Journal of Africana Religions

The Hellhounds and the Void: The Heart Sūtra as Survival Technology in Black Religious Thought

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
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Manuscript Region of Origin:	UNITED STATES
Full Title:	The Hellhounds and the Void: The Heart Sūtra as Survival Technology in Black Religious Thought
Article Type:	Original Study
Keywords:	Heart Sūtra; Blues epistemology; survival technology; Africana religions; Black Buddhism
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Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Author Comments:	I am pleased to submit "The Hellhounds and the Void: The Heart Sūtra as Survival Technology in Black Religious Thought" for consideration. This article proposes a novel interpretation of the Buddhist Heart Sūtra through the lens of African-American Blues epistemology. Drawing on Clyde Woods's theorization of the Blues as survival knowledge, I argue that the Sūtra's famous negations function not as metaphysical abstractions but as a strategic dissolution of the self-as-target under conditions of radical precarity. The analysis centers on "The Heart Sutra Reborn: An American Blues Interpretation" (2025), a vernacular translation I treat as a primary document of Africana religious production. This work contributes to the journal's mission of expanding the boundaries of what constitutes "Africana religion" and engages with scholarship on Black Buddhism (Jan Willis, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel) while grounding its argument in Blues epistemology and critical race theory. The work has not been previously published and is not under consideration elsewhere. Thank you for your consideration.
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The Hellhounds and the Void: The Heart Sūtra as Survival Technology in Black Religious Thought

Abstract

This article argues that the *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra* (Heart Sūtra), when interpreted through an African-American Blues epistemology, functions as a text of survival technology developed under conditions of radical precarity. Drawing on Clyde Woods's theorization of the Blues as a system of critique, explanation, and survival, I propose that the Sūtra's systematic negations—"no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind"—operate not as metaphysical abstractions but as a strategic dissolution of the self-as-target.

The analysis centers on "The Heart Sutra Reborn: An American Blues Interpretation" (2025) as a primary document of Africana religious production. This vernacular translation renders the ancient Sanskrit text into the idiom of the American South, deploying call-and-response structures, Blues cadences, and survival practices that resonate with the Black church and juke joint alike. I argue that this translation is not an appropriation of Buddhist thought but an act of Black religious agency that reclaims emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as mobility rather than void—the knowledge of how to remain fluid in a rigid world.

Keywords: Heart Sūtra, Blues epistemology, survival technology, Africana religions, vernacular hermeneutics, Black Buddhism, śūnyatā

1. Introduction: The Hellhounds and the Void

When Robert Johnson sang of "hellhounds on my trail," he articulated what Clyde Woods would later theorize as the permanent condition of Black life in America: a state of radical

precarity in which the body is perpetually targeted, the self perpetually under siege.[^1] The Blues, Woods argued, was not merely music but an epistemology—a way of knowing forged in the crucible of plantation violence and its afterlives. It was, and remains, survival knowledge.

This article proposes an encounter between that survival knowledge and one of the most condensed, most paradoxical texts in the Buddhist canon: the *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra*, commonly known as the Heart Sūtra. In approximately 260 Chinese characters (or 14 Sanskrit ślokas), this text dismantles every category by which a self might be constructed—the senses, the consciousness, the very notion of suffering and its cessation—only to conclude with a mantra that sounds, to ears trained in the African American spiritual tradition, remarkably like a shout of liberation: *Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*. Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond. Awakening. Hail!

The argument I advance is this: the Heart Sūtra is not primarily a metaphysical summary of Mahāyāna doctrine. It is a *crisis text*—a verbal technology designed to collapse false refuge. When rendered through the interpretive lens of Blues epistemology, its systematic negations emerge not as nihilism but as survival strategy. The text's famous litany—"no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind"—reads differently when heard by those whose bodies have been historically constructed as targets. For if there is no fixed self, there is no fixed target. The arrows still come, but they pass through.

This reading emerges from close engagement with a remarkable document: "The Heart Sutra Reborn: An American Blues Interpretation," a vernacular translation that renders the ancient wisdom of Avalokiteśvara into the idiom of the American South.[^2] This text—which I treat here as a primary source of Africana religious production rather than mere commentary—

deploys call-and-response structures, Blues cadences, and embodied practices that resonate with both the Black church and the juke joint. Its author describes the project as "dressing up" the Sūtra in new cultural clothing, citing the precedent of the great translator Kumārajīva, who "dressed up the Dharma in Chinese clothes" when he brought the Buddhist scriptures to China in the fifth century.[^3]

The implications of this translation extend beyond the literary. They touch on fundamental questions about the nature of religion under conditions of precarity, the function of emptiness as a concept and a technology, and the expanding boundaries of what we recognize as "Africana religion." If the Blues, as James Cone argued, is a "secular spiritual"—a way of affirming existence in the face of non-existence—then the Emptiness Blues may be its ultimate expression: affirmation through the very negation of what can be negated.[^4]

The article proceeds in five movements, echoing the structure of a Blues progression. First, I establish the Heart Sūtra's peculiar status as a crisis text—a scripture that bypasses explanation to drop the listener directly into the experience of groundlessness. Second, I read the Sūtra's negation litany as a practice of dispossession rather than abstraction, placing it in dialogue with Ralph Ellison's phenomenology of invisibility. Third, I reframe the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) as mobility rather than void, aligning it with the Blues survival strategy of remaining fluid in a rigid world. Fourth, I interpret the closing mantra as performative release—the moment when, in Blues performance, the room exhales and the pain moves. Finally, I address the ethics of vernacular translation, arguing that such work is neither parody nor replacement of liturgy but restoration of impact.

