**Lady Sings the Blues: A Woman's Perspective on Authenticity**

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*White people have no business playing the blues*
*ever, at all, under any circumstances. What the fuck*
*do white people have to be blue about?*
*Banana Republic ran out of khakis?*
~ George Carlin.

What, indeed, do white people have to be blue about? The position that Carlin's clever remark sketches for us–that blues performance belongs exclusively to one group of people–can be reformulated as follows:

1. In order for a person or group of persons legitimately to sing the blues, they must suffer, or have suffered, in the relevant way.
2. White people do not suffer, or have not suffered, in the relevant way.
3. Therefore, white people "have no business" singing the blues.

The argument above captures a few related objections to white people performing the blues. Some blues purists object for largely aesthetic reasons; the blues just doesn't ring true somehow when interpreted and performed by whites. Others suggest that in addition to this aesthetic problem, there are good *moral* reasons for white musicians to abstain from adopting–and profiting from–the blues style. These objections invoke the idea of ownership, and of these what amounts to cultural theft is the most serious charge. We'll look briefly at a couple of these arguments later. Though there may be reasons in favor of rejecting the first premise of the argument altogether, let's assume for the sake of discussion that there is a certain kind of lived experience that may be vital to blues performance–for both artist and audience. Absent this experience, blues musicians offend at best aesthetically, and at worst, morally. For the most part, it will be the second premise with which I take issue in this chapter; I'm going to argue that at least some white people suffer in the right sort of way and that it is very much their business to sing the blues.

I'm going to try to show that at the very least, women–whether black or white–are entitled to sing the blues, and they ought to be encouraged to do so. From Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith to Bettye Lavette and Bonnie Raitt, the history of the blues is backed by a chorus of powerful female voices. I hope I can persuade you that the importance of the blues for women's expression crosses racial and ethnic boundaries, and that the social frustrations faced by women–from sexual politics to unfairness in the work world–provide a compelling answer to the challenge of inauthenticity. The blues has been and continues to be an important medium for the promotion of women's sexuality and independence. The blues can be performed authentically by women of any race or ethnicity, owing to their shared experiences of oppression.

So it was, out of oppression, that one of the most influential musical and lyrical styles in history was born and although the effects of oppression tend to be silencing, there's nothing silent about the blues. We can't help but listen, and we can't help but respond. It's no accident the blues has the emotional power it does–it's a dialogue between the artist and her instrument, her band, and the audience, which harkens back to the call and response field hollers, work songs, and reinterpreted spirituals of the eighteenth century and before. The form of the blues is, without question, an African American creation, and possesses a unique ability to communicate the full range and depth of emotional experience. Much early, and some contemporary blues satirizes and provides escape from the oppressed conditions experienced by its black authors and originators.

**Why so Blue?**

So what does it mean to "suffer" in the way that's relevant to the blues experience?

The objection that white blues is inauthentic because white people don't get the blues assumes that the kind of feeling required to perform the blues convincingly is acquired through group

affiliation. Blues purists of this sort claim that white people lack some crucial experience that is key to the blues aesthetic, and so the very fact that they are members of the white cultural majority detracts from the performance. It takes away from the *believability* of the performance, and this is crucial to the blues experience for both artist and audience. And so purists like Carlin can mock "white blues" because white people, they contend, have nothing to be blue about.

In the very early days of the blues and its roots, the black population of the United States under slavery comprised a group that suffered under the full weight of oppression. Despite the depth of time and tremendous social change since slavery's end, discrimination, marginalization, acts of violence and intolerance have continued to be a part of the lived experience of many African Americans. The blues as creation, response, and catharsis, then, arose out of the enduring condition of an oppressed people. Black oppression did not vanish with the abolition of slavery.

The late political and feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young offers a philosophical treatment of oppression that will be useful, I think, for this discussion. All oppressed people, she says, "suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings."[1] So what it is that unites oppressed social groups–blacks, women, gays and lesbians, the disabled, and the elderly, to name a few–is that their members face this condition under which their goals and preferences may be chosen for them, and their own voices silenced.

