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“SONGS ARE LIKE TATTOOS”: LITERARY ARTISTRY AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN JONI MITCHELL’S *BLUE*

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In his 1977 review of Joni Mitchell’s *Hejira* for *The Village Voice*—the only literary analysis of her work that I have been able to find—Perry Meisel concludes that Mitchell lacks an awareness of “the finer ironies of what it means to work in language” (84). He does grant her a “conscious grasp” of *dramatic* irony, although he seems to regard this element in her work as outside language since it only appears, he believes, in the cover art (84). However, to dismiss the dramatic dimension of Mitchell’s “work in language” is to ignore one of its vital dimensions. “I see myself as a singing playwright and an actress and I try to make plays that are pertinent to our times,” she says in a 1996 interview (Hillburn 255), an explanation of mode and method that comes up in many interviews when Mitchell discusses both producing albums and performing onstage.¹ Dramatic mode informs, as well, the writing of the songs, as is clear in her description of the experience of hearing Bob Dylan’s “Positively Fourth Street” for the first time: “I thought, now that’s poetry; now we’re talking. That direct, confronting speech, commingled with imagery” (Rodgers 256). This theatrical-dramatic analog allows us to understand clearly a remark like, “I’m influenced by Shakespeare, not so much by the reading of him as by … the concept of the dark soliloquy, with a lot of human meat on it” (Hoskyns 168). This comment and the insight about “direct, confronting speech, commingled with imagery” demonstrate that Mitchell knows quite well what she is doing with language, and that she conceives and performs even those songs that are renowned for their personal intimacy as “soliloquies.” Mitchell’s art is profoundly social and performative: it requires in the first instance to be apprehended as a body of work conceived and delivered in the dramatic mode.

However, Mitchell is frequently described as a storyteller and refers to herself in this way almost as often as she invokes the theatrical analog: “I’m not making these songs out of a need to confess to anyone; it’s out of a need to create a story,” for example, and “*Blue* is … one chapter in the Great American novel of my work” (Mercer 46, 23).² Thus the album is also more than a collection of individual soliloquies. It has the narrative cohesion that emerges from the careful arrangement of interrelated short works, like the sonnet sequence or, in the world of classical music, the *Liederkreis* or song cycle—works whose lyric moments, while exploring the lands and waters of an emotional and social terrain,

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¹ The interviews with Levitin (184), Reilly (41) and Hoskyns (164) in Luftig contain some examples; L. D. Smith (30) and Flanagan (236, 241) contain still others.

² Garbarini (115) and Mercer (7) see this side to her in personal interviews, for example. Mercer also quotes Mitchell saying, “They always ask me to write something for a soundtrack and then reject me, and you know why? ... Because I tell the whole story, the whole movie” (111).

suggest in fragmentary glimpses the sequence of events that have resulted in that terrain.³ In its evocations and explorations of blueness, then, *Blue* also calls on the expressive strategies of lyric and narrative, thus making use of all three literary modes of presentation—narrative line, lyric intensity and pattern, and dramatic enactment. This modal complexity allows Mitchell to engage in precisely the “finer ironies of working in language” that characterize a work of literary art.⁴

Blue is also more than personal, for as Mitchell says, it is “pertinent to our times” and presents an evocative portrait and an insightful critique of its times. In this album, however, the critique emerges indirectly, from the ironic reverberations between the emotional and critical dimensions in which it might be said to reside. Its protagonist (call her “Joni”), the romantic *dramatis persona* whose voice sings the individual *cris-de-coeur*, enacts its emotional dimension. Less obviously, the producer of the album (call her “Mitchell”) composes, arranges, directs, and sequences those *crys* in ways that supply a wider perspective than the protagonist can muster, engulfed as she is by her turmoil. It is from this perspective that the album’s critical dimension becomes visible and with it our access to insights that lie beyond the reach of its protagonist. Thus, listeners attain, via empathy with “Joni’s” feeling and comprehension of “Mitchell’s” design, a catharsis. My aim in this article is to try what the tools of literary criticism might do to gain for *Blue* a fuller appreciation, not only of its intimate, “confessional,” or “personal” dimension, which listeners have been applauding (or decrying) since its initial release in 1971, but also of the analysis Mitchell makes of the 1960s counterculture and its rock and roll expression—the “times” to which it is most specifically “pertinent”—as a multifaceted work in narrative, lyric, and dramatic forms of language.⁵

It's Really Not My Home

In his study of the Romantic roots of rock and roll rhetoric, *The Cowboy and the Dandy*, Perry Meisel identifies one of the paradigms forming the “cowboy” ideology as “the boundary or opposition between East and West, settlement and frontier” (5). Meisel’s

³ Mitchell herself prefers the term “art songs” to “folk songs” for her work (Whitesell 5). About “concept albums”: Whitesell identifies *Blue* as one of Mitchell’s six albums that are “conceived as a whole,” as well as *Song to a Seagull*, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, *Hejira*, *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*, and *Mingus*. He decides that the coherence of *Blue* is “implicit rather than explicit” (204). However, I think its narrative and critical dimensions are quite explicitly coherent.

