

Blues and the Pedagogical Subject

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Please don't laugh at me,
You know I didn't make myself.

— Howlin' Wolf, "Don't Laugh at Me"¹

Let's begin with a story. This particular anecdote has circulated among musicians of my acquaintance for so long that its specifics have been worn away through retelling, to the point that it is probably better to consider it apocryphal rather than historical. But since something like it has happened to most of us in that circle — thus giving the story its interest and its life — it seems to me that there are some powerful suggestions, even truths, in its outline.

In this story, a young white musician has been recruited as an emergency fill-in back-up guitarist for a Black blues singer who is passing through town on tour and has lost one of his regular band members. The young replacement mounts the stage with the combination of brashness and humility most players of his age show when thrust into the company of more veteran and well-known artists whose work they know from records. He's happily grooving along with the rest of the band, playing as best he can what he knows of the blues idiom and what he's learned from his quick study of the singer's recordings. At some point, either in between songs or in the middle of another player's solo, the singer walks over to him, gets up in his face, and snarls: "What you did back there — don't do that again. It makes my dick hurt!" The singer then ambles back to the microphone and resumes singing, as if nothing had happened. That's the only instruction he gives the kid for the rest of the evening; the kid himself has no idea what he did wrong, or whether or not he is repeating his mistake as the set progresses.

This is a teaching moment, but the species of pedagogy is far afield from what is currently expected in the academy. In the context of blues performance, this particular bandstand feedback is more direct and specific than the customary nonverbal signals — grunts, approving nods, disapproving frowns. But like those other more usual responses, it treats as *tacit* and *assumed* both the principles in play and the particular ways in which those principles have been transgressed in the moment. The method of the instruction is neither empirical nor theoretical, but rather it's an exhortation to become *the kind of person who intuitively knows what to play and what not to play*, to internalize the ever-unstated premises of the blues idiom. It's the blues version of the dictum that Henry James once pronounced for the aspiring novelist: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"²

But how does one become this kind of person? Can one simply will oneself to "be one on whom nothing is lost," or can one learn to *play the blues* in the way one learns to play scales or to notate the harmonic sequence of a twelve-bar blues chorus? Is this moment of bandstand instruction a pointless one? What does it take for this hapless white kid to avoid repeating the mistake of "doing what he did back

there”? And what implicit message was the singer/bandleader imparting about the nature of “blues knowledge”?

At this point, we must make a theoretical distinction between *kinds* of learning and, correlatively, *purposes* of learning — a distinction that may seem overly obvious to anyone whose discipline lies within what we commonly refer to as the “liberal arts” (or “a liberal arts education”). The distinction is that between the notion of learning as the *formation of a certain kind of subjectivity* (the traditional claim made for a liberal arts education) and that of learning as simply pouring knowledge into the vessel of an already-formed subject. Education in this first sense is not just a matter of gaining knowledge and skills but of the internalization of a certain habitus, a way of thinking and acting with respect to knowledge — not a matter of knowing per se, but of *accepting a way of knowing*, as ecologist Wes Jackson once put it.³ A liberal arts education traditionally had as its goal this sort of subject formation, wherein expert proficiency in the particular subject matter was secondary to the subject’s internalization of a more generalized attitude toward, and identification with, an underlying set of values and practices.

In this respect, a “blues education,” properly understood, transpires in a manner, and with purposes, roughly parallel to that claimed for a “liberal arts education” — that is, it involves an internalization of *that which generally goes without saying among a particular group of subjects*, and which requires articulation or acknowledgement only at certain crisis points where collective expression and practice of the idiom is disrupted or impeded. The blues is a worldview defined less by proposition than by practice; it expresses not a philosophy but a habitus, a way of doing and of knowing that is learned and enacted at a tacit level and which is generally not available for conscious inspection. Thus, some exploration of the idea of a blues education can help us understand the beleaguered situation of liberal arts education in general and the humanities in particular in our present circumstances.

