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Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?

The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle class blues singer.

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People*

It is unlikely that [the blues] will survive through the imitations of the young white college copyists, the “urban blues singers,” whose relation to the blues is that of the “trad” jazz band to the music of New Orleans: sterile and derivative. The bleak prospect is that the blues probably has no real future; that, folk music that it is, it served its purpose and flourished whilst it had meaning in the Negro community. At the end of the century it may well be seen as an important cultural phenomenon—and someone will commence a systematic study of it, too late.

Paul Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*

Can white people sing the blues? Can white people play the blues? On the surface, these may seem to be silly questions. Why not? What is Mose Allison, if not a white blues singer? Surely the performances of guitarists Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan and pianist Dr. John must count as playing the blues. But the question “Can white people sing (or play) the blues?” is much more persistent, elusive, and deep than such ready responses acknowledge. The above passage from Paul Oliver exemplifies a tradition of criticism which distinguishes between the performances of black and white blues musicians, preferring those of black musicians and refusing to recognize as genuine those of white musicians.¹ This tradition raises questions of race, ethnicity, and expressive authenticity which go to the heart of the contemporary debate over multi-culturalism, the canon, and the curriculum. I derive my title, and take my theme, from the late jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason, who raised the issue definitively, at least for white liberals in the late 1960s, saying:

[T]he blues is black man’s music, and whites diminish it at best or steal it at worst. In any case they have no moral right to use it.²

When I raise this issue in my Aesthetics classes, I find I must first get my students to appreciate it as a genuine and genuinely deep issue. They tend to dismiss it rather quickly by

simple appeal to their own musical experience. They tend to think that the mere mention of the name “Stevie Ray Vaughan” settles it. It doesn’t. Nevertheless, there’s something in this naive response. It reflects the central dialectic of the issue—the difficulty of appreciating its depth and significance in the face of its apparent implications. In an age of renewed and heightened racial and cultural sensitivity such a critical stance seems paradoxically to be both progressive and reactionary, and to stand in need of both clarification and critique. It seems to embody, as well as any, the problematic of “political correctness.” The stance taken, as in the case of Gleason and Oliver, by white critics and scholars seems progressive in that it unambiguously credits African-American culture as the authoritative source of the blues as musical genre and style, something the dominant culture has by and large systematically neglected. And yet it seems reactionary—indeed, *prima facie* racist—to restrict access to the blues as a medium of artistic expression. Check through the “blues” racks at your best local roots record store. There you’ll find quite a few white recording artists among the many black recording artists. Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield, Dr. John, Mark and Robben Ford, Nick Gravenites, John Hammond, Delbert McClinton, Charlie Musselwhite, Johnny Otis, Roy Rogers (not the cowboy), Stevie Ray Vaughan, Marcia Ball, Lou Ann Barton, Rory Block, Angela Strehli, and so on. This would appear to make

the affirmative case. Add to this list the non-black sidemen in the backup bands of many recognized blues artists—Jesse Edwin Davis (in Taj Mahal's early bands), Tim Kaihatsu (the Japanese second guitarist in Robert Cray's touring band), Albert Gianquinto (James Cotton's piano player for many years), to name only a few—and the thesis that the blues is a musical idiom which knows no racial or ethnic barriers begins to look pretty well confirmed. In the face of such evidence, what could have prompted our question in the first place? Is there some crucial difference between John Lee Hooker's blues and John Hammond's? What sort of difference could it be? Do the notes sound different when played with black fingers? If Leontyne Price can sing opera, and Charlie Pride can sing country, why can't Bonnie Raitt sing the blues?

I. A "RACIST" ARGUMENT?

Part of appreciating the issue is rescuing it from a racist reading. Let us first get clear about what would make the negative position "racist." "Racism" is widely discussed and many would say even more widely practiced, but it is rarely defined or clarified conceptually. For present purposes I will consider as racist any doctrine or set of doctrines which presupposes that there are "races" whose members share genetically transmitted traits and characteristics not shared by members of other "races" and which makes moral distinctions or other (for example aesthetic) distinctions with moral implications, on this basis alone.³ Essentially racism seeks to establish a scientific, in this case biological, basis for differential treatment of human beings—a basis in the nature of things for discrimination.