⁴ Whitesell also overviews Mitchell’s works in terms of these poetic modes of address, adding one that he calls “political” to the standard three (47–48). Because his is an overview spanning her entire oeuvre, however, he does not examine the ways an album might mix modes as I see *Blue* doing.

⁵ I am aware of the vexed position the analysis of song lyrics without music or production occupies in the worlds of sociological and musicological analyses of popular music. In this article, I do include some nods to vocal performance or instrumental accompaniment, but I am neither a sociologist nor a musicologist (although I have been a sometime singer-songwriter). My interest is in adding to the suite of tools the academy might bring to such analysis the ones from my own discipline. For smart discussion of the theoretical issues involved in the analysis of song lyrics, see Frith “Towards” and “Why,” Regev, and Shepherd “Music and Social Categories” among sociologists; McClary and Walker “Start,” Cook, and Middleton among musicologists. Sociologists addressing issues involving gender and popular music include McRobbie, Frith and McRobbie, and Shepherd “Music and Male Hegemony.” Whitesell’s *Music* provides the most incisive, thorough, and evocative study of all dimensions of Mitchell’s work—as performer, producer, musician, poet, painter, and critic. As anyone studying Mitchell ought to be, I am incalculably indebted to this book.

scope does not include a consideration of how these oppositions or boundaries might map onto gender, but once we imagine such an exercise, we can see that “female” would line up with “East” and “settlement.” Home is the wife and kids, of which the “cowboy” (the Romantic artist or rock and roll star) needs to keep free if he is to pursue his ideals without compromising them, for to pursue an uncompromisingly single life, figured as “freedom,” is to be fully alive, to live an authentic life; it is the positive value whose negative opposite is the bourgeois domestic scene of marriage, family, and economic success that are figured as “settling down” and “selling out.” Any story participating in this anti-bourgeois ideology will demonstrate its dynamic: an idealistic hero denies or resists the temptations of love and, therefore, of the woman and the domestic settlement she represents in order to live by his ideals and pursue his calling. Westerns from *Shane* (1953) to *Appaloosa* (2008) give us paradigms specifically from the “cowboy” world, but films that are not strictly westerns—*Casablanca*, for example—will do as well.⁶

Blue poses difficult questions to this ideology: what if the romantic hero with the ideals, the vocation, and the need for authenticity and freedom is also a woman; the woman who because she is in love—and becomes a mother—embodies the very sign of bourgeois “settling down” and “selling out”? Moreover, what if she herself, despite her loving state, is fully invested in this anti-bourgeois ideology?⁷ *Blue*'s protagonist attempts to construct a precarious identity within it as *artist* in love, by stitching together mutually contradictory terms that generate shattering negations of the identities she tries to develop: the woman in love who gives up her child and lover is a selfish monster; the woman who cleaves to them is the contemptible “figure skater” in “The Last Time I Saw Richard” who trades in her skates for the “dishwasher and … coffee percolator” with which that song so scathingly rhymes her (lines 21–22).

This contradictory set of terms is intertwined with and complicated by the other story told on the album: the progress of this woman’s career, in which similar challenges to authenticity, love, and freedom arise from the lonely vocational pursuit she makes. As she rejects the inauthentic life of settling down for one of artistic pursuit, she finds herself moving into the kind of economic success that would have allowed her to keep her child, thus removing all but the worst interpretation of the choice to give her up. At the same time, since success can also lead to “selling out” or its appearance, the authenticity of her artistic pursuit also comes into question, and so she ends up seeming to have emptied her life of vital human connections for the sake of an equally hollow career. By dramatizing “Joni’s” fragmentations within and across these ironies, Mitchell creates not only an analysis of the attitudes,

⁶The others Meisel describes are the “dandy” paradigm, which plays with “the boundary or opposition between self and world, inside and outside” (5–6); and the blues tradition, which crosses “the boundary or opposition between North and South, urban and folk” (6). “Female” would line up with the “self” and “inside” of the “dandy” oppositions, but with the “south” and “folk” of the “blues” oppositions (think “Midnight Train to Georgia,” for example), once again illustrating the fragmenting effect such male-centered ideologies might have on a woman attempting to construct a cohesive identity in this world. Mitchell’s work attends to all these terms at one time or another, always from the oppositional stance of a woman deconstructing the dichotomies.