I need to pause here to note one possible qualification or objection before I plunge ahead. Some will have noted the strongly gendered aspect of my opening example. It’s true that blues subjectivity has become strongly masculinized over time so that the term lacks the sort of gender inclusiveness or gender fluidity that marks contemporary ethics of the subject. And it’s also true that the activity that the young man in the example is engaged in — playing an instrument in support of a singer (whether that singer is male or female) — is one predominantly performed in the blues by men; female *sidemen* are almost unknown entities in the genre, as the noun itself suggests. There are historical and sociological reasons for this distribution, just as there are for the fact that the first popularizers of the genre were so-called “blues queens” like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.⁴ And there are many valences to subjectivity, gender of course being one of the primary among them. For my purposes here, however, I will be treating the blues as an agent of a more general category of subject formation, more Marxist than feminist in its theoretical roots and orientation.

The concept of the subject, once occupying an honorific position in contrast to that of “object,” has become more ambiguous and complex in the last half century. Theorists like Louis Althusser see the notion of subjectivity as entangled in issues

of power, with an increasing emphasis on the intimacy between this term and its etymological cousin, “subjection.” This represents a dissent from Enlightenment thinking, wherein the notion of “subjectivity” was entangled with the Cartesian concept of the “autonomous knower.” Rather than autonomy, the basis of the subject for Althusser is contingency; subjectivity is the result of the individual’s initiation into, and instantiation within, a set of “*material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.*”⁵

Furthermore, the identity of the subject is not something consciously acquired or consented to, but an internalized effect of innumerable doings that occur within the primary institutions — mainly family and church, but also early schooling — that Althusser identifies with the forbidding term “ideological apparatuses.” As he elaborates,

The “ideas” of a human subject exist in his actions.... I shall talk of *actions* inserted into practices. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an ideological apparatus, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small Mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports club, a school day.⁶

One could add “blues performance” to that list of microritual actions that are the interpellative forms by which the subject acquires ideas about himself or herself and the world. But first let’s linger for a moment on the point that most of my students find most alienating, disturbing, and counterintuitive.

Althusser’s (and others’) notion is that the subject is a product of fashioning by supraindividual forces (usually referred to by the forbidding and antihumanistic term “ideology”). This raises the scandalous proposition that the subject is not opposed to but is actually constituted by “subjection” to the ideological forces that characterize his or her social environment. In contrast to the theory of the autonomous knower — still a treasured if much abused concept in American civic and democratic discourse — this post-Enlightenment, Marxist-derived theory of subjectivity posits the self as defined, not by freedom, but by *specific contours of “unfreedom”* within which the subject must — and can — operate. As Howlin’ Wolf proclaimed in the epigraph above, we do not make ourselves; our identity is not a product of conscious assent or conscious effort. We awaken to ourselves already made, already acting, in significant ways that are inherent in our functioning as subjects. (It seems to me this might be the very quality that a non-philosopher like myself might apprehend from casual reading as Heidegger’s concept of *Geworfenheit*, or “thrown-ness.”⁷)

Now consider the situation of our anecdotal white boy on the bandstand, feeling his way into an expressive idiom that is most likely not part of his primary culture. Isn’t this the very essence of *thrown-ness*? The question goes to my point that the unfreedom resulting from interpellation is not just negative but constitutive as well. What that white kid lacks, in a sense, is the specific experience of “subjection” that a fuller and earlier interpellation into blues performance style would have entailed. Becoming a competent blues player is not going to be a matter of asking for more specific instruction regarding his mistake; it’s a matter of continual re-engagement in

blues practice so that over time he has internalized the feeling — the sense of rhythm, pace, melodic choice — that characterizes effective performance in the idiom, so that he can successfully realize *that which goes without saying*. I'm guessing that his infelicitous performance — that which earned the reprimand of the lead singer — had little to do with any lack of technique or proficiency on his instrument, but rather with his lack of apprehension of the specific kinds of unfreedom that constitute the blues idiom.

It's not an impossible proposition for that kid to attain an effective grasp of the idiom; contrary to racial stereotype, blues competence is not transferred through the genes but through concretely situated ideological sites. In the case of the blues, those would mainly be the family, the church, and other such social spaces where blues and other musical forms with related African-derived performance styles (jazz, gospel) are characteristically (and ritually) performed. Given the likelihood that our anecdotal white boy did *not* grow up in a community in which blues and these related musical idioms were primary forms of interpellation, he had missed out on two of the principal sites of institutional subjection that might have helped him avoid his bandstand infelicity — the home and the church. Note also that formal education — whether or not situated in a Black community — probably would not have provided much of an opportunity to assimilate this particular vernacular ethos. (That is, he may have learned about it, may even have studied it — but such conscious acquisitions of knowledge are different from the kind of knowledge that goes without saying, and that is the basic lower frequency on which ideology operates.) In Althusserian terms, the white kid had not yet had sufficient opportunity to be “hailed” as a blues subject or to participate in the ritual practices through which that subjectivity is formed and internalized in thought and practice. (In college, I had a professor — of a now-extinct Mandarin sort — whose philosophy of composition was simply “read everything that’s good, and then do what comes naturally!” In retrospect, this seems to me a very blues-like way of approaching writing pedagogy.)

