

## Korean *P'ansori* and the Blues: Art for Communal Healing

Katharine C. Purcell, Trident Technical College

and

E. Taylor Atkins, Northern Illinois University

### Abstract

This presentation uses musical examples and lyrical analysis to explore the common social, aesthetic, and political characteristics of Korean *p'ansori* and American blues. Included in the text are discussions of the historical roots, philosophies, social functions, musical aesthetics, and rhetorical devices of these respective performance genres. This essay explores the diverse elements employed by blues and *p'ansori* performers to transform songs and folktales into social commentary, and also reveals the similar intentions behind this form of Signifyin(g). In short, while form and function are linked to culture, the compulsion to perform arises from similar conditions of oppression as well as the desire to overcome this oppression.

The seeds of this project first germinated beneath the trade winds of Hawai'i, and later flowered in a smoky blues bar high above the bustle of Seoul's It'aewon district. But it was not until the authors, fortified with fried chicken and kimchee, boarded a speeding train from Andong that the idea of putting our thoughts to paper occurred to us. As Southerners participating in the Asian Studies Development Program's Korean Culture and Society Institute, we shared a particular transfixion with the genre of solo dramatic singing known as *p'ansori*. We were immediately struck and entranced by the subtle musical, aesthetic, and cultural parallels to the blues, which, like *p'ansori*, originated as a subaltern expressive form with a distinctive and highly refined musical and lyrical vocabulary capable of challenging and transforming hegemonic aesthetic conventions and social ideologies.

What came immediately to mind were the ideas of the acclaimed African American musician, actor, and activist Paul Robeson (1898-1976), who frequently claimed that all world folk music possessed not only appreciable musicological similarities but also, more importantly, a common emotional core that effectively communicated across national and cultural boundaries. An artist steeped in both European classical and African American folk traditions, Robeson heard familiar emotional strains and musical devices in the "sorrow songs" of peoples he encountered as he traversed the globe. Those peoples, in turn, responded to his performances with surprising empathy:

When I sang my American folk melodies in Budapest, Prague, Tiflis, Moscow, Oslo, the Hebrides, or on the Spanish front, the people understood and wept or rejoiced with the spirit of the songs. I found that where fortunes have been the same, whether people weave, build, pick cotton, or dig in the mines, they understand each other in the common language of work, suffering and protest.... When I sing "let my people go," I can feel sympathetic vibrations from my audience, whatever its nationality. It is no longer just a Negro song—it is a symbol of those seeking freedom.... (quoted in Foner 1978, 131).

Robeson's extensive research on world folk melodies revealed that pentatonic (five-tone) scales predominated. Such evidence compelled him to speculate that "a world reservoir, a universal source of basic folk themes exists, from which the entire folk music is derived and to which they have a direct or an indirect tie" (quoted in Foner 1978, 444, 437).

Everywhere he went, Robeson witnessed not only sorrow and oppression, but also the vibrant musical medicines through which people objected to their circumstances and eased their pain collectively. The musicological, aesthetic, and social characteristics common to both Korean *p'ansori* and American blues suggest that Paul Robeson's theory merits revisiting. Whereas Robeson based his theory primarily on the ubiquity of the pentatonic and the universality of social injustice, *p'ansori* and the blues share many other musicological, aesthetic, literary, and functional characteristics that might be useful in developing a more refined cross-cultural vision of "sorrow songs." Both genres emerged from socially despised castes within their respective

countries, entranced the dominant classes, and thereby transformed performance practices and aesthetic sensibilities by providing alternative visions of beauty, humor, and social truth.

Expressive form is, of course, culturally specific: the expressive conventions of the African American and Sino-Korean traditions are clearly the products of unique historical and cultural circumstances. Nonetheless, it was the function of both blues and *p'ansori* to provide a medium through which the lowborn could examine their place and explore a sense of freedom. To borrow a term from Henry Louis Gates (1988), both genres permitted historically disadvantaged participants to "Signify" on their surroundings. Both forms encouraged singers and listeners alike to preserve an ennobled sense of self as they navigated the obstacles erected by economic and social oppression. These sorrow songs opened a space for participants to negotiate their position within a given society. Both performance genres constituted what Albert Murray (quoting Kenneth Burke) has called "basic 'equipment for living'" that empowered African Americans and Koreans to persevere in the face of material deprivation, social oppression, and psychological torment (Murray 1985, 570).

