

## TEACHING THE BLUES: a few useful concepts for the classroom

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"[T]he blues are relentlessly dialectical, foiling any attempt we make to crystallize their truths into one incontrovertible statement. This curious and under-remarked quality has something to do with the freedom-needs and trickster-sensibilities of the music's African American originators--a refusal to be either nameless *or* wholly known; a refusal to be held in place, defined downward by slander, quietly rubbed out."

--from *Journeyman's Road: Modern Blues Lives from Faulkner's Mississippi to Post-9/11 New York*  
(U of Tennessee Press, 1997)

What are blues dialectics?:

- tragic / comic
- sad / happy ("laughing to keep from crying")
- minor / major (blues melodies)
- stay / go
- love / hate

What is / are the blues? BLUES CONDITIONS precipitate BLUES FEELINGS which find expressive outlet and relief in BLUES MUSIC. The entire process is sustained by the BLUES ETHOS.

--BLUES CONDITIONS

--BLUES FEELINGS

--BLUES MUSIC

--BLUES ETHOS

What is blues literature?

--BLUES FORM

--BLUES PORTRAITURE

--BLUES POWER

## THE BLUES ARE:

### BLUES CONDITIONS:

Unrequited love, failed love, a promiscuous lover, a terrific lover, the arrival of Saturday night with all its romantic possibilities; Jim Crow social relations, racism, the presence of lynching and vagrancy laws in the social field, race-based disrespect, disrespect from one's racial coevals; flood, fire, famine; poverty

### BLUES FEELINGS:

Loneliness, a feeling of romantic abandonment or romantic hopelessness, anger at romantic mistreatment or rejection; *any* sense of loss precipitated by a sundered cathexis; homesickness; anxiety, fear, restlessness, terror, fury, bitterness; a sense of worthlessness, shame, or guilt; a sense of renewed possibility, hopefulness, or potency; braggadociousness; two-mindedness or self-division; a compelling need to bear witness and/or call out injustice

### BLUES MUSIC:

AAB lyric form; call-and-response; blues melodic elements ("blue" notes); vocalizations; blues-idiomatic language (including signifying); rhythms and the dance-steps associated with them (shuffle, two-beat, slow drag)

### BLUES ETHOS:

Stoic persistence in the face of disappointment and disaster; faith in the karmic workings of the universe; the ability to laugh in the face of pain, a sense of humor based on frank confrontation with the unpleasant facts of life and an insistence on mocking and belittling pain by exaggerating it (Salaam); a keen eye for the transformative possibilities inherent in bad situations and the ability to improvise as a way of grasping victory from the jaws of defeat (Pearson); an insistence on sharing one's blues by performing them, either with an imputed audience or an actual community, rather than suffering silently and alone

## BLUES LITERATURE IS:

### BLUES FORM:

AAB lyric form and its variants, call-and-response, blues-idiomatic language (including signifying)

### BLUES PORTRAITURE:

Portraits of charismatic blues performers (Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, Hughes's "I heard a Negro play," etc.) and their audiences in representative performance contexts (juke joints, concert halls, recording studios, back porches), often in ways that inscribe BLUES CONDITIONS, BLUES FEELINGS, and the BLUES ETHOS

### BLUES POWER:

Representations of the music's expressive, evocative, and transformative (cathartic and/or shamanistic) power.