The idea of subjection as an *opportunity* seems almost counterintuitive in a cultural context wherein the maximization of individual freedom and self-determination seems to be a predominant value; in my field, for instance, creative writing classrooms are full of students who resist reading the writers in the tradition they aspire to enter out of fear that their own originality will be polluted by the “influences” of those other, usually earlier, authors. But “subjection” and “ideology” should not simply be seen as antagonists of the individual or as sinister and unjust incursions on the individual’s rightful state as a free and autonomous knower; rather, like mortality itself, they represent what blues discourse would call the “natural facts” within which the individual human subject is instantiated and with which he or she must contend in the pursuit of happiness.

I want to assert that blues practice assumes a necessary and productive dialectic between the subject and the process of ideological subjection through which that subject comes into being. At the same time, I want to insist that this subjection is not purely a wounding but an enabling as well; as a result of this subjection, the individual is not defenseless but is endowed with resources of the sort that Kenneth Burke once

referred to as “equipment for living” — aesthetic forms and practices “that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes.”⁸

It is easy to recognize these resources when they occur in the form of what Burke calls “the proverbial”⁹ — that is, when they are distilled into an elegant proposition (for example, Mose Allison’s blues line, “I don’t worry about a thing / ‘Cause I know nothing is gonna be all right”¹⁰). But such proverbial formulae are simply epiphenomenal expressions of underlying values that are *performed* and that usually *go without saying* in the blues; they are shared and tacitly understood because they have been internalized by musician and audience alike through repetition — not in the form of verbal propositions, but through ritualized *action*. To sum up: I have been discussing the blues as a site of *ideological subjection* in which the individual participates in repeated ritualized actions that *latently express*, and *from which arise*, particular *attitudes and values* that characterize what we might call the blues subject. These ritualized actions — in this specific context, blues performances — thus establish at the level of form and style those values and attitudes that achieve conscious expression and recognition at the level of Burke’s *proverbial*.

I would like now to turn to some of the particular features of the blues that I believe comprise their distinctive ideological infrastructure. This discussion will necessarily be schematic and will flatten out many nuances and variations that occur in actual practice; but these are some essential asymptotes toward which blues performance inclines, and I offer them in hope that this further specification of the blues ethos might illuminate some concluding suggestions I would like to make vis-à-vis the state of liberal arts pedagogy.

REPETITION WITH DIFFERENCE. The first feature worthy of remark is the basic structure of blues performance. Some folks say they find the blues “boring” because blues performance in the main consists of the same harmonic structure repeated over and over (usually twelve measures, but sometimes other units) rather than having the more familiar (to Western ears, at least) progressive harmonic structure in which harmonic units are contrasted, developed, and brought to a clear climax or resolution. James Snead asserts that, from a blues standpoint, Western culture in general suffers from a “progression compulsion,” a fixation on the idea of directional or qualitative change, accompanied by a consequent ignoring or devaluing of the abiding parameters within which the human struggle occurs.¹¹ Blues, by contrast, emphasizes the circular or cyclical nature of time — the way in which the same abiding human problems or the same harmonic structures arise again and again, providing even in their repetition fresh opportunities for human negotiation. The implicit lesson here is that human problems and human possibilities abide, but always arise in different moments in different configurations or guises. This is the lesson of what Snead calls “repetition with difference”¹² and that some others have referred to as “the changing same.”¹³

COLLABORATION. Because the basic harmonic sequence of a blues verse is simple and infinitely repeatable, it underwrites a valuing of the collective and collaborative both within the music and beyond it. The “assurance of repetition” provided by this modular structure allows for the performance to be “at any point ‘social’”¹⁴; that is,

players can join or drop out of the performance without interrupting the music and can even shift back and forth between roles as musician and audience member. In this way the participant's "subjection" to the seeming harmonic and structural limitations of the repeated twelve-measure unit allows him or her to participate more freely and fully with other similarly constituted subjects, thus maximizing the emotional and creative possibilities of *collective* expression.