⁷These are the kinds of questions feminist sociologists of popular cultures and subcultures come to several years later: See McRobbie (especially 68–69), McRobbie and Frith (especially 377), and Shepherd “Music.”

ideologies, and behaviors that defined the countercultural and rock and roll worlds in which her protagonist participates, but also makes vivid the particular difficulties these worlds presented to women. In this way, the album enacts the idea that “the personal is political,” just when Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay of that name was popularizing the phrase at the beginning of second-wave feminism.⁸

On a Lonely Road

The sequence of songs on the album tells this interconnected pair of stories (of the love affair and of the career) in a narrative line that highlights the protagonist’s worsening dislocations both from her world and within herself. The opening cluster of songs, from “All I Want” to “Little Green,” begins with her attempts to inhabit both the hero’s role in an anti-bourgeois, anti-domestic romance and the heroine’s role in a courtship romance.⁹ In “All I Want,” she flings herself breathlessly into the hope that her “sweet romance” (line 14) can free her and her lover from “the jealousy and greed” that threaten to “unravel” the “joy” they share (lines 31–33) and allow them to “belong to the living,” for “life is our cause” (lines 8, 22). At the same time, the song expresses her desire for the tender details of domesticity, which she also wants: “to talk to you,” to “shampoo you,” “to knit you a sweater” (lines 20, 36). These desires, which her anti-bourgeois stance renders mutually contradictory, come jumbled together, especially in the final verse, as though the power of her desire can fuse the contradictory ideological terms of “settling” and “freedom” into a kind of oxymoron, a bohemian scene of domestic freedom:

I want to have fun, I want to shine like the sun
 I want to be the one that you want to see
 I want to knit you a sweater
 I want to write you a love letter
 I want to make you feel better,
 I want to make you feel free. (lines 34–39)

Similarly, in the portrait of her peripatetic lover and their life together in “My Old Man,” she (along with the whole counterculture) rejects defiantly the need for any “piece of paper/From the City Hall” because their love is authentic, based on free choice instead of a contract imposed by state bureaucracy (lines 5–6). And yet, when this “singer in the park … walker in the rain … dancer in the dark” (lines 2–4) exercises his freedom to go out in the world alone, she “collides” with “them lonesome blues,” a condition she

⁸An excellent account of the place of this idea and essay can be found in Dale M. Smith’s *Poets Beyond the Barricade*.

⁹Most analyses of Mitchell’s songs focus on identifying the actual people she writes about in her songs: see Flanagan (230), Weller (299–305 and *passim*), Bego (96–99). Even Mercer, whose interest is in understanding the process of what she calls the “literary nature of songwriting” (12), ends up pursuing this angle quite frequently because she wants to understand how Mitchell was influenced by her fellow artists. Biography is certainly not my interest here; instead, I will read the songs as a cohesive and fictional story whose “characters” are the usual lyric ones of speaker and beloved.

expresses with more images of domestic settlement, this time an abandoned one: “the bed’s too big, the frying pan’s too wide” (lines 19–22).¹⁰

These two main characters and their way of life thus introduced, “Little Green” recounts the event—the birth of their baby—which threatens to unravel this delicate fabric the protagonist has tried to knit out of domesticity and freedom—especially since her lover departs, keeping his artistic authenticity free of the “bourgeois conformity” with which this woman-and-child now threaten him:

He went to California
 Hearing that everything’s warmer there
 So you write him a letter, say, “Her eyes are blue.”
 He sends you a poem and she’s lost to you
 Little green, he’s a nonconformer. (lines 6–10)

This verse of “Little Green” illustrates beautifully the “finer ironies” of working in the dramatic forms that give this song its devastating poignancy. On its surface, performed in the most “innocent” of Mitchell’s vocal styles, the song unfolds in the tenderly soothing tones of a lullaby-like soliloquy that expresses the mother’s deep love and explains why she must nevertheless send her baby into the “happy ending” of stability that she cannot provide (line 22). It is a voice that also seems to attach no blame to the lover’s “nonconformity”: in fact, because of it, he finds this woman-and-child poetically inspiring—not the source of shame they would present to her parents, who apparently would embrace the moralistic conservatism that his non-conforming ideology opposes (thus she sends “lies” home, and when the only way to take care of her baby becomes giving her up, she’s “sad and … sorry, but … *not ashamed*” [lines 19, 21, my emphasis].)

Mitchell has said, however, that she was always both inside and outside this countercultural world: “I was the queen of the hippies, but in a way I wasn’t really a hippy at all. I was always looking at it for its upsides and downsides, balancing it and thinking, here’s the beauty of it and here’s the exploitative quality of it and here’s the silliness of it. I could never buy into it totally as an orthodoxy” (Hoskyns 167). Thus, the words of this verse also express a view of this lover and his actions that lies outside the innocently sorrowful voice that sings them. In the lines, “So you write him a letter, say, ‘Her eyes are blue.’ / He sends you a poem and she’s lost to you,” we can hear the ironic distance between Mitchell and her protagonist, one that invites us to see “the exploitative quality” of precisely the countercultural “orthodoxy” and its hero that this young mother clings to in her love and sorrow. If the standard sexual mores of the mid-twentieth century held the young woman to blame when she “got herself in trouble” and excused the young man because “boys will be boys,” the countercultural ideology opposing this moralistic view—despite no longer blaming and shaming the young woman—held the young man no more responsible for the consequences of free love than bourgeois morality had done.¹¹ As

¹⁰Whitesell also notes that “the perils of domesticity and the perils of rootlessness” form a “lasting controversy” in Mitchell’s “search for self-fulfillment” that runs throughout her career (78–79).

