

RECOGNITION, IDENTITY, AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE BLUES

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Abstract

This paper analyses issues of recognition, identity, and authenticity in connection with blues music, blackness and whiteness. Using conceptualizations from recognition theory, the discussion begins by raising some fundamental problems encountered in the troubled cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene. The two positions of Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism are then distinguished, characterized, and critically discussed, while looking at some relevant examples from the literature. As its constructive contribution, the paper concludes by suggesting that musical ideas should be recognized in similar fashion to scholarly ones, that is, by respecting and crediting the original sources, while openly utilizing and freely developing them into further directions.

Keywords: Recognition, Blues music, Cultural identity, Authenticity, Race.

1. Problematizing Blues, Blackness, and Whiteness

Upon hearing that I, as a middle-aged white guy, had started to take lessons to learn to play the guitar, and that my foremost musical interest was in the blues, some of my researcher colleagues at the university acted surprised, and commented that shouldn't I rather be interested in things like country and Johnny Cash, because this was white music, and blues was black. I, in turn, was myself surprised and puzzled by these seemingly stereotyped comments, as I had indeed always thought of blues as black music, but at the same time not felt in any way that the music itself would or should somehow be the sole property of, or limited to black people alone. Later on, during one of my guitar lessons, my teacher suggested that if I really wanted to get to the root of things, I should turn to the original black blues players, and try to learn their technique and style. He also mentioned in passing that nowadays, the blues scene is almost totally dominated by white people. While then attending various international blues festivals with my wife, I came across dif-

ferent views connected with the issue of blues and race. The topic was also variously discussed in the blues literature (Charters 1959; Cohn 1993; Gioia 2008; Palmer 1981; Tilton 1994; Wald 2004, 2010) that I studied to gain a deeper understanding of the music.

All this left me feeling that there is something important and problematic here, but I couldn't really articulate clearly enough to myself at the time how to think about the topic. When I then came across and read Adam Gussow's (2020) recent monograph, *Whose Blues? Facing Up to Race and the Future of the Music*, I thought that it is time to try, at least initially, to systematize my own thoughts around the topic. This paper is the result of that initial attempt. Although I shall rely on a wider scope of sources, at the center of my attention throughout will be Gussow's book, and in particular Corey Harris's *Blues is Black music!* blog, especially its inaugural post "Can White People Play the Blues?" (Harris 2015a). In the latter, many of the central issues are concisely formulated and clearly expressed. Harris's post has provoked a lot of commentary, and for our purposes, it provides a useful reference point in the literature.¹

Before proceeding any further, I shall resort to two metaphors that serve to set the stage for the ensuing discussion. I am terming these metaphors by their authors as 'Harris's Tree' (Harris 2015a) and 'Lomax's River' (Lomax 1993). They go as follows:

Harris's Tree: Black music is that tree that is always growing. Africa is the root, the blues is the trunk and the other styles from jazz to gospel, rock n' roll and hip-hop are the branches.

Lomax's River: To the black people of the Delta, who created a Mississippi of song that now flows through the music of the whole world.²

The rooty and earthy metaphors of a tree and a river are both dynamic in nature, for the tree is always growing and the river keeps flowing. One thing that arguably distinguishes Harris's Tree from Lomax's River, however, is that although both explicitly refer to blackness, the former posits black music as a tree-like solid individual entity with a relatively clear identity, while the latter is based on a more fluid and less discernible identity of a flowing water. In Harris's Tree, blues is depicted as a particular

1 Throughout this paper, I shall be operating with unproblematized notions of 'blackness' and 'whiteness'. For more philosophical discussion concerning the nature of race, see Glasgow *et al.* (2019).

2 The term 'Lomax's River' is derived from his book dedication.

concrete trunk that you can bump into, while in Lomax's River, the 'Mississippi of song' created by the black people of the Delta now flows universally and freely through the music of the whole world.

It is important to note that both metaphors are fully compatible with recognizing the history and origin of the blues as dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, and being forged in the black experience in the Southern United States (or partially even earlier in Africa, cf. e.g. Gioia 2008, pp. 1-17). However, they do seem to paint significantly differing pictures of the contemporary blues scene, where what was once perceived as an African American art, is now often conceived as a less racialized form of global popular music (cf. Pearson 2014, pp. *xi, xiii*). Lomax's River seems to readily accommodate and even directly depict the contemporary situation of diffusion, while Harris's Tree appears more insistent on a fixed and trunk-like identity of the blues as essentially black music with roots in Africa.³ The dynamic temporal dimension is central for creating the problematizations of this paper, because the process by which blues shifted from a black vernacular tradition to global popular music (Pearson 2014, p. *xi*; cf. Daley 2003, p. 163) is precisely the historical development with whose consequences we are currently grappling. With the two metaphors in place, we have a launching pad for articulating some of the fundamental problems encountered in the lived experience and cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene.