Thus critiques of racism have attempted to establish that there is no genetic or biological (i.e., scientific) basis for *morally significant* classification of human beings into races, by arguing that those genetically determined gross morphological characteristics whereby individuals are assigned to racial categories (pigmentation, bone structure, and so on) are not morally significant and that those human characteristics which *are* or *can be* morally significant (intelligence, linguistic capability, and so on), though genetically determined, do not vary significantly with race. A more radical critique of racism would

undercut the concept of "race" itself as an artificial and harmful construct without objective foundation in science, arguing in effect that there is no foundation in biology or genetics for *any* system of classification of humans by "race." This might be based on the observation that the degree of variation, with respect even to gross morphological characteristics, within a given "racial" group exceeds that between "typical" members of different groups, and on the generally accepted finding in genetics that the probability of any particular genetic difference occurring between two members of the same "racial" group is roughly the same as for any two human beings.⁴ We might do well to wonder whether, if either of these critiques has force, (and they both seem forceful to me), we can raise the issue of the authenticity of white blues musicians at all. Is there a way to enter into such a discussion without reifying "race" and investing it with moral significance? Doesn't the very question presuppose race as a morally significant human category with a verifiable basis of some sort?

Suppose we begin to answer this by distinguishing between race and ethnicity. Unlike race, let us say, which is supposed to be innate and in nature, ethnicity requires no genetic or biological foundation. Ethnicity is a matter of acknowledged common culture, based on shared items of cultural significance such as experience, language, religion, history, habitat, and the like. Ethnicity is essentially a socially conferred status—a matter of communal acceptance, recognition, and respect.⁵

Thus the negative position may *seem* racist since it may appear that nothing other than race is available as a basis for what is evidently both an aesthetic and moral distinction between black and white blues artists and performances. The negative position would *be* racist if, for example, it held that white people were genetically incapable of producing the sounds essential to the blues. Is there a difference between John Lee Hooker's blues and John Hammond's blues? Well, certainly. There are many. The diction, phrasing, and intonation of each as vocalist, as well as their techniques of instrumental self-accompaniment are distinctive and immediately identifiable (which shows that whatever differences there are are relevant *aesthetically*). If someone proposed to explain

these differences on the basis of the genetically inherited expressive capacities and limitations of members of different races, and then went on to argue for some form of differential assessment of performances or treatment of artists on this basis, that would qualify as a racist account.

However, the question raised by the negative position is not one of genetically transmissible expressive or musical capabilities and limitations, but rather one of “authenticity.” Again, the negative position would *be* racist if it held that music made by white people, however much it may resemble blues and be intended as blues, isn’t authentic blues *simply because it is made by people of the wrong race*. But nobody says this. Nor does any serious adherent of the negative position hold that white people are somehow *genetically* incapable of delivering an authentic blues performance. What makes one blues performance authentic and another inauthentic? The question of authenticity is really a matter of “credentials.”

II. THE AUTHENTICITY QUESTION

Authenticity is a value—a species of the genus credibility. It’s the kind of credibility that comes from having the appropriate relationship to an original source. Thus authenticity’s most precise, formal, and fully institutionalized application in the artworld is to distinguish from the forgery a work “by the author’s own hand.” When we authenticate a work in this sense, what we want to know is whether or not the putative author is who he or she is represented to be. In this application the “authentic/inauthentic” distinction is dichotomous, the alternatives both mutually exclusive and exhaustive, and the appropriate relationship is one of identity.

More broadly, less precisely, but in an essentially similar way, “authenticity” is applicable to the artifacts and rituals which are a culture’s “currency,” conferring value on those “acceptably derived” from original sources. So, for example, an authentic restoration of a turn of the century Victorian house might be one reconstructed according to original plans and specifications and perhaps using only the tools, techniques, and building materials of the period. An authentic Cajun recipe might be one traceable to a source within the culture using ingredients traditionally available within the region.

In such applications authenticity admits of degrees. A given piece of work may be more or less authentic than another. And the standards or criteria of authenticity admit of some flexibility of interpretation relative to purpose.

