

The Blues' Ontology of Improvisation

Reagan P. Mitchell

Louisiana State University

It is a pleasure and honor to respond to Eli Kramer's essay, which shows that "timing" and "rhythm" must not be relegated to the artistic disciplines. The larger powerful idea I see in Kramer's discussion proposes that educators have the responsibility to intentionally and actively engage with "timing" and "rhythm," and that the temporality of the relationship between these produces the arrhythmic moment. The essay considers how "timing" and "rhythm" collectively have permeated, are permeating, and will permeate our perceptions in the realization of individual and collective agency.

Kramer makes use of selected works by Henri Bergson, Martha Russell, and John Dewey to articulate the importance of attending to the precautionary preparations of guarding against arrhythmic moments. Furthermore, he frames the arrhythmic experience as the points in existence that present the possibility of yielding tragic repercussions. In response to his discussion, several additional scholars came to mind, far too many to list and discuss due to the time constraints. However, the three I will mention in my response are Houston Baker, David Scott, and Cornel West. In my response, I consider the questions of how we — the author, the audience, and I — can push this discourse further, and how discussions of improvisation in relation to agency could push the discourse even further? My conception of agency here is aligned with that of Sherri Ortner who understands agency as being about intents while simultaneously referring to the act of reacting in opposition to inequitable systems of power.¹

My formal discussion picks up with the last word of Kramer's primary title, "Blues." Houston Baker, in his book, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, writes, "Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation — a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation — of species experience."² Baker's statement acknowledges the improvisatory nature of the blues. For him, the blues exist as an agent promoting perceptual shift. Additionally, the blues, according to Baker, is also an agent by which the broader contexts represented and expressed are shifted according to the practitioner. Altogether, Baker presents the blues as, comprising improvisational acts, that aids humanity in making meaning of events.

If we consider Baker's discussion in the context of this exploration of the relation of "time" to "rhythm," his statement can be understood as an acknowledgment of how neither the flattening nor uniformity yields positive outcomes. Rather, it is continuous nonlinear and unsteady relationship of "time" to "rhythm" that keeps the discourse in motion. Furthermore, positivity in this relationship can be understood as the conversation being kept alive. While Baker mentions the recapitulation, the regularity of it exists in the sense of a groove, whereby a hierarchy is presented.

However, even with the acknowledgement of the hierarchy, the blues is understood as malleable in Baker's statement.

I would further add, in line with Baker's view, that time and rhythm exist as both connected and demarcated. However, it is the insurmountable nature of the transcendental divide between time and rhythm that creates the improvisational tension maintained, not in a sense of being settled. This sense of maintaining an improvisational tension articulates the necessity to continually engage the existential process of responsibility's function in engaging the moodiness of discourse.

I would also like to note Kramer's discussion of Martha Russell's "phrase-form" and the analysis of the dancer "completing the routine," contains a tragic aspect. To paraphrase Kramer, for the dancer to successfully complete the routine, a balance between her cerebral existence must be struck in order to seamlessly progress into the next system of phrases. Tragedy is situated as the point in the process whereby the individual surrenders completely to the cerebral existence which, as a result, the ability to experience the phrase fully sensually is blocked. Furthermore, I saw Kramer's discussion as a broader call for a simultaneously individual and collective responsibility to engage with the continual tensions of improvisation.

The dancer's situation raises the question of whether or not it could ever be divorced from tragedy. It seems that individuals can guard against tragedy, understood as the ill-timed and/or arrhythmic experiences, but this as an *aporia*. The *aporia* in this context can be understood as the inability, regardless of the good intent of our actions to disconnect or guard against tragedy. David Scott articulates the nature of this *aporia* when examining historical narrative in regard to knowledge construction: "We are poignantly warned about the doubleness of knowledge — how it can obscure even as it enables, how it can disable as much as enables, how it can imprison at the very moment it emancipates."³

Scott's statement is a critique of C.L.R. James's book *The Black Jacobins*.⁴ While an admirer of James's work, Scott questions whether it was stricken with a case of "Revolutionary Romanticism," Scott's term to describe what he sees as James's overly heroic depiction of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave of Saint Dominique (presently Haiti), whose savvy as the leader of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), enabled him to execute the most influential slave revolt. However, the larger point in Scott's statement refers to knowledge as *aporetic* because it is simultaneously liberatory and oppressive. Therefore, Scott emphasizes that the tragedy of the *aporia* of knowledge is the inability to separate its empowering and disabling effects.

