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Bound to Ride that Northern Railroad: Representations of Blackness in "O Brother, Where Art Thou"

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bound to ride

by Eric Goldfisher

THAT northern railroad

Representations of Blackness in *O Brother, Where Art Thou* Pg 1

Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother Where Art Thou* (Touchstone Pictures, 2000) follows three white prison escapees on an Odessa-inspired sprint through Mississippi in the latter years of the Great Depression. The various misadventures that befall Ulysees Everett McGill (George Clooney), Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar O'Donnell (Tim Blake Nelson) while on the run from a sadistic sheriff include encounters with sirens, a crazed gangster, gubernatorial candidates, and a memorable bible-selling con-man (John Goodman). Throughout all of these amusing moments, a serious representation of blackness plays a central role in the movie. Before the opening credits role, a black chain gang sings work chants, or what W.E.B. DuBois would consider "sorrow songs," setting the viewer's time frame and location—during Jim Crow, and Southern. After the credits roll and the protagonists, led by Everett, attempt and fail to board a moving train, they end up joining a blind old black man moving himself along on a manual railroad car. This old man plays the part of a prophet, telling the three men that they face "a road fraught with peril, mmhm," and exhorting them to follow the metaphorical road until their salvation.¹ This blind prophet bookends the movie—the final fade-out shows him rolling through the town where Everett has finally ended his adventures.

The representations of blackness contained in *O Brother, Where Art Thou* focus on travel and music. As in the scene described above, the train is a recurring symbol of the black experience, conveying travel, movement (especially to the North), and a longing for freedom. The Coen brothers did their research well; trains were used extensively as metaphors in black cultural production in this time period, the end part of the Great Migration, in poetry (Langston Hughes, *Freedom Train*), literature (Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*) and radio in the popular minstrel show *Amos 'n' Andy*. Travel and trains are the subjects of much of the Grammy-winning soundtrack for the movie, which features music produced by T. Bone Burnett and performed by artists ranging from folk singers (Allison Krauss) and gospel quartets (The Fairfield Four). This imagery centers around the award-winning song "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow," performed in the movie by Everett, Pete, Delmar, and a key black character, Tommy Johnson, all under the alias of The Soggy Bottom Boys. An examination of the performance of this song in *O Brother, Where*

Art Thou reveals an intersection between black and white identity during the Depression, one that shows a continuing fascination with the Other while also playing with the social construct of race through interactions around music and train travel.

Much of this text's examination of blackness comes through interactions with Tommy, who is portrayed by the rap/blues pioneer Chris Thomas King. The three jailbirds meet Tommy when they pick him up at a lonely, deserted crossroads surrounded by fields, where he has just sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the ability to play guitar.² Notably, when Pete asks what the devil looks like, Tommy tells the group that "He's white...white as you folks."³ Despite the racialized description of the devil, and Delmar's previous reference to Tommy as a "colored boy," the three protagonists display no overt racism towards Tommy, a tactic that further endears them to the modern viewer while setting up the possibility that, as convicts and fellow victims of the state, they might be closer to blackness than the average white Mississippian at this time. Their earlier escape, juxtaposed after the imagery of the black chain gang, further corroborates their implied lower racial status.

The scene that immediately follows this initial encounter with Tommy continues the theme of toying with blackness as a common identifier. Everett, acting on Tommy's suggestion, pulls up to a lonely roadside building where the group finds a man who will pay them to "sing into a can." This man, who is white and completely blind, asks whether the group can perform "niggra songs." Everett, wildly inventing on the spot, initiates the following dialogue:

EVERETT: Um, well, uh, sir, we are Negroes. All except for our acom—uh, ah, our accompan—the fellow who plays the guitar.

BLIND MAN: Yeah, well, I don't record nigger songs. No, I look for some old-timer material, you see, people can't seem to get enough of it...

EVERETT: Sir, the Soggy Bottom Boys have been steeped in old-timey material. Heck, we're silly with it, ain't we boys?

DELMAR: Yes, that's right. See, we ain't really Negroes—

PETE: All except for our accompanist.

The comfort with which the three white characters switch, at least verbally, switch into and out of blackness at a moment's notice belies an image of complete racial separation and discomfort, and instead reveals what the earlier moments with the chain gang and the blind prophet had hinted at: These white prisoners, whom the state has given up as useless and unproductive citizens, can interact closely with blackness as their place on the racialized totem pole has been reduced to near the bottom. At the same time, they continue to display a fascination with Tommy (the Other) through Everett's insistence on keeping him racially separate from the others, even when he is lying about their identity. The bluff works, and the shot cuts to the beginning of the Soggy Bottom Boys first performance in the studio.

The lyrics and performance of "I am a Man of Constant Sorrow," shown below in a screenshot, bring an additional layer of discourse to that of trains, poverty, and the transience of blackness already seen in the movie. The song, a traditional Appalachian folk song, gained renewed prominence through the release of this movie, and in the film itself, catapults the fictional Soggy Bottom Boys to fame, unbeknownst to them. Much of the song's lyrics could describe the Great Migration itself, were it written in that time. However, one verse in particular stands out as worthy of an analysis of contemporary representations of blackness: "It's fare thee well my old lover/I never expect to see you again/For I'm bound to ride that northern railroad/Perhaps I'll die upon this train/(Perhaps he'll die upon this train)."⁴ The "northern train" line not only encapsulates these characters' desire to escape their present situation of imprisonment, it also speaks to a wider movement away from the South and towards the industry and capital of the North. The train as a symbol speaks not only to Tommy's blackness, but also to the undesirability of the three other men in Mississippi and their desperate need to escape. Thus, the song becomes an intersection between white and black identity in the context of the film, and in the larger context of the Deep South during the Depression.

The Soggy Bottom Boys' performance of the song also reveals racial intersection. Everett delivers the song into the large microphone with no vocal embellishment whatsoever, and wears a deadly serious facial that moves towards one of desperate pleading as he reaches the end of each verse. The camera mostly focuses on him at the microphone, and remains there as Pete and Delmar move forward to deliver the backing vocals. Tommy sits in the corner playing the guitar part, and is only shown on camera twice until the end of the song, when he has a few seconds of screen time to deliver a searing pentatonic blues riff.

This performance is that of a sorrow song—not as obvious as the chain gang chant that opens the film, and disguised because of the camera focus on Everett rather than Tommy, but just as focused on death and a hope for freedom as in DuBois’ original description.⁵

After a litany of adventures, the three protagonists find themselves rescuing Tommy from a Ku Klux Klan lynching by masquerading as the color guard, shown above. Predictably, this initial attempt fails and their masks are torn off, eliciting a memorable response from the Klan’s leader, who also happens to be a candidate for governor: “The color guard is colored!” Of course, he is reacting to their grimy faces and attempt to rescue Tommy (He later claims that “These boys is miscegenated!” when he again encounters them as the Soggy Bottom Boys). But this statement is not nearly as far from the truth as the comedy of the moment would suggest. The Coen brothers portray a black identity in this film that is not completely tied to black skin, but rather a blackness that reflects a certain Depression-era zeitgeist, an identity that three white prison escapees can claim through a song, a performance, and some lighthearted deception that reveals the true social construction of blackness at this time in American history.

Endnotes

1. Coen, Joel, and Ethan Coen. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Dir. Joel Coen, 2000. Touchstone Pictures.
2. Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou*
3. Ibid
4. American Traditional, “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow.” Accessed on October 25, 2011 from <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/obrotherwhereartthou/iamamanof-constantsorrow.htm>
5. DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover, 1994. P. 157