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LITTLE WHEEL BLUES

John Lee Hooker, the Eisenhower Administration and African Decolonization

During the second term of the Eisenhower administration, American officials and statesmen confronted the phenomenon of African decolonization. Because they were more concerned with the continued economic recovery of Europe and curtailing communism, members of the Eisenhower administration feared that African decolonization would wreak havoc with their carefully orchestrated plans to revitalize and defend the "Free World." The execution of their approach to decolonization, either through direct statements, international exhibits, economic support or diplomatic adventures, calls to mind the courtship blues of John Lee Hooker's *Little Wheel*.

This article explores the attempted seduction of Africans by the Eisenhower White House. It uses the Blues to gauge America's conduct during this watershed period. The lyrics from *Little Wheel* serve as markers of Eisenhower administration goals in this regard. The song sheds light on a powerful but largely obscured element of American foreign policy: Whiteness. The piece is divided into five parts: Part I, a brief introduction to the Blues, John Lee Hooker, and the relevance of the Blues to the field of foreign relations; Part II delineates the Eisenhower administration's views on African independence; Part III examines the Eisenhower administration's multi-faceted response to African decolonization; Part IV provides an analysis of the impact of Whiteness on U.S. diplomacy, with special emphasis on the ideas of White innocence, Black erasure and Black self-abnegation; and Part V offers a summation of the argument.

***Saying Things You Can't Say Any Other Way*¹**

The Blues is a uniquely African American cultural form. Born in Africa, the Blues slowly emerged from the co-mingling of marginalization, joy in spite of pain, love in spite of heartbreak, and righteous indignation among enslaved

1. Barbara Dane, "The Meaning of the Blues," *Downbeat* (March 31, 1960).

Blacks and their socially dead descendants.² The Blues in its more well-known form grew from the soil of the Mississippi Delta.³ Oddly, today it is approaching the revered status of a *classical* art and many of its contemporary practitioners are White.⁴

The Blues transcends the limited characterizations attributed to it in popular culture and early scholarly work.⁵ While it is tempting to interpret the Blues simply as expressions of heartache, loss, or unrequited love, the Blues is political [Charters 123]. The Blues provided Black people a means of expression that protected them from the repressive manifestations of White Supremacy. Yet, when Big Mama Thornton sang that “Blues is Like a Woman,” many consumers of the form detached the meaning of the song from its clear racial, gender, and class based politics in favor of a reductionist, romanticized notion of emotion and nature.⁶ Although much of recorded Blues mined the themes present in contemporary popular music, it was about much more than *lost love* [Lomax 52; Russell 8-9].⁷

More recent research illustrates the critical foundation of the Blues. Work song Blues were more than ways for convicts to pass the time during brutal work; they provided incarcerated men with the opportunity to communicate about former loves, complain about prison conditions, or plan escapes.⁸ Blues sung by ordinary folk can be similarly subversive. In an interview with singer Charles Haffer, Jr., writer Alan Lomax recalled that Haffer’s song *Titanic* was a means of ridiculing White arrogance: “The

2. Here, I borrow the concept of *social death* (to describe a person existing outside the recognized rules of society) from sociologist Orlando Patterson. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982). As to the African roots of the Blues, see, i.e., Gerhard Kubik, *African & the Blues* (Jackson, MS.: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Keith Shadwick, *Blues: Keeping the Faith* (Edison, NJ.: Chartwell Books, 1998); Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998); Samuel Charters, *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* (Boston and London: Marion Boyars, 1981).

3. Tony Russell, *The Blues: From Robert Johnson to Robert Cray* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997); Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

4. Peter Watrous, “The Blues: A Cousin of Mozart?,” *New York Times* (February 7, 1993), 25.

5. Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London & New York: Verso Books, 1998), 28.

6. See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); as to the assertion of the Blues as a general site for resistance to racial and class oppression, see Woods, 72-120; Lomax, 66-68, 93-98, 368.

7. See also *Rollin’ and Tumblin’: The Postwar Blues Guitarists*, edited by Jas Obrecht (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 2000), 284-287; George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 119-126; *The Blues: Jazz Series*, vol. 2, Folkways Records, Album No. Foll. 55 (1950).

8. Charles K. Wolf and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1992); John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folksongs As Sung by Leadbelly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936); Woods, 93-94.

unsinkable *Titanic* is just another white folks' brag. The rich folks who could afford the luxurious passage pay for their sins of greed and pride" [Lomax 53].

More than just entertainment, the Blues serves as an epistemological system which allows African Americans, particularly those in poor and working-class communities, to understand their reality in the face of constant scrutiny and attack and to challenge power relations which effected their daily lives. It is by nature oppositional, yet performed in ways that concealed its revolutionary core [Woods 25-39, 91].⁹ As a result, the Blues provides Black people with a means of communicating things, which cannot be said directly to, or in the presence of, White people.