Throughout, I draw on the theoretical frameworks of Black religious studies, particularly the work of scholars who have traced the long history of African American engagement with Asian religions. From W.E.B. Du Bois's correspondence with Indian nationalists to Howard Thurman's meeting with Gandhi, from the Black Buddhist writers Jan Willis and Charles Johnson to the contemporary Radical Dharma movement of Rev. angel Kyodo williams, there exists a genealogy of Afro-Asian spiritual exchange that contextualizes the present work.[^5] The Heart Sutra Reborn is not an anomaly but an articulation—a bringing to voice of intuitions that have circulated in Black communities for over a century.

The stakes of this reading are not merely academic. In an era of mass incarceration, police violence, and what Christina Sharpe has called the "weather" of anti-Blackness, the question of how to survive psychically—how to remain capable of love and creativity when the hellhounds are on the trail—is urgent.[^6] The Heart Sūtra, I argue, offers a technology for that survival. Not a solution to the external problem of oppression, but a transformation of the internal relationship to that oppression. As the vernacular translation puts it: "If there ain't no solid target, the arrow of suffering can't stick."[^7]

2. The Heart Sūtra as Crisis Text

The Heart Sūtra is strange. Even within the already paradoxical literature of Mahāyāna Buddhism, it stands out for its compression, its violence of negation, its refusal of narrative cushioning. Where other sūtras offer stories, parables, and extended dialogues, the Heart Sūtra offers what can only be called a controlled demolition. In the space of a few hundred words, it dismantles the entire apparatus by which Buddhism itself constructs its path: the aggregates, the sense bases, the chain of dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths, wisdom, attainment. "No

suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering, no path"—this from a tradition whose founding insight is precisely the Four Noble Truths of suffering and its cessation.[^8]

How are we to understand a text that denies its own foundations? The standard scholarly approach treats the Heart Sūtra as a summary or "heart" (*hṛdaya*) of the vast Perfection of Wisdom literature, compressing into mantra-like form the central insight of *śūnyatā*. Donald Lopez, in his comprehensive study *Elaborations on Emptiness*, traces the text's complex history of reception across Asian Buddhist cultures, noting how it served different functions in different contexts: philosophical treatise in India, ritual text in Tibet, popular devotional scripture in East Asia.[^9] Lopez's work is invaluable for understanding *how* the text has been used, but it leaves open the question of *what kind* of text this is.

I propose that the Heart Sūtra is best understood as a *crisis text*—a verbal technology designed not to explain but to enact. Like certain other extreme texts in the world's religious traditions—the Book of Job, perhaps, or the more paradoxical kōans of Zen—it functions by overwhelming the conceptual mind, creating a kind of controlled cognitive crisis in which ordinary categories break down. As Kazuaki Tanahashi puts it in his translation and commentary, the Sūtra aims to produce "groundlessness"—not a new ground to stand on, but the recognition that there never was ground to begin with.[^10]

This framing has profound implications for understanding the Sūtra's function under conditions of precarity. A crisis text meets its listener in crisis and provides not comfort but company—and, paradoxically, a kind of freedom. If you are already falling, the text seems to say, you might as well learn to fly.

The formal structure of the Heart Sūtra reinforces this crisis function. Notably, the text is not spoken by the Buddha. Unlike most sūtras, which begin with "Thus have I heard: at one time the Buddha was dwelling at..." and proceed through the Buddha's teaching, the Heart Sūtra is spoken by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara—the One Who Perceives the Sounds of the World, the embodiment of compassion. The Buddha is present but silent; he only confirms the teaching after it has been given. This structural feature is often overlooked, but it is crucial. The wisdom that the Heart Sūtra transmits is not doctrinal instruction delivered from on high. It is *testimony*—the report of what Avalokiteśvara saw when he "practiced the deep Perfection of Wisdom" and "perceived that the five aggregates are all empty."[^11]

The vernacular translation captures this perfectly: "Let me tell you how this started. Wasn't in no big cathedral. Wasn't in no fancy temple with gold on the walls. It was just Avalokiteśvara—the One Who Hears the Cries of the World—sitting deep, real deep, in that pocket of wisdom."[^12] The shift from doctrinal to testimonial voice is significant. Testimony is the currency of the Blues tradition—the "true story" that the singer tells, the "I woke up this morning" that anchors the most abstract lyrics in embodied experience. By framing Avalokiteśvara's insight as testimony rather than teaching, the vernacular translation aligns the Sūtra with a mode of truth-telling that Black communities have practiced for centuries.

