick didn't trust in God no more: not even the God that spoke through his cornet" (102).

cause he comes to play in the Irish Pub in New Orleans where Sylvia's search ends every two weeks. It is Fortnightly who fills Sylvia, Jim and Musa in on the complete story of Lick Holden as previously presented to the reader by the narrator, and it is Fortnightly who supplements the ending of this story, i.e. Lick's death as reconstructed by him in the late 1930s (♯). "How do you come to know all this?" Sylvia asks him, and his laconic answer is: "'Cause I made it my business to know" (370). Fortnightly's mixture of personal – "he was my pappy an' jus' 'cos I never met him don't change that" (371) – and 'larger' motivations – "See, Lick Holden was the greatest horn man ever lost to history" (370) – is well representative of the narrative impulse as described and staged in *Twelve Bar Blues* at large. What is more, the conclusion of Lick's story at the end of the novel is presented partly by Fortnightly and partly by the narrator, and their ways of speaking begin to overlap, especially with regard to their shared predilection for phrases like "Fact is, [...]" or "Truth be told, [...]" and with regard to their obsession with the phrase "lost to history," which is, as Sylvia points out, "the old man's favourite phrase" (374), but was also introduced programmatically by the narrator at the end of the prelude (12). And finally there is the striking fact that passages from Fortnightly's later story are very suddenly introduced in an unannounced flashforward in italics at the beginning of chapter 4 in part 2 (cf. 247 ↔ 365). This passage definitely stands out not only as a demonstration of the power of omniscient narration but also as an important meta-poetical statement on the musicalization of narrative in terms of the blues at the heart of the novel:

The old man was certainly fond of digression, like a jazz trumpeter that gets wrapped up in the improvisational potential of a specific phrase; something that never happened to the original blues men, like Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong (before '38 anyways) an' Lick Holden, of course. Y'all don't know me. Y'all don't know nothing about 'ne cept I'm the one gonna finish this story and you spect it to sound as clear as the music from this ol' horn [Lick's cornet, which Fortnightly has inherited, but cannot play, becoming a self-accompanying blues singer and guitarist instead]. But let me tell you somethin', sugar pie. In fact, let me tell you three things about stories because there ain't nothin' so damn complicated as a story (except the jazz and I's not stupid enough to think you understand that any). (247-8)

The three things one needs to know about stories are the following: 1) "There ain't no story so important as the one you tells about yourself." 2) "No story[s] set in stone [...] If them pages restrict a story, then there ain't nothin' restrict it so bad as your own mind." And 3) "Last thing I tell you is that stories don't have no beginning, middle an' end [...] Fact is that stories have a vibe jus' like love" (247-8). Stories, like the blues, it becomes clear here, should be an essential part of the practice of life. They should mediate between personal and other dimensions of experience and knowledge, and they should be ever-changing and mutable without becoming 'wrapped up in the improvisational potential of a specific phrase' as, for example, more evolved forms of jazz or, by implication, more evolved forms of narrative, like the novel in its more extreme modernist and postmodernist variants.

Patrick Neate's novel *Twelve Bar Blues* puts this musical poetics of narrative into practice. Telling stories, like singing the blues, is to a certain extent an intentional act, and in this sense the power of music and narrative is the power of the singer or

I came here to lose myself but I found someone else.
Now she ran off with a witchdoctor and I'm left on the shelf.
Woh yeah! I got the identity-crisis blues!
When you can't forget yourself, it surely turns you to the booze!
For the first time in my life I figure that I'm in love,
But my baby's a dirty whore. Lord Jesus! Heavens above!
Woh yeah. She'll fuck anyone who'll pay!
But when it comes to me? I just don't get no play!
Yeah she a low-down hooker! Not even much of a looker!
Kind of elegant, I guess! But way past her best!
False eyebrows, lashes and nails! Probably got false breasts as well!
I can't help but love her! But she's old enough to be my mother! (320-1)

On the other hand, however, one must not forget that Jim has a very constructive role to play for the denouement of Silvia Di Napoli's story. So in all his ambiguity Jim Tulloh can be read as a substitute for the author within the fictional world, a substitute which facilitates the situational grounding of the twelve bar blues told by Patrick Neate in his particular life-story with its experiences in Zimbabwe as more obviously referenced in *Musungu Jim*.

Then again, while the authorial narrator is explicitly linked to the novel's empirical author through the character of Jim Tulloh, his identity is also de-centred towards other characters in the novel such as Musa, whose *deus-ex-machina* appearance is absolutely essential for the happy ending of the novel's late-20th-century strand (→) but short on probability. In a way, his former meeting with Jim Tulloh in the days of *Musungu Jim* only serves to illustrate that his spiritual capabilities as a *zakutu* are very much caught up in the fictional universe created by the author Patrick Neate, who in turn uses Musa to embody the seemingly magical powers of narrative in his novels. Be that as it may, without Musa and his spiritual and magical powers Sylvia Di Napoli's search for her origins would never have been successful, and Musa himself illustrates the fundamental contingency of all events outside of narrative with his story about the undistinguishable twins and chief's sons called Fate and Choice (cf. 288-290), which, according to him, is a traditional story, albeit rarely told because the *zakutus* "worry that the people will be confused [...]" (290, italics in original).

In spite of the fact that Musa's allegorical treatment of the central concerns of Neate's novel can easily be positioned by the reader as part of the Africa-strand of the narrative (C), it is also separated from the main text by the use of italics so that its paradigmatic status is clearly emphasised. If, then, the use of italics indicates passages of fundamental importance to the overall outlook of *Twelve Bar Blues*, two further instances merit closer attention. The first of these instances is the scene in which Sylvia Di Napoli tells Jim Tulloh her life-story in an Irish Pub in New York City (159-67), and it is obvious that this scene is necessary for Jim's later re-telling of her story, which, as mentioned above, serves as the novel's prime example for the pragmatically embedded life-world story-telling it values so much. More importantly, however, a third passage of this kind blurs the borders between the narrator of the novel and Fortis Holden, Jr., the old black (!) blues singer called 'Fortnightly' be-

teller to open up possibilities of communication, action, and attaining knowledge. And this includes a white author writing about 'black' topics and reflecting upon problems of authenticity in the process – the novel's insistence on the proliferation of Irish Pubs in all parts of the world is just one symptom of this engagement. On the other hand, however, narrative, like music, is a medium beyond the teller's or singer's intentionality, a medium which opens up and, at the same time, delimits the field of 'sayable' and 'thinkable' and 'experienceable' things according to its own dynamics. Ideally, then, stories should fulfill the paradoxical requirements which are part and parcel of the close ties between music and storytelling in oral cultures, but which can only tentatively be transposed to the medium of written stories (cf. Jimoh 2002): they should combine closure with openness, overview with involvement, and an awareness of their own contingency with narrative authority. While the genre of the novel in its present state, i.e. after 300 years of continuous evolution, opens up a field of the greatest possible freedom from conventional restraints, Neate's *Twelve Bar Blues* nevertheless insists on a pragmatic grounding of narrative flights of fancy. "[W]hat good is a perfect solution in an imperfect world?" Musa asks at one stage, and this question captures the balancing act of the novel between aesthetic criteria like formal complexity and closure on the one hand and pragmatic criteria like mutability and open-endedness on the other quite nicely. It is, however, a successful balancing act which never loses sight of the one prerequisite for both narrative and musical relevance beneath the spheres of cultural specialization and elevation: accessibility. And so the final sentence of the novel can also serve as the final sentence of this essay: "And the song is ever incomplete and it leaves us wanting more" (401).

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