In the literature of musical aesthetics the authenticity question has been focused largely on the relation between performances and “the work”—or, because the work is conceived of as a composition, between performances and what the composer intended—and the criteria for authenticity have been understood in terms of accuracy or conformity with performance specifications which constitute the work. As applied to blues performances the authenticity question must be focused somewhat differently, for although we may speak of blues “compositions,” what we thereby refer to consist of no more typically than a simple chord progression shared by many other such “compositions,” with no definite key signature, no particular prescribed instrumentation, and a lyrical text which itself is open to *ad lib* interruption, interpretation, and elaboration in performance. As a musical genre, the blues is characterized by what we might call “compositional minimalism” and a complementary emphasis on expressive elements. The question of the authenticity of a given blues performance is thus one of stylistic and expressive authenticity, and our question becomes, “Is white blues ‘acceptably enough derived’ from the original sources of the blues to be stylistically authentic and authentically expressive within the style?” The negative position can now be understood as: white musicians cannot play the blues in an authentic way because they do not have the requisite relation or proximity to the original sources of the blues.⁶ No one has made the case for the negative position more provocatively, eloquently, profoundly, and forcefully than Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). In what follows I will consider that case, which I believe consists of two interrelated arguments, which I will call the “Proprietary Argument” and the “Experiential Access Argument.”⁷

III. THE PROPRIETARY ARGUMENT

The proprietary argument addresses the question of ownership. Who “owns” the blues? Who has legitimate authority to use the blues as an

idiom, as a performance style, to interpret it, to draw from it and to contribute to it as a fund of artistic and cultural wealth, to profit from it? The originators and the major innovative elaborators of the blues were in fact members of the African-American community. Women and men like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Professor Longhair, and so on. The question arises, to whom does this cultural and artistic heritage belong? Who are Robert Johnson's legitimate cultural and artistic heirs and conservators?

The proprietary argument says in effect that the blues as genre and style belongs to the African-American community and that when white people undertake to perform the blues they misappropriate the cultural heritage and intellectual property of African-Americans and of the African-American community—what Baraka refers to as “the Great Music Robbery.”⁸ Baraka describes a systematic and pervasive pattern throughout the history of black people in America—a pattern of cultural and artistic co-optation and misappropriation in which not just the blues, but every major black artistic innovation, after an initial period of condemnation and rejection as culturally inferior, eventually wins recognition for superior artistic significance and merit, only to be immediately appropriated by white imitators whose imitations are very profitably mass produced and distributed, and accepted in the cultural mainstream as definitive, generally without due credit to their sources. Calling the blues “the basic national voice of the African-American people,”⁹ he writes:

... after each new wave of black innovation, i.e., New Orleans, big band, bebop, rhythm and blues, hard bop, new music, there was a commercial cooptation of the original music and an attempt to replace it with corporate dilution which mainly featured white players and was mainly intended for a white middle-class audience.¹⁰

This is not an aberrant or accidental phenomenon, nor is it benign. Rather it is part and parcel of a subtle and systematic form of institutionalized racism which reinforces a racist socioeconomic class structure.

The problem for the Creators of Black Music, the African-American people, is that because they lack Self-Determination, i.e., political power and economic self-sufficiency, various peoples' borrowings and cooptation of the music can be disguised and the beneficiaries of such acts pretend they are creating out of the air.¹¹

Let's consider a possible objection, or set of objections, to this argument. The crucial claim is the ownership claim: that the blues as genre and style belongs to the African-American community. How is this claim warranted? Part of the warrant is the factual claim that the originators and major innovative elaborators of the blues were members of the African-American community like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Professor Longhair, and so on. There is an interpretive tradition which holds, contrary to this, that the blues is an oral folk form with an ancient and untraceable pre-history, but in spite of this let us take the factual claim as true. But what is the principle or set of principles which connects this factual claim with the ownership claim that the blues belongs to the African-American community?

The crucial assumption underlying this as a *critical* question—as the basis for a series of objections—is the modern notion of intellectual property¹² as applied to the blues. On this assumption, an *individual* is understood to have certain rights regarding the products of his or her original creative work, including the right to control access to the work for the purposes of commercial exploitation, etc. So one could say that the musical literature of the blues rightly belongs to *certain members* of the African-American community like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Professor Longhair, or their estates, legitimate heirs and assigns. But this list, even drawn up on the basis of a liberal reading of “legitimate heirs and assigns,” even if *padded*, is not co-extensive with “the African-American community.”

Moreover, these rights can be alienated voluntarily and involuntarily in various ways. They can be purchased, sold, exchanged, wagered, and so on. So for example the rights inherent in

Robert Johnson's entire catalogue of recorded compositions now belong to something called King of Spades Music and the rights to the recordings of his performances of them belong to CBS Records, part of the Sony Corporation. In other words, on this assumption a number of individual and corporate ownership claims would seem to follow from the facts, but not the communal ownership claim central to Baraka's case.