There is another structural feature worth noting. The Heart Sūtra, in its most common Chinese form (the version most widely chanted today), includes a section known as the *nidāna* or "setting"—a brief narrative frame in which the Buddha enters a meditative absorption and Avalokiteśvara speaks. But in the shorter Sanskrit versions, even this frame is stripped away. The text simply begins with Avalokiteśvara practicing deep Prajñāpāramitā and seeing the five

aggregates as empty. There is no scene-setting, no narrative buildup. We are dropped directly into the crisis.

This formal austerity is the opposite of what we might call "liturgical hospitality"—the way most ritual texts ease their participants into sacred space through opening prayers, invocations, and carefully staged transitions. The Heart Sūtra refuses this hospitality. It puts you on the spot. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form"—figure that out or remain confused. "No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind"—lose yourself or keep suffering.

This structure maps onto a certain strand of the Blues tradition: the unaccompanied field holler, the song that begins without introduction and ends without resolution, the testimony that assumes its listener already knows the situation and needs no preamble. "Woke up this morning, blues all around my bed"—we do not need to be told what the blues are or how the singer came to have them. We are presumed to know. The Heart Sūtra makes the same presumption. It assumes we are already in crisis, already looking for a way out. It offers not explanation but *demonstration*.

The testimonial structure of the Heart Sūtra also inverts the usual hierarchy of Buddhist authority. In most sūtras, the Buddha speaks and disciples listen; enlightenment flows downward from the awakened one to those still struggling on the path. But in the Heart Sūtra, Avalokiteśvara—a bodhisattva, not a fully enlightened Buddha—speaks from within the experience of deep practice. The Buddha merely confirms what has been said. This structure resonates with the democratic epistemology of the Blues tradition, where truth emerges not from credentials or institutional authority but from the authenticity of lived experience. The singer does not need a degree to sing the Blues; she needs only to have lived them.

Moreover, the crisis text functions differently in oral versus written contexts. When chanted in a monastery or meditation hall, the Heart Sūtra's words wash over the listener in a stream of sound, their meaning perhaps only partially grasped, their effect more somatic than cognitive. This ritual context parallels the function of repetition in Blues performance—the way a phrase like "I woke up this morning" can be sung a hundred times, each repetition deepening rather than diminishing its impact. The crisis is not solved by the repetition; it is *inhabited*. The practitioner learns to live within the crisis rather than escape from it.

This distinction between solving and inhabiting is crucial for understanding the Heart Sūtra as survival technology. The text does not promise an end to suffering in the conventional sense. It promises something more paradoxical: the discovery that suffering itself, like the self that suffers, lacks the solidity we attribute to it. This discovery does not make the pain go away. It changes what the pain *is*—transforms it from a solid thing that crushes us to a flowing process that we can move with. As one contemporary Buddhist teacher has put it, the Heart Sūtra teaches us not to get rid of the waves but to learn to surf.

3. "No Eyes, No Ears": Dispossession, Not Abstraction

At the structural center of the Heart Sūtra lies the *mahā-vyavadāna*, the great negation. Having established that the five aggregates are empty—that form is emptiness and emptiness form—the text proceeds to negate systematically every category by which Buddhist psychology constructs the experiencing self:

> Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no formations, no consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought; no realm of sight... up to no realm of consciousness; no

> ignorance and no end of ignorance... up to no old age and death and no end of old age and death; no suffering, origin, cessation, path; no wisdom and no attainment.[^13]

The standard Mahāyāna reading of this passage emphasizes its ontological claim: that all these categories lack inherent existence (*svabhāva*), that they are empty of any permanent, unchanging essence. This is the doctrine of *śūnyatā* in its philosophical aspect: not that phenomena don't exist, but that they don't exist in the way we instinctively believe they do—as solid, bounded, self-sufficient things.

But there is another way to hear these negations, particularly when one hears them from within the experience of having one's body rendered hypervisible—targeted, surveilled, endangered. Ralph Ellison opened *Invisible Man* with a meditation on a different kind of negation:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.[^14]

Ellison's narrator is invisible not because he lacks substance but because the structures of perception that organize American social life render that substance illegible. He is negated not ontologically but *socially*—negated by a gaze that cannot or will not perceive his full humanity. The paradox of Ellison's prologue is that this invisibility, though painful, is also a resource. Living in a basement illuminated by 1,369 light bulbs stolen from the electric company, the invisible man has carved out a space of freedom precisely where he was supposed to disappear.

The Heart Sūtra's negations can be read analogously—not as statements about ultimate reality but as *practices of strategic dispossession*. "No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind"—to hear this from within the condition of being hyper-embodied as a target is to hear an invitation to disappear. Not to become invisible in Ellison's sense of being unseen, but to become *ungraspable*—to dissolve the coordinates by which the targeting system locates you.

The vernacular translation makes this reading explicit:

> So in this deep place of truth, Śāriputra, there ain't no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind. No sights to see. No sounds to hear. No touch, no taste, no smell, no knowing. No ignorance to be trapped in—and no end to ignorance neither. No getting old and dying—and no end to getting old and dying. See? When you go all the way down, you find there ain't no bottom to stand on. And that's the freedom.[^15]

"When you go all the way down, you find there ain't no bottom to stand on. And that's the freedom." This is not the language of metaphysical abstraction. It is the language of survival. The freedom here is not from suffering (the text has already negated that category) but from the *fixity* that makes suffering stick. If there is no solid self, there is no fixed target. The violence still comes—the text is not naïve about that—but it passes through rather than lodges.