IMPROVISATION. In the main, the blues performance is *not composed* but *improvised*, thus allowing for maximum creativity in, and response to, the particular moment, including the suggestions of the listeners and dancers as well as the improvisations of the other musicians. So the freedom of improvisation is profoundly unfree; while the performance may include "spontaneous appropriation (or inspired allusion)" or "on-the-spot invention," the player "must always play notes that fulfill the requirements of the context, a feat which presupposes far more skill and taste than raw emotion."¹⁵ Or, as Olly Wilson once put it, blues "consists of the way of doing something, not simply something that is done."¹⁶

PRIMACY OF VERNACULAR RATHER THAN LEARNED RESOURCES. It follows from what I have said so far that blues is properly learned in the social and ritual contexts in which it is primarily performed; and, unlike some other forms of music, there is no "reference" performance (recorded or otherwise) that functions as a privileged model for study. It's the practice of performance itself, characterized by the attributes discussed above, that constitutes what we might call "blues literacy" and which forms the basis of what I have been referring to as the "blues subject." In practical terms, this means that blues is learned through direct interaction and participation with mentors and fellow subjects in repeated real-time performance situations. It also thus follows that blues knowledge is *vernacular* knowledge (etymologically "in the house" as opposed to "in the school" or "in the studio"), thus passed on more through generational transfer (with a correlative respect for elders) rather than institutional transfer (with its correlative valuing of institutional authority and credentialed expertise).

I hope that this relatively schematic discussion will provide a supportive context for my next suggestion. I think we could do worse — as educators, as parents, and as a culture at large — than to strive for a subjectivity that is more "bluesy" in line with some of the characteristics I have noted above and to figure out the "hailing" or ritual practices or micropractices that would cultivate such a subjectivity in others. In many respects our pedagogical goals and practices are being pushed in opposite, and ultimately unproductive directions, with a consequent cost to the resilience, the creativity, and the happiness of our students.

My primary purpose here is not to recommend the blues per se as an antidote to what ails us. Rather, it's to observe the strategic lesson that blues competence — and the challenges of acquiring it — presents for those of us concerned about what seems to me the increasingly hollowed-out spaces of the curriculum and the culture where the liberal arts reside. More specifically, this blues competence is not essentially or even primarily a set of skills or a matter of conscious knowledge, but an internalized, shared frame of reference through which those things operate. If that

kid of my opening anecdote really wants to play blues, what he needs, in a sense, is to experience a virtual approximation of the interpellative experiences by which the others on the bandstand became blues subjects in their own right.

Note that I am not saying that he doesn't need to be proficient on his instrument, but rather than proficiency is a *what*, not a *how* or a *why*, and it's the how or why that is the issue. This distinction brings me back to the point with which I began but which I hope will be clearer and more powerful for having been illustrated in blues terms: The *acquisition of knowledge* is different from the *acquisition of a frame of reference* in which that knowledge is contextualized and in terms of which it is pursued and applied.

The current so-called crisis in education — including higher education — has been largely diagnosed and treated as a “what” problem, as a problem with what people know or can do. I suggest we refocus it as a “frame-of-reference” problem, deriving from a collision of ideologies — mainly between the providers of education and their presumed customers — over the meaning and worth of the intellectual development of the human person. It is worth reminding ourselves that in our educational system and in our culture as presently constituted, the underlying “proverbial” matrix of values associated with the liberal arts is not a “first culture” or a “first language” for many, if not most, of our students — no more than the above-specified matrix of the blues might be.

This underlying matrix that gives the idea of the liberal arts its coherence is not primarily a knowledge set or a skill set but an ethos or *aesthetic* (Althusser and others would call it an *ideology*). As such, it operates on a different, lower frequency than the overt instruction in subject matter and skill sets whose acquisition is the measure of “success” in the contemporary academy. If we want to be more effective advocates for the liberal arts, I believe we need to think more about the frame-of-reference question. In this context, we might begin with a challenge to ourselves along the following lines: how can we make our initiation of students into the liberal arts ethos *more like* the initiation of the blues subject? And how can we understand the value of the liberal arts as a countercultural one, embodying some of the same countercultural values as those I have identified as elements of the blues ideology?