Finally, the proprietary argument claims ownership of the blues as genre and style, so that musical and expressive elements as elusive as timbre, diction, vocal inflection, timing, rhythmic "feel," and their imitations become the subjects of dispute. For example, the rock group ZZ Top has obviously imitated or "borrowed from" elements of John Lee Hooker's distinctive style in several of their original compositions.¹³ For Baraka this constitutes misappropriation—just another instance of The Great Music Robbery. But where in the notion of music as intellectual property can one find precedent for this? If anything, the history of music provides ample precedent for accepting such borrowings as legitimate forms of tribute and trade in ideas. The modern notion of intellectual property as applied to music can be used to support ownership claims concerning compositions but not musical ideas as ephemeral and problematic for purposes of documentation as these "elements of style."

Arguably this series of objections does very little damage to the proprietary argument. First of all, what the objection grants is important evidence in support of the proprietary argument. The modern notion of intellectual property, insofar as it is applicable to the blues, would seem to warrant at least an indictment of the American music establishment on the offense of Great Music Robbery, just as Baraka maintains. The means whereby the intellectual property rights inherent in the creative work of African-American blues musicians were alienated from the artists, later to turn up in various corporate portfolios at greatly appreciated value, were in many cases questionable, to say the least.¹⁴

But more important, though it may not be entirely inappropriate to apply an eighteenth-century English legal concept of intellectual property¹⁵ to the blues—after all, the blues *is*

modern American music—it's not entirely appropriate either. Approaching the blues via such a conceptual route entails treating the blues as a collection of compositions, discrete pieces of intellectual property, convenient as commodities to the economic apparatus of the twentieth-century American music and entertainment industries, whereas attention and sensitivity to the social context of the music, its production, presentation, and enjoyment disclose phenomena rather more in the nature of real-time event and communally shared experience, in which the roles of performer and audience are nowhere near as sharply delineated as would be suggested by the imposition of the notions of creative artist and consumer upon them.

Stories, jokes, and music are all part of the blues performance. They flow together in small rooms filled with smoke and the smell of alcohol as couples talk, slow drag, and sing with the performer. ... During blues sessions the audience frequently addresses the singer and forces him to respond to their comments through his music. ... [T]he blues singer sometimes prevents fights by talking the blues with his audience and integrating their conversations between his blues verses. After he sings a verse, the musician continues instrumental accompaniment and develops a talk session. He may then sing another verse while participants remember rhymes and short jokes which they introduce at the next verse break. The singer always controls this talk through his instrumental accompaniment. ... [This] shows the limitations of using blues records in the study of oral tradition, for studio conditions completely remove the performer-audience dimension of blues. Listeners influence the length and structure of each blues performed and force the singer to integrate his song with their responses. ... [W]hat I first saw as "interruptions" were, in fact, the heart of the blues performance.¹⁶

Thus the question of how to derive communal ownership claims from individual intellectual property rights needn't detain us. Indeed it arguably misleads attention from the real sources of the communal ownership claim, namely that the blues as genre and style originated as a communicative idiom and practice within the African-American community.

Finally, in insisting on a contrast between musical compositions as documentable items of

intellectual property and relatively problematic ephemera of musical and expressive style, the objection begs a complex set of deeply intriguing questions concerning the ownership and regulation of musical “fragments” as commodified abstract ideas—which, ironically, rap music (particularly in its employment of the technology of digital sampling) has lately elevated to the status of a pressing legal issue.¹⁷ But even more to the point, far from being problematic ephemera, the elements of blues style, when understood within the context of the music’s historical origins and the social context of its production, take on crucial semantic and syntactic significance.

On balance, the modern notion of intellectual property as applied to the blues seems little more than an elaborate red herring which in effect obscures crucial facts about the social circumstances of the music’s production, appreciation, and indeed, *meaning*. This brings me to what I am calling the “experiential access argument.”

IV. THE EXPERIENTIAL ACCESS ARGUMENT

Where the proprietary argument addresses the question of ownership, the experiential access argument addresses the questions of meaning and understanding as these bear centrally on issues of culture, its identity, evolution, and transmission. What is the significance of the blues? Who can legitimately claim to understand the blues? Or to speak authoritatively about the blues and its interpretation? Who can legitimately claim fluency in the blues as a musical idiolect? Or the authority to pass it on to the next generation? Who are the real bearers of the blues tradition?