What follows is an examination of the parallel historical, musical, and lyrical characteristics of these two expressive forms. By exploring in tandem the artistic evolution, aural aesthetics, social functions, and literary techniques of blues and *p'ansori*, we draw attention to the interstices between musician and audience, word and note, formal and vernacular, which are defining features of these particular sorrow songs. Both genres employed sonic and literary devices that expressed emotions originating among subaltern groups yet which eventually transcended social distinctions to challenge and transform canonical conventions and social wisdom; thus, both forms became vehicles for healing both individuals and communities partitioned by rigid social categories. It is not our intention to efface the obvious and significant differences between blues and *p'ansori*, nor to deny the possible similarities between these genres and other musical expressions. On the contrary, we hope to encourage further cross-cultural explorations of the aesthetic values, social production and reception, politically subversive qualities, and communally therapeutic functions of sorrow songs. Such inquiries will heighten awareness among educators and students of the ways in

which human beings in different cultural contexts heal themselves and transcend their circumstances through the production of musical sound and the manipulation of aesthetic devices.

### Roots

*P'ansori* is oral literature, consisting of both sung and recited passages, performed by a singer (*kwangdae*) accompanied by a lone drummer. It has been described as "one-man opera" (Pihl 1994, 3), for the *kwangdae* narrates the action and performs every role him- or herself. During the Choson period (1392-1910), the art of narrative singing developed gradually out of a tradition of heroic folklore and narrative songs performed by female shamans and their husbands. *P'ansori* emerged as a distinctive art with a broad-based, popular following in the early eighteenth century. In spite of its plebian origins and sensibilities, "it attracted an audience that included royalty as well as outcasts, a fact that not only suggests the extraordinary wide social base of *p'ansori*, but also bears witness to the very adaptive nature of the form" (Pihl 1994, 6). *P'ansori*'s origins are most commonly located in the southwestern Cholla region, from whence the major performers emerged. Concomitant with the primacy of regional identification in Korean society, there are regional variations (though it is instructive that the so-called "eastern" [*tongp'yonje*] and "western" [*sop'yonje*] schools refer to geographical distinctions within Cholla province, demarcated by the Somjin River) (Cho 1986, 15; Pihl 1994, 34).

In this respect, *p'ansori* is similar to blues, a genre including various regional dialects, but most commonly identified with the American South and particularly the Mississippi Delta (Palmer 1981, 43-44). The blues form arose from the Post-Emancipation African American culture of the South, a culture that incorporated spirituals originally meant to teach that hard work and acceptance of one's lot in this life would bring heavenly reward in the next. Spirituals, sung through long days in the field and late at night in covert meetings, quickly adopted a critical posture that retained the Christian metaphors but communicated a desire to transform present oppressive conditions. Both the blues and *p'ansori* had roots within religious contexts, yet they became tools to address more immediate secular concerns.

Like blues, *p'ansori* literature and performance styles were originally transmitted orally and thus were susceptible to

considerable individual interpretation and extemporaneous variation in illustrative detail, dramatic emphasis, and episodic sequence. Indeed, as Marshall Pihl has argued, *kwangdae* cared less about adhering to an established version of a given tale than about immediately winning over an audience with a "creative inventiveness that sets each telling apart from the other" (Pihl 1972, 23; Pihl 1981a, 33). The fluidity of text and interpretation was somewhat compromised by Shin Chae-hyo (1812-1884), a *yangban* scholar and *p'ansori* connoisseur who transcribed the major works (*madang*) and codified a core set of aesthetic principles and a canon of renowned *kwangdae*. The resulting standard repertoire of six (later five) *madang* (out of an original twelve in the oral tradition) reflected Confucian virtues: chastity, filial piety, respect for elder siblings, loyalty, and gentlemanly faith (Park 1998b, 66). The outcome of Shin's project was that a previously fluid and unambiguously plebian performance genre became relatively ossified and gentrified by the late nineteenth century (Cho 1986, 11-13); the aesthetic merit of this process remains a point of contention among connoisseurs. Two other major developments occurred in the waning years of the Choson dynasty. With the debut of Shin's protégé Chin Ch'ae-son (1847-1901) at the royal palace in 1868, women came to be accepted as *kwangdae* (they now predominate among modern performers) (Park 1998b, 63, 65-7). Then, in the early twentieth century, *p'ansori* repertoire, narrative, and singing techniques provided the foundation for the staged, ensemble operatic style known as *ch'angguk* (Pihl 1994, 40-54).

Western audiences will no doubt be most familiar with these Korean performance arts thanks to Im Kwon-taek's *Chunhyang* (a featured selection at the Toronto, Telluride, New York, and Cannes Film Festivals in 2000). This acclaimed film not only takes its story from the best-known piece in the *p'ansori* repertoire (*Song of Ch'unhyang*) but also intersperses actual *p'ansori* performances within the narrative structure of the film. With support from such institutions as the Korea Foundation that "promote global awareness of Korean culture," *p'ansori* has played a high profile role in cultural exchange programs and no doubt will become better known outside of the Korean peninsula (Park 1998a, 16-17).