2. *Blues and Adequate Recognition*

Metaphors are ways of thinking about something. In discussing some of the crucial problems of "the troubled cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene", as Gussow (2020, p. 5) puts it, I shall in the following rely on further conceptualizations from recognition theory (see e.g., Honneth 1995; Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007). Having worked with this theoretical framework before (e.g. Koskinen 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020), my suggestion would be that many of the relevant problematic issues directly concern the topic of *adequate recognition*. In other words, the fundamental question is who gets to recognize some object as something, and whether this act of recognition is adequate or not.

3 Perhaps this difference could be expected, as Harris (2015a) states that "Your answer depends on where you stand in the debate". On the other hand, in the book dedication from which Lomax's River is derived, he is *not* denying the history of the music and the people, but making explicit reference, and giving credit to it instead.

On a more general philosophical level (cf. Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007), recognition can be seen as a *relation* with the following three components: the subject or recognizer ‘*A*’; the object or what is recognized ‘*B*’; and the content or *as what* something is recognized ‘*X*’. Thus, we get the basic *A-B-X* form of recognition-relations, where someone (*A*) recognizes some object (*B*) as something (*X*). Recognition-relations, or their lack, can also be *contested* or judged *inadequate*, because not all acts of recognition are acceptable to the recipient, or to some other third parties. This brings in questions of *power*, and the issues of (i) who gets to be the recognizing *subject* that (ii) chooses some *object* for recognition, and (iii) determines the *content* of the act of recognition. All three issues related to power are also highly relevant when thinking about recognition, identity, and authenticity in the blues.

In particular, we can focus on the following three interrelated problems prominent in the discussion:

BR1: The identity of the blues

BR2: The misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians

BR3: The question of whether white musicians can authentically play the blues

To say something about why I take all three to be issues of blues recognition, or ‘BR’ for short, let me point out that in ordinary language, the word ‘recognition’ has at least three different uses or meanings (cf. Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007). In the first sense of *identification*, ‘recognition’ can mean taking something as the individual thing it is, as a thing with some particular features, or as belonging to a certain kind. This meaning is obviously significant for discussing the identity of the blues. In the second sense of *acknowledgement*, ‘recognition’ is applicable to normative entities, as in taking norms, principles, rules, or claims as valid, reasons as good, values as genuine, and so forth. This meaning comes into play when we are discussing evaluative judgements, including those of authenticity, in connection with the blues. In the third sense paradigmatic to recognition theory, ‘recognition’ means *mutual recognition between persons*, as in taking someone as a person, as a rational being, or as one of us. This third meaning is pertinent for example to the question of whether black and white blues musicians are treated equally in the business.

Within the third paradigmatic sense of taking someone as a person, we may further distinguish three different species of recognition that are central to the contemporary theory-formation (cf. Honneth 1995). The first one

is *respect*, which is based on what we are, our shared humanity, and our equal dignity as persons. The second one is *esteem*, which is based on who we are, namely persons of a certain kind, with particular identities, capabilities, contributions, and unequal merits. The third one is *love*, friendship, or emotional support, which is based on being a certain unique individual person, and on the unequal personal significance between individuals. All of these different meanings and dimensions of recognition are variously intertwined in the morality, ethics, and cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene. On present occasion, I shall try to point out at least some of the ways in which they are systematically connected with the questions BR1–BR3 of blues recognition articulated above.

Arguably, problem BR1 regarding the *identity* of the blues presents a foundational question. This is true e.g. in the sense that BR1 inevitably has an effect on how we think about the other two issues of BR2 and BR3. The foundational nature of BR1 becomes especially clear as we focus on the assumed role of *blackness* in characterizing the nature of the blues. The question ‘What is blues?’ or ‘How is the identity of the blues defined?’ can be seen as the problem of adequately recognizing (in the sense of identifying) the blues. If blues is indeed taken to be essentially black music, then this appears to have immediate consequences for BR2, and interpretations of the misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians. The same goes for BR3, and the question of whether white musicians can authentically play the blues. If we assume that due to its very identity, blues is essentially (or by definition) black music, and therefore only playable authentically by black people, then this apparently puts an end to any further discussion concerning BR3.