A key passage in the vernacular translation's commentary develops this imagery:

> This is one of the deepest teachings. If you think you got a solid, permanent self, then every insult, every loss, every pain has a target to hit. But when you see through that illusion? When you see there ain't no fixed self to be hurt? The

arrows still come—life still brings suffering—but they pass right through. Like shooting arrows at the sky.[^16]

The metaphor of the target and the arrow introduces a spatial and ballistic dimension to the concept of *anātman* (no-self). It reframes the doctrine for those whose bodies have been historically marked for violence. The practice of dispossession—of dissolving the sense of a fixed, bounded self—becomes a survival technology: a way of being present to experience without being imprisoned by it.

This reading illuminates why the Sūtra's negations might resonate with communities formed under conditions of radical dispossession. Those who have been forcibly stripped of property, legal personhood, and social recognition may find in the Heart Sūtra's voluntary dispossession a paradoxical reclamation of agency. If you will not let me possess, the logic runs, then I will become unpossessable. If you insist on locating me in a category (the body, the race, the gender, the class), I will dissolve the category. You cannot capture what has no fixed coordinates.

The phenomenology of this move deserves careful attention. When Ellison's invisible man descends into his basement, he does not cease to exist. He continues to eat, sleep, dream, and—crucially—write. The invisibility that was imposed upon him becomes a condition he *inhabits*, and in inhabiting it, he transforms it from a curse into a vantage point. Similarly, the Heart Sūtra's negations do not abolish experience; they abolish the *reification* of experience. The practitioner who realizes "no eyes, no ears" does not become blind and deaf. She sees and hears with new clarity, freed from the compulsive identification of "I" with the seeing and hearing.

This distinction is vital for understanding the political implications of the Sūtra. A superficial reading might suggest that the text counsels quietism—a withdrawal from the world of struggle into a hermetic inner peace. But the Blues epistemology suggests a different interpretation. The dissolution of the fixed self is not a retreat from engagement; it is a *prerequisite* for effective engagement. The activist who is attached to being a hero, who needs to be seen as the leader, who cannot tolerate failure or criticism—this activist is brittle. She will break. The activist who knows that there is no fixed self to defend, who can move and adapt and laugh at her own pretensions—this activist is durable. She will last.

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, a Zen priest and one of the foremost Black Buddhist teachers of our era, has written extensively about the relationship between emptiness and identity. In *The Way of Tenderness*, Manuel argues that the realization of no-self does not erase the social categories of race, gender, and sexuality; rather, it allows us to hold these categories lightly, to see them as contingent constructions rather than fixed essences.[^35] This is not the post-racial fantasy of "not seeing color." It is the harder recognition that race is both real (in its effects) and empty (in its essence). The negations of the Heart Sūtra, from this perspective, do not deny the reality of racial oppression; they deny the *ontological solidity* of the categories on which that oppression depends.

Orlando Patterson famously defined slavery as a condition of "social death"—the removal of the enslaved person from all recognized social relations, rendering them a "socially dead person."[^17] The Heart Sūtra, from this angle, might be read as a manual for surviving social death by embracing a kind of *ontological death*—the death of the illusion that there was ever a fixed self to kill. It is a grim reading, but not a hopeless one. The text ends, after all, in

liberation: "Because there are no obstructions, there is no fear... far apart from all inverted dream-thought, they attain to Nirvana."[^18]

The phrase "no obstructions" (*āvaraṇa* in Sanskrit) merits further reflection. What are the obstructions that the Heart Sūtra dissolves? In traditional Buddhist commentary, they are typically identified as the "two obscurations": the obscuration of afflictive emotions (kleśāvaraṇa) and the obscuration of cognitive errors (jñeyāvaraṇa). But in the context of a Blues hermeneutic, we might add a third: the obscuration of social position—the way that one's assigned place in a hierarchical system limits what one can see, think, and do. The realization of emptiness, from this angle, is not only a matter of personal psychology; it is a form of political consciousness. It is the recognition that the categories by which we are sorted and ranked are not given but made—and what is made can be unmade.

4. Emptiness as Mobility, Not Void

One of the most persistent misreadings of the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* in Western reception is its conflation with nihilism or void. From Schopenhauer's melancholic appropriation of Buddhist themes to contemporary popular misunderstandings that equate "emptiness" with emotional numbness or existential despair, the concept has frequently been domesticated into frameworks that distort its meaning. The Heart Sūtra, with its relentless negations, is particularly susceptible to this misreading. "No suffering, no path, no wisdom, no attainment"—what is this if not the negation of all meaning?