¹¹McRobbie diagnoses just this blind spot in left-wing sociologists of popular culture, while Weller supplies a more journalistic account of the ways the three artists she covers, including Mitchell, negotiated the special difficulties the free love era posed to women.

the verse shifts into the direct address of its final line, “Little green, he’s a nonconformer,” moreover, it harnesses the great ironic power not just of soliloquy, but more especially of dramatic monologue, a form whose very structure is premised on an ironic disjunction between speaker and author. Here, while the mother sadly explains to her baby why her father has left, we can hear across that ironic distance Mitchell’s scathing assessment of his flimsy reason: Little Green, he’s a “nonconformer.” Since the whole is also performed in the very voice of sorrow, this “nonconformer” who signs away his little family with “a poem” seems all the more irresponsibly selfish for having brought this devastating sorrow down on such innocent heads.¹² The message, meanwhile, is not just “pertinent” to the times, but is in fact prescient, anticipating as it does the shift of sexual mores that occurred later in the century—perhaps in response to the “free love” ethos—that produced the idea of the contemptible, blameworthy “deadbeat dad.”

The dissonance between love and “orthodoxy” thus begun in “Little Green” intensifies in the emotional terrain covered by the next cluster of songs (from “Carey” to “This Flight Tonight”), for Mitchell conveys this part of the story on two narrative levels, enacting the widening dislocations this dissonance causes within her protagonist. The surface is depicted in “Carey” and “California,” the bouncy travel-and-party songs in which the protagonist follows the paths of the hippie diaspora from California to Paris, Greece, and Spain (and “maybe ... Amsterdam or maybe ... Rome” [“Carey” lines 21–22]). In these songs, she also seems to have gained some success in her artistic vocation (as her “finest silver” in line 35 of “Carey” suggests) before returning home “above the Las Vegas sands” (“Flight” line 4). Alternating with these upbeat songs come the devastating cries from the inside of that outside, articulated in “Blue” and “This Flight Tonight,” which voice her alienation from that surface life and the increasingly unbearable self it constructs for her. Both the breezy surface and the despairing depth are evoked equally vividly, and Mitchell places them in ironic contrast to each other so that the dark songs make the fun of the sunny songs look like denial, as the sunny songs portray the increasingly shallow and materialistic blandishments offered by her artistic success. Together, the songs stage for us a fully realized self of surfaces and depths whose internal divisions result from the fracturing antinomies presented by her deep attachment to the two kinds of romance—one with art and freedom and one with her lover—that simply refuse integration.

Once she ends her love affair (sometime between “Flight” and “River”), the surface becomes untenable. “River” invites us to understand this breakup as a compounding repetition of the signing away of Little Green in the motif of “greenness” shared by the two songs: “Call her green and the winters cannot fade her / Call her green for the children who have made her” of lines 3–4 in “Little Green” becomes “it don’t snow here / it stays pretty green / I’m going to make a lot of money / Then I’m going to quit

¹² Whitesell devotes a chapter to the “Voices and Personae” Mitchell develops and performs across her career, including a comprehensive taxonomy of the stylistic ranges she gives her voice in order to dramatize the contents of her songs and the personae who articulate them. One of these ranges is “naïve vs. sophisticated” (62), and two personae include “the Ingénue” (66–68) and “the Critic” (73–77). Because this taxonomy is an overview, however, he does not have space to develop a discussion of the ways she might occupy two of these personae at once, via dramatic mode, as I am claiming she does here with “Ingénue” and “Critic.”

this crazy scene" in "River" (lines 7–10). The natural, living green of the child and the "children who've made her" seems in this juxtaposition to have been traded for the artificial green of "a lot of money," making the self-castigations in "I made my baby cry" and "I made my baby say good-bye" reverberate with the rejection of both child and lover for an artistic vocation that is becoming defined by the very inauthenticity she had thought she was escaping (lines 17, 33). Faced with so much disillusionment—with her lover, with the countercultural ideologies on which she had staked the authenticity of their love, with the celebritizing of her artistic career, but especially with herself for having, as she thinks, "sold out" in both domains—she can only "wish I had a river /I could skate away on" (lines 5–6), condemning herself to a lonely road that takes her finally to the "dark cocoon" in "The Last Time I Saw Richard" (line 31). This drama-narrative in lyric soliloquies thus tells the story of a young woman trying to live according to two contradictory ideals and who suffers tremendous losses—especially in her sense of who she is—because those contradictions and the contradiction between them and her gender allow her no space in which to integrate herself as both woman and artist.