Regarding problem BR2 concerning the *misrecognition* and *non-recognition* of black blues musicians (cf. e.g., Opening Plenary 2012; Blues Foundation 2019a, 2019b), it should be pointed out that the term ‘misrecognition’ is intended to implicate that some *A* recognizes some black blues musician *B* as *X* in a way that is not considered adequate or appropriate either by the recipient *B*, or by some other third party observing the relational *A-B-X* act of recognition. The term ‘non-recognition’, then, is intended to implicate that there is a complete lack or absence of recognition, adequate or otherwise. While we are engaged in conceptualizing the issue BR2 in recognition-theoretical terms, it should also be observed that we can think about the misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians in at least two different ways based on the distinct species of recognition articulated above. On the one hand, we can think about the mis- and non-recognition in the dimension of *respect* as

a matter of shared humanity and equal treatment. On the other hand, we can think about the mis- and non-recognition of black blues musicians as an issue of *esteem*, which takes us to particular identities, capabilities, contributions, and unequal merits. This latter sense obviously connects with Harris's (2015a) claim that "There would be no blues without Black people, and Black people still set the standard by which all other players and singers are measured."

By now, it should have become very clear that our answer to question BR3 about whether white musicians can authentically play the blues is closely and systematically tied to the preceding issues of BR1 and BR2. If blackness has an essential or definitional role in the very *identity* of blues music, and if black people are especially *esteemed* as both the originators and standard-setters of the blues, then it seems that the authenticity of white blues musicians is at a serious disadvantage to begin with. Moreover, as the special esteem of black blues musicians is so strongly connected with the assumed black identity of the music, we should carefully focus on BR1 and the way in which we characterize the identity of the blues.

3. Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism

In thus focusing on the identity of the blues and the question of what blues is, we can distinguish two opposing positions. These are based on the metaphors of Harris's Tree and Lomax's River that we began with in Section 1. The two suggested positions are also closely connected with the pair of ideologies that Gussow (2020, p. 2) distinguishes in his book. As we may remember, Harris's Tree appears insistent on a fixed and trunk-like identity of the blues as essentially or definitionally⁴ black music with roots in Africa. Gussow terms this ideology 'black bluesism', and states that it comes with a ready-made slogan, which he borrows from Harris: '*Blues is black music!*'. Lomax's River, on the other hand, seems to readily accommodate and depict the actual diffusion in the contemporary blues scene. Gussow calls this ideology 'blues universalism', and associates it with the slogan '*No black. No white. Just the blues.*'⁵

4 Harris does not use the *essential* versus *definitional* distinction. This is my terminology intended to suggest that in an ontological sense, we can take either a *realistically* or a *linguistically* oriented approach to the whole issue of defining what blues is.

5 This latter slogan, Gussow (2020, p. 3) points out, is a familiar T-shirt meme on Beale Street in Memphis in the mid-1990s, which has later survived and

The ‘black bluesism’ that Gussow contrasts with ‘blues universalism’ is in effect a form of *blues particularism*, even if we did, on empirical and historical grounds, take the conceptual possibility of ‘white bluesism’ to be a non-starter as far as blues ideologies go. To suggest what can be seen as a slightly more adequate contrast on the same philosophical level of abstraction, we might then attempt to distinguish and preliminarily characterize the two opposing positions of Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism thus:

Black Blues Particularism: The blues is, essentially or by definition, tied to the particular human feature of blackness, black culture, and the particular black historical origins and social conditions that created the blues.

Blues Universalism: The blues is, essentially or by definition, a genre of music that is formally characterizable, musically recognizable, and freely transferable from one particular cultural, historical, and social context to another.

Regarding our problems BR1–BR3, Black Blues Particularism ties the *identity* of the blues to blackness, grants special blues *esteem* to black people and culture, and answers the question of whether white musicians can *authentically* play the blues in the negative. Gussow (2020, p. 62) expresses this sentiment as follows:

[B]lues isn’t just a musical form, a set of lyrics and sounds and instrumental techniques that anybody can master, and it isn’t just a feeling. It’s a specifically *racial* feeling, one grounded in the painful particulars of the black experience. Since whites don’t share that experience, either historically or existentially (i.e., in the present day), they can’t possibly play the music for real. They’re just appropriating, mimicking, pretending.