Though it gives us a starting point, this paints a pretty broad picture of oppression. One might say, for example, that anyone can look at this characterization of what it means to be oppressed, and fit herself into it somehow. Also, the oppressive circumstances facing women must surely differ in cause, degree, and expression from those facing blacks. Further (though

somewhat obvious), it's important to point out as well that there is overlap between these and other groups. Does this mean black women are *doubly* oppressed? There's considerable sociological, feminist, activist, and philosophical literature devoted to elucidating the complexities involved in this question, and without a doubt, on this view oppression admits of degrees. That is, it's certainly possible to be *more* or *less* oppressed. However, quantifying oppression–as one might imagine–is exceedingly difficult. There is no quick and dirty oppression meter.

Young goes on to talk about "five faces" of oppression. These faces name five conditions that variously influence the social lives of oppressed groups; namely, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. So in order to make sense of a given social group's experience of oppression, we need to consider the effects that these forces have on the lives of its members. Under slavery, it's safe to say, blacks experienced fully every one of these forces. Slavery is paradigmatically the most oppressive circumstance under which a human being can live. However, it's important to bear in mind that our concept of oppression here is not as simple as the domination of one identifiable group over another. Though when and where this occurs, the subjugated group can certainly be said to be oppressed, 'oppression' as we use the term to apply to various social groups in contemporary liberal democratic societies is much more complex. Oppression in the sense we are considering exists as a state of *imbalance* among the power relations between classes, races, genders, and ages. It can be conscious and/or unconscious, subtle, and self-perpetuating. Viewing social conditions this way, Young says "makes sense of much of our social experience."[2]

It's not news that women share in the history, as well as in the present experience of being oppressed. Women's oppression, in particular, cuts across divisions of race, class, age, ability, etc, and constitutes–along with race and class–one of the most basic structures of

oppression. Women continue to struggle with discrimination, sexual objectification and abuse, domestic violence, and gender norms that tend to reinforce these conditions. Despite many positive social changes over the last century, they also experience exploitation of their labor both privately and professionally. On this Young writes:

> …women undergo specific forms of gender exploitation in which their energies and power are expended, often unnoticed and unacknowledged, usually to benefit men by releasing them for more important and creative work, enhancing their status or the environment around them, or providing them with sexual or emotional service.[3]

So bringing us back to Carlin's question as to what it is white people have to be blue about, it would seem that we have a candidate subgroup of non-blacks–namely, women–who share in the sort of experience that frustrates personal autonomy, self-expression, and social mobility in a way that lends a key component of believability to a blues performance.

**Women and the Blues:**

The emergence of the blues into mainstream music followed and coincided to some extent with the expansion of women into the sphere of professional musicians (1870-1900s). Prior to the late 19th century, the opportunities for women to become career musicians—with the exception of pianists—were pretty limited.[4] Like all steps forward for women's participation in social and professional life, the growing number of women pursuing musical careers was met with controversy and derision. Some detractors even went so far as to mark it the "degeneracy" of the art. By 1900, however, music as a profession was a common choice for more and more women entering the world of work.

At the outset of this trend, English art critic John Ruskin, had this to offer women seeking to find work as musicians:

**ADVICE TO YOUNG WOMEN:**

In music especially you will soon find what personal benefit there is in being serviceable . . . Get your voice disciplined and clear, and think only of accuracy; never of effect or expression: if you have any soul worth ex- pressing, it will show itself in your singing; but most likely there are very few feelings in you, at present, needing any particular expression; and the one thing you have to do is make a clear-voiced little instrument of yourself, which other people can depend upon for the note wanted....

John Ruskin, Preface to the 1871 edition of Sesame and Lilies.[5]

It's significant then, that among the first to record the blues were black women. In 1920, the first vocal blues recording by an African American was Mamie Smith's *Crazy Blues*. The recording became widely popular, and paved the way for a generation of successful female blues singers. These included Ma Rainey (1886-1939), Ida Cox (1896-1967), Alberta Hunter (1895-1984), and Bessie Smith (1894-1937), to name a few. Though there were fewer women musicians of the older, country blues form, women were at the forefront of the more commercial urban blues–the "classic" female blues of the twenties. This popularity of women's blues among blacks as well as among whites is telling considering the prevailing attitude toward women generally, and toward women as musicians. The idea of the female blues singer who embodied strength, independence, and some degree of sexual freedom was *novel*, though less so to her black audience.[6] It signified the beginning of a mainstream cultural shift toward stronger voices for women in public and political life–marked most vividly in 1920, with women's right to vote universally recognized in the United States. Against the backdrop of a patriarchal, white, middleclass social order, early blueswomen defied convention and demonstrated that in fact there *were* a few feelings women needed to express.