Like *p'ansori*, blues developed a mass audience beyond the boundaries of its community of origin. The Great Migration, the

massive, early twentieth-century movement of black southerners into northern cities, drew blues out of the cotton fields, back rooms, and front porches and onto center stage where white Americans could become privy to the codes of the oppressed. Blues was no less transformed by hegemonic forces' appropriation than was *p'ansori*: for example, Pat Boone's whitebread renditions of R & B tunes such as "Tutti Frutti" are analogous to the *yangban* elite's insertion of moralizing Confucian didacticism in late nineteenth-century *p'ansori*. Yet, both forms maintained their social responsiveness and artistic vibrancy well after elite co-optation commenced, in part by transforming themselves to respond to the banalization that could and often did result from such processes.

### The Aesthetics of Sorrowfulness

Because *p'ansori* expresses the sense of indignant sorrow (*han*) that ostensibly is most emblematic of a unique Korean national character, many would regard the genre as the quintessential national song form. Koreans' *han* is the product of lamentable historical experiences. The peninsula suffered frequent invasions and interventions by Chinese, Mongols, Manchurians, and Japanese; the brutality and humiliation of Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945; the ignominious distinction of being combatants in the first real battle of the Cold War; and the ordeal of over half a century of partition. And yet none of these travails was experienced equally by all Koreans. If the term *han* has been most often designated a unified national bitterness toward intrusive, destructive outsiders, it also conveys discontent over injustices and inequities within a society that was highly stratified, patriarchal, and with a significant slave population. "As popular literature," Pihl remarks, "*p'ansori* rejected the aristocratic assumption of a historical mandate for the social status quo and emphasized the contradictions and inequities of the real world in which the common people struggled to survive" (Pihl 1994, 6; Cho 1986, 18). Though *p'ansori* had become somewhat gentrified by the late 1800s, Cho Tong-il contends, "it was not because of such [external] themes as faithfulness, filial piety, or brotherly love that *p'ansori* moved the hearts of its audience .... what they most sincerely liked was not the didactic message itself but, rather, the criticism of that message" (Cho 1986, 20; Seo 1988, 121; Park 1998b, 67).

In exposing and critiquing the injustice and contradictions of existing social and gender arrangements, *p'ansori* served a purpose similar to that of the blues in twentieth-century American society. Many commentators hear in blues the most sustained and stinging critique of racial, class, and gender inequities of any American art. Blues expressed the tragicomic plight of African Americans who had achieved "emancipation without liberation" in the Land of the Free (ya Salaam 1995, 375; Baraka 1963). When sung by women, blues could also be a piercing indictment of (black or white) male privilege and a vehicle for communicating feminist aspirations (Davis 1998). Franklin Rosemont writes, "all authentic blues and jazz share a poetically subversive core, an explosive essence of irreconcilable revolt against the shameful limits of an unlivable destiny" (7-8). What made the blues so powerful was its penchant for identifying or "naming," with varying degrees of subtlety, the sources of one's misery (Brown 1930; Murray 1973, 36; Davis 1998, 33). "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it," Ralph Ellison declared, "not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (78).

This "impulse" to preserve and revisit the resentment caused by historical injustices may have no readily identifiable name in the English language, but Koreans have "named" it with the term *han*, and given it musical expression via *p'ansori*. The term *han* signifies that which both inhibits and empowers the individual's creative capacity to adapt to adverse circumstances. Thus, in the absence of a precise English equivalent, the term *han* might be used to illustrate a blues outlook, which itself recognizes and "names" the source of one's pathos. In other words, blues is living proof that *han*, "the aesthetics of sorrowfulness" (Park 1998a, 21n), is not a sentiment unique to Koreans.

Both blues and *p'ansori* singers were concerned with describing life as it was, not as it should be, and their respective worldviews were unrelentingly bleak. This is not to say that happy endings are scarce in either genre. Many blues songs end with a resolution to change the situation that gives one the blues: leaving an abusive lover, jumping the next train, dusting one's broom, or otherwise "making a change." There is in the blues a "disposition to persevere," in Albert Murray's (1976) words, to

"confront the most unpromising circumstances and make the most of what little there is to go on . . . and not without finding delight in the process or forgetting mortality at the height of ecstasy" (68, 69-70). *P'ansori* narratives, too, resolve to fortuitous outcomes: Ch'unhyang succeeds in fending off Governor Pyon's advances and reunites with her husband Mong-nyong; Sim Ch'ong restores her father's sight and becomes queen of China. Yet, it is equally undeniable that in both blues and *p'ansori* adversity is omnipresent and relentless, suffering and sorrow at the forefront, for it is precisely such adversity that makes heroism possible and healing necessary. As Murray writes in *The Hero and the Blues*, "difficulties and vicissitudes which beset the potential hero on all sides not only threaten his existence and jeopardize his prospects; they also, by bringing out the best in him, serve his purpose. They make it possible for him to make something of himself" (1976, 38).