As this dramatized narrative moves through the successive roads and homes that seem so uncannily to shift into one another, Mitchell enacts her protagonist's disillusionments in a network of imagery made up of lights, warmth, and sight and their opposites of darkness, cold, and blindness. This network plays on the literal meanings of "illusion" and disillusionment: a false-seeing or deception of the eye that must be extinguished before true-seeing or enlightenment can take place. The second verse of "My Old Man" provides as good an entry into this web as any:

He's my sunshine in the morning
He's my fireworks at the end of the day
He's the warmest chord I ever heard
Play that warm chord, play and stay, baby (lines 10–13)

The "sunshine in the morning" picks up a pair of those desires so breathlessly spilled out in "All I Want," "I want to have fun, I want to shine like the sun /I want to be the one that you want to see," but this version reverses the line of the gaze so that "He" is the "sunshine," "the one" she "wants to see." The brightness of this sunshine is matched in this verse with the associated value of warmth in "He's the warmest chord I ever heard." It is a fitful warmth that he provides, however, for as we see in the bridge, he often leaves, prompting her request that he "play that warm chord, play and stay, baby." The warmth appears again in "Little Green" when he goes "to California /Hearing that everything's warmer there." The warmth and light that shifted from her to him in "My Old Man" shifts again now to that state, where he follows it (or takes it with him). Thus in her European travels, it is sunny California, where he is, that becomes the home she longs for, especially in the song "California," which calls Paris "too old and cold and settled in its ways" (line 7). Even the Matala of "Carey," too hot with its African wind and "bright red /devil," perhaps, is "really not my home" (lines 16–17, 4). However, as she begins to suggest in the "Sunset" of "I'll even kiss a Sunset pig," the warm glow of the "warm chord" has begun to wane (line 12). In

the last reference to California in “River,” its light and warmth have become a winter of alienation, the longed-for home now frozen into a long river that transforms it into just another cold and lonely road.

The setting of the warm sun has its corollary in the loss of light as well, the nighttime lights of moon and stars also begun as a motif in “My Old Man”: “he’s my fireworks at the end of the day.” The erotic sparkle of this image results in Little Green, who is “born with the moon in Cancer” in the opening line and called “Just a little green /Like the lights when the northern lights perform” (lines 14–15) in the final chorus. In “Carey,” such lights supply the sparkle of fun and flirtation: “the night is a starry dome. /And they’re playin’ that scratchy rock’n’roll /Beneath the Matala moon” (lines 26–28), both of which are reflected in her “finest silver” and the “empty glasses” they “smash down” (lines 12–13). However, the twinkling, erotic “starry dome” becomes the very image of loss in “This Flight Tonight,” as recounted in its first verse:

Look out the left, the captain said
 The lights down there, that’s where we’ll land.
 I saw a falling star burn up
 Above the Las Vegas sands.
 It wasn’t the one that you gave to me
 That night down south between the trailers;
 Not the early one
 That you can wish upon;
 Not the northern one
 That guides in the sailors. (lines 1–10)

This verse with its “falling star” that “burned up” and its series of denying “nots” suggests the massive failure of the whole starry dome—wishes, guidance, gifts, and all. The failure of the stars also recurs in the song’s refrain with the wishing star (“Starbright, starbright /you got the lovin’ that I like all right”) that fails to grant her wishes to “turn this crazy bird around,” to make it all not so—“I shouldn’t have got on this flight tonight” (lines 11–14). The lights have gone out in her “heart” as well: “Blackness, blackness dragging me down /Come on light the candle in this poor heart of mine” (lines 23–24). Loss of light is loss of sight, not only in the “blackness everywhere,” but especially in the twin disillusionments she recounts, the first in her lover’s gaze, now a “look so critical” (line 16), and the other in her own, signified in the return of “Carey’s” “scratchy rock’n’roll” that now plays mockingly in her headphones: “Bye bye baby, baby goodbye /Ooh ooh love is blind” (lines 30–34).

After this massive extinguishing of sun, moon, fireworks, northern lights, stars, and candles, the remaining songs take place largely in darkness. In “A Case of You,” aside from its sole “blue TV screen light” (line 7), the lover is “constantly in the darkness” (line 3), as the protagonist expresses her newly critical take on his declaration that he is as “constant as the northern star” (line 2). In “Richard,” she reaches the darkest place of all, one lit only by a single candle that she herself blows out, with the “tombs” in her eyes that she saw in Richard’s “in Detroit in ‘68” when he accused hers of being “full of moon” (lines 16, 1, 5).