Returning to the question of whether or not the dancer's completion of the routine can be divorced from tragedy, I see it as impossible. Scott's notion of the doubled meanings knowledge expresses this sentiment. The example of the dancer powerfully articulates how the individual perceives their fluctuating relationship with their agency. The individual "completing the routine" straddles and must continually navigate internal and external aporetic contexts, which are in constant flux. Therefore, the discovery of individual and communal agency to "complete the routine"

must be approached with an improvisational mindset acknowledging the necessity to conceptualize and renavigate shifting contexts situated in tragedy.

For this reason, I believe improvisation holds possibilities for navigating the complexities of tragic moments. Additionally, I am wary of referring to engagements as “arrhythmic” or “ill-timed,” as it deemphasizes the responsibility individuals and communities have to understand themselves as improvisers. With improvising musicians, such as Louis Armstrong, John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and so, on their approach to improvisation was situated in a context where tragedy was understood as a factor permeating the foundation. Furthermore, the meticulous development of their improvisational savvy was not solely a result of guarding against the “ill-timed” or “arrhythmic” event. Rather, the skill and depth of their improvisational talents were developed in tandem with the realization that each performance opportunity would present differing musical contexts. The flux of the contexts is the tragic. Thus, “completing the routine” in reference to the improvising musician entails preparation (that is, rehearsal and technique) but also the realization that the musician will constantly be placed in a situation whereby they will be called to engage their musician colleagues, the composition, and their technique differently in order to navigate varying tragedies presented in performance.

The final point of exploration inspired by Kramer’s work was hope. In attempting to explore the notions put forth about ill-timing and arrhythmia, I considered the possibilities of how hope could function. I draw here on Cornel West’s concept of Prophetic Pragmatism. West eloquently explains hope when he writes,

To talk about human hope is to engage in an audacious attempt to galvanize and energize, to inspire and to invigorate world-weary people. Because that is what we are. We are world-weary; we are tired. For some of us there are misanthropic skeletons hanging in our closet. And by misanthropic I mean the notion that we have to give up on the capacity of human beings to do *anything* right. The capacity of human communities to solve any problem.⁵

West situates hope against the backdrop of tragedy. His understanding of hope critiques the optimistic view presented by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Tragedy, in West’s statement, arises from the space between humanity’s relationships. Thus, West’s analysis bears witness to the failures humanity has experienced and will continually experience due to these relationship, which has caused humanity to become exhausted and doubtful about the possibility that goodwill exists. West goes so far as to acknowledge how, for some individuals, misanthropic tensions have dominated their consciousness, placing a perceptual barrier of unbelief in the ability to exist compassionately or work towards humanity’s betterment. Yet, his understanding hope speaks of the simultaneous resilience and responsibility that humanity embodies. For him, it is resilience and responsibility contained in hope that must be accessed in order to stay engaged in the search for a healthier existence, in spite of shifting contexts that mute possibilities for improvement. Thus, West’s notion of hope functions as an instrument to navigate the complex and tragic compositional topographies emanating from the public sphere in the search for agency.

Understanding “completing the phrase” in light of hope, as discussed by West, challenges our understanding of individuals’ control in a situation. Furthermore, to

be hopeful is to acknowledge both the expected and unexpected points of tragedy. As for the dancer there is preparation and rehearsal in order to execute the routine. As the author mentions, there also exists the possibility that the dancer will become too cerebrally occupied when in performing. This stands as an example of the tragedy. However, hope, according to West, situates tragedy as continually present. His notion of hope also emphasizes the importance of attempting to follow through and sit with tragic moments as points of learning. Altogether, hope emerges in developing the ability to realize agency through tragedy which requires an improvisatory engagement while also understanding that the desired outcome is not guaranteed.

In conclusion, I come back to the Sherri Ortner's notion of agency, defined as the simultaneous act of intentionality and the reaction against inequitable systems of power along with Baker's discussion of the ability of the blues to articulate varieties of experience. Perhaps metaphorically, the blues can be seen as embodying the agency required to acknowledge and face head-on the "ill-timed and arrhythmic experiences that are ever-present in order to engage as hopeful improvisers.

1. Sherri Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

2. Houston Baker, *Blues, ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

3. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 207.

4. C.L.R James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1938).

5. Cornel West. *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*. (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1993), 6 (emphasis in original).