*P'ansori* and blues conveyed their dismal outlooks on human existence in a language laced with humor, irony, and satirical bite: they encouraged their communities to keep "laughing to keep from crying." "While *p'ansori* does, on the one hand, impart a sorrowful feeling," Cho Tong-il asserts, "it also evokes laughter, on the other. Life is tragic but laughter can give us the wisdom to endure and, while critically viewing the world, overcome the tragic." *P'ansori* staples such as *Song of the Water Palace* and *Song of Ch'unhyang* subject the hypocrisy and tyranny of the supposedly benevolent ruling class to satiric scrutiny (Cho 1986, 18). Likewise, Angela Davis (1998) argues, "Blues make abundant use of humor, satire, and irony, revealing their historical roots in slave music, wherein indirect methods of expression were the only means by which the oppression of slavery could be denounced" (26). Both genres recognized and articulated the absurdity of hegemonic social ideologies and practices in their respective societies, thereby alleviating (if only temporarily) the hopelessness and psychosis that might otherwise have consumed the victims of such ideologies and practices. However, neither blues nor *p'ansori* overlooked the irony that the self was culpable in its own suffering. Blaming "the man" was too facile a strategy. Blues "offer no scapegoat but the self," Ralph Ellison asserted (94), and the protagonists in *p'ansori* tales battled "as much against their own human frailty as against the evils of society...." (Park 1998b, 68). The ultimate absurdity in a blues/*p'ansori*

worldview was that the sufferer often could see her/his own worst enemy in the mirror.

### Sounds of Sorrow

This indignant sorrow was communicated via highly refined musical vocabularies that attempted both to replicate the harsh conditions of social oppression and to develop community consciousness. Both *p'ansori* and the blues set their respective critiques to music that eschewed purity of tone as a standard of artistic beauty and moral truth, while blurring the line between performer and audience. In so doing, *p'ansori* and the blues revolutionized aesthetic sensibilities by broadening the range of sounds that audiences consider beautiful and true, and they demystified the creative process by accepting contributions from their respective audiences. Both arts were inherently dialogic in their original forms, constructed in the course of performance through an almost conversational exchange between voice and instrument, between performer and audience. In much the way that Louis Armstrong's cornet discoursed with Bessie Smith's lyrics, or that Robert Johnson's guitar fills "commented" on what he sang, the *p'ansori* drummer, while performing a set meter, added improvised beats and vocal shouts to encourage and fill out the *kwangdae's* performance. Both types of performance, moreover, accepted and incorporated spontaneous contributions from the audience. Marshall Pihl (1994) writes of *p'ansori*, "popular audiences of the early nineteenth century were parties to the act of composition and, thus, had an indirect role in shaping the content and emphasis of *p'ansori* songs" (9). Likewise, blues emerged from residual African practices of communal music making and "call-and-response," in which entire communities could and did participate (Palmer 1981, 28-29; ya Salaam 1995, 359; Davis 1998, 55-57). Performers were not sages detached from their listeners: they came from the same stock. The most accomplished *p'ansori* singers might keep royal company, as their blues counterparts could realistically aspire to play Carnegie Hall, but their very authenticity depended on retaining connections to their respective folk communities.

Although blues and *p'ansori* singers were heirs to substantial folk traditions, they were similarly compelled to improvise and innovate within their respective idioms, to develop distinctive voices, to diverge from their own teachers' styles in readily identifiable ways. The high modernist ideal of continual artistic

innovation thus meshed nicely with the folk aesthetics of *p'ansori* and the blues. Though performing songs from a common folk repertoire—in the case of blues “Catfish Blues,” “Staggerlee,” or “Walking Blues” would be examples—each artist must contribute something original to the composition or interpretation. A similar compulsion is detectable in *p'ansori* in its nineteenth-century heyday: “As can be expected of oral literature, *p'ansori* is essentially a product of serial composition by many singers over a long period of time. Thus, while the *kwangdae* receives an established tradition he also innovates” (Pihl 1994, 5).

In terms of musical aesthetics, both genres value tonal qualities that are harsh, raspy, and raw. One of the Africanisms that survived intact in the blues was the “fondness for muddying perfectly clean sounds.” The tendency to bend or slur pitches (melisma), to heighten dramatic effect by incorporating “an extravagant variety of tonal effects, from grainy falsetto shrieks to affected hoarseness, throaty growls, and gutbucket grunting,” is a defining characteristic of blues singing (Palmer 1981, 30; Baraka 1963, 26). Moreover, like their African ancestors, African American blues musicians modified their instruments to achieve buzz, rattle, or noise effects: the use of a bottleneck or pocketknife to play “slide” guitar, or of electronic distortion in the amplified blues of Willie Johnson, Buddy Guy, or Jimi Hendrix, are cases in point. Albert Murray (a writer who downplays blues’ political intent in favor of its aesthetic characteristics and “good time” functionality) insists that it was precisely this attention to “tonal coloration” and “musical nuance,” rather than “mournful lyrics,” that made blues a distinctive art (Murray 1976, 79-80).