One of the most revered Blues artists is John Lee Hooker. Hooker was born in the Mississippi Delta, sang gospel in his father's church and learned about the Blues from his stepfather. After running away from home, Hooker moved to Detroit after a brief stop in Cincinnati. His first hit songs, like *Boogie Chillen*, reminded fans and peers alike of the Delta blues of the 1920s. In 1957, after recording on several labels, Hooker recorded *Little Wheel* on Vee Jay Records [Obrecht 284-285].¹⁰

Although Hooker was known for his sparse, often formless, storytelling style, *Little Wheel* is a structured courtship ballad. In the song, the singer appeals to an unidentified woman who he knows is in a relationship with another man. Because the "other man" is absent, the singer pleads with the woman to accept his romantic overtures and enter into a temporary relationship with him. Not only does this singer promise the woman more fun and pleasure than she's ever had, he promises to act tactfully. The song stands as testament to the often one-sided basis of masculine romantic banter. *Little Wheel* and the Blues are apropos for exploring international relations.

Many scholars and former statesmen have written about the often inherently delicate nature of diplomacy.¹¹ In public settings, state officials engaged in international relations tend to interact with finesse and aplomb, mindful of the rituals and customs of perceived or potential allies. This is particularly true if the diplomats' goals are at odds. The Blues, which took shape in response to disparities in power and competition among various constituencies for precious material and psychic resources, provides an ideal lens through which to assess U.S. foreign policy. This music which emerged from

9. See also Franklin Rosemont, "Preface," in Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (New York: Da Capo, 1975), 7-8.

10. John Lee Hooker, *The Vee Jay Years, 1955-1964* [audio recording].

11. See, e.g., Walter LaFeber, *America in the Cold War: Twenty Years of Revolution and Response, 1947-1967* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969), 117-121, 152-155; Lucius D. Clay, *Decision in Germany* (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1950), 39-40.

a social reality in which Black people “faced death from working too hard and death from not working hard enough,” is the perfect medium for exploring American diplomacy on a continent where the same could be said for its inhabitants. [Woods 94] After all, the language of diplomacy is a discreet dialect aimed at expressing that which cannot be said any other way.

Born Under a Bad Sign¹²

Decolonization is best described as the process of an indigenous people losing the formal trappings of colonial domination. On the African continent, the process was negotiated by both peaceful and military means.¹³ Albert King’s verse about being cursed since birth exemplified Washington’s concern with African decolonization.¹⁴

For many Africans, decolonization meant an end to tyranny. However, to members of the American diplomatic and intelligence corps, decolonization was a means to a different end. Even as the Eisenhower administration rhetorically supported decolonization, its members worried that decolonization would prove to be a disaster. The impression in Washington was that Africans neither understood the responsibilities of self-governance, the importance of rebuilding Western Europe, nor the complexities of a world divided between capitalist and communist blocs. It is this bittersweet melange of global and racial factors which served as the backdrop for the Eisenhower administration’s *Little Wheel Blues*.

Although the Eisenhower administration’s approach to decolonization differed from that of earlier American regimes, the roots of its dilemma stretched back to World War II and the alleged non-White need for Western tutelage.¹⁵ Africa’s decolonization troubled President Eisenhower because, like his predecessors, he believed that Africans were unprepared for independence. Yet early planning documents reveal that the White House was

12. Booker T. Jones and William Bell, *Born Under a Bad Sign*, performed by Albert King, from the album *New Orleans Heat*, Tomato Records (1978).

13. The “peaceful” transition from colonial to independent state for Ghana is contrasted with the bloody revolutions in Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Angola, and (to a lesser degree) Kenya and the Congo. See, e.g., Basil Davidson, *No Fist is Big Enough to Hide the Sky: The Liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde* (London: Zed Press, 1981); Mustafah Dhada, *Warriors at Work: How Guinea Was Really Set Free* (Niwot, CO.: University Press of Colorado, 1993); John A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution* (Cambridge, MA.: M.I.T. Press, 1978); George S. Mwase, *Strike a Blow and Die: A Narrative of Race Relations in Colonial Africa* (Cambridge, MA.: M.I.T. Press, 1967); Cora A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women, The Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1992).

14. Jones and Bell, *Born Under a Bad Sign* (in which King sings “I can’t read/ Haven’t learned to write/ My whole life has been one big fight/ Born under a bad sign/ I been down since I begin to crawl/ If it wasn’t for bad luck, I would have no luck at all”).

concerned that America risked having Africa pull away from the capitalist camp if it did not help dissolve formal colonial relationships.¹⁶ Instead of openly acquiescing to imperial interests, Eisenhower hoped to forge a consensus with European powers to proceed cooperatively toward the abolition of colonialism.¹⁷

President Eisenhower and his advisors generally frowned upon non-White nationalism, believing it to be disguised Communism or Communist-influenced.¹⁸ With specific regard to Africa, the President remarked that “the spirit of nationalism [...] resembled a torrent overrunning everything in its path, including, frequently, the best interests of those concerned.”¹⁹ As a result, Eisenhower administration policy aimed to openly champion decolonization while quietly fostering a transformation into a more palatable form of European control of African people.

Noting what they considered the “essential ties” between Europe and Africa, the drafters of National Security Council Memorandum 5719/1 recited America’s objective toward Africa: “that Africa South of the Sahara develop in an orderly manner towards self-government and independence in cooperation with the European powers now in control of large areas of the continent.”²⁰ The gist of the new approach would be to openly support independence while reminding Africans of the responsibilities of self-governance, directing emerging states back to their former European colonizers for

15. Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign policy, 1932-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 283; Xiaoyuan Liu, *A Partnership for Disorder: China, the United States, and Their Policies for the Postwar Disposition of the Japanese Empire, 1941-1945* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay, 1941-1945: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3-10, 91-94; Warren Kimball, *Forged in War: Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Second World War* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 198-199, 203, 304; Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 130, 45.