In opposition to such Black Blues Particularism, Blues Universalism takes blues music to be formally characterizable, musically recognizable, and as such, a cultural creation that is transferable from one particular cultural, historical, and social context to another one without restriction. Blues Universalism also accordingly tries to answer the BR1 problem of the identity of the blues in more abstract, general, formal, or purely musical terms⁶ without anchoring blues essentially or definitionally to any particular ex-

prospered.

6 It is interesting to note in this connection the difficulties of finding any one specific feature with which to answer the question of what blues is, as usefully demonstrated by Elijah Wald (2004, pp. 3-13; 2010, pp. 1-7).

tra-musical context. One might then say that the very possibility of Blues Universalism is based on the acceptability of the idea that blues music can be abstracted or lifted out of its particular cultural, historical, and social context. Consequently, this *contextual transferability* seems to be the philosophically central issue that distinguishes and also gives contrastive significance to the two opposing positions. If Blues Universalism and its contextual transferability are accepted, then the *identity* of blues cannot be defined in particularistic terms, the BR2 issue of mis- and non-recognition of black blues musicians becomes more emphatically a question of respect-recognition and *equality* of treatment, and the BR3 problem of *authenticity* remains to be solved by other means than blackness, whether understood as a particular human feature, culture, history, or social condition.

The central issue thus seems to be whether blues has an essential or identity-defining connection to blackness, as Black Blues Particularism assumes, or whether blues is freely transferable from black contexts to other ones, as Blues Universalism presupposes. Although we will not presently dig very deeply into the questions of blackness and race themselves (cf. e.g. Glasgow et. al. 2019), it is interesting to note how Harris (2015a, 2015b) characterizes blackness. He insists on several occasions that the issue is *not* (or at least not *only*) about skin color or race, but rather about the culture and history of a people. Blackness, Harris (2015b) states, is more than just a matter of skin color. In his formulation it is also “a heritage, a history, a way of eating, speaking, fighting, loving, cooking, worshipping and making music”. He (2015a) also insists that “Without culture there is no music. Music is the voice of a culture. Separate the two and the music can never be the same.”, and even more concisely, “take the Black element out of the blues and it is not the same thing” (2015b). These would seem to be relatively clear expressions of Black Blues Particularism.

However, we should also notice that Harris’s formulations seem to leave open the question of how rigidly his version of Black Blues Particularism or BBP is to be understood. A lot seems to hang on how we should understand blues without the black element being “not the same thing”. In a more *rigid* reading of BBP, blackness is essential or definitional to the blues in the sense that if blackness is taken out of the blues, then whatever we have left, is not, and cannot by its very nature, or by definition, be blues music. This rigid reading of BBP is based precisely on the idea that blackness is essential to blues music, and without blackness, there is no blues. A looser, or *non-rigid* reading of BBP would merely insist that if blackness is taken out of the blues, then we have

something different that can still adequately be recognized or identified as the blues. This non-rigid reading of BBP shifts the position somewhat towards Blues Universalism, and seems to make different, *black* and *non-black* varieties of the blues possible.

Since even in the non-rigid reading of BBP, the blues still is, essentially or by definition, tied to the particular human feature of blackness, black culture, and the black historical origins and social conditions that created the blues, the result could easily be seen as the recognition of something like *two categories of authenticity* in the blues. Thus, our first- or A-category blues would be black and more authentic in nature, while our second- or B-category blues would be white (or more generally, non-black) and therefore, also less authentic in nature. This appears to be the kind of non-rigid BBP position that Harris is arguing for⁷ as he (2015b) writes that

[H]eritage and culture do matter in music. These things can not be faked. We bring who ever we are to the music that we play. That is reality. Music is not some magical realm where we leave our identity, our histories and unique experiences at the door and where culture doesn't matter. This means that although he is a superb guitarist, the music of Eric Clapton will never be the same as B.B. King. This is not to dismiss Sir Eric, nor any of the other non-Black guitar players who have found a musical home in the blues. It is saying that since their experience is different, the music they make will also be different. Playing in a musical style from a particular culture, even at expert levels, will never be the same as an expert player who is from the culture.