Inside You'll Hear a Sigh

The narrative and dramatic exposition of this story can thus be followed by listening to the songs in sequence from "All I Want" to "The Last Time I Saw Richard," a linear structure that is also figured in the "road" imagery that appears in the variously lighted and darkened roads, rivers, seas, and flights down, along, over, and on which the protagonist is "travelling, travelling, travelling" ("All I Want," line 1). However, the album does not only enact a narrative. It can also be apprehended as a lyric meditation on the condition of its protagonist. This lyric exploration of feeling and ideas about the world occurs in a differently imagined structural figure: not a linear sequence, but a three-dimensional space that contains layers of emotion and thought between its core and its crust, like a globe or a self. This structuring principle, like the linear narrative, is thematized in a set of figures that appears throughout the album, one composed not of "roads," but of "containers": dives, bars, cafés, "shell," "box of paints," "dark cocoon," and many more. The core of this structure is the title song, "Blue," which Mitchell places at the center or mid-point of the album. The other songs can be seen as an accretion of concentric layers upon this center. Marking the outer crust and closing or sealing off the album, then, is "The Last Time I Saw Richard," that dark expression of toughened cynicism with which this album-as-psyche clothes and protects its despairing interior. An exploration of this lyric structure best begins, then, with a careful reading of its core.

"Blue" moves through its ideas by means of metonymic or associational drift, almost like a daydream or free association. It does not have "verses" so much as repeated passes through the same series of images, each of which deepens and broadens the meaning of the series. The first pass lays out the series in spare assertion:

Blue, songs are like tattoos
You know I've been to sea before
Crown and anchor me
Or let me sail away. (lines 1–4)¹³

The opening melismatic, falling chant through the single word "blue" evokes both the color itself and the depressed, decadent condition that color so often signifies. It is the color which produces the first association, "Blue ... songs are like tattoos," no doubt because tattoos are "blue": inky, but also painful to receive. In this pass through blueness, songs, and tattoos, we are not told how "songs are like tattoos," but we can understand that songs are an engraving or recording of ideas and experiences in the mind as tattoos engrave them across a body. This song, then, might be about blue songs—about its own identity as expression—and about the tattooing of "blue" experiences across the self, figured as a body. The next line suggests a reference to those who in the mid-twentieth century were most commonly associated with tattoos: sailors. Here, however, the sea-going one is not the "man who went out sailing in a decade full of dreams" ("Cactus Tree," line 1), but rather

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the singer herself, evoked as the sailor's always feminine vessel, which can either be anchored in harbor or allowed to "sail away." This evocation of the two possibilities for a woman-in-love—to be "crowned and anchored" in harbor or emptied and let to sail away—encapsulates the dilemma the protagonist has been facing between being "tied and true" or feeling hollow with "lonesome blues," as she puts it in "My Old Man." This dilemma seems to be the experience recorded or engraved by the song-tattoo in this pass.

On the horns of that dilemma, the song pauses—"sail away" where?—and then makes another pass through the series:

Hey, Blue, here is a song for you
 Ink on a pin underneath the skin
 An empty space to fill in
 Well there're so many sinking now
 You've got to keep thinking
 You can make it through these waves. (lines 5–10)

In this pass, the series acquires a different specificity. "Blue" becomes the addressee to whom this song is an offering of communication across the space between speaker and lover, much as his poem had been sent in response to her letter about Little Green. Songs are like tattoos in this pass, then, because they are attempts to fill empty spaces with a communication of feeling through art, just as the tattoo fills in a bodily space: "Ink on a pin /Underneath the skin /An empty space to fill in." But the ink does not in fact close the gap; instead, it marks it permanently as empty space. Thus the oceanic desire and need that caused the emptiness in the first place go unmet, and lover, speaker, sailor, ship, and "so many" are all "sinking" in it, hardly able to keep head above the waves of this deep blue sea, an image that recalls the face on the album's cover drowning in its blue ink.¹⁴

This pass goes on to complicate the idea of "empty spaces to fill in" with the "ink"- and "song"-like substitutes and substances that characterized the Woodstock generation, all of whom the speaker sees, in her blue condition, as drowning in these unfulfilling fillers of empty spaces:

Acid, booze and ass
 Needles, guns and grass
 Lots of laughs, lots of laughs
 Everybody's saying
 That hell's the hippest way to go,
 Well I don't think so
 But I'm gonna take a look around it though
 Blue, I love you. (lines 12–19)

Here, "acid, booze, and ass /Needles, guns, and grass /Lots of laughs" are like the "songs" that "are like tattoos" especially because they are the fillers of empty spaces created by "the hippest way to go," life spent chasing a freedom that evacuates

¹⁴ Crowe called these lines a "message of survival" in his review of the album for *Stereo Review*. "These words sound to me like a pointed and pertinent warning to that part of a generation that talks a lot about getting it all together but begins to seem less and less capable of really doing so" (41–42).

human connection, an emptiness evoked so hauntingly in the “lots of laughs, lots of laughs” that hang hollowly over a faltering piano, ghostly echoes of the party in “Carey” where they “laugh and toast to nothing” (line 12). However, she is “gonna take a look around” this “hell” because “Blue” is “sinking” in it like everyone else, and she ends this pass with the direct declaration, “Blue … I love you,” in a musical line that trails off, as Lloyd Whitesell has brilliantly noted, in an echo of the piano accompaniment to “My Old Man” (137).

