



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume V: The Blues Impulse

Introduction

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“Nobody knows who made up the songs called the blues,” Langston Hughes wrote in *The First Book of Jazz*, “but their twelve bar, three line form has since become a standard pattern in American music.” As a musical idiom, Hughes’s words point out, the blues is a familiar genre of American and especially African American cultural expression. It is a music whose formal features—its rhythms, its harmonies, its vocal techniques—were born early this century from the work songs, field hollers, African American spirituals, and plantation songs of the deep South a century earlier. While the history and evolution of the blues have been well-documented by musicologists, cultural historians, and the artists themselves, however, very little talk or text has been devoted to the blues beyond its musical frames of reference. That is, while most Americans can readily distinguish the blues from pop music, say, or country and western tunes, not many of us are able to recognize the blues aesthetic in its visual or literary incarnations. Few of us have even imagined that the blues could have incarnations outside of musical contexts!

Perhaps Ralph Ellison expressed the blues’ wider, ideological significance best when he described the fundamental blues quality of fellow novelist Richard Wright’s autobiography, *Black Boy*. In an essay called “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ellison defined the blues not so much in musical terms but more broadly as “an impulse” in (black) cultural life “to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it.” The blues impulse, then, conveys a heroic, survivalist sensibility towards the cold, hard, low-down facts of (black) life. It is homeopathy for troubled living, medicine for the sorrow-sick soul which succeeds in easing the miseries and melancholia of loneliness, abandon, brokenheartedness, poverty, prejudice and grief by confrontation and improvisation.

Contrary to popular belief, the blues does not function to *induce* sadness or complaint so much as it functions to *rid oneself of those feelings* by facing them squarely, if sometimes also humorously. Ironic as it may sound, in confronting disappointment and disaster head on—whether one’s blues are sung, written about, or painted, one finds a certain solace. For one always and inevitably finds a witness as well, someone who knows the heartache and headache one’s blues expresses because they too have visited sorrow’s kitchen. Both bluesman and witness, then, know survival is possible because the other’s presence and testimony prove it. But confrontation alone is inadequate to convey the phenomenology of the blues as an interdisciplinary art and outlook on (African) American life. All blues expressions involve improvisation as well.

To improvise, or to “swing,” understand, is to adapt to the unhappy truths and tragedies hich brought on the blues in the first place. It is to deal with the hand life has dealt, its meanness and its ugliness, in creative, flexible and stylistic ways. To improvise is to cope with a certain flair called “raw elegance.” Cultural critic and

blues novelist Albert Murray describes improvisation as “the ultimate human and heroic endowment.” “Improvisation is that,” he says, “which will enable contemporary man to be at home with his sometimes tolerable but never quite certain condition of being not at home in the world.”

The Fellows whose ideas and work appear in this volume of curricular units, I discovered, are improvisers of the first magnitude. The units which follow represent nothing if not so many experiments in improvising on the blues theme of our summer seminar. While one or two of the Fellows developed units on the history and influence of the blues from a musicological vantage point—Bissell and Flake, most notably—others sought to explore ways in which the blues impulse made itself an available theme in other, less familiar forms. Belton and Savage produced fascinating units on the blues in the visual arts, naming such figures as Romare Bearden, William Johnson, and Jacob Lawrence (to mention only a few) as exemplars of the blues’ visual forms. Andrade and Turtola brought the blues into the discourse of theatre—Andrade as a performer, and Turtola as critic and scholar. In the unit created by M. Blue, the language and poetic dimensions of blues expression became the basis of an impressive variety of lessons and exercises in creative writing, a novel and promising approach to blues thought. While the unit composed by J. Blue shares with M. Blue (O happy coincidence!) a sensitivity to the language of the blues, J. Blue is especially concerned to help her much younger students mature verbally. With a concentration on slavery and childhood, J. Blue’s unit seeks to aid primary school students to cope with the difficult experiences of their own young lives by analogy to the slave experience and verbal articulation of blue moods. On this score, J. Blue is in harmony with the goals and objectives of Robinson and Coleman as well, both of whom also aim to help their students’ sense of self by personalizing written, performed and visual blues expressions in such a way that their students recognize themselves, *their* hurts, *their* pains, and *their* troubles reflected in these works. The goal here, of course, as with every unit in this volume, is to make our American art, literature, and music relevant, to compel what we teach to bear a moral responsibility to our students. At bottom, these units are designed to teach New Haven’s students how to improvise and cope creatively with the personal, sometimes devastating blues of their own fragile lives in and away from school. More than anything else, however, what the units of this volume represent is a profound desire in these Fellows, all of them deeply committed to their craft, to see that those in their daily charge succeed in what education promises to deliver—our students’ survival in the world!

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