

Singing the Blues: Disorderly Mute Repetitions in the Juke Joint of Ideas

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This essay responds to the call to enter the Juke Joint of Ideas and, by doing so, enacts the possibility of a repetition with difference in which the Juke Joint of Ideas emerges as a space where we can “hear the resonance of humanity.” Taking a lead from the intention to explore “repetitions and differences in the blues” for a hermeneutics of teaching and a heuristics of learning potentiality, this essay responds to the Deleuzian notion of repetition and the invitation to “speak the blues” in yet another register. Intended here is a modulation in response to the tonic of the call, stumbled over in the Juke Joint where ideas rowdily collide, desires burn and join, and the “metaphysics of the blues” bends the pedagogical-Deleuzian pitch to a pedagogical-Lyotardian resonance. In concert with the author, “I hear the blues as a musical mode of call and response,” in which the call is embedded into the written form of the responses below.

(MEASURES 1–4) DIFFERENCE AND REPETITION

Call: “*The security of rest, the return to home and its predictability, is exposed as false, i.e., we hear the difference embedded in repetition identity.*”

Response: “*Repetition escapes from repetition in order to repeat.*”¹

The author’s call to think the harmonic structure of the blues in the educational space opens possibilities to hear the false notes of a system that assumes rational autonomy, stable identity, and predictable outcomes. Like the possibility of the deferred harmonic resolution that is expected but sometimes thwarted or “undercut” in the twelfth measure of the blues, so, too, is there the possibility of unintended educational meanderings and adventures where the straight acquisition of knowledge takes unusual and illuminating detours. Extending the deferred resolution further, Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of repetition jostles audaciously beside Gilles Deleuze’s articulation of repetition as the marker of difference and identity in the educational space. Analyzing the fleeting dimension of timbre and nuance in the essay “God and the Puppet,” Lyotard likens the unrepeatability of the musical event to the automatic movements of a marionette in response to the commands of a puppeteer. The “grace” that the marionette portrays through the repeated movements that are singular responses to a singular command is, for Lyotard, a metaphor for music as event — a radically singular happening that cannot be grasped or repeated in exactly the same way outside of that performance (or command), and yet, by virtue of this ability to escape from repetition, is eminently generative and rich with future musical potentiality. To think the blues with this Lyotardian inflection of repetition is to offer up the classroom to a Juke Joint of Ideas where imagination can take flight and repetition as difference extends the multiple horizons of the classroom.

(MEASURES 5–8) MUTIC METAPHYSICAL BLUES: A “PUNGENT DISSONANCE”

Call: “*We must admit that no matter how well we teach in terms of the Metaphysical Blues there are times when we are unable to represent either the inhumanity of undeserved suffering or the courage and genius of the survivors. At these moments a retreat into the mystical quietude of Wittgenstein’s silence might be tempting, however the Juke Joint of Ideas is a space where we can sing a blues song about our inability to sing the blues, and hear the resonance of humanity.*”

Response: “*No matter how clear the phrases of the clearest music might be, they bellow forth fright in secret.*”²

When we sing a blues song, even one that posits the inability to sing the blues, we hear the resonance of our collective humanity and the potentiality of the sonic spectrum of our human condition. As a music whose genealogy traces a dark line of deprivation, sorrow, and suffering, this is also a music that proffers some of the most intensely joyful, ebullient, and defiantly celebratory musical moments that stretches back in history and whose legacy reaches beyond where we are now into the future. I hear in the call to sing a blues song about not being able to sing the blues, a plea for an awareness of the transformative possibility of education as a space that keeps clear and always guards its emancipatory potential, whilst acknowledging its always-imminent failure to fully realise this potential. This double-sided dimension to education is acknowledged in the essay through a depiction of the “pungent dissonance” of the semi-tonal clash brought about by the flattened “blue notes” of the pentatonic scale next to the major mode of the Western diatonic scale.