My dad — a World War II vet who went on to become a GI Bill philosophy major — once told me, “You can't reason a person out of a position he wasn't reasoned into to begin with.” Now, that's a vernacular philosophy lesson if ever there was one, but it goes right to my point. As liberal arts educators — philosophers, historians, teachers of literature — we can preach until we're blue in the face about the value of our disciplines; but until we find ways to engage students in actions and practices that enact those values — even prior to announcing and naming those values — I think we will be putting the cart before the horse. The crisis of the liberal arts is not that its skill base is no longer appreciated — everyone wants students, and eventually workers and citizens, who can write well, think critically, locate and process information accurately and effectively; even ideological profit centers like advertising and marketing agencies value “creativity.” What seems largely missing

these days is the coherence of the liberal arts as an unspoken, underlying, almost reflexive set of attitudes that are central to the subjectivity of our students and others in our society.

What kind of pedagogy might serve the frame-of-reference approach that I am advocating for? First, I think we have to throw overboard the proliferating accountability structures that made the educational enterprise into an interlocking set of grids in which both students and teachers are now trapped. Taking a lesson from musical lingo, learning must be experienced more as meaningful *play* than as trivializing labor. This would mean ditching such “accountability” measures as grades, which punish risk, failure, and curiosity, and which discourage resilience and persistence at difficult tasks. What we want students to take away from their experience should be communicated more through suggestion and invitation, like the overheard conversation of elders on the porch of a summer’s night, rather than through the increasingly panoptical practices — in both the virtual and actual classroom — that seem to be increasingly dominating twenty-first-century pedagogy (at least at my school). Only by inculcating a spirit of *play* — not in the sense of idle distraction, but in the sense of *playing* an instrument — can we make *working* at the task of learning intrinsically joyous and worthwhile, and create an atmosphere in which even the tersest and most cryptic criticism can be taken as a puzzle to be solved rather than as a discouraging put-down.

These few recommendations probably seem inadequate (in terms of both scope and concreteness) for giving a sense of what a really-existing “blues pedagogy” might look like. But as I think I have indicated, I think we need to begin consciously building a counterculture that can resist and subvert the hyper-rationalized, “preparing-the-work-force-of-the-future” regimes now being imposed on higher education. Whether or not my idea of blues pedagogy is a model that will resonate broadly enough to carry this mission forward, I don’t know. What I do believe, however, is that if we focus primarily on cognitive appeals and arguments to persuade others of the value of education for its own sake, or if we fall into the trap of thinking of education as a repertoire of knowledge and skills rather than as an ideology that must locate and create its own subjects, all our efforts at exhortation and persuasion will principally have the effect of confirming the convictions of the ever-thinning ranks of already-true believers. Such gambits as trying to demonstrate the “utility” or the “career possibilities” of a major in English or philosophy or history are shortcuts that lead away from, rather than to an enlarged, enlivened world in which *it goes without saying* that that which we value, many others will value too.

1. Howlin’ Wolf (Chester Burnett), “Don’t Laugh at Me,” *Change My Way*, Chess 1945 (LP), 1966.

2. Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 53.

3. Wes Jackson, “Solving the Ten-Thousand-Year-Old Problem of Agriculture” (presentation at The Delta Symposium XIX, Jonesboro, AR), April 18, 2013.

4. For good discussions of these “blues queens” and the historical-cultural contexts in which they created their art, see Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1999) and Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

5. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 127.
6. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 127.
7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 223–224.
8. Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 2d. ed., ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 598.
9. *Ibid.*, 593.
10. Mose Allison, "I Don't Worry About a Thing," *I Don't Worry About a Thing*, Atlantic #1389, June 1962 (LP).
11. James Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 69–70.
12. *Ibid.*, 67.
13. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "The Changing Same (R & B and New Black Music)," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1971), 112–25. See also Deborah E. McDowell, "The Changing Same": *Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 34–57.
14. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," 70, 71.
15. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 96, 98.
16. Olly Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West African Music," *Black Perspectives in Music 2* (Spring 1974): 20.