16. See, e.g., November 1955, “Psychological Aspects of United States Strategy: Source Book of Individual Papers,” White House Staff Secretary File, NSC Staff Papers, Executive Secretary Subject Files [this document was prepared by the Planning Coordinating Group, a collection of military, business, political, and academic elites, which included a young Henry Kissinger]; see a discussion of the relevant sections of National Security Council memorandum 162/2 in Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 213-214; John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 149-152.

17. Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 213-214; Thomas J. McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2nd printing, 1991), 55-57, 112-113; but cf., Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World: U.S. Foreign policy, 1945-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 53.

18. February 5, 1954 diary entry of phone conversation between Eisenhower and General Bedell Smith regarding military situation in Indo-China, Ann Whitman File, DDE Series.

19. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: The White House Years; A Personal Account, 1956-1961* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1965), 572.

20. August 23, 1957, National Security Council Memorandum 5719/1, OSANSA records, NSC Series, Policy Papers subseries, 2 (emphasis added).

economic aid, and addressing thorny political or development issues on a case-by-case basis through international organizations like the United Nations or the World Bank.

This flexible American policy would “encourage an orderly development of the whole area based on a mutually advantageous accommodation between nationalism and the metropolitan powers.”²¹ The United States viewed the African continent, given its incredible wealth of human and natural resources, as too important to lose to the Soviets [NSC 5719/1, 6-10]. One of the major worries was that Africans did not comprehend the seriousness of Soviet subversive abilities and objectives. This was one of the reasons the United States, in Vice President Richard Nixon’s words, needed the “African strongman” on its side.²² Therefore, the United States took a middle-of-the-road position that listed decidedly toward the European side of the road.

Let Me Be Your Little Wheel, Till Your Big Wheel Comes

The song *Little Wheel* is part seduction, obfuscation, and directive from the singer (subject) of the song to the object of his affection or, at least, attention. Hooker’s composition is played with the I-IV-V chord progression typically attributed to the Blues and in the standard 12-bar style representative of the most popular versions of post-war Blues. Accordingly, its structured pattern is well-suited for the conservative corps of crooners in the Eisenhower administration.

Little Wheel opens with a propulsive boogie-woogie bottom shaped by the bass and rhythm guitar players. The snapping back beat played by the drummer adds intensity to the infectious thum. The entire rhythm section builds to the chorded shout of Hooker’s guitar as he primes the listener for his vocals. The lilting piano riff which begins after Hooker starts singing provides both a poly-rhythmic compliment to the piece as well as a light counterpoint to soften the insistent groove. Hooker sings:

Let me be your little wheel, baby, Til your big wheel comes (2x)
Girl, I’ll do more rollin’ than your big wheel ever done

In much the same way, the Eisenhower administration’s rhetoric on decolonization combined a consistent back beat of American exceptionalism with a lyric of forthcoming freedom, racial harmony, and justice to craft a siren song

21. July 29, 1958 Memorandum from Lay to NSC regarding proposed revisions to 5719/1, OSANSA Records, NSC Series, Policy Papers subseries, 14-15.

22. March 31, 1960 Memorandum regarding 432nd NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 3.

which attempted to obscure Washington's beliefs and objectives. The American *song* suggested that Africa should align itself with the Free World until it was truly prepared for responsible self-governance and self-sufficiency.

First Verse

The Eisenhower White House trumpeted the notion that the U.S. was a beacon of freedom. The goal was to create the impression in Africa and the rest of the world that America was innately anti-colonial and acted only in the interests of global justice. Beginning in the Truman administration, the Justice Department intervened in major desegregation cases. In its brief siding with the plaintiffs in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, [347 U.S. 483 (1954)] Truman era lawyers argued that the Supreme Court should consider the issue of state-supported racially-segregated schools within the context of America's struggle with global communism.²³ The Eisenhower administration, which inherited the case, quickly broadcast internationally the Court's unanimous verdict making legally-segregated schools unconstitutional.²⁴

The implementation of the Court's ruling provided the White House with another "public relations" opportunity. Three years after the *Brown* decision, nine Black children attempted to register at Little Rock's Central High School, only to find that the governor of Arkansas dispatched the state militia to prevent them from entering the school. President Eisenhower avoided the ensuing constitutional crisis as long as he could. One of the factors which forced his hand was the plummeting respect for the United States in foreign opinion polls and editorials from Scandinavia to Fiji. When the President announced²⁵ that he was intervening in the matter by sending the 101st Airborne to safeguard the entry of the "Little Rock 9" into Central High School,

23. 1952 Department of Justice *amicus curiae* brief in *Brown v. Board of Education*, 6 (where the author wrote: "It is in the context of the present world struggle between freedom and tyranny that the problem of racial discrimination must be viewed.").