4. *Authenticity, Ownership, and Meaning in the Blues*

Our BR3 issue of authenticity with its two different categories apparently generated by the non-rigid reading of Black Blues Particularism quite naturally connects with the theme of *ownership*, which also comes

7 Such a position is not limited to Harris or to black commentators alone. In discussing white blues scholars, Christian O'Connell (2013, p. 65) points out that many writers shared the desire to defend the music from white cultural colonialism: "Inherent in this vision of the blues was the disdain with which white scholars often depicted white musicians. The attempts of white British musicians to play and popularize black music, from skiffle in the late Fifties to the rhythm and blues covers of the Rolling Stones and the Animals in the Sixties, had made writers such as Derrick Steward-Baxter and Paul Oliver 'shudder' with revulsion. Indeed, the latter argued that whites would never be able to replicate black music because they did not possess the magical quality of 'soul'." (O'Connell 2013, p. 66)

up in the discussion and relevant literature. If we do recognize black people and black culture as the paradigms, standard-setters, and originators of blues as well as representatives of A-category blues authenticity, then can we, or should we even, accordingly accept that black people somehow *own* the blues? Using the terminology of ‘heritage’ or ‘heritage musicians’ (cf. Harris 2015b; Opening Plenary 2012) in connection with black people would also seem to clearly indicate an inherited black ownership of the blues.

Supposing that such ownership of a whole genre of music⁸ would make sense to begin with, we could try to articulate some systematic comparisons between the positions distinguished in the previous section. The idea of some degree of ownership of the blues certainly seems to be at least compatible with both the rigid and non-rigid readings of Black Blues Particularism, whereas Blues Universalism and its contextual transferability works against any form of particularized ownership. With *rigid* BBP, black ownership of the blues becomes an essential feature of the music in such a strict manner that no-one else *can* own or even play the blues. With *non-rigid* BBP, black ownership is not as narrowly defined, since it arguably leaves some room for white (or non-black) ownership of *B-category blues*. Blues Universalism, then, naturally aligns with a doctrine of *no ownership* of the blues, as within the position, the music is taken to be universally and openly accessible.

Harris seems to have a somewhat divided attitude towards the ownership of the blues. On the one hand, he (Harris 2015a) clearly states that the issue is *not* about ownership,⁹ nor about policing the music-making of white people, or about giving out permission slips or licenses to perform the blues. On the other hand, Harris (2015a) claims that faced with the attitudes of Blues Universalism, the black blues player wonders to himself, ‘well, damn can’t Black folk have *nothing*?’. He (Harris 2015a) also writes that the Blues Universalists who deny the history of the music and the people will aggressively defend their privilege to play the music and will fight with all their might like a prospector guarding his claim in Native land. Harris (2015a) continues that just as they have laid claim to lands across the globe without asking *the original owners* (italics mine) of the land, white people have had the privilege of playing whatever music they want

8 As opposed, e.g., to ownership of a copyright to an individual song.

9 “[...] since everyone knows that blues is Black music, the product of Black survival despite a system that worked overtime to snuff out Black lives” (Harris 2015a).

to play. These latter remarks together with the prospector analogy that he uses would certainly seem to tie Harris's discussion rather explicitly with the theme of ownership.

Whatever we may think about the philosophical possibility of owning the blues (or any other genre of music for that matter) by a group of people, we should be mindful of certain problematic actualities in the current music business which give concrete economic and political urgency to our BR1–BR3 issues of blues recognition. Harris (2015b) depicts the situation as follows:

The reality is that white people do own the blues in a very real, economic sense. Record companies, promoters, booking agents, audiences, blues societies and organizations are and have been overwhelmingly white since the very beginning of the 'race record' (music marketed to Black people) industry. [...] Black people have no real ownership in the blues music industry, having a position more akin to sharecroppers who produce the crop but who have no economic power or control over the industry.

In reviewing Gussow's (2020) monograph *Whose Blues?*,¹⁰ Robert H. Cataliotti (2021, p. 57) points out that the inequality that needs to be addressed is absolutely unavoidable, and continues that the real challenge is to figure out how to make sure that African Americans will always be empowered, credited, and recompensed in the realm of the blues (Cataliotti, 2021, p. 58). It is easy to agree, but it is perhaps not so clear whether arguing over the issue of cultural ownership in connection with BR1 and BR3 is an efficient strategy for dealing with BR2, or the problematic misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians.