The experiential access argument says in effect that one cannot understand the blues or authentically express oneself in the blues unless one knows what it’s like to live as a black person in America, and one cannot know this without being one. To put it more elaborately, the meaning of the blues is deep, hidden, and accessible only to those with an adequate grasp of the historically unique experience of the African-American community. Members of other communities may take an interest in this experience and even empathize with it, but they have no direct access to the experience and

therefore cannot fully comprehend or express it. Hence their attempts to master the blues or to express themselves in the idiom of the blues will of necessity tend to be relatively shallow and superficial, i.e., inauthentic. Jazz players have an expression, a motto of sorts: Fake it ‘till you feel it—the point being that authentic expression is expression derived from felt emotion. The experiential access argument in effect posits the experience of living as a black person in America as a precondition of the felt emotion essential to authentic expression in the idiom of the blues. Delfeayo Marsalis, in the liner notes to Branford Marsalis’s 1992 release *I Heard You Twice the First Time*, writes:

Yes, one must pay serious dues in order to accurately translate the sorrow and heartache of the blues experience into musical terms. The great blues musician Charlie Parker once said, “If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.”

And Baraka writes:

Blues as an autonomous music had been in a sense inviolable. There was no clear way into it, i.e., its production, not its appreciation, except as concomitant with what seems to me to be the peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of a black man in America. The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle-class blues singer. The materials of blues were not available to the white American, even though some strange circumstance might prompt him to look for them. It was as if these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood.¹⁸

In the context of the kinds of questions raised here about culture, its identity, evolution, and transmission, the appeal to experience functions as a basis upon which to either establish or challenge authority, based on some such principle as this: Other things equal, the more directly one’s knowledge claims are grounded in first hand experience, the more unassailable one’s authority. Though there is room for debate about the centrality of experience as a ground of knowledge, as for example in current discussions of “feminist epistemology,” such a principle as this one seems plausible and reasonable enough.

Nevertheless, stated baldly, and understood literally, the experiential access argument seems to invite the objection that it is either a priori or just dubious. The access that most contemporary black Americans have to the experience of slavery or sharecropping or life on the Mississippi delta during the twenties and thirties is every bit as remote, mediated, and indirect as that of any white would-be blues player. Does the argument subscribe to some "Myth of Ethnic Memory" whereby mere membership in the ethnic group confers special access to the lived experience of ancestors and other former members? It would be just as facile and fatuous for a Jewish-American baby boomer (such as myself) to take the position that only Jews can adequately comprehend the experience of the holocaust.

However the argument is susceptible of a more subtle and defensible reading, namely that the blues is essentially a cryptic language, a kind of secret code. Texts composed in this language typically have multiple layers of meaning, some relatively superficial, some deeper. To gain access to the deeper layers of meaning one must have the keys to the code. But the keys to the code presuppose extensive and detailed familiarity with the historically unique body of experience shared within and definitive of the African-American community and are therefore available only to the properly initiated.

There is a certain amount of theoretical and historical material, as well as textual material within the blues, available to support this argument. A general theoretical framework for understanding the development of cryptic devices and systems of communication under repressive circumstances can be found in the work of Leo Strauss. Strauss maintains that where control of the thought and communication of a subjugated population is attempted in order to maintain a political arrangement, even the most violent means of repression are inadequate to the task, for "it is a safe venture to tell the truth one knows to benevolent and trustworthy acquaintances, or ... to reasonable friends."¹⁹ The human spirit will continue to seek, recognize, and communicate the truth privately in defiance of even the most repressive regimes, which moreover cannot even prevent public communication of forbidden ideas, "for a man

of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines."²⁰ Unjust and repressive regimes thus naturally tend to engender covert communication strategies with "all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances, [and] all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—capital punishment for the author."²¹

Evidence of the employment of such strategies within the African-American community is fairly well documented. For example, the evolution of "Black English," as well as a number of its salient characteristics, such as crucial ambiguity, understatement, irony, and inversion of meaning ("bad" means "good," and so on), may best be explained as the development of cryptic communicative strategies under repression.