A “raspy or buzzing sound quality” is also a hallmark of Korean musical aesthetics. “Devices which produce raspy, buzzing, or rattling sounds” abound in Korean musical instruments. Those instruments adopted from China or other countries that produced too “pure” a tone were modified to suit indigenous tastes (Lee 1997, 53-55), just as African Americans altered European instruments—using anything from spittoons to toilet plungers—to produce new, raucous sounds. A raw timbre is expected in the *p'ansori* singer’s voice as well, and is achieved only through strenuous effort and discipline. *Kwangdae*-in-training frequently sang themselves hoarse, singing in the mountains or against the din of waterfalls to achieve power, melismatic dexterity, and raspiness. Spitting up blood was a

common occupational hazard (Pihl 1994, 105; Cho 1986, 11). Im Kwon-taek’s 1993 blockbuster film *Sop'yonje* offers a vivid, if extreme, depiction of the hardships endured to perform authentic and credible *p'ansori*. This parable of sacrifice and treachery for the sake of art portrays the quixotic efforts of an itinerant *kwangdae* to teach *p'ansori* singing to his adopted daughter. The frustrated *kwangdae* repeatedly complains that she has not suffered adequately to express convincingly the elemental pathos (*han*) of *p'ansori*. Finally, determined to refine her craft, he gives his daughter a root brew that renders her sightless. By the end of the film, he remorsefully confesses his crimes. Instead of rebuking him, she rather offers her gratitude for taking the cruel step necessary to perfect her *p'ansori*.

It is worth noting that in both blues and *p'ansori*, audiences expect the same raspy timbre in men and women. Blues audiences find the husky voices of Bessie Smith, Koko Taylor, and Dinah Washington more convincing and appropriate to the blues than the more pure tones produced by, say, Sarah Vaughan or Ella Fitzgerald. Likewise, Chan E. Park notes, in *p'ansori* “no division of pitch or vocal part has developed between male and female as it has in Western opera.” Rather, women emulated the harsh, “strenuous” vocal techniques of their male teachers. The result was that the female *p'ansori* singer’s voice became “increasingly degendered”: “Once transformed, her voice is quite often mistaken for a ‘male’ voice, no longer deemed acceptable by societal standards; not conforming to expectations of how a woman ‘should sound’ in everyday life” (Park 1998b, 63, 77).

The refined coarseness of blues and *p'ansori* aesthetics were suitable for sonically representing the harsh realities of life, the human frailties, and the rugged determination to resist “adversity and absurdity” (Murray 1973, 37) of which both genres were expressive. “There is an inexactness in the bluesy sound,” Kalamu ya Salaam contends, which “approximates the social reality, which is one of chaos and struggle rather than order and stability” (357). If the abstract, didactic themes of elite Euro-American and Sino-Korean artistic traditions were most effectively communicated via “harmonious,” scientifically tempered musical systems, it made sense that the rougher, bleaker content of blues and *p'ansori*—mined from the lived experiences and popular legends of common folk—required alternative, “uglier” (if no less stylized and refined) musical vocabularies.

### The Signifying Performance

The reshaping of traditional musical sounds mirrors the reshaping of the narrative roots of blues and *p'ansori*. The core tales of loss in *p'ansori*—loss of parents, loss of lovers, loss of life—uphold Confucian ideals, teaching that complete devotion renders reward. Yet, in the context of performance it was possible to challenge these heroic formulas. Likewise, within the blues tradition, singer and situation continually reshape and revise allusions to folktales and heroic ballads. In short, as performers transformed traditional instruments and sounds to reflect the harsh conditions in which they found themselves, so too did they borrow and then bend tales of heroic deeds to comment upon the human drama that played around them. Often, the revision of the tales of great deeds and admonishments functions as a vehicle for social commentary. These folkloric cores, together with fixed sets of rhythm, are the only prescriptive elements of *p'ansori* and the blues. All other elements are dynamic, changing as each performer draws out particular elements of the plot or weaves contemporary events into the storyline. In effect, *p'ansori* and blues travel the rails of repetition yet depend upon revision as a source of energy.