The Blues epistemology provides a powerful corrective. In the Blues tradition, as Clyde Woods has documented, survival depends not on permanence but on adaptability. The working-class Black communities of the Mississippi Delta, dispossessed of land and rights generation

after generation, developed what Woods calls a "blues epistemology"—a mode of cognition that processes contradictory realities simultaneously, that maintains orientation amid displacement, that survives by moving.[^19] This is not nihilism; it is hypermobility. It is the knowledge that if you cannot own the ground, you had better learn to float.

The vernacular translation explicitly recasts *śūnyatā* in these terms:

> Now that don't mean it don't exist. It means it flows like water in a river, changes like clouds across the sky, ain't got no solid core you can pin down. When you truly see that? When you see it clear? You can't be broken. Can't be shattered. 'Cause there ain't no fixed target for the arrows of pain to hit.[^20]

Emptiness here is not void but *fluidity*. The distinction is crucial. A void is static—a hole, an absence. Fluidity is dynamic—a river, a movement, an adaptation. The empty self is not a diminished self; it is a self freed from the rigidity that makes it breakable. "Flows like water in a river"—this is the *śūnyatā* of survival, not of metaphysical abstraction.

Houston Baker, in his foundational study *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, theorized the Blues as a "matrix"—a point of generative uncertainty from which multiple meanings can emerge.[^21] Baker's analysis focuses on the productive ambiguity of Blues lyrics, the way they can be heard simultaneously as complaint and affirmation, as personal expression and social critique. This matrix quality—this refusal to resolute into a single fixed meaning—is precisely what the Heart Sūtra's *śūnyatā* describes at the level of ontology. Phenomena are empty precisely because they are not fixed: they arise in dependence on conditions, persist only as long as conditions support them, and transform as conditions change.

For communities whose conditions are perpetually precarious, this vision is not depressing but liberating. It says: *you are not the fixed thing they have told you you are*. The roles imposed by social death—slave, convict, other—are empty of inherent existence. They are imposed, maintained by force, dependent on conditions. And conditions can change.

The vernacular translation's practice instructions operationalize this insight:

> Walking Practice: As you walk today, consider the world around you as made of flowing parts, not solid wholes. Like a child watching the clouds and seeing dragons, then horses, then castles—knowing each shape is real, but none is permanent.[^22]

This is not escapism or denial. The practice does not claim that oppression is unreal or that its effects can be wished away. It claims something subtler: that our *relationship* to oppression can be transformed through a shift in perception. If the world is flowing, then we can flow with it. If there is no fixed target, then the targeting system loses its purchase.

Albert Murray, in *Stomping the Blues*, argued that the function of the Blues was not to wallow in suffering but to "stomp" it—to transform it through rhythmic engagement into something bearable, even beautiful.[^23] The Blues performance does not deny the pain; it metabolizes it. It takes the raw material of suffering and, through the alchemy of art, produces an experience of community and even joy. This is the opposite of nihilism. It is the ultimate affirmation: not despite suffering, but *through* it.

Murray's concept of "stomping" deserves extended attention, for it illuminates what might be called the *active* dimension of emptiness. In conventional Buddhist presentation, emptiness can sound passive—a mere seeing through, a dissolution of illusion. But the Blues

tradition knows that survival is work. You do not simply perceive your way out of the hellhounds' path; you move, you dodge, you dance. The "stomp" is not contemplative; it is rhythmic action, embodied resistance. The foot comes down hard on the earth, claiming space, asserting presence even while acknowledging pain.

This active dimension is present in the Heart Sūtra, though it may be easy to miss. The text's central character is not a static meditator but a *practicing* bodhisattva—Avalokiteśvara "practicing the deep Perfection of Wisdom" (*gambhīrāṃ prajñāpāramitāṃ caryāṃ caramāṇo*). The term *caryā*—practice, conduct, behavior—implies movement, action, engagement. Avalokiteśvara is not sitting still and having a vision; she is doing something. The vernacular translation captures this with characteristic directness: "She looks into the nature of reality. And what she sees sets her free."[^36] The looking is not passive reception but active investigation—the kind of "deep seeing" that transforms what it sees.

Angela Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, emphasizes this active, transformative dimension of the Blues. The women she studies—Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday—were not merely expressing their pain; they were *working* it, shaping it, making art from the raw material of oppression. Their performances were acts of resistance, claiming public space for Black women's sexuality, desire, and rage. The emptiness they inhabited was not void but *cleared ground*—space from which to build something new.

The Heart Sūtra offers a similar affirmation. Its negations are not denials but *clearings*. They clear away the reifications that make suffering stick—the belief in a solid self that suffers, in a solid world that causes suffering, in a solid path that leads away from suffering. What remains after this clearing is not nothing. It is *everything*—everything minus the illusion of

fixity. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form"—not a negation but an identity, a breathtaking claim that the flowing phenomenal world and the truth of its flowingness are not two different things but one.

The genius of the Blues epistemology, as a lens for reading the Heart Sūtra, is that it refuses to separate theory from practice, understanding from action. When Muddy Waters sings "I got my mojo working," he is not merely describing a state of affairs; he is *performing* that state into being. The song is the mojo. Similarly, when the Heart Sūtra declares "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form," it is not merely stating a metaphysical truth; it is performing that truth, enacting it in the very act of utterance. To chant the Heart Sūtra is not to repeat a proposition but to participate in a reality.