Harris (2015a) admits that in reality, white people around the world already play the blues by the millions, and even concedes that many play well in the style. To some extent, then, in our problems BR1–BR3, the issues of empirical adequacy and conceptual stipulation would seem to be intertwined. As already illustrated by our initial metaphors of Harris's Tree and Lomax's River, what we observe and how we talk about things is to a large extent determined by the concepts we use (cf. e.g. Haaparanta & Koskinen 2012). One thing that should be noticed at this point is that with a *rigid* understanding of Black Blues Particularism, whites *laying claim* or *stealing* the blues, at least by playing it themselves, would become a conceptual impossibility. The rigid version of BBP would also make blues

10 The title of Gussow's (2020) book in its way also highlights the issue of ownership.

completely inaccessible to white people as well as to all other non-blacks. In the name of empirical adequacy, this might then be taken to constitute a counterexample against *rigid* BBP, leading to its rejection.

If we do accept it as an empirical fact that white people (together with other non-blacks) play the blues by the millions, then *non-rigid* Black Blues Particularism would still seem to remain at least a viable option. However, what makes this position less palatable for non-black blues players is the possible assumption of two categories of authenticity. For non-black players and singers of the blues, it is not a very inspiring prospect to devote a lot of time, energy, and emotion to a blues commitment that would somehow be pre-destined to produce a second-rate or B-category result, no matter how good one would or could become. This seemed to be the implication of Harris's earlier comparison between Eric Clapton and B.B. King. The impression is only strengthened by Harris's already familiar emphasis of the intimate connection between music and culture, as he (Harris 2015a) writes that

Of course, it may be in the same *style* as the original, but the meaning of a song such as Son House's 'My Black Mama' will always be changed with a different performer. This is especially true if the performer is not from the Black culture that gave birth to the blues.¹¹

Again, just as with blues 'not being the same' before, here too, a lot depends on what we read into the notion of 'changed meaning'. It can be taken either to imply the two different categories of authenticity where one is more valuable than the other, or to just mean *different*, as in *not the same*, in a less normative and evaluatively neutral way. Thus, we end up with two possible readings of non-rigid Black Blues Particularism. The first one generates two different levels of authenticity, while the second one is more unbiased in merely accepting normatively indifferent differences in blues performances by blacks and non-blacks.

Whether we go with the categorized and rated, or with the neutral and indifferent interpretation, it should already be more or less self-evident that with different performers, the meanings of songs are always going to change for the simple reason that the interpretations are bound

11 As there are plenty of black performers' blues songs around without any explicit mention of blackness in their titles or lyrics, it seems that in choosing Son House's 'My Black Mama' as his example, Harris wants to repeatedly emphasize the feature of blackness. For an excellent biography of Son House himself, see Beaumont (2011).

to be different in a multitude of ways. This holds true even between distinct black performers, unless we want to make the questionable suggestion that black people somehow form a cultural monolith, within which there is no distinguishing between the individual performances e.g. of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, and Muddy Waters. What this arguably shows is that a demarcation line between differences in meaning cannot be decisively drawn between black and white, or between black and non-black.

In leaving behind evaluative categories of authenticity, the neutral and normatively indifferent interpretation of non-rigid Black Blues Particularism already shifts us very close towards Blues Universalism. The differences in blues performances could assumably still be noted, but not specifically evaluated or ranked anymore, which appears almost the same as taking the blues to be, essentially or by definition, a genre of music that is formally characterizable, musically recognizable, and freely transferable from one particular cultural, historical, and social context to another. The contextual transferability of Blues Universalism seems compatible with neutrally registering differences between performers from different cultures as well as within them, and the line between the two adjacent positions of neutral non-rigid BBP and full-blown BU becomes very thin, if not impossible to draw.

As we shift from particularist ideas towards universalist ones, it becomes more and more difficult to recognize the special nature and role of black people and black culture in and for the blues. This special place itself can be taken as both important and undeniable. On the other hand, as we shift back from full Blues Universalism towards different degrees of particularism, we get either only B-category blues authenticity left for non-blacks, or in the rigid Black Blues Particularist extreme, blues restricted to black people alone, which would not appear to correspond with generally accepted facts. Thus, it seems surprisingly difficult to formulate a clearly articulated, systematically stable, and intellectually sustainable position that would avoid the extremes, solve the problems inherent in the intermediary positions, and also incorporate the important insights of particularism and universalism that we wish to hold on to.¹²

12 For in seminal discussion concerning some of the central philosophical tensions involved, see the volume *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by Gutmann (1994).

