Artists and musicians communicate their thoughts and experiences of the world via their compositions. It is the role of the audience to interpret the artist’s creation, to connect with their message. Music can communicate the musician’s internal world and offer insight into how they or the group they represent positions itself in the world relative to others. They reveal how they perceive themselves and how they intend to be perceived by their audience.

Their creation is also a document of the times and places of which they live, the forces that impact on their experience and the wider cultural milieu. Blues musicians in particular have throughout the last century given us a window through which we can see into the world they lived in, one which represented the African-American community in the United States.

Blues is a genre that contains strong themes of social inequality, poverty, hardship and violence as well as love, happiness, faith and hope. It is a strongly expressive art form through which the musicians have documented the cultural history of the black community through slavery, segregation and civil inequalities and injustices. In their music, performers have sometimes represented these emotions and experiences by tying them to place.

As environmental psychologists have observed, there are few aspects of our affective experience, such as the affinity and community or the aversion and hostility, among persons that are not somehow related to place (Giuliani, 2003). Blues musicians, in creating their art, have captured this concept and often expressed their relationship to place in their music. The application of place attachment and identity theories can tell us much about their affective and cognitive selves.

### Place attachment and identity

Place attachment is an affective bond with place that can either be positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant (Giuliani, 2003). Temporally, it may be a place related to our current experience, often to our past, and maybe even our future. Spatially, it may be represented by a room, a house, a neighbourhood, a city or a country. These aspects of our affective experience often emerge as part of our conscious experience and can be represented in our expressions of life, such as those of the blues artists in this article. The affective bond, suggests Giuliani, can also qualify our existence, not just privately, but also of the existence of entire human groups. Community and fraternity between persons, and diversity and hostility are frequently related to matters of place.

Moreover, our affective bonds to places influence the formation of our identity, giving our lives meaning and significance. A standard piece of information that people exchange when first meeting is often about the place where they are from. Place identity is a cognitive element of the person’s relationship with place. It is defined as personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills and behaviours relevant to a specific environment (Proshansky, 1978).

### Racial persecution – J.B. Lenoir

One blues musician that highlighted the affective bond he had with place was J.B. Lenoir. In his song ‘Alabama Blues’ Lenoir conveyed to his audience his feelings of this American state.

I will never love Alabama, Alabama seemed to never have loved poor me – Alabama, Alabama, why you be so mean, you got my people behind a barb wire fence, now you tryin’ to take my freedom away from me.

Lenoir’s brother and sister were both killed in Alabama, his brother shot by the police, and he clearly attributes these tragedies to the persecution that African-Americans were suffering by the authority of the majority. In order to make sense of his feelings about events which occurred in Alabama and to express them to his audience, Lenoir has personified place and appropriated it to direct his affective energy.

The prevalent definitions of place attachment have been criticised for being largely focused on positive affect (Giuliani & Feldman, 1993), and this insight from Lenoir is an example of the negative emotions a person can feel about a place. Negative place attachment has been noted in feminist literature in particular, where findings from a number of studies have contested the ideology of the blustefull

**References**

home life, especially for women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse (Manzo, 2003). Similarly, the experience of Lenoir and his family is indicative of the exclusion and violence that limits the safe places that they could occupy because of the racial divide that existed in the American South. Additionally, with regard to notions of territoriality, for some people a sense of place attachment can be achieved by excluding others from that place (Pratt, 1984).

The ‘black man’s haven’ – Beale Street, Memphis

In contrast to the negative place attachments experienced by Lenoir in Alabama, there are a number of places significant in the history of the blues that were thriving, exciting places for the black community. Beale Street in Memphis, for example, held significance for many blues musicians in the American South as it was a place where African-Americans could gather, play music and forget some of the harsh realities of their lives. The blues and jazz clubs were open all night, every night and by the 1940s Beale Street was regarded as a cultural centre for blacks throughout the South. It was not regarded as a place which was frequently visited by white people, as illustrated by this quote from the performer Rufus Thomas:

‘Beale Street was a haven for the black man, they come from the Delta and get to Beale Street... it was heaven to these people that came up, all black, but I told a white fella on Beale Street one night, I said, ‘if you were black, for one Saturday night on Beale Street, you never would want to be white any more!’

Appropriating a cultural definition of place attachment (Low, 1992), Beale Street became a place which for the black community at the time was transformed into a space with a cultural meaning, acting as a shared symbol for the black community. It symbolised a distinct cultural identity (Hummon, 1990) in addition to its functional physical characteristics.

From a biographical viewpoint, Beale Street was also a symbolic extension of the musician’s selves. It was, and is, imbued with personal meanings of their life experiences. In the documentary film The Road to Memphis (2004), the piano player Rosco Gordon describes the changes in the street that have taken place since the 1940s to reveal more about his own experiences as a young musician. He talks about the changes that have occurred on the street, such as the increased volume that modern musicians use, and about noticing Walk of Fame-style metallic notes embedded in the pavement paying tribute to past musicians, Gordon comments: ‘I don’t see no Rosco Gordon notes, they didn’t give me the kind of attention I think I deserved.’ For Gordon, the emotional connection he has to the place is not reciprocated – the street is part of him, but he is not part of the street.

Also, against the backdrop of racial segregation, the quote from Thomas reveals the ideological status of Beale Street in the black community. Research has shown that urban residents and rural residents will describe their local environment with imagery that is comparatively favourable to the other (Hummon, 1990). Similarly, the Thomas quote reveals a favourable comparison of the places that black people could occupy with those available to white people. At the same time, it supports the view that the built environment is a non-verbal medium for the communication of moral reputation, social rank and significant qualities of self (Rapoport, 1982).

Tracing African roots – Corey Harris

Another blues musician who examined the links between the music and place is Corey Harris, a modern acoustic player and scholar who studied the roots of the music. His research took him all the way to Mali and is documented in the film Feel Like Going Home (2003). Harris was interested in the elements of the music that linked the blues to its African origins, while simultaneously discovering the ingredients of his own personal heritage and identity. The faces he sees in Mali he describes as being familiar and new at the same time, which alludes to a sense of attachment he experiences on an intuitive level.

Interestingly, Harris assigns meaning and significance to the places he visits by delving into a past he has not personally experienced. For Marcus (1992), memories from the past shape attachments in the present, and the remembering of place may occur because the emotion once associated with place is sought after. Perhaps as an extension to this, Harris wished to imagine a past from before his lifetime to seek an emotion and sense of belonging in the present, and for which he identifies the role of music as the medium for the connection. For African-Americans such as Harris, the music unifies the cultures and communities that exist in West Africa and North America, and provides a sense of unity to those separated by physical distance.

From a cultural perspective, Mali is significant for Harris as symbolic of his own, and of the music’s, genealogical history. While a number of studies have shown that loss and bereavement are expressed among people who have lost their community to urban development (Fried, 1963; Gans, 1982) and flooding (Erikson, 1976), the symbolic existence of a homeland is also a powerful attachment (Low, 1992).

Conclusion

Place attachment is an aspect of the human connection with place that can encompass a range of affective experiences and give meaning and value to our lives. The music that blues musicians have produced has told us much about the difficult aspects of their lives, including their own relationship with places that have held significance for themselves and the African-American community. While many of these will have suffered in times of segregation and civil inequality and felt tied to places from which they would no doubt rather have been freed, history also shows that places such as Beale Street offered an alternative, a place which is fondly remembered. For performers such as Corey Harris the music is an important medium for connecting with the past, and uniting separated cultures. Whichever way we choose to think about our past or even our future, we can be sure that a connection to place, in some form, will always be present and a source of inspiration to artists and musicians.

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