5. The Mantra as the Turn

The Heart Sūtra culminates in a mantra: *Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*. "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond. Awakening. Hail!" This brief concluding utterance has generated centuries of commentary. Is it a magical spell? A mystical invocation? A philosophical summary in condensed form? The text itself offers a clue, calling the Perfection of Wisdom "the great mantra, the illuminating mantra, the unsurpassed mantra, the unequaled mantra, which removes all suffering"—a characterization that emphasizes the mantra's *function* rather than its *meaning*.[^24]

In the Blues tradition, there is a parallel moment: what might be called "the turn." It is the moment in a performance when the tension breaks—when the accumulated weight of suffering in the lyrics is suddenly released through a cry, a bend in the note, an unexpected resolution. The

turn does not make the suffering disappear. It *moves* it. It takes what was static and stuck and sets it into motion. The room exhales. The congregation responds. Something has shifted.

The vernacular translation captures this quality in its rendering of the mantra:

Gate Gate — Gone, gone away!

Paragate — Gone to a brighter day!

Parasamgate — Gone all together!

Bodhi Svaha — Awake forever![^25]

And again, with a Blues inflection:

Gate Gate — Leave it all behind!

Paragate — Clear your worried mind!

Parasamgate — Cross to the other shore!

Bodhi Svaha — Don't you cry no more![^26]

The mantra becomes a call-and-response, a climactic shout that follows the systematic dismantling of the earlier verses. The logic is that the negations *prepare* for this moment—they clear the space, dissolve the obstacles, empty out the clutter of false refuge. Then the mantra arrives as release: not a conclusion in the intellectual sense but an eruption, a breakthrough.

The term *pāragate* ("gone beyond") carries particular resonance. In Buddhist usage, it refers to crossing from the shore of *saṃsāra* (the cycle of suffering) to the shore of *nirvāṇa* (liberation). The vernacular translation explicitly links this to the African American spiritual

tradition: "When the old spirituals sang about 'crossing over Jordan,' they were singing about *pāragate*—going to the other shore."[^27] The comparison illuminates the functional similarity between the Buddhist mantra and the spiritual shout. Both are sonic events that enact what they describe. To sing "Wade in the Water" is not merely to invoke an escape narrative; it is to *participate* in that escape, to join one's voice to the chorus of those who have crossed over and those who are crossing now.

James Cone, in *The Spirituals and the Blues*, argued that both traditions are fundamentally about the affirmation of Black humanity in the face of its denial.[^28] The spirituals do this through appeal to a transcendent God who will eventually vindicate the oppressed; the Blues does this through the more immanent means of communal testimony and aesthetic transformation. The Heart Sūtra's mantra offers a third way: affirmation through *realization*—the experiential insight that there is, in the deepest sense, nothing to escape from and no one to escape, because there never was a fixed self imprisoned in a fixed world.

This is not to say that the mantra offers an escape from material conditions of oppression. Liberation from the illusion of fixity is not the same as liberation from the prison-industrial complex. But the practice of the mantra—the sonic, somatic, communal practice of chanting these syllables—may provide resources for enduring, resisting, and ultimately transforming those conditions. It is a technology of psychological survival that complements and supports the technologies of political struggle.

The physiological effects of mantra practice are increasingly documented in the scientific literature. Repetitive vocalization activates the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing cortisol levels and calming the body's stress response. The vibrations produced by the voice have

measurable effects on heart rate variability and brainwave patterns. For communities living under conditions of chronic stress—where the body is perpetually primed for fight or flight, where the nervous system is shaped by generations of trauma—such practices may offer significant physiological relief. The mantra becomes, in this light, a technology of nervous system regulation: a way of resetting the body's baseline from hypervigilance to presence.

But the significance of the mantra is not only physiological. It is also *communal*. When a group chants together, something happens that exceeds the sum of individual vocalizations. Voices blend, rhythms synchronize, and the boundary between self and other becomes permeable. This experience of sonic communion has parallels in both Buddhist and Black religious traditions. The monastery chanting the Heart Sūtra at dawn and the Black church responding to the preacher's call are participating in similar technologies of collective consciousness. The "I" dissolves into a "we," and for a moment, the isolation that oppression imposes is overcome.

The vernacular translation's commentary makes this explicit:

> A mantra ain't just words—it's a vibration, a frequency, a way of tuning your whole being to the truth. When you chant *Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*, you're not just saying words. You're participating in the movement from bondage to freedom.[^29]

"Participating in the movement from bondage to freedom"—this is precisely the function of the spiritual-as-song-of-resistance, and it is the function the Heart Sūtra's mantra can serve in the context of a Blues epistemology. The movement is not merely metaphorical. The body that chants is a body in motion—vibrating, resonating, joining its voice to a larger sonic field. The

"gone" of *gate* is not a passive disappearance but an active crossing. And the "hail" of *svāhā* is not a quiet benediction but a shout—the Blues "yeah!" that follows the moment of release.