24. Mary Dudziak, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative," 41 *Stanford Law Review* 61 (1988), at 113. It should be noted that the Eisenhower Justice Department reluctantly filed a second brief to the Supreme Court. For his part, the President could not understand the Court's need for a second brief and consistently distanced his administration from the decision in the domestic media. In this regard, see Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 650-651, 753; August 19, 1953 White House Memorandum for the Record, subject *Responsibility of the Attorney General to provide a factual brief on the segregation of people in public schools*, Ann Whitman File, DDE Series; May 31, 1955 Memorandum of phone conversation between Eisenhower and Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Ann Whitman File, DDE Series; March 21, 1956 Memorandum of phone conversation between Eisenhower and Oveta Culp Hobby, Ann Whitman File, ACW Diary Series.

25. See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), 269-271; "Eyes on the Prize: Fighting Back, 1957-62," [videorecording], Blackside, Inc. and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (1988).

he conspicuously mentioned the need to remove a stain from the nation's image abroad.

The art of shaping America's image extended into other venues as well. The State Department sponsored international tours of American jazz stars as a means of promoting an image of improving race relations in the U.S. These *jambassadors* included such luminaries as Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie [Plummer 211-213]. In a similar ploy, a large photograph in the U.S. Pavilion at the 1958 World's Fair depicted Black and White children happily playing together.²⁶

The White House led this national preening so that Africa might accept America as its "little wheel." The administration also addressed the question of where the "little wheel" would take Africa.

Second Verse, Part One

In the first portion of the second verse, Hooker repeats the plea "Let me roll with you baby. Roll you all over town." In popular music, the term "rolling" is a euphemism for many things, from spending time with a person, to spending money lavishly on someone, to sexual intercourse. The Eisenhower administration version continued its seduction with an oath of unconditional economic and technical assistance that naturally would emerge from the maintenance of Africa's relationship with the world's most developed economies.

One example of this portion of the lyric is the U.S. support for the Volta River Dam project. Shortly before becoming Prime Minister of the Gold Coast in 1951, Nkrumah and his advisers supported a British-conceived plan of creating a hydroelectric dam on the Volta River.²⁷ The immediate gain for such an endeavor would be the provision of power for the processing of bauxite into aluminum. In the long run, it was the Nkrumah administration's hope to use the facility to modernize the entire nation's economy and infrastructure [Nwaubani 163-164, 168]. Although initially unsuccessful in gaining Western support for the project, Nkrumah persisted until he convinced a consortium of American aluminum corporations, under the name VALCO, to invest in the venture [Nwaubani 128-130, 181-194].²⁸ After American corporate interests

26. Michael Krenn, "Unfinished Business: Segregation and U.S. Diplomacy at the 1958 World's Fair," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Fall 1996), 591-612 (where the photo was part of the Unfinished Business exhibit).

27. Ebere Nwaubani, *The United States and Decolonization in West Africa* (Rochester, NY: The University of Rochester Press, 2001), 165-168; Basil Davidson, *Black Star: A View of the Life and Times of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 197.

28. See also March 21, 1958 OCB Report to the National Security Council on NSC 5719/1, 6.

favorably assessed the project, the federal government provided support. The State Department announced in August 1960 that Washington would loan Ghana \$20 million, contingent upon its ability to secure additional financing. Shortly thereafter, Ghana proclaimed that the World Bank and Great Britain had committed to loaning \$40 million and \$14 million, respectively.²⁹ The White House hoped that Africans would believe that the “little wheel” could take them to fiscal self-sufficiency. Moreover, the White House hoped to hide this tryst from prying eyes.

Second Verse, Part Two

Hooker ends the second verse of *Little Wheel* with this guarantee: “Well, I’ll roll you so easy, Baby, that you’ll never know.” The bait offered through this bravado is that the proposed intimate liaison would be both surreptitious and imperceptible; that the lover could weave his seduction so subtly that no one would know that he had been there. The Eisenhower refrain mimicked this swagger by promising support through international organizations so that there would not appear to be any Western encroachment on African sovereignty.

The Cameroon provides a pertinent example of the requirement of secrecy. In August 1959, Dr. Félix Moumié of the *Union des populations du Cameroun* (the “UPC”) and André Marie M’bida of the *Parti des Démocrates Camerounais* (the “PDC”) met in Conakry with American ambassador John Morrow and handed him a joint communique.³⁰ The statement was the result of a meeting between Moumié and M’bida at the Monrovia Conference of Independent States. During the conference, the leaders of the UPC and PDC openly reviewed the crisis in their country. The joint communique criticized the French model of decolonization as merely a violent neo-colonialism engendered through the use of American arms and condemned the United States for secretly hosting their opponent, Ahmadou Ahidjo, a few days before the Monrovia Conference.³¹

The leaders condemned the White House for trying to bind “the Cameroon people, hand and foot, to French expansionist policy” and highlighted the fact that both parties agreed to the need for a peaceful and democratic resolution of the current crisis.³² After stating that the struggle in the Cameroon was not “a domestic matter within the French Community,” they warned that

29. Thomas Noer, “The New Frontier and African Neutralism: Kennedy, Nkrumah, and the Volta River Project,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 8, no. 1, (1984), 63.

30. August 18, 1959, John H. Morrow Foreign Service Dispatch to Department of State, Ann Whitman File, International Series, Cameroun subseries.