When Lucille Bogan cried out for her "sweet black angel," loving "the way he spreads his wings" (*Black Angel Blues*, one of her tamer compositions), she was participating openly in a

dialogue steeped in explicit sexual reference and metaphor–stepping out from the prescribed sphere of appropriate female behavior, where women were expected to be demure, subservient, and "ladylike." Moreover, she did so, for the most part, in an environment of public acceptance. Blueswomen were icons within, as well as outside the black community of the time. It is in this sense that the history of the blues as a black form, and its history as a women's form are bound together.

The structures and language of the blues have afforded women a safe forum in which to acknowledge and celebrate their sexuality since the early days of the genre, when African American blueswomen challenged the status quo by objectifying their male objectifiers. Women urban and country blues artists asserted their sexuality alongside male performers. Though the early blueswomen, with their provocative and sometimes downright raunchy lyrics, may not have been consciously furthering feminist concerns or knowingly opening feminist dialogue, the lack of censorship and the encouragement of defiant, sexually aggressive lyrics allowed women to express themselves openly and equally with men. Examples of this expression range from the less overt:

*If you see my rooster, please run him back on home*
*If you see my rooster, please run him back on home*
*I haven't found no eggs in my basket, since my rooster been gone.*

(Memphis Minnie, *If you see my Rooster*)

to the blatent:

*Ain't but the one thing that makes me sore*
*When you grind me one time and just won't do it no more.*

(Dorthea Trowbridge and Stump Johnson, *Steady Grinding*)

The blues not only facilitates the expression of female sexuality, but has historically given voice–literally and figuratively–to women musicians wishing to confront the social, political, and material conditions of their lives. Themes of role-reversal, independence, and protest against physical abuse permeate the lyrical content of women's blues.

This was as true of early blueswomen, for example:

*I'm as good as any woman in your town*
*I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep killer brown*

*I ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down*
*I'm gonna drink good moonshine and run these browns down*

(Bessie Smith, *Young Woman's Blues*)

… as it is for contemporary blueswomen:

*Hey Mister, we want you to know*
*We think you've taken this about as far as it can go*
*It's about to Blow*
*You got nowhere to run, why don't you sit back and watch the show?*

*You used to drop your little darlin' off at Sunday School*
*Family values while you're getting some behind the pool*
*She's nobody's fool*
*So don't be actin' surprised when your daughter wants it bad as you*

(Bonnie Raitt, *Hell to Pay*)

Despite the talent, strength, and charismatic personalities of its popular female performers, the blues itself has been a male-dominated genre for most of its history.[7] The initial popularity of women's blues in the twenties wound down toward the end of the decade. The association of blues music with the bluesman–the solo guitarist/vocalist–has relevance to our present question. This question is far too commonly posed, "can, or should white *men* play the blues?"

to be ignored.[8] This is interesting for our discussion because settling the issue one way or the other for white men has not been part of this undertaking. Though I'm confident that women–black and non-black–have a case when it comes to the experiential element to authentic blues performance, I don't know that I have a straightforward response to Carlin's question for white, middleclass men. Let's take another look at Carlin's stern treatment of white blues performers, as he himself elaborates:

> White people ought to understand that it's their job to *give* people the blues, not to get them. And certainly not to sing or play them. I'll tell you a little secret about the blues, folks: it's not enough to know which notes to play, you need to know *why* they need to be played.[9]

My answer to Carlin is that women, as a group, have suffered the silencing effects of oppressive cultural practices and attitudes. Many women blues musicians know exactly *why* they need to sing and play the notes they do. The blues helped many of them find their voice, as the early blueswomen brought not only the conditions of black experience, but also women's experience, to public notice. The experience of being systematically unheard–to have one's frustrations ignored–by a male, white middleclass majority, is the kind of suffering that delivers the blues. And playing the blues, delivers us *from* that experience.