Rev. angel Kyodo williams, in *Radical Dharma*, has written of the need for practices that address trauma at the level of the body, not only the mind. The mantra, understood as a somatic technology, does precisely this. It does not require the practitioner to understand emptiness intellectually; it invites her to *feel* it, to let the vibrations of the syllables work on the nervous system and gradually dissolve the contractions of fear. This is the wisdom of the Blues: that sometimes you cannot think your way out of pain, but you can sing your way through it.

6. Ethics of Vernacular Translation

The project of rendering a canonical Buddhist text into African American vernacular English raises immediate questions of authority and appropriation. Who has the right to "dress up" the Dharma in new cultural clothing? Does such translation diminish the original, flatten its profundities, or strip it of its sacred power? These questions must be addressed directly, for they touch on the ethics of intercultural religious exchange.

The vernacular translation confronts these questions from its opening pages:

> When the great translator Kumārajīva brought the Buddhist scriptures from India to China in the fourth and fifth centuries... he didn't just translate the words. He translated the spirit, the soul, the meaning—and he dressed it up in Chinese clothes. The concepts that had been expressed in Sanskrit took on new life in Chinese... That's what we're doing here. We're taking this ancient wisdom and dressing it up in American clothes—specifically, in the clothes of the Blues and Gospel traditions.[^30]

The Kumārajīva precedent is crucial. It establishes that Buddhism has *always* been a translated religion—that there is no "pure" original that subsequent translations corrupt. The Buddhism that spread from India to China, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and now to the West was never simply transmitted intact; it was always adapted, recontextualized, made legible within new cultural frames. The question is not whether such adaptation is legitimate but whether it is skillful—whether it preserves and transmits the animating insight of the tradition or distorts it.

The vernacular translation passes this test, I would argue, precisely because it takes the doctrinal content of the Heart Sūtra seriously even as it remakes its form. The footnotes and commentaries demonstrate sophisticated engagement with the Sanskrit and Chinese textual traditions, the philosophical subtleties of *śūnyatā*, the structure of Buddhist psychology and soteriology. This is not parody or superficial appropriation. It is what Buddhists call *upāya*—skillful means, the adaptation of teaching to audience. The Buddha himself, according to the *Lotus Sūtra*, taught different people different things depending on their capacities and conditions. The Dharma is not a fixed set of propositions but a living stream that takes the shape of whatever container holds it.[^31]

The vernacular translation's author explicitly frames the work as neither replacement nor parody:

> This is not a replacement for the traditional chants and liturgies that have sustained practitioners for centuries. Those forms are sacred and beautiful. And this is not a parody or a joke—the Heart Sūtra is too profound for that. This is an attempt to find new words for timeless truths, to make this teaching accessible to

people who might never pick up a traditional Buddhist text but who know in their bones what it means to suffer, to search, and to find freedom.[^32]

"To make this teaching accessible to people who might never pick up a traditional Buddhist text"—this is the ethical core of the project. Accessibility is not the same as dumbing down. The vernacular translation does not simplify the Heart Sūtra; it *retranslates* it into a different register of complexity. The complexity of "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" becomes the complexity of "the cup needs the emptiness to be a cup"—a different kind of profundity, but profundity nonetheless.[^33]

There is also a critical dimension to the translation's ethical stance. By claiming the Heart Sūtra as a text amenable to Blues interpretation, the translation challenges the cultural ownership of Buddhism by Asian and (increasingly) white American sanghas. It asserts that Black religious thinkers have as much right to inherit and adapt this tradition as any other community. This assertion has historical support. As mentioned earlier, African American intellectuals have engaged with Asian religions since the nineteenth century, and Black Buddhist practitioners and teachers have made significant contributions to American Buddhism. The vernacular translation is a continuation of this lineage, not an aberration from it.

Finally, the ethics of vernacular translation must be understood in terms of *impact*. The Heart Sūtra, for all its profundity, is in danger of becoming in the West what it has often been in East Asia: ritual background noise, a text chanted but not understood, a formula repeated without penetration. The vernacular translation restores *impact*. It forces the listener to hear the words again as if for the first time—to grapple with their meaning rather than pass over them

comfortably. This is not a departure from tradition; it is a return to the tradition's original animating purpose.

7. Conclusion

The Heart Sūtra and the Blues are separated by more than a millennium and half a world, yet they share a common orientation: toward suffering, through suffering, beyond suffering. Both traditions begin with an unflinching recognition of *dukkha*—the First Noble Truth, the woke-up-this-morning-with-the-blues-all-around-my-bed. Both traditions refuse the false comfort of denial or distraction. And both traditions offer a technology for survival: a practice, a discipline, a way of moving through the world that neither succumbs to suffering nor merely endures it but *transforms* it.

The reading I have offered in this article frames the Heart Sūtra as survival technology—a verbal instrument forged for conditions of radical precarity. The Sūtra's negations, from this perspective, are not metaphysical abstractions but practices of strategic dispossession: ways of dissolving the coordinates by which the self-as-target is located. The Sūtra's culminating mantra is not a magical spell but a sonic release: the moment when, after the systematic clearing of false refuge, the practitioner crosses to the other shore.