31. *Ibid.* 1 (of the official translation attached to Foreign Service Dispatch).

continued U.S. support for the French also would sour the rest of the continent on continued relations with the West.³³ The White House offered only silence in return. State Department official John Calhoun wrote: “[a]s in the past the Department recommends against a Presidential reply to this exiled, Communist-influenced politician.”³⁴ Ultimately, the United States tacitly supported the UN position of ending Cameroon’s trusteeship without requiring new elections, allowing for the installment of the repressive Ahidjo regime [Joseph 341].

The administration’s fear of armed revolt by Africans against either European imperialists or White settler states stirred the White House to develop a proposal for an international arms agreement for Africa. On its face, such a pact would allow African self-determination to proceed in a peaceful manner without outside influence. South Africa was one venue in which this issue emerged.

Although American elites were troubled by the consequences of the increasing racial stratification of South African society, what they failed to acknowledge (or admit to themselves) was that American society had been just as exclusionary and repressive when European immigrants were the numerical minority.³⁵ In Washington, White Supremacy was not problematic.³⁶ The great concern in policy circles was three-fold: (1) the global psychological and political ramifications of apartheid and America’s refusal to condemn it;³⁷ (2) White South African reactions to U.S. opinions, UN votes, and statements³⁸ and, (3) increased non-White radicalism as a response to the lack of racial

32. *Ibid.* 2-3 (of the official translation); see also Richard Joseph, “Radical Nationalism in French Africa: The Case of Cameroon,” in *Decolonization and African Independence: The Transfers of Power, 1960-1980*, edited by Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1988), 335-341.

33. *Ibid.* 3-6 (of the official translation).

34. September 14, 1959 memorandum from Calhoun, Department of State, to Brig. Gen. A. J. Goodpaster, the White House, Ann Whitman File, International Series, Cameroun sub-series.

35. See, e.g., A. Leon Higginbotham, in *the Matter of Color: Race & the American Legal Process: the Colonial Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Robert Cottrol and Raymond Diamond, “The Second Amendment: Toward an Afro-American Reconstruction,” 80 *Georgetown Law Review* 309 (1991).

36. See, e.g., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957: Volume XVIII, Africa* (Washington, DC.: United States Government Printing Office, 1989), Letter from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Rountree) to the Ambassador in South Africa (Byroade), Washington (December 14, 1956), 803.

37. See, e.g., July 25, 1960, PCIAA #37, “Themes,” OSANSA Records, Sprague Committee File, PCIAA Papers series.

38. See, e.g., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960: Volume XIV: Africa* (Washington, DC.: United States Government Printing Office, 1989), Telegram From the Embassy in South Africa to the Department of State, Capetown [regarding meeting between American Ambassador Crowe and Prime Minister Henrik Verwoerd] (April 27, 1959), 733; C, September 21, 1959 Memorandum of Conversation between Herter, et al., and Louw, 736.

reforms.³⁹ In fact, President Eisenhower indicated his compassion for the crisis facing the South African government. With respect to a British suggestion of jointly drafting an “innocuous resolution” in the UN critical of the apartheid regime’s violence against Black protesters, Eisenhower agreed with such an approach rather than sitting “in judgment on a difficult social and political problem six thousand miles away.”⁴⁰

In this context, an international arms agreement effectively would create a White monopoly on violence. By 1960, the White House became aware of South African contingency plans to avoid an armed Black rebellion by creating a buffer zone between itself and decolonizing Africa, with the anticipated cooperation of the Belgians and Portuguese.⁴¹ The creation of such a shield was a distinct possibility since the United States was willing to supply arms to Belgium and Portugal almost free of charge.⁴² Similar concerns about the stability of the apartheid system surfaced in Washington following the Sharpeville Massacre and the Verwoerd regime’s temporary moratorium on pass laws. The fear was that “Communists” might use the Congo as a conduit for shipping arms to invigorated Black South Africans.⁴³

The emergence of an independent Congo troubled America for this reason, as well as others. With the ascendance of Patrice Lumumba as the democratically-elected Prime Minister of the Congo, the United States feared a breach of its policy. The Belgians had communicated to the White House their aversion to Lumumba and members of the Eisenhower administration unhesitatingly noted that America’s aims were identical to Belgium’s.⁴⁴ Less than three weeks after Lumumba took office, the American ambassador to Belgium stated that the “Lumumba government” was a threat which needed to be destroyed and replaced with a regime “which would be acceptable in [the] rest of Africa and defensible against Soviet political attack.”⁴⁵

39. April 2, 1960 memorandum regarding 439th NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 9-10.

40. *FRUS, 1958-1960*, March 28, 1960 Memorandum of Conversation regarding Camp David meeting between Eisenhower, et al., and British Prime Minister Macmillan, et al., 745-746.

41. August 4, 1960 memorandum regarding 454th NSC meeting [meeting held on August 1, 1960], Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 19 (emphasis in original).

42. July 29, 1960 Briefing Note for the NSC meeting, August 1, 1960, “Commitments for Grant Military Assistance To Certain Free-World Nations With Well-Developed Economies,” 1-2, attached to August 4, 1960 memorandum regarding 454th NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Briefing Note Series.

43. April 2, 1960 memorandum regarding the 439th NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 9-10 (emphasis added).

