

The Metaphysical Blues and the Juke Joint of Ideas

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It is a principle of music
to repeat the theme. Repeat
and repeat again,
as the pace mounts. The
theme is difficult
but no more difficult
than the facts to be
resolved.

— William Carlos Williams¹

Without doubt, the blues is one of the most repetitive of musical forms and among the earliest musical forms subject to mechanical reproduction. Similarly, speaking of the blues is an exercise in repetition, a repetition of the repetition essential to the blues, but in a different register. To speak of the blues in the terms provided by Gilles Deleuze, as I plan to do in what follows, is to repeat the play of identity and difference, of equality and inequality, freedom and enslavement, departure and return. The following asks if the repetition of difference in the blues might serve as both a hermeneutic model for teaching and as a heuristic measure to determine the extent to which the classroom might become a rowdy and disorderly Juke Joint of Ideas.²

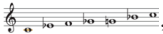


LISTENING TO THE BLUES

Typically speaking, the blues is tripartite and follows an AAB pattern, as in figure 1. The most ubiquitous blues is twelve measures long and divided into three groups of four measures each (1–4 / 5–8 / 9–12). The text of the first line, often a recollection of a past event or experience, is accompanied by an unchanging tonic harmony (I–I). The second line repeats the lyrics and melody of the first, but with a different harmonic underpinning (I–IV⁷–I). The lyrics of the third line offer a commentary, often ironic and overcoded, on the event or experience recounted in the first two lines. The third line, the text of which must rhyme with the first two lines, is accompanied by yet another harmonic pattern (I–V⁷–IV⁷–I).³

measure:	1 - 4	5 - 8	9 - 12
lyrics:	A	A	B
melody:	X	X	Y
harmony:	I - I ⁷	I- IV ⁷ -I	V-IV ⁷ -V ⁷ -I (or V ⁷)

Figure 1.

The blues is an example of call and response, a feature found in the preponderance of West African music. Like Amiri Baraka,⁴ it seems natural to my mind's ear that, after the solo voice sings the first line, its repetition in the second is sung by the listeners. During this time, the rhymed response of the third line is created *in situ*. Hence, as is the case with the dozens, jazz, and the free-styling of rap, the blues is both improvisatory and agonistic.

In the blues, one hears an echo of the encounter of West African and Western European cultures in confrontation of the pentatonic scale, , indigenous to West Africa and the diatonic scale, , of the west. The so-called blues scale, , is neither a synthesis of the two nor is the so-called blue note a relic of the slave's inability to reproduce the European musical language of the slave owner. Rather, the blues is a form of musical troping. Its novel extension of the dominant musical language is a snub of the nose at those who are musically monolingual. The primary marker of the blues, the so-called blue note, is typically described a lowered third in the melody; however, for those fluent in more than one musical language, it is also the second degree of the pentatonic scale. To my ear, the pungent dissonance created by the blue note is a deft appropriation, a sign of resistance disguised as a musical malapropism.

DIFFERENCE AND REPETITION

In *Difference and Repetition*, his principal doctoral thesis published in 1968, Gilles Deleuze calls into question the principles of identity and difference upon which Western metaphysics has relied since Plato. In doing so, the French philosopher problematizes the so-called correspondence theory of truth according to which reality is constituted by those instances in which our experience of the world outside our selves and our ideas of the same are in conformity. Roughly speaking, such thinking takes an assemblage of particulars and judges them according to the principles of identity and difference. For Deleuze, however, our repeated encounters with the world are singular repetitions of difference. Indeed, repetition marks the difference embedded in identity, and his *Difference and Repetition* elaborates a different metaphysics.

Inasmuch as repetitions articulate and expose difference, they are a violation of thought and its laws. Thus, repetition is “in every respect a transgression.”⁵⁵ Repetition “puts law into question and denounces its nominal or general character, in favor of a more profound artistic activity.”⁵⁶ Moreover, “there is no bare repetition which may be abstracted or inferred from the disguise itself.”⁵⁷ Rather, “repetition is in its essence symbolic” and, as a consequence, “difference is included in repetition by way of disguise and according to the order of the symbol.”⁵⁸

A Deleuzian listener would likely focus on the difference of repetition disguised in line 2 of the blues. Here, the different harmonic motion accompanying the repetition in line 2 of the lyrics and melody of line 1 reveals not only the presence of the past in recollection, but the “presentness” that marks any act of recollection. Moreover, such a listener might recognize that the ironic commentary of line 3 is concerned not so much with the past event stated in line 1 as the naive belief that the relation between lines 1 and 2 is one of identity.

TEACHING AND THE METAPHYSICAL BLUES

So, what can the blues tell us about teaching? How might we teach with a blues inflection? And can such a bent pedagogy transform the classroom into a Juke Joint of Ideas?

1. Just as there is no such thing as “the” blues, in an abstract or generic sense, we might entertain the question of whether or not there is any such thing

as a philosophy of education. Such a question might prompt us to rethink education as an endless series of encounters with individual students

2. Might we finally concede that the so-called Socratic method works only as a conversation between individuals and instead adopt a model based on call and response?
3. Instead of a monotonous voice attuned to (a) discipline or (the) institution, might we teach with a blues-inflected voice that resonates in the juke joint's space of disorderly order?
4. Is it possible that students would respond more fully to a blues inflected voice that reveals enough about our selves as human beings that it has a chance of being heard as a human voice by our students?
5. We must accept the reality that, no matter how well we teach in terms of the metaphysical blues, there are times when the attempt to represent the inhumanity of undeserved suffering or the courage and genius of its survivors will fail to elicit a response.
6. Indeed, the Juke Joint of Ideas is a space where we can also sing about our inability to sing the metaphysical blues and hear the resonance of our own humanity.
7. Finally, with the realization that difference is always already embedded in identity, the idea of equality becomes problematic. Inasmuch as my commitment to equality is fundamental, both personally and professionally, the recognition of its derivative nature can be destabilizing and disheartening. The only adequate response I have found is to recognize my commitment to this principle, despite its fall from transcendence to instrumentality, as part of teaching's necessary tragedy.

1. William Carlos Williams, "The Orchestra," in *Desert Music and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 1954).

2. The designation derives from joog [Gullah], meaning rowdy or disorderly (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 20 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) and joint [American slang], meaning out-of-the-way place for shady or disorderly activities (*The Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). A photo of juke joint from the 1950s can be viewed at <http://www.tagg.org/udem/histanglo/Pix/Blues/Rural/ColoredCafe.jpg>.

3. A common variant of the third line's harmonic pattern ends on the dominant (I-V⁷-IV⁷-V⁷). This pattern, known to blues musicians as a "turn around" lends a more insistent quality to line 3 and links it more closely to line 1 of the following stanza.

4. Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*. New York: Harper (1999).

5. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 3.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 17.

8. Ibid.