The vernacular translation that has anchored this analysis—"The Heart Sutra Reborn: An American Blues Interpretation"—should be understood not as commentary on the Heart Sūtra but as a *performance* of it. Like a jazz musician taking a standard and making it their own, the translator has inhabited the tradition and spoken from within it. The result is a document of Africana religious production that deserves scholarly attention in its own right.

The implications extend beyond the study of Buddhism or the Blues. If the argument of this article is correct, then the boundaries of what we recognize as "Africana religion" must be expanded to include practices and texts that originate outside the geographic and cultural boundaries of Africa and its diaspora. When a Black translator renders a Sanskrit sūtra into the idiom of the Mississippi Delta, something new is created—something that belongs neither to "Buddhism" nor to "African American religion" in their conventional definitions but to the generative space between them. This space is worth exploring further.

This expansion of the field is not without precedent. Scholars of Africana religions have long recognized that the category cannot be limited to traditions with direct African origins. The religious creativity of the African diaspora has always involved synthesis, adaptation, and transformation—the making of something new from available materials. Vodou incorporated Catholic saints; Santería wrapped Yoruba orishas in the garb of Christian iconography; the Black church itself emerged from the encounter between African religious sensibilities and Protestant Christianity. The "Heart Sutra Reborn" participates in this same tradition of creative synthesis, expanding the archive of Africana religious production.

What makes this particular synthesis significant is its theoretical intervention. By reading the Heart Sūtra through the lens of Blues epistemology, the vernacular translation does not merely add another religion to the Africana repertoire; it proposes a new way of understanding the *function* of religion under conditions of oppression. The concept of "survival technology" offers a framework for analyzing religious practices not in terms of their cosmological claims or institutional structures but in terms of their pragmatic effects on the psyche of the practitioner. This framework may prove useful for understanding other Africana religious phenomena as well.

The title of this article invokes Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail," one of the most haunting recordings in the Blues canon. Johnson sang of being pursued by forces he could neither escape nor defeat—forces that have been interpreted as personal demons, as the consequences of his legendary deal with the devil, and as metaphors for the systemic violence that stalked Black life in the Jim Crow South. Whatever their origin, the hellhounds are real. They are still on the trail.

The Heart Sūtra offers a response to the hellhounds that is neither fight nor flight but *dissolution*. If there is no fixed self, there is no fixed prey. The hellhounds still run, but they find nothing to catch. This is not a solution to the political problem of anti-Black violence—only political struggle can address that. But it is a technology for surviving the psychological assault of that violence, for maintaining the capacity for love and creativity and resistance even when the hellhounds are howling.

In the end, the "Emptiness Blues" may be the most honest song that can be sung about suffering. It does not promise that the pain will end; it does not pretend that positive thinking or faith in a benevolent deity will make everything right. It says only this: that the pain is real, that the self who suffers is not, and that in this paradox lies a strange and liberating freedom. The Blues has always known this. The Heart Sūtra puts it into philosophical form. Together, they offer a way of moving through a world that, as Saidiya Hartman has written, was never meant for Black people to survive—and surviving it anyway, with grace, with defiance, with an irrepressible song.

As the vernacular translation concludes:

May all beings see the emptiness that sets them free.

May all beings cross to the other shore.

May all beings awaken to what was never lost.

Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā.[^34]

Gone. Gone beyond. Gone completely beyond. Awakening. Hail.

Endnotes

1. Clyde Woods, Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta (London: Verso, 1998), 25-29.

2. "The Heart Sutra Reborn: An American Blues Interpretation" (Houston: 2025), unpublished manuscript. Hereafter cited as Heart Sutra Reborn.

3. Heart Sutra Reborn, "Why the Blues?" section.

4. James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 97-127.

5. On the history of African American engagement with Asian religions, see Vijay Prashad, Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

6. Christina Sharpe, In the Wake: On Blackness and Being (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 104-134.

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8. Donald S. Lopez Jr., The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 19-21.

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10. Kazuaki Tanahashi, The Heart Sutra: A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism (Boston: Shambhala, 2014), 147.

11. Tanahashi, The Heart Sutra, 3.

12. Heart Sutra Reborn, Section 1.

13. My translation, following the standard Chinese text (T. 251).

14. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage, 1952), 3.

15. Heart Sutra Reborn, Section 4.

16. Heart Sutra Reborn, "Endnotes" section.

17. Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

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20. Heart Sutra Reborn, Introduction.

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22. Heart Sutra Reborn, "The Emptiness Blues: Practice Instructions."

23. Albert Murray, Stomping the Blues (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 17.

24. My translation of the Heart Sūtra.

25. Heart Sutra Reborn, Section 7.

26. Heart Sutra Reborn, Section 7.

27. Heart Sutra Reborn, "Translator's Notes."

28. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, 1-25.

29. Heart Sutra Reborn, "Endnotes" section.

30. Heart Sutra Reborn, "Why the Blues?" section.

31. Burton Watson, trans., The Lotus Sutra (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 31.

32. Heart Sutra Reborn, "Why the Blues?" section.

33. Heart Sutra Reborn, Section 2.

34. Heart Sutra Reborn, conclusion.

35. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2015), 47-52.

36. Heart Sutra Reborn, Section 1.