44. March 31, 1960 memorandum regarding 432nd NSC meeting [meeting held January 14th], Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 4.

45. Madeline Kalb, *The Congo Cables: The Cold War in Africa; From Eisenhower to Kennedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 27.

Worried that an open military play against Lumumba would expose the American objective of keeping former colonies wed to their former colonizers, American officials thought that working through international organizations was the best means to those ends.⁴⁶ Such an approach held the secondary benefit of placating European statesmen and business interests concerned that the U.S. was trying to supplant them on the continent.⁴⁷ Accordingly, the White House decided to use the United Nations as a means of concealing its efforts to dispose of Lumumba.

As the Congo crisis evolved, the United States decided to support the June 14, 1960 UN resolution to assist the Congo as a means of getting Western troops into the area and deterring the Soviet Union from moving unilaterally to the same end.⁴⁸ In turn, the UN agreed to the American recommendation of seeking exclusive rights to send technicians to the Congo, with the understanding that America would funnel all of its technicians through the UN.⁴⁹ All of this the United States did, at least according to public pronouncements, in the interest of allowing the Congo to develop free of external interference.⁵⁰ In so doing, the “little wheel” concealed its penetration of the African continent.

***I Thought a Five Hundred Dollar Suit Could Keep Me Out of Robert Johnson's Shoes*⁵¹**

In its African diplomacy, the Eisenhower White House sang the blues on the global stage because it felt trapped by its self-proclaimed anti-colonialism, its support for a capitalist Europe and that continent's imperial legacy, by its fear of Soviet control of Africa's people and resources, and its certainty of the

46. See, e.g., March 21, 1958 OCB Progress Report on NSC 5719/1, OSANSARecords, NSC Series, Policy papers subseries, 6.

47. *Ibid.* 5; August 8, 1958 memorandum regarding the 375th NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 11; see also David N. Gibbs, *The Political Economy of Third World Intervention: Mines, Money, and U.S. Policy in the Congo Crisis* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 67, 136-140.

48. July 18, 1960 memorandum regarding the 451st NSC meeting, Ann Whitman Files, NSC Series, 6; July 21, 1960 memorandum regarding the 452nd NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 15; see also Kalb, 18-19 (where the author mentions that even though few American soldiers went to the Congo, the U.S. military helped the UN effort with advice and an airlift of other troops and materiel).

49. August 4, 1960 memorandum regarding the 454th NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 18.

50. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 582-583; September 22, 1960 Secretary of State memorandum of conversation between Eisenhower, Herter, and Nkrumah, Ann Whitman File, ACW Diary Series, Ghana folder.

51. Yusef Komunyaaka, “No Good Blues,” [poem] on the conceptual jazz-poetry album by John Tchicai and Yusef Komunyaaka, *Love Notes From the Madhouse*, 8th Harmonic Breakdown Records (1998).

primitive nature of Africans. The *Little Wheel Blues* revealed little of this. However, the White House's ballad reveals a great deal about the influence of Whiteness on American foreign policy during the early Cold War. In essence, the *Little Wheel Blues* elucidated the Eisenhower administration's convictions regarding White innocence, Black erasure, and Black self-abnegation.

White Innocence

The Eisenhower Blues hid a core belief in White Supremacy. Among the privileges of Whiteness,⁵² one of the great illusions is the idea of White innocence.⁵³ The idea of White innocence encapsulates more than just the notion that Whites are, by nature, more law-abiding, pious, and compassionate than non-Whites; it incorporates the idea of a purity of purpose and intent and, more so, a sanctity of essence. Not only does the belief in White innocence mock any critiques of White behavior, it also serves as self-absolution.

In the realm of international relations, this belief in White innocence allowed the Eisenhower administration both to assert the viability of a type of decolonization which was a *mutual accommodation* of African and European interests and to hold itself out as a champion of freedom. The administration believed, and wanted to convince Africans, that their former colonizers would deal fairly with them in order to allow for their self-determination. Thus, the *essential ties* between Europe and Africa were conceptualized as a lifeline rather than a chain, in spite of evidence to the contrary.⁵⁴

Even the self-proclaimed image of an anti-colonial land of liberty seemed like a strained conceit. Although the United States had not engaged in the technical creation of colonies, its expansion across the North American

52. See, e.g., Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994); Derrick A. Bell, *Faces At the Bottom of the Well: the Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness As Property," 106 *Harvard Law Review* 1707 (1993); bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995); Stephanie Wildman, et al., *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996).

53. See, e.g., Sumi Cho, "Redeeming Whiteness in the Shadow of Internment: Earl Warren, Brown, and a Theory of Racial Redemption," 19 *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 73 (Fall 1998); Kimberle W. Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-Discrimination Law," 101 *Harvard Law Review* 1331 (May 1988); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

54. May 9, 1958 Memorandum regarding the 365th NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 3; July 27, 1960 Department of State Incoming Telegram regarding Congo, Ann Whitman File, ACW Series, Congo folder (where Henry Cabot Lodge recounts that Lumumba told him that the Belgians had emptied the Congo's treasury just prior to independence); *Lumumba Speaks: The Speeches and Writings of Patrice Lumumba, 1958-1961*, edited by Jean van Lierde (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1972), 328 (where the author discusses the Belgian theft of gold and diamonds in the period immediately after independence).

continent and appropriation of Hawaii resembled the Afrikaner expansion across the southern tip of Africa. Its domination of Central and South America resembled the British control of China or the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, the United States benefited from the European hegemony over Africa in the form of millions of slave laborers, whose descendants presented another problem for “the leader of the free world.” The White House’s belief in White innocence was palpable in the administration’s response to Black demands for human rights.