Blacks clearly recognized that to master the language of whites was in effect to consent to be mastered by it through the white definitions of caste built into the semantic/social system. Inversion therefore becomes the defensive mechanism which enables blacks to fight linguistic, and thereby psychological, entrapment. ... Words and phrases were given reverse meanings and functions changed. Whites, denied access to the semantic extensions of duality, connotations, and denotations that developed within black usage, could only interpret the same material according to its original singular meaning ... enabling blacks to deceive and manipulate whites without penalty. This protective process, understood and shared by blacks, became a contest of matching wits ... [and a] form of linguistic guerrilla warfare [which] protected the subordinated, permitted the masking and disguising of true feelings, allowed the subtle assertion of self, and promoted group solidarity.²²

Ethnomusicologists, working independently and apparently absent any familiarity with Strauss's work in political philosophy or sociolinguistic studies of Black English, have arrived at strikingly similar conclusions regarding the origins, functions, and stylistic features of jazz and blues.²³

Lyricaly the blues are rife with more or less covert allusions to the oppressive conditions of black life in America. If Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man"

(Big boss man, can't you hear me when I call [twice]
Well you ain't so big, you just tall, that's all)

is overt, it is merely extending a more covert tradition central to the blues. As Paul Oliver observes:

An appreciation of the part African-Americans have played in United States society and of the rights and other aspects of living that were denied them is of major assistance in understanding the blues. But there are barriers to appreciation presented by the manner of delivery, of speech, and of form, and [even] when these are overcome the full significance of the blues to the black audience still remains elusive. ... Many black terms arose through the deliberate intention to conceal meaning. ... [I]nnocuous words were often given secondary meanings which were closed to all but the initiated and by their use the singer could be more outspoken in the blues than might otherwise be prudent. Some of these became traditional terms recognized and used throughout the states by blacks, for whom the colored man was the "monkey," the white man the "baboon." With comparative immunity Dirty Red could sing:

Monkey and the baboon playing Seven-Up,
Monkey win the money, scared to pick it up.
The monkey stumbled, the baboon fell,
Monkey grabbed the money an' he run like hell!²⁴

Similarly, the blues are full of covert and even overt references, both musical and lyrical, to the esoterica of African religions whose practice on this continent was prohibited and systematically repressed. When Muddy Waters sings:

I got a black cat bone
I got a mojo too
I got John the conqueror root
I'm gonna mess wit' you

we understand very little unless we recognize the references to the conjures and charms of the Dahomean religion which migrated to the Americas under slavery as vodun or "voodoo."

Similarly we lose whole realms of meaning in Robert Johnson's "Crossroads" if we miss the symbolic reference to the Yoruba deity Eshu-Elegbara. The prevalence of such references not only tends to confirm the Straussian hypothesis of a covert communicative strategy, but also begins to suggest what might be involved in a "proper initiation."²⁵

Having said all this, it nevertheless remains apparent that neither the proprietary argument nor the experiential access argument quite secures the thesis that white people can not sing (or play) authentic blues. The experiential access argument has undeniable moral force as a reminder of and warning against the offense of presumptive familiarity, but it distorts the blues in the process by obscuring what is crucially and universally *human* about its central themes.²⁶ And it leaves open the possibility of the proper initiation of white people and other non-blacks, if not entirely into the African-American ethnic community, then at least in the use of the blues as an expressive idiom and so into the blues community. Obvious examples would include Johnny Otis²⁷ and Dr. John.²⁸ Given this, the force of the proprietary argument is also limited, since initiation into the blues community presumably carries with it legitimate access to the blues as a means of artistic expression.

This of course leaves the authenticity question still open on a case-by-case basis. Many white attempts at blues certainly come off as inauthentic, as no doubt do some black ones. However, if the authenticity question turns not on race but rather on ethnicity, which admits of initiation, and on the achievement and demonstration of genuine understanding and fluency, which are also communicable by other than genetic means, then it is hard to resist the conclusion that Professor Longhair's legitimate cultural and artistic heirs include Dr. John, and that Robert Johnson's legitimate cultural and artistic heirs include John Hammond. It is tempting to conclude on this basis that the answer to the question "Can white people sing (or play) the blues?" is: "Yes. Unless you're a racist."

V. CODA: HOW TO KEEP THE BLUES ALIVE

This isn't very likely to hold up as the last word, however—at least not yet. Some issues

seem to persistently elude—and yet at the same time haunt—the discussion. Here I'm still bothered by the issues of race and racism despite my earlier attempt to set them aside. I wanted to say something in this paper about the authenticity of white blues without either descending into or inviting hateful discourse. And I'm afraid that, though the distinction I introduced earlier between race and ethnicity helps somewhat, it doesn't quite do the whole trick.