The roots of revision of the folkloric core of *p'ansori* can be found in an examination of the manner in which the performance differs from its close ancestors in the shamanic tradition. Cho indicates, "as works of extraordinary power that could accomplish things beyond the reach of ordinary people, narrative shaman songs were built around shamanic spirits that were objects of religious faith" (1986, 13). The shamanic performance opened lines of communication between the spiritual realms and the common folk. *P'ansori*, on the other hand, does not focus its intentions on that which is just beyond the conceptual grasp of its listeners; rather, it challenges them to employ critical tools that they possess in order to analyze the complexities at hand. *P'ansori* revises the folkloric core of the shamanic tradition, transforming the subject of reverence and mystery into an object of analysis. Thus, in one core tale, the benevolence of a king is undermined when he readily sacrifices his daughter's life for a questionable cure. The power originally invested in the traditional core tales shifts to favor the collective experience of an audience. The codified story is further revised through the addition of supplementary characters (or characterization) and scene depiction, in what Pihl describes as "the structure of the accretive

portion of *p'ansori* [which] is typically very complicated and unsystematic in contrast to the simple, regular, and clear character of the folktale" (1981, 32). He explains that these lengthy, complex adaptations represent the *kwangdae's* interpretation of the contradictory, everyday life of his or her listeners. The popularity of bringing fantastic events from folktales to the street level is well documented: the wealthy middle class of the late Choson dynasty lined the pockets of *kwangdae* in exchange for the opportunity to view the "virtuous" Confucian elite through their cracked lenses (Cho 1986, 14).

Transforming the core of traditional stories and songs, via Signifyin(g), is also a longstanding tradition in African American performance. Paul Oliver explains that blues, a term that was not popular until the early twentieth century, grew from its secular roots of plantation-era "leader and chorus" work songs and "hollers, 'long, loud musical shouts, rising and falling and breaking into falsetto'" (Olmsted 1883 quoted in Oliver 1986, 40). Oliver notes that as segregation became the law of the land, further isolating African Americans, communities turned more to their roots for self-definition (42). Blues singers differed from other performers of the period in that they adopted themes from spirituals or hero songs, adding their own experience of survival in a world rife with economic and social barriers.

The sense of survival through song permeates the blues to its basic roots. Angela Davis traces this evolution from the spirituals to the blues by examining the manner in which Harriet Tubman rhetorically reconfigured lyrics in order to lead enslaved African Americans safely into freedom. "Tubman's spirituals were functional not only in a sense that they provided concrete information about the struggle for liberation, they were also functional in the sense that they assisted in forging a collective social consciousness—indeed of both aesthetic and a socio-historical community of individuals who had a very basic need to be free" (Davis 1990, 10). Tubman revised spirituals to communicate routes, to warn of possible dangers, and to encourage the freedom seekers to persevere. An example of her restructuring appears in the following spiritual:

Dark and thorny is the desert  
Where the pilgrim makes his ways.  
Yet beyond this vale of sorrow

Lies the field of endless days.

Drawing from Earl Conrad's portrait of the Underground Railroad's most famous conductor, Davis explains that this verse was part of a signal song: sung once, those in hiding would know to wait for a set of instructions; sung twice, the fleeing slaves would know to continue on their way (9). The plaintive praise song thus takes on a new meaning while retaining its original core.

*P'ansori* lyrics also adopt a sense of double voicedness. Cho indicates that the lyrics help to present two themes within the single performance: "The external theme is present through connective narration and is embellished by erudite vocabulary. The internal theme is manifested in the concrete unfolding of events in the form of scene and dialogue and is expressed in vernacular terms" (1986, 20). For example, scenes from *The Song of Ch'unhyang* in which two lovers meet on the sly may titillate audiences, yet they also reveal the dilemmas of cross-class relationships in a culture that was structured on strict class and gender boundaries. The external theme links the performance to its folkloric lineage in Confucian didacticism. Nevertheless, the internal theme places the performance squarely within the time of the performer and audience by drawing attention to the tragic consequences of rigid class structures and gender ideologies that hinder rather than enable moral action. Cho (1986) proposes that the two themes allowed even the upper class to enjoy the more sordid, non-Confucian elements by nurturing a space for criticizing the ruling power and its alleged moral authority (20). The depiction of Ch'unhyang as both a chaste wife and a lowly *kisaeng*, for example, challenges conventional class demarcations. Cho explains that the contradictions within the character focus upon the drive "to overcome the constraints of social status and achieve human liberation" (20). Thus, *p'ansori* opens a cultural space to analyze stratification and overcome its constraints. The performance calls for the individual to turn these constraints into tools for defining herself through identification with a character (Ch'unhyang) who possesses moral capacities of which her social category is theoretically bereft.

As performers added descriptive detail and secondary characters, simplistic paragons of Confucian virtue evolved into realistic, complex characters. *The Song of Sim Ch'ong* provides an example: a daughter sacrifices her life for her blind father and his ill-considered pledge of several hundred bags of rice to the

Buddha. While the popular legend concludes with a reward for Sim Ch'ong's filial piety, "the *p'ansori* version, on the other hand, introduces detailed personal relationships, for instance, which are realized through a variety of devices and invoke additional characters that contribute only indirectly to the forward movement of the tale. To this is added a vivid sense of atmosphere, locale, and spatial movement" (Pihl 1981, 37). With embellishments, the performer could comment on the daftness of the father, the greed of the monks, and the sheer despair sometimes involved in observing filial piety. The story of the hero does not change: Sim Ch'ong gives herself in exchange for the rice and retrieves her lost father, all the while maintaining her chaste reputation. It is the revision around the core story that encourages listeners to pay attention.