In spite of the promise of the initial decision in *Brown*, the Eisenhower administration championed a gradualist approach to school desegregation largely because of its belief that White citizens should not be forced to welcome racial integration. Even as segregationists began mounting various campaigns of massive resistance, the President trusted that every American citizen would obey the declaration of the Supreme Court.⁵⁵ Even as deadly mobs prowled the grounds surrounding Little Rock’s Central High School, the President reassured his Attorney General that there was no need to make a rash decision about sending troops to Arkansas because “time was not of the essence.”⁵⁶ A week after sending troops to Little Rock, the President informed a speech writer that he thought the decision in *Brown* was “wrong” and that he did not find compelling the argument that racially segregated facilities were inherently unequal.⁵⁷ The administration’s conciliatory approach toward the architects of housing and employment discrimination brought equally dismal results for Black workers and potential homeowners [Burk 95-108, 112-127].

On an international level, the belief in White innocence made decolonization appear to be a threat to aggrieved White men and their institutions. As elite members of the White House team traveled to the continent, their interactions with White authority echoed the idea of innocence. Colonial governors and rulers of White settler regimes appeared to members of the Eisenhower administration either as imminently reasonable, though anachronistic, men or, at worst, stubborn yet noble acolytes of a pioneering tradition. Adding to the administration’s self-confidence was its dim view of Africans.

55. See, i.e., September 14, 1957 Press Release by James Hagerty, Ann Whitman File, ACW Diary Series and October 8, 1957 Diary Entry of meeting notes from Sept. 14th meeting between Eisenhower and Faubus, Ann Whitman File, ACW Diary Series; see also Robyn D. Ladino, *Desegregating Texas Schools: Eisenhower, Shivers, and the Crisis at Mansfield High* (Austin, TX.: University of Texas Press, 1996), 50-62, 114-115.

56. September 24, 1957 Memorandum regarding phone conversation between Eisenhower and Brownell, Ann Whitman File, DDE Series.

57. Arthur Larson, *Eisenhower: The President Nobody Knew* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 124-126.

Black Erasure and Self-Abnegation

Black erasure and self-abnegation are two sides of the coin of marginalization. Where the former is an act of White arrogance, the latter results when Blacks prostrate themselves at the throne of social invisibility, usually as a means of survival.⁵⁸ The Eisenhower administration maintained a misanthropic consensus regarding Africans. In 1955, one military analyst warned that continued colonization would produce a revolutionary nationalism which “would be characterized by unpredictabilities, emotional as to policy, which would make the irrationality of some Arab politics seem like cold logic” [“Psychological Aspects” vi].

Roughly six months before the Congo crisis, the National Security Council was discussing the prospects for the development of Western-style democracy in Africa. During the conversation, Nixon offered that “it was difficult to realize the problems faced in Africa without visiting the Continent. Some of the peoples of Africa have been out of the trees for only about fifty years.”⁵⁹ Maurice Stans, Director of the Bureau of the Budget, agreed with this assessment: “Mr. Stans [...] said that he had formed the impression that many Africans still belonged in the trees.” [*Ibid.* 3] But this negative assessment extended beyond the “superstitious” African masses: according to these minds, “African leaders were incapable of exercising power when they obtained it, [thus] their need for advice made them easily impressionable.”⁶⁰

These comments were more than ugly racial slurs. They were pronouncements of the White assurance that Africans were incompetent. The notion that Africans were only fifty years removed from the trees follows the Hegelian myth of Africa as a continent without a history. If Africa had no history, then there was no tradition of self-rule which the Eisenhower administration needed to respect. Therefore, the President and Allen Dulles could agree that none of the emerging nations “had the capability of governing themselves.”⁶¹ From this vantage point, “the detribalized African [was] an easy target for elements eager to exploit his traditional need for leadership and guidance” [NSC 5719/1, 18]. If Africans were merely prey for demagogic

58. See, i.e., Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*; Gerald Astor, *And a Credit to His Race: The Life and Hard Times of Joseph Louis Barrow, a.k.a. Joe Louis* (New York: Dutton, 1974); Donald L. Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); Jackie Robinson, *I Never had It Made* (G. Putnam's Sons, 1972); cf. Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, NY.: Kennikat Press, 1975).

59. March 31, 1960 memorandum regarding 432nd NSC meeting [held January 14th], Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 3.

60. March 31, 1960 memorandum regarding 432nd NSC meeting [held January 14th], Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 3-5.

61. March 31, 1960 memorandum regarding 423rd NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series.

“agitators,” then Communists puppeteers had to be engineering any anti-West sentiment on the continent.