I can imagine someone objecting to the line of reasoning I've developed so far: "To dismiss black concerns about white cultural imperialism as 'racist'—to co-opt the notion of racism in this way—is the height of disingenuous arrogance. This so-called 'evolution' of the blues community and tradition is just another case of the Great Music Robbery. It's true that the racial makeup of the blues community has evolved over the years, especially if you count these white musicians as blues players (i.e., if you insist on begging the question). Just look at the contemporary blues audience: mostly white people who can't seem to tell the difference between John Lee Hooker (the real thing) and John Hammond (the white imitation)!" Such objections are not hard to come by. Charles Whitaker, in a recent *Ebony Magazine* article entitled "Are Blacks Giving Away the Blues?" goes even further when he notes with alarm the prevalence in the contemporary blues audience of "yuppie-ish white people who clap arrhythmically (*sic*)."²⁹ This seems *prima facie* racist, but is it? What if Whitaker said, "Of course I don't think it's a *genetic* thing, but they (white people) just haven't got it (rhythm). It's an *ethnic* thing." How much does this help? Is ethnocentrism a significant advance beyond racism? Certainly not when measured by the horrors and pointless suffering which have been inflicted over the years in the name of each. This is no way to keep the blues alive.

Of course not all talk of issues of ethnic heritage and authenticity need be ethnocentric. The fact that ethnocentric applications and uses of the concept of ethnicity are possible does not show that the concept itself is harmful or useless. There is a certain amount of truth in the observation that different ethnic groups use music in different ways and that members of different ethnic groups tend to make and respond to music in ways that are characteristic

of their respective communities. And to be fair to Baraka—to avoid suggesting *he* be read as a clumsy ethnocentrist—it must be said that he does recognize the possibility of (and even sketches an ordered progression of) initiation into African-American musics. He writes:

Jazz, as a Negro music, ... and its sources were *secret* as far as the rest of America was concerned. ... The first white critics were men who sought, whether consciously or not, to understand this secret, just as the first serious white jazz musicians ... sought not only to understand the phenomenon of Negro music but to appropriate it as a means of expression which they themselves might utilize. The success of this "appropriation" signaled the existence of an American music, where before there was a Negro music. ... The white musician's commitment to jazz, the *ultimate concern*, proposed that the sub-cultural attitudes that produced the music as a profound expression of human feelings, could be *learned*. ... And Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made. The white jazz musician came to understand this attitude as a way of making music, and the intensity of his understanding produced the "great" white jazz musicians, and is producing them now.³⁰

In other words, the essence of the blues is a *stance* embodied and articulated in sound and poetry, and what distinguishes authentic from inauthentic blues is essentially what distinguishes that stance from its superficial imitations—from *posturing*. I think that if we wish to avoid ethnocentrism, as we would wish to avoid racism, what we should say is that the authenticity of a blues performance turns not on the ethnicity of the performer but on the degree of mastery of the idiom and the integrity of the performer's use of the idiom in performance. This last is delicate and can be difficult to discern. But what one is looking for is evidence in and around the performance of the performer's recognition and acknowledgement of indebtedness to sources of inspiration and technique (which as a matter of historical fact *do* have an identifiable ethnicity). In the opening epigram Paul Oliver estimates the blues' chances of survival through these times of ethnic mingling as "unlikely." This kind of "blues purism" is no way to keep the blues alive either. The blues,

like any oral tradition, remains alive to the extent that it continues to evolve and things continue to “grow out of it.” The way to keep the blues alive is to celebrate such evolutionary developments.³¹

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1. For convenient reference, I'll call this the “negative position,” and distinguish it from the “affirmative position” represented so far by the above “ready responses.”

2. Ralph J. Gleason, “Can the White Man Sing the Blues?,” *Jazz and Pop* (1968): 28–29.

3. This follows Kwame Anthony Appiah's account in “Racisms,” in David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Anatomy of Racism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 3–17. Racist attitudes and practices are no doubt more prevalent than racist doctrines. Following Appiah, I take racist doctrines as theoretically fundamental. To the extent that racist attitudes and practices can be rationalized at all, and thereby rendered accessible to rational assessment and critique, it is on the basis of racist doctrine. For a critical account of the concept of race presupposed by racist doctrine and practice thus defined, see Appiah's “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 21–37.

4. See Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 21 and 30–31. Appiah notes that not all biologists are ready to accept, as an interpretation of the genetic data, that the notion of distinct “races” of human beings is an artificial construct without objective foundation in science, however attractive the idea may be for its egalitarian implications. The scientific debate is outside the scope of this discussion (and my competence). I am interested in its conceptual implications.