5. *Recognition of Ideas – Musical and Scholarly*

In the foregoing, we have set the stage for our discussion with the initial metaphors of Harris's Tree and Lomax's River; introduced conceptualizations from contemporary recognition theory; distinguished the interrelated problems BR1–BR3 of identity, mis- or non-recognition, and authenticity; discussed the positions of Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism together with their variations; and ended up with apparent problems in all of the charted positional variations. What are we to think, then, after all this? Is there any way of trying to solve, or at least to ease somehow, the persistently remaining problems in the options charted above?

Gussow's (2020) conclusions, or rather, the lack of them, does not help us much forward. Beyond distinguishing the pair of ideologies that he calls 'Black Bluesism' and 'Blues Universalism,' Gussow does not structure his discussion very systematically, or articulate his conclusions at the end of the book in an especially useful way as starting points for further discussion. It is thus rather easy to agree with Robert H. Cataliotti's review of the monograph, as he writes about Gussow's discussion of the inequality of the overwhelmingly white control of the contemporary blues idiom:

At times, that ideological debate gets lost in the other agenda items he's addressing, even if his conscious decision to address a 'productive disarray of our contemporary moment' signals he is assembling a kind of postmodern collage (structured in 12 'Bars') of interrelated ideas and subjects that ultimately do relate to this crucial issue. A more tightly focused examination of the ideological debate may have been more effective, even though his literature survey and close readings are revelatory – they could stand as an independent study (Cataliotti 2021, p. 57).

This is something of a pity, as it does seem that with just a bit more systematic effort, and some additional work put into thematizing and organizing the highly interesting volume, Gussow could have taken the discussion much further from where it remains in the book. Clearly, Gussow knows his business, and thus probably could have gone much deeper into realizing his stated goal of creating a situation where "a more thoughtful and productive conversation begins to emerge" (Gussow 2020, p. 2).

As far as Harris's conclusions or recommendations are concerned, in addition to insisting that blues is black music, he seems willing to emphasize that white performers should clearly operate within their own boundaries of identity and their own cultural spheres of authenticity, not crossing any lines of culture, history, or social context:

White blues lovers who want to sing and play in the style should stop trying to sound Black. Keep it real and sing like who you are! Be true to yourself! Express *yourself*, not your imitation of someone from another culture. This is what true artists do (Harris 2015a).

The problem with this type of approach is that it seems to assume and impose, upon both black and white individuals, certain pre-defined collective identities that easily become too tightly scripted and compulsive for individual persons (cf. Appiah 1994). Again, the fundamental question is who gets to recognize some object as something, and whether this act of recognition is adequate or not. Moreover, it could convincingly be argued that true artists recurrently take their influences from various sources, and often do not respect any pre-defined or culturally established boundaries. This is also how culture, including blues music, develops and keeps its vitality. Blues itself is a gumbo of various ingredients, and not all of these are unquestionably or purely black (cf. Wald 2004; Gioia 2008; Gussow 2020).

Instead of assuming that we are faced with an exclusive either-or type of ideological choice between Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism, we could try to articulate how it is that they are, in fact, both true. One way of achieving this would be by utilizing our conceptualizations of contemporary recognition theory. In connection with individual human beings, we do not have to decide in an exclusivist manner whether they are persons or whether they are members of certain cultures, however defined. This is the case, because all individual people share their universal humanity while simultaneously also belonging to more specific particular cultures, histories, and social conditions distinguishing them from each other.

It would be foolish to try to decide whether the author of this paper is a human being or whether he is a Finn, because he is assuredly both. The same could be seen to hold with the blues. It is black music because of its particular origins, but it is also a universal genre of music that can be enjoyed, studied, and played by whites and other non-blacks as well. Within such a conceptualization, we are freed of the problematic assumption of an exclusive ideological choice between Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism, while still retaining our own personal freedom to esteem and evaluate individuals or groups of blues performers as we please.

We could then conclude by suggesting that musical ideas, including the blues, should be recognized in similar fashion to scholarly ones, that is,

by respecting and crediting the original sources while openly utilizing and freely developing them into further directions. Just as a competent scholar knows the particular roots and historical origins of her ideas, openly crediting and referencing them, a competent blues player of whatever color or culture knows where the power and beauty of the music comes from. Blues is black music, and thanks to its black originators, we can all universally enjoy and participate in it. To make our recognition real, and to give our appreciation concrete plausibility, we should organize and distribute our resources accordingly, or as a blues lyric might have it, put our money where our mouth is.

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