When Sterling Brown published *Southern Road* in 1932, black poets were moving away from traditional folk poetry. Before the Civil War, blackface minstrelsy was popular in the United States. Blackface minstrelsy portrayed blacks as “contorted and servile” and “instilled the stereotypes of blacks as childlike, carefree, and in need of protection” (Moody-Turner 34). After the Civil War, black performers began to perform instead of their white counterparts. Black performers were “trapped within the confines of caricature and rewarded for their ability to personify the stereotypes conjured up by white minstrel performances” (34). Later, the mostly white audience desired to see “authentic” portrayals of black life on the plantation. Just a few years before Brown’s birth the show “Black America” was set up in the city “complete with Negro cabins, hay yards, chickens, mules” and five hundred African Americans that were billed as “brought directly from the field” (36). These images of “authentic” life for African Americans instilled the stereotype that there were differences between the races and that the “separation of blacks and whites followed existing customs, traditions, and habits” (41). These stereotypes ended up being codified into law by state legislators who believed they were upholding the “customs” of the people. The study of African American folklore was taken up by W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Pauline Hawkins, Sterling Brown, and others as a “conscious cultivation of an oppositional perspective and history embodied in black folklore” (44). Sterling Brown chose to use the dialect of black southerners to show the humanity of the people that was denied to them by social circumstances.

When studying Brown and his use of the devil in “Slim in Hell,” it is helpful to understand the devil in the blues tradition. An avid fan of the blues, Brown said that the blues where “second in importance only to the spirituals” in the folk tradition (A Son’s Return 222). The devil in blues music has a long history. Adam Gussow in *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* traces the history of the blues as “devil music.” Gussow research shows the stigma of the blues as the devil’s music back to the aftermath of the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening. By the late 17th century many independent religious dominations began to rapidly grow in the southern United States. According to Gussow; “the devil of the black southern church” was whoever interfered with the growth of the church (32). This “devil” took the form of anyone playing rhythmic music which would naturally attract dancing and sometimes alcohol.

The devil evolved from the inspiration of devil music to the form of the slave master in the black imagination (Gussow 108). After Emancipation, the devil became the white boss man, sheriff, and prison farm warden in the carceral network of the south (108). Gussow argues that bluesman and his use of the devil “coexists with a desire to evade, destabilize and usurp the devilish prerogatives a white mastery” (109). This the devil that Sterling Brown created in “Slim in Hell.” As Slim travels through hell it looks mostly harmless, but as Slim descends in he starts seeing religious hypocrisy and drunkenness. It is only when Slim sees that the white devils are throwing the black devils in the furnace that Slim flees because it looks too much like Dixie. Brown’s representation of the devil as a cracker “wad a sheriff’s star” aligns with the traditional use of the devil as the oppressor in traditional blues music (91).

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