However, her cry of love, enclosed as it is in the space of this song, only marks the empty space between her and her lover—like the ink on the pin, or the drinks and drugs and laughs at the party—an emptiness performed literally in the voice. Here, Mitchell uses her widest vibrato on the “you” of “I love you,” one so wide that it threatens the integrity of the pitch by emptying its center. The same wide vibrato then marks the empty space she faces in herself in the final pass, where she uses it for “me”:

Blue, here is a shell for you
Inside you'll hear a sigh
A foggy lullaby
There is your song from me. (lines 20–23)

In this last pass, the song offered to Blue is finally revealed as a shell, another empty vessel that once contained a life but now will only echo the giver’s or recipient’s own empty interior. “Blue,” in this pass, is a sigh of empty space echoing back to itself its own emptiness—a “foggy lullaby” for a baby that is lost. This set of insights, that songs are like tattoos because art cannot restore the greatest losses and that the freedoms beckoning in both the counterculture and its fashionable celebrity imitation are illusions, gives the album its despairing core.

The other songs that radiate from this core come in pairs that can be matched in one way by instrumental accompaniment and in another by color imagery, but always by the before and after “Blue” versions of similar thematic material. For this song, as the conclusion of side one, also functions as an epiphanic moment that slices her story in half so that what comes after it is a more experienced, darker look at the kinds of events and states of mind that came before it.¹⁵ Immediately flanking “Blue,” for example, come “Carey” and “California,” the two band-and-dulcimer accompanied songs that recount her travels and her successful career. However, “California,” after the “Blue” devastations, expresses a loneliness and weariness with this life that she has not yet felt in “Carey,” as well as an increasing cynicism about those “pretty people” of the inauthentic world into which that success is bringing her (line 35). In “Carey,” she could still enjoy and miss their “clean white linen and … fancy French cologne” (line 6). Flanking these songs come the guitar-accompanied accounts of giving up her deepest attachments, “Little Green” and “This Flight Tonight.” “Flight” retains none of the sweet, sorrowful poignancy that

¹⁵This article is an analysis of the original LP record, which has a “side one” and “side two.” Mitchell clearly designed the album with this structure in mind, and placed her title track in this particularly important moment in the overall sequence of songs. (Other media from the period, cassette and 8-track tapes, would retain this two-sided structure, as CDs and mp3 files do not.)

characterizes “Little Green,” but instead recounts in bitterness and desperation the beginning of her choice to end the affair with Little Green’s father. This contrast appears not only in the imagery of falling stars, but also in the guitar accompaniments Mitchell uses, a delicate finger-picking style for “Little Green” and a harder, buzzing strum for “Flight.” Flanking these are the two piano meditations on her lover and their lifestyle: the innocently idealistic “My Old Man,” and the cry of self-alienated misery that is “River.” Outside these come the two dulcimer-accompanied self portraits, “All I Want” and “A Case of You,” breathless hope in a new “sweet romance” replaced by sad resignation after its loss. “Richard” then completes this concentric figure with its veneer of cynicism: “all romantics meet this same fate someday, / cynical and drunk and boring someone in some dark café” (lines 2–3), the answer at the end of side two to the despairing epiphany that closed side one.

The songs fan outward in slightly different sets if we match them by color instead of instrumentation, adding richness to the ways they speak to one another.¹⁶ In “Carey” and “California” appear the “reds” of the “bright red /devil” and the “red red rogue” (“California” line 18), a rival lover in Matala, who with his priapic “goat dance,” too-hot, red-devilish unpredictability (“he cooked good omelets and stews … but he kept my camera to sell”) makes her long for her warm “home” in California (lines 15, 17, 19), as does the too-cold celebrity “party down a red dirt road” in Spain (line 34). Meanwhile, the “clean white linen” and the “silver” of “Carey” during the journey away from that home are darkened irrevocably in “This Flight Tonight” by the “blackness, blackness dragging me down” of the journey back to it. Surrounding this three-song ring of red and black-and-white are the “green” songs that recount the losses of child and lover in poignant and despairing versions. The green of the new spring that “winters cannot fade” in “Little Green” hollows into the hard, uncanny green of southern California that transforms mid-winter with its family Christmas celebrations into an alienating landscape of inauthenticity and despair, a transformation captured precisely with the modulation of “Jingle Bells” into alien harmonic territories in the piano. Outside this ring comes another layer of innocent and experienced blue love songs: when he leaves she gets the blues in “My Old Man,” while she leaves him for the “blue TV screen light” in “A Case of You” (line 7). The opening and closing songs of the album, “All I Want” and “Richard,” together lay out in the color-less outer layer, almost like the introduction and conclusion of an essay, the central paradox staged by the album, that “the key to set me free” unlocks only a “dark café” that is “gettin’ on time to close” (“All I Want,” line 30; “Richard,” line 12).