In its shift from the conventional to the experiential, Cho Tong-il explains, the *p'ansori* performance diverges quickly from the written story. "*P'ansori*, because of its episodic independence, can impart a lively feeling that cannot be found in prose fiction; and it can express, without distortion, the ideological narrator, the contradictions inherent in real experience" (1986, 19). Characters can be wise and foolish, rich and poor, or old and young. These contradictions in the performance reflect the dichotomies present within the minds of the characters. A character may feel as if he has made a wise choice, but to the audience his actions appear quite foolish.

To extend this juxtaposition, the *kwangdae* approaches a scene from several angles throughout the story. The lengthy, sung passages (*ch'ang*) exhibit extended themes either in a monologue or in extended description and are sung with appropriate rhythms to reflect the character's emotional state. The spoken passages (*aniri*), however, function as transitional devices, descriptions, or short exchanges between two characters (Pihl 1984, 27). With these devices, the *kwangdae* can embellish a well-known folktale, thereby rendering a multi-layered and true-to-life scene. Pihl's (1984) translation of the lovers parting in *The Song of Ch'unhyang* shows just how much is lost in love that traverses class boundaries. As Ch'unhyang's *kisaeng* mother hears the sighs of her daughter and her parting lover, she enters into an exchange with her daughter, whom she berates for having so easily released a fine catch. The gentleman, whose departure will surely ruin Ch'unhyang's reputation and her mother's financial security, is



urged to stay (32). Within this tragic turn of lost love, however, is a scene in which the young woman faces the reality of her lover's parting, and with biting wit, sings,

If you leave me now

When will you return?

Tell me when you'll come!

When the highest peaks of the Diamond

Mountains

Become a plain, will then you come? (31)

Tragedy transforms into irony as the lyrics encourage the audience to recognize the multiple layers of the scene. At one level is the lament; at another is the implicit sense of responsibility that the gentleman bears for causing the separation.

The language of the performance further emphasizes dichotomies within the layers. Cho explains that "erudite Sino-Korean and vernacular wording are found juxtaposed throughout *p'ansori* work" (1986, 19). And while the pairings maintain the attention of the various social classes of nineteenth-century audiences, they also create layers of meaning. As the *kwangdae* presents scenes or character monologues, the vernacular absorbs the formal language, transforming it for its own purposes. This Signifying play with words enables the *kwangdae* to critically examine the surrounding social structures and offer commentary to his or her audience.

Like Korean *p'ansori*, African American performances also employ vernacular to establish an independent space within an environment that has historically ignored its presence. This self-reflexive nature, Henry Louis Gates (1988) contends, allows for Western texts to be incorporated and revised to reflect "a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular" (xii). As in *p'ansori*, a key function in African American performances, either on the stage or on the page, is to recast the dominant culture and its language and stories into tools for transformation. Within African American texts, Gates explains, is a unique dialectic of two cultures with "distinct yet profound—even inextricably—related orders of meaning dependent precisely as much for their confrontation or relations of identity, manifested in the signifier, as on their relationship of difference manifested at

the level of the signified" (45). Both African American performances and Korean *p'ansori* emphasize difference among cultures in order to comprehend that which is shared—be it love or loss.

Gates explains that African American performance "signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle-class white people" (47). Within an African American text, whether "the dozens" or a novel, Gates finds that "precisely because the concepts represented in the poem are shaped, repeated, and familiar to the poet's audience, meaning is devalued while the signifier is valorized" (61). Attention is drawn not necessarily to the story, but rather to the manner in which the story is told. The eyes and ears of the audience are focused on the performer and his or her revisions.

Angela Davis (1990) explains, "Through the vehicle of song, [African Americans] were able to preserve their heritage, even as they were generations removed from their homeland and perhaps even unaware that their songs bore witness to and affirmed their African cultural roots" (5). Singing, for West African cultures, is not relegated solely to ritual and entertainment; instead, it incorporates ritual into every aspect of daily life, or, as Davis explains, singing "humaniz[es] the environment" (1990, 6). Words and rhythm call together all of creation for a specific purpose. This West African view enables musicians "to incorporate in their music and impart to others by means of their music a collective consciousness and a very specific communal yearning for freedom" (1990, 6).

Drawing from its roots in the West African tradition and Christian spirituals and responding to post-Reconstruction economic conditions, blues arose as a means to continue the mode of communication, yet also to document and examine the lives of the musicians and listeners. For example, Davis sees a pattern in female blues singers' lyrics dealing with love relationships. Discord among lovers becomes emblematic of discord in society. "As the spirituals consolidated a collective social consciousness of the need to fight for freedom under slavery, the blues also forged a communal consciousness, one that was based on the communication and sharing of African Americans' individual suffering and the expression of the possibility of prevailing over the most intransigent problems" (1990, 12). By singing about predicaments and failures of love and the process by which one

begins to venture out or away from them, musicians force their listeners to examine their own dilemmas—regardless of whether they are personal, social, or economic.