I would like to extend this metaphor of dissonance further by bringing in Lyotard’s analysis of music as consisting of audible sounds that simultaneously carry the threat of inaudibility. Music, according to Lyotard, is only musical because it carries within it the threat of never hearing again, the threat of never again being moved or affected by music, a portent of the true silence of death. Instead of a heard dissonance, to return to the metaphor, it is a dissonance that can only ever be *felt* and can only ever be reached for unknowingly in the “mutic”³ darkness of the musical instant. A mutic metaphysical blues works with the pedagogical intent to transform the classroom into a Juke Joint of Ideas by acknowledging failure, inability, and perhaps even cognitive dissonance as the very dimensions toward which educative potential can flourish. This brings us close to the Deleuzian antimetaphysics that “replaces the principle of identity with the principle of difference.” In this case, the principle of difference is constituted by a lack and the repeated impetus to start again as a pedagogy of beginnings and renewal.

(MEASURES 9–12) A BLUES-INFLECTED VOICE

Call: “*Instead of a voice attuned to (a) discipline or (the) institution, we might teach with a blues-inflected voice. Such a voice would echo the voice heard in the joog joint. This voice is one that might resonate in that space of disorderly order.*”

Response: “*a voiceless voice*”⁴

In the call to teach in a blues-inflected voice, I hear once again an articulation of a type of pedagogy that takes as its inspiration the relationality of the blues as a musical form that incorporates many voices, sometimes ironically, always in relation to each other. The voices that resonate in the juke joint are both one voice, all voices, and no voice. It is a universal voice that speaks of difference, repetition, equality, freedom, and justice, yet also accounts for and resonates with the unspeakable tragedies and sorrows that rumble underneath the human condition — a “voiceless voice,” (or “mute rattle”), according to Lyotard. Teaching with a voice of the blues is to break down the hierarchy between teacher and student, the learner and the learned. This is a pedagogic relationship the melancholia of love and loss of which is born not only of the unavoidable limits of thought, but the inevitability of a shared fate that is constantly defied by the ceaseless arising of new educative possibilities. In the context of becoming and recommencement, the teacher has as much to learn from the student — the call and response is one that enables further calls and future responses. To “resonate in that space of disorderly order” is to proceed in the teaching endeavor with an openness and unknowing unreadiness to the unfamiliar and unknown. To continue in the voice of the author, the blues voice is one that “has the quality of ‘presentness’ — with all its busy and unpredictable becoming, while [the harmonic movement of] line 2 has the quality of ‘pastness.’” It is a simultaneously historic, temporal, and future voice that acknowledges the disorderly in the orderly and beats an educational pulse that inscribes difference within repetition.

SINGING THE BLUES IN THE JUKE JOINT OF IDEAS

To enter into the Juke Joint of Ideas is to take up an invitation, to respond to a command to engage, to be interpellated into the orderly space of the musical form to the disorderly space of musical potentiality. It is a crowded, vibrant space of engagement with our collective “human resonance” that speaks of so much of what makes life worth living, while also whispering the secret that so much will remain unknown. The Juke Joint has called for responses to the notions of repetition and difference as a form of identity constitution and articulation of musical affect. It has called for responses to the mute rumbling of humanity through a metaphysics of the blues that blends the Deleuzian antimetaphysics with a Lyotard-inspired negative ontological dimension of the subterranean mute horror of never hearing music again. The Juke Joint of Ideas speaks the language and syntax of a blues that is one voice and all voices, a voiceless voice, a flattened dissonance of different modalities, desires, and ideas. Finally, the Juke Joint begins with a promise that by singing a blues song about our inability to fully do so, we are here *now*. There is, after all, something other than nothing.

Kia ora and thank you to the author of “The Metaphysical Blues and the Juke Joint of Ideas” for providing such fertile ground for response.

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* [L’human: Causeries sur le Temps], trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 153.

2. Jean-François Lyotard, “Music, Mute” in *Postmodern Fables* [Moralités Postmodernes], trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225.

3. *Ibid.*