As disillusioned and cynical as the protagonist seems in “The Last Time I Saw Richard,” however, the real insight to be wrung from her condition comes not to her, but to us, out of the gap between what “Joni” perceives and what Mitchell has shown us in the design of the album as a whole. We can see, for example, that she continues to value even these agonizing “dark café days” (line 33) as more

¹⁶ Whitesell articulates this motif in the most fully developed way, although he does not note its function as structural pattern: “six out of the ten songs on that album make striking reference to ‘the blues’ or the color blue; the remaining songs make subsidiary mention of red, black, white, and green. The penultimate song, ‘A Case of You’, consummates the motif with the line ‘I live in a box of paints’” (196).

romantically authentic than Richard's sellout marriage, which she describes with a contempt that appears especially clear in the contrast between his drinking "at home now with the TV on /and all the house lights left up bright" (lines 23–24) and her "hidin' behind bottles in dark cafes" and imagining another escape when "I get my gorgeous wings and fly away" (lines 29–32). When she blows "this damn candle out," she enacts her final disillusionment (line 25). However, no enlightenment or truer seeing comes to her. Instead, it is we who see that such blind flyings-away will take her nowhere new. "Richard" shows us that ideals as they harden into "orthodoxy" become traps just as "moons" become "tombs." The finality of this closure appears nowhere more poignantly than in the melodic motive of the last phrase of the song. Its fall through the descending fifth and third in the melody enacts a musical downward spiral into more and more "dark ... café ... days" in darkly ironic contrast to the gorgeously winged ascent imagined in the lyric. We apprehend this truth even though "Joni" cannot because Mitchell has shown in all the flights her protagonist has attempted or imagined on planes, skates, sails, and wings, or the spaces she has tried to occupy in dives, ships, cafés, boxes of paint, and even beds and frying pans, that there is no escape from the fragmented and dislocated self, no song that can heal it.

Mitchell famously resists talking about the recognition of her work in terms of gender: "I wish we could get over that," she says, "I'm a musician and I leave gender aside. I'm an accomplished musician" (qtd. in Whitesell 5). Quite rightly, she hopes with remarks like these to discourage qualification of her achievement with her gender, whether because her work might be considered extraordinary "for a woman" or because she is expected to take extra pride in having achieved it as "a woman in a man's world." When I call her work a "feminist statement," then—as I am going to do—I use that phrase in a different sense, one that does not imply her isolation or anomaly as a female artist, but instead one that builds upon another artistic role she has assigned herself: the witness. "I think I know my role. I'm a witness. I'm to document my experiences in one way or another," she tells Jenny Boyd (qtd. in L. Smith 26), and to Bill Flanagan, speaking of herself in second person: "You're always working towards reporting instead of editorializing—just seeing things as they are" (240). What Mitchell witnesses and reports so incisively are experiences, states of mind, or perspectives that "read across" (McRobbie 67) the tropes and ideologies—the orthodoxies—that favor the formation of coherent identities in members of a dominant group. I take this phrase of "reading across" from feminist sociologist Angela McRobbie, who, in a feminist critique of her male colleagues' studies of youth subcultures, identifies the contribution feminism makes to this field as an ability to "read across" masculinist paradigms in order to make visible the experiences of women that those paradigms ignore, silence, or fragment: "No commentary on the hippies dealt with the sexual division of labor, let alone the hypocrisies of 'free love'; few writers seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home after a weekend on speed," as she puts it (68–69). So, too, with Mitchell's work, which can help its listeners read across any dominant orthodoxy, not just those of gender, as Irish writer Colm Toibín demonstrates in an essay about his discovery of *Blue* when he was sixteen:

I wonder if my addiction to *Blue* was about being gay in a small town and finding in those melodies and chords and those words something about the idea of being not quite right (her voice, my family said, was not quite right) that I found nowhere else. I found it in Hemingway soon and in Kafka too, but I never found it in songs from Hollywood musicals, as other gay men of my generation did, or in more obvious camp (unless Joni Mitchell at her Joniest was, in fact, the most obvious camp available at the time). (209)

His observation expresses exactly the condition of being “not quite right” not only in his small town in Ireland in 1971, but also in the “not quite right” group within which he might have expected to feel more “right,” a subculture that itself turned out to have orthodoxies that excluded his experience—just as Mitchell witnessed in the hippie counterculture of which she was reputedly “the queen.” *Blue* gave Toibín, he goes on to say, “some further iron to my soul, in case I needed it” (211). Her albums provide such catharses again and again in one of the vividly and powerfully enacted feminist statements in art and literature of the last fifty years.

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