Equally important, by erasing Black agency, the members of the Eisenhower administration portrayed themselves as the saviors of unhindered African independence. Not only did African primitiveness explain their susceptibility to Communist flattery, but so too did evidence of organized, synchronous protest. In a discussion about Lumumba and the Congolese rebellion of July 1960, CIA chief Dulles indicated that:

Lumumba may have sent out instructions and these instructions may have been under a Communist directive. *The insurrection had been simultaneous in many areas and it was therefore difficult to find any other explanation.*⁶²

Even as they recognized that Africans would act in their perceived self-interest [NSC 5719/1, 7-8], the men of the Eisenhower administration concurred that such interests, if legitimate, were secondary to the concerns of the West. The desires of Black South Africans for freedom were insignificant compared to the stability of the apartheid regime. Likewise, the economic interests of Nkrumah's Ghana were trumped by the fiscal well-being of VALCO. For instance, in an NSC discussion of Ghana's request for American assistance for the Volta River Project, one official opined that “we would have to give these businessmen an even shake if we wanted to keep this great resource for the Free World.”⁶³ When the question was raised as to whether Ghana eventually would seek to control all of the power generated by the dam, another official interjected that “If we are going to put up much of the money for the project, we ought to have a lot to say about how the power is distributed” [*Ibid.*]. Thus, Ghana's needs had been completely erased and any American aid was to be given only in the interest of White businessmen. Furthermore, it was necessary for Blacks to acknowledge their peripheral status. Indeed, the expectation of Black erasure and the demand for Black self-abnegation were such that the United States was willing to kill Lumumba, a democratically-elected African official who refused to silence himself and accept subordination.⁶⁴

Ultimately, White innocence, Black erasure, and Black self-abnegation combined to obscure the contradictions in the *Little Wheel Blues*. The rhetoric

62. July 21, 1960 memorandum regarding 452nd NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 16 (emphasis added).

63. August 25, 1960 memorandum regarding the 456th NSC meeting, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 11.

64. Ludo DeWitte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (London & New York: Verso Books, 2001), xxiv, 17; “Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders,” *An Interim Report of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities*, United States Senate, (Washington, DC.: United States Government Printing Office, 1975), 24-33, 39, 42-48, 75-76; Kalb, 129-133, 149-152.

of White innocence “builds a sense of righteous indignation among its [proponents] that enables them to believe that the selfish and self-interested politics they pursue are actually part of a moral crusade” [Lipsitz 16]. Coupled with an absolute conviction in rendering African aspirations invisible, American diplomats made the irrational seem rational. For instance, based upon this blurred vision, the United States had to pamper the rabidly anti-Communist apartheid regimes in order to prevent them from leaving the Western orbit. Consequently, these imperatives of Whiteness were the lubrication which made the “little wheel” roll.

Let Me Roll With You, Baby

After Hooker sings the first two verses, his sidemen take the song into a jarring bridge, in which they play through the I-IV-V chord changes in percussive triplets. Immediately thereafter, the rhythm section resumes its boogie-woogie push and Hooker plays a grunting guitar solo. Following his brief soliloquy, Hooker sings the verses in reverse order. The song ends as the piano drops out, leaving only the rhythm guitar and bass to quietly repeat the suddenly more serious bottom line. Ominously, Hooker repeats the phrase “let me roll with you, baby” until the fade, perhaps providing the object of his desire with a glimpse of his true intentions. The U.S. actions in the Congo mirrored this brooding coda and suggested that the Cold War was not just a fight against American concerns about attempted Soviet domination but a struggle with the fears and fantasies of Whiteness.

Although America gave the impression of being a disinterested savior, the Eisenhower administration was certain that it had no interest in providing aid to Africa if decolonization did not proceed along pro-Western lines.⁶⁵ The *Little Wheel Blues* effectively “took back the center” from African people, a behavior common among Whites who are uncomfortable with Black concerns and desires becoming a prime factor in social interaction [Wildman 90-93]. In Washington, the competition with the Soviet Union was more important than African freedom and Americans had to remind Africans of this fact:

To a considerable extent, the African is still immature and unsophisticated with respect to his attitudes towards the issues that divide the world today. The African’s mind is not made up and he is being subjected to a number of contradictory forces. This pressure will increase in the future. [NSC 5719/1, 8]

65. March 31, 1960 Memorandum regarding the 423rd NSC meeting regarding U.S. Policy Toward South, Central, and East Africa (NSC 5818 and NSC 5920), Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 2.

According to the Eisenhower Blues, no liberation movement could be both legitimate and anti-West. Racial friction during colonization disappeared in this view of the world, similar to the arguments of early twentieth century scholars who asserted that American slavery was a cite of racial harmony [Woods 96-98]. Because people of color throughout the world had endured imperialism in fashions approximating the African experience, none of them were prepared for self-government. This being the case, the potential for Soviet expansion was widespread and capable of taking root anywhere. If few of the nationalist movements were legitimate and none of the potential leadership was "responsible," American intervention was not just necessary but the duty of a civilized state. This self-serving rationale makes the East-West binary seem logical. This rationale flattens and erases any complexity or diversity among the struggles of human beings and justifies the aggressive, interventionist exercise of power which was America's hallmark throughout the world. In this light, the Eisenhower administration's *Little Wheel Blues* was a song which rationalized the clear destruction of democracy and freedom by its chief spokespersons.