**Stealing the Blues**

It's important, I think, to turn now by way of acknowledgement to the moral arguments against white people playing the blues. In addition to the specific, experiential element of authentic blues performance we've been looking at so far, there are other arguments leveled against the acceptability of white blues. Those who take offense at white blues performance may do so for a variety of reasons: maybe white people just can't effectively imitate the style; perhaps, as some critics have argued, the blues as a whole has become "diluted"[10] under the influence of its white

consumers and performers; or–as we've been discussing–non-black performers can't really *feel* the blues. However, these are largely aesthetic criticisms.

The more serious objections to white people performing the blues include charges of inauthenticity, but go further and suggest that white people who adopt the blues style are engaging in harmful cultural appropriation. This objection has a *moral,* as well as aesthetic dimension, so that merely calling attention to successful and talented white blues musicians like Johnny Winter or Susan Tedeschi in the hopes of settling the issue of whether white people can play the blues just won't do. The sense of 'can,' here has nothing to do with whether they are able to play, but rather whether they ought to play. Pointing to blues music we like as performed by white artists who display great skill–or effective imitation of the blues style–would be too dismissive. The fact that white artists *can* and *do* play the blues will not satisfy those who believe the artists don't have the right kind of relationship to the blues. It will not count in favor of whether white musicians *should* adopt the style.

1. *Cultural Appropriation*

Behind allegations of cultural appropriation lies a sort of rights-based moral objection to the use of the blues style by non-blacks. The charge is that owing to its history and cultural importance, the blues *belongs* to blacks. Essentially, cultural appropriation (or, *mis*appropriation) amounts to the theft of this cultural property. As James Young explains, cultural appropriation is a species of the broader phenomenon of "voice appropriation,"[11] and is an issue that extends beyond the case of the blues. It "can arise in the context of any multicultural society."[12] In addition to the worry of a sort of theft taking place is the concern that the adoption of a minority culture's unique symbols, stories, linguistic and other style elements has the potential to cause harm to this culture by misrepresenting them to members of the majority.

Familiar examples of this kind of misrepresentation can be found in portrayals of Native

Americans in the movies and on television, which often feature ceremonial dress, references to "the Great Spirit," and to other spiritual beliefs and practices that are out of context. Whether portrayed as the "Noble Savage" or the blood-thirsty Indian, many portrayals of Native Americans in pop culture represent a distortion; one that has arisen from a long history of misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Native culture on the part of the white cultural majority. A further worry, in terms of propagating negative cultural stereotypes, is that the minority group itself (and in particular, its younger members) is faced with mixed representations, and some degree of misunderstanding of their *own* culture and group identity can result.

The blues style is, in a sense, a living artifact of African Americans' cultural heritage and identity. So when Bonnie Raitt belts out a verse and Eric Clapton bends a blue note, they are participating in a style–in a sense, adopting a language–that they can only ever understand from the outside, in virtue of their membership in majority culture. The blues form, to continue the metaphor, can only ever be their *second* language.

2. *Appropriation of Audience*

Another side to this ownership argument addresses the appropriation of *audiences*. When members of the white majority produce blues music, the objection goes, they are limiting the audience for black blues musicians. The suggestion is that audiences can only consume so much blues and will be faithful to a limited number of artists. Hence, the more white blues there is, the less room there is for black blues artists to find an audience for their music.[13]

A perusal of the music/guitar magazine stand will confirm the disproportionate audience reception of white blues. Why, for example, do women like Bonnie Raitt and Susan Tedeschi (somewhat rare as female blues singers/guitar players) get more press–why are they featured in more music magazines and better publicized–than black women blues

singers/guitarists like Debora Coleman and Beverly "Guitar" Watkins? Critics of white blues have pointed to this issue and to the unfairness inherent in white performers enjoying more success than black performers of equal skill and experience.