5. One important writer on these topics, W.E.B. Du Bois, attempted to reconceptualize “race” as a special case of ethnicity in order to avoid the irrational evils of racism while at the same time facilitating access to and expression of truths about peoples (such as the Negro people) united by common origins and struggles. See W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890–1919*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), cited in Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument.”

6. Some may be tempted at this early stage to dismiss the negative position as an instance of the “genetic fallacy,” which misconstrues an aesthetic property of the work or performance itself as a relational property arising out of the origins of the work or performance. However, I don't think this move would be fair. First of all, as I've said above, I think the negative position is right in taking authenticity as fundamentally relational. More important, the negative position, as we shall see presently, raises an issue of an essentially moral and political nature, and makes argu-

ments of sufficient depth and substance to merit assessment on their own terms.

7. See *Blues People* (New York: Quill, 1963) and *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: Morrow, 1987).

8. “The Great Music Robbery,” in *The Music*, pp. 328–332.

9. “Blues, Poetry and the New Music,” in *The Music*, p. 262.

10. “Jazz Writing: Survival in the Eighties,” in *The Music*, p. 259.

11. “Where's the Music Going and Why?” in *The Music*, p. 179.

12. As understood, for example, in Article One, Section 8 of the United States Constitution, which gives Congress the power “to promote the progress of science and the useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries.”

13. Compare ZZ Top's “La Grange” or “My Head's in Mississippi” with John Lee Hooker's 1948 recording of “Boogie Chillun.”

14. It's worth noting that the music industry, and entertainment industry more generally, are tough businesses, and blacks are not the *only* creative artists whose work has been stolen. This is not to deny the existence also of discrimination on the basis of race.

15. Intellectual property became a matter of English statutory law with the 1710 Statute of Anne, which gave exclusive copyright to the author for a renewable fourteen year period. Prior to this statute the “right of copy” was held by licensed printers as a matter of royal patronage and its function was not to secure compensation to the author of a work but to order and regulate publication in the interests of the church and the state.

16. William Ferris, *Blues From the Delta* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1978), pp. 101–103. Cf. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), chapters 6 and 7, where Keil develops the notion of blues performance as ritual and the connection between the role of the blues singer and that of the preacher.

17. See Andrew Goodwin, “Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction,” in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), pp. 258–274; Bruce J. McGiverin, “Digital Sounds Sampling, Copyright and Publicity: Protecting Against the Electronic Appropriation of Sounds,” *Columbia Law Review* (December, 1987): 1723–1745. There is even a rap group calling itself KLF (Kopyright Liberation Front).

18. *Blues People*, pp. 147–148.

19. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 23–24.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

22. Grace Simms Holt, “‘Inversion’ in Black Communication,” in Thomas Kochman, ed., *Rappin' and Stylin' Out* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), quoted in Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 221–222.

23. See Ben Sidran, *Black Talk: How the Music of Black America Created a Radical Alternative to the Values of the Western Literary Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart &

Winston, 1971). Cf. Roger Taylor's account of the origins and significance of jazz, blues, and in particular the New Orleans piano tradition in *Art, an Enemy of the People* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), chapter 4.

24. Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 265 ff.

25. The lyric is from Willie Dixon's "Hoochie Coochie Man." For an exegesis and interpretive analysis of this and other lyrical references within the blues see Oliver, *op. cit.* But see also Stanley Edgar Hyman's critique of Oliver's interpretive analysis in "The Blues" and "Really the Blues" in *The Critic's Credentials* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), pp. 147–182. For an introduction to the sources of African-American art in African religious traditions see Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

26. Hyman, *op. cit.*

27. A white American of ethnic Greek ancestry, whose biggest hit was "Willie and the Hand Jive." As a rhythm and blues bandleader for forty years, Johnny Otis gave Little Esther Phillips, the Coasters, Little Willie John, and Big Mama Thornton their initial breaks.

28. (Mac Rebennak), a central figure in New Orleans music since the late fifties, a founding member (and the only white member) of the black artists' cooperative AFO (All for One) Records, and arguably the leading current exponent of the New Orleans piano tradition.

29. Cf. Charles Whitaker, "Are Blacks Giving Away the Blues?," *Ebony Magazine* (October, 1990).

30. Baraka, "Jazz and the White Critic," *Down Beat* (1963), reprinted in *Black Music* (New York: Apollo, 1968), p. 13.

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