By voicing suffering, *p'ansori* and blues performers make it an object of analysis. Harold Schweizer, in his *Suffering and the Remedy of Art*, describes this focus on suffering as a “redemptive theory of art,” claiming that “literary language reveals the secret of suffering only by keeping it,” and as a result, “it legitimizes the experience of suffering itself” (1997, 1). *P'ansori kwangdae* do not attempt to draw a moral from a daughter’s suffering caused by a father’s physical and psychologically blindness, nor do blues singers claim to know why lovers can inflict so much pain on the ones they purport to love. Drawing from Nietzsche’s explanation of the “remedy of art” (and echoing Ellison’s contention that the purpose of blues is to “keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain”), Schweizer claims that “art is a remedy only in the sense in which it binds up to make more visible” (1). By revising traditional tales and meanings of words using lyrics and music, singers of both traditions bring to the forefront conflict often obscured beneath hegemonic cultural traditions. Yet *kwangdae* and blues singers do not exist merely to draw attention to endemic suffering. While Schweizer sees a “problematic relationship between suffering and language” in prose and poetry, it is the additions to the language—repetition, the extending of notes, and the juxtaposing of characters—that enable blues and *p'ansori* performers to redirect the attention of their listeners from the mere naming of the suffering to the accepting and surpassing of it.

The play of words and sound in blues and *p'ansori* is similar to a healing component in the novels of ethnic women writers, as noted by Gay Wilentz (2000): “Precisely because the language of novels is metaphorical and interpretive, it allows a displacement of [culturally derived binary oppositions] so that healing discourse can be achieved” (4). Music and wordplay disrupt the juxtapositions of rich and poor, male and female, good and bad by placing crisis within a community context, transforming what seems to be an individual trial into a shared problematic. The responsibility of healing becomes that of the community at large.

### Meeting at the Crossroads

*P'ansori* and blues are culturally specific artistic methods for addressing a universal human experience, namely, suffering. They do so by employing musical vocabularies and signifying strategies that, for all their appreciable differences, are remarkably similar in many ways. Viewing these genres in tandem allows educators and students to identify and interpret standards of beauty, nuances of sound, rhetorical play, and connections between the form and function of any given work of art.

These performance genres also represent valuable tools in historical and sociological investigations of social cleavages and the possibilities for healing them. For instance, *p'ansori* emerged from the same social rifts that eventually divided the Korean peninsula politically, economically, and ideologically. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it also provided a space where elites and commoners could enjoy a performance together, and their respective tastes and concerns could be explored and challenged. Blues, too, arose from the social and political inequalities of postbellum America that led eventually to the Civil Rights movement; but the eventual acceptance of the blues as the basis of American popular music caused many white Americans to take notice of and reconsider their preconceptions of African Americans. Blues-based music provided some of the first desegregated spaces where white and black performers could collaborate and their respective audiences could mingle. Blues placed African-derived cultures in the forefront of American life, eventually achieving official recognition as America’s most important cultural contribution to the world. *P'ansori* has likewise achieved acceptance by the South Korean government as an Intangible Cultural Asset, and has figured prominently in official efforts to educate international audiences about Korean culture. Ultimately, both genres, in their rise from lower social strata to national prominence, lost much of their evolutionary dynamism and social functionality to newer forms such as hip hop; yet each remains instructive for those exploring the potentials of social healing through art.

Our findings here suggest that there may be more to Paul Robeson’s original theory of cross-cultural sorrow songs than merely ubiquitous pentatonics and universal oppression. We have identified the following characteristics as important cross-cultural traits of sorrow songs: musical sounds that intentionally mimic

harsh social conditions; aesthetic principles that privilege improvisational prowess and individual interpretation over orthodox performance practices and readings; and Signifying lyrical strategies that play with elite values and language in order to lampoon, critique, and invert hegemonic social ideologies. These devices enable transcendence and healing for the victims of such ideologies, and are even capable of generating greater sensitivity among the privileged beneficiaries of existing social arrangements. We have witnessed how sorrow songs originating in subaltern contexts climb social and aesthetic ladders to achieve official respectability and to compromise the integrity of social categories.

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, with its concomitant rhetoric of *jihad*, crusades, and a "clash of civilizations," Robeson's implicit "one-world" premise may seem as irredeemably facile and naïve as the Disney ditty "It's a Small World." But, as peoples around the world grieve over these events, we will inevitably turn to our sorrow songs for solace, and may take comfort in exploring the similarities of human experiences, emotions, modes of expression, and healing strategies contained therein.

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