Even if it were the case that without white-biased blues journalism, black women artists would be more popular than at present, it seems that this does not speak to the credibility–or lack thereof–of the blues performances themselves. Does blame for the harm here rest with the artists themselves, or is it rather an expression of the deeper fact that racism and white-bias still persist in mainstream culture more generally? The fact that racism persists is certainly undesirable, and it may be that we can encourage important changes through certain kinds of social interventions. However, it is difficult to see how calling for white blues players to abstain from playing would address this problem in any positive way. One would think, intuitively, that discouraging young musicians who are not black from playing the blues–because the blues belongs to somebody else–may serve only to drive the racial wedge in further.

The question of how to go about respecting the cultural property rights of African American blues musicians presents us with a whole host of interesting–and important–further questions about the borrowing, covering, sampling, flat-out plagiarizing, and other forms of adoption of the blues form by artists who are not African American. For example, are the concerns different–or more/less worrisome–when a white artist is covering a particular blues song written by an African American, rather than performing an original blues composition? How do we determine the body of blues compositions to which blacks have these cultural property rights, especially in light of the genre's nearly immeasurable influence on rock'n'roll, soul/R&B, and country? At the very least, do the artists have an obligation to address these social issues in their music?

Whether or not you think it makes sense to talk about the blues as though certain

groups of people have–or don't have–ownership and performance "rights" to the art form, we can say for now that these concerns at the very least give us reason to tread carefully. The blues as an art form has an important cultural history, and in particular has special significance to black history and culture. The suggestion that the use of the blues style by non-blacks may under some circumstances be misappropriating an important expression of cultural identity for African Americans has a great deal of weight.

To summarize, my modest aim in this chapter has been to meet the aesthetic challenge that white people lack the experience of the blues necessary to perform convincingly. I hope to have shown that at least some white people–women–share, with other oppressed groups, a history and experience of social frustration and silencing that brings with it the emotional center of the blues aesthetic. Those of us who are not black musicians but nonetheless adopt the blues style must be careful which elements of the blues and its language we emphasize, so as not to engage in the kind of bad imitation and misrepresentation that results in harmful caricature. However, those who still object that there is something aesthetically suspect about whites performing the blues–ever, at all, under any circumstances–should be just as careful not to cartoon their targets. As a white woman I frequently have the blues, occasionally sing the blues, and if Banana Republic were to run out of khakis, I'd be the last to know.

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[1]Iris Marion Young *Justice and the Politics of Difference* Princeton: Princeton University Press (1990): 40.
[2]Young (1990): 39.
[3] *Ibid*., 51.
[4]See Judith Tisk "Women as Professional Musicians in the United States" *Anuario Interamericano de Investigacion Musical* 9 (1973): 95-133; Adrienne Fried Block and Nancy Stewart "Women in American Music, 1800-1918" in Karen Pendle (ed.) *Women and Music*: *A History* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991): 142-172.
[5]as cited in Tisk (1973): 96.
[6]See Michael J. Budds "African-American Women in Blues and Jazz" in Karen Pendle (ed.) *Women and Music*: *A History* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991): 282-297.

Women have a longer history of participation in African-American music, and songs celebrating the powers and commanding personalities of the "voodoo queens"/priestess figures influenced the stage personae of early blueswomen.

[7]This is particularly true of female electric guitar players [see Maria V. Johnson "Electric Guitarists, Blues, and Authenticity" in *Black Women and Music* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press (2007)]. Though there are several notable exceptions, such as Memphis Minnie, Deborah Coleman, Bonnie Raitt, and Susan Tedesci.

[8] See for example Ralph J. Gleason "Can the White Man Sing the Blues?" *Jazz and Pop* (1968): 28-29; and a more recent example with James O. Young "Should White Men Play the Blues?" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 28 (1994): 415-424.

[9]George Carlin "You Are All Diseased" [video release], MPI Studios (2003).

[10] See Paul Garon, in his *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* London: Eddison Press (1975).

[11] Voice appropriation involves adopting the perspective of a member of another social/cultural group as a means of artistic expression. As well as borrowing cultural elements, voice appropriation can include adopting the perspective of a member of a different sex, sexual orientation, etc. from which to create a work of art. See Young, James O. (1994): 416.

[12] *Ibid.,* 415.

[13] *Ibid*.,416.