History

Classic blues attempts a universality that earlier blues forms could not even envision. But with the attainment of such broad human meaning, the meanings which existed in blues only for Negroes grew less pointed. (Jones 87)

In *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones (not yet Amiri Baraka) attends the transition between the individuated, private “primitive blues” that followed emancipation and the subsequent white supremacist reaction that was Jim Crow—the transition between integral developments in blues as a result of privacy and independence, to the extent that they were newly available to Black Americans in the late 19th century, and the nuanced disillusionment of qualified freedom—and the professionalization of blues music that followed. As Black Americans were both relatively free to move around the country and desperately (and itinerantly) in search of work, blues became an occupation (or a side job), rather than primarily or only a mode of personal expression made possible by the solitary alienation of the free(d) Black American.\(^{59}\)

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\(^{59}\) It should be noted here that Jones distinguishes between “classic” and “country” blues singers: “While the country singers accompanied themselves usually on guitar or banjo, the classic blues singers usually had a band backing them up” (90). He also notes that classic blues, which was dominated by great female singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, was recorded years before country blues singers, who were “almost always men” (91), made records. Jones notes that the “best-known country singers were wanderers” seeking employment, while women could not and did not need to move around the way men did. Not only were there societal and familial restrictions on her movement, but a woman could “almost always obtain domestic employment,” which meant she did not need to travel for work (91). Of course, there was a sense of glamour and prestige associated with the entertainment field and traveling shows, which was a draw for classic blues singers, “providing an independence and importance not available in other areas open to them—the church, domestic work, or prostitution” (93). In any case, as Angela Davis points out in her critical study on Rainey, Smith and Billie Holiday, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), “Most women … were denied the option of taking to the road” (19). Davis also
If emancipation allowed Black Americans to be by themselves, together or separately, and to cultivate private lives not strictly circumscribed by servitude, it also led to the development of a public blues form that communicated in a way that was not at issue in private blues. Black American slaves were not allowed to freely express their interiority in all its complexity, but their experiences were also limited by their circumstances. They did not have free time; generations of slaves born in America only knew servitude, and had little more to sing about. Emancipated Black Americans had broadened if not necessarily liberated—from racism, hunger, destitution—experiences. As blues developed from personal and personalized self-gratifying expression to public performance, its modes of signification also developed and diversified. The audience inflects the material, or the performer inflects the material toward (and away from) the audience. Perhaps before there is an audience, and particularly

elaborates on the rights and prerogatives that were and were not available to Black blues musicians after emancipation. Political and economic freedom were not available, so these musicians exercised (and sang about) the freedom they did have: the (gender qualified) ability to travel, and sexual agency (which Davis’s subjects asserted as a freedom they shared with male counterparts) denied them under the conditions of slavery. Davis goes on to connect themes of travel in the music of Black female blues musicians with sexual autonomy, and discusses the ways in which these songs “permitted the women’s blues community—performers and audiences alike—to engage aesthetically with ideas and experiences that were not accessible to them in real life” (66). As Davis explains, this promotes the development of Black cultural consciousness and the pursuit of proto-feminist liberation, as “dominant gender politics within black consciousness are troubled and destabilized” (67). Here is an emergent early 20th-century strategy of gender trouble situated within shifting genre parameters: gender trouble becoming genre trouble.

though perhaps no one can be denied the privacy of her mind, or of sleep—not for long

Nor were they allowed to sing of much else—so that, for example, a song about sexual or liberatory desire must be sublimated and encoded within the work song, and delivery to the hereafter might stand in for escape from the land of servitude. In *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012), Kevin Young writes about Frederick Douglas’s analysis of slave-era spirituals, “[T]hese songs were not just about Canaan or the afterlife, but about Canada and the life after slavery.”
an audience composed of Others, there is no material—or, in Jones’s terms, there is expression, but no artifact (30), no song as song object.62

At any rate, by the early 20th century, blues becomes public exhibition, and it takes on a universal inflection that is “less obscure to white America,” a “classic blues” that is “less involuted, and certainly less precise” (Jones 87). Considered in the “trouble” light,63 this universality is analogous to a generality of reference that charges lyrical utterance. What trouble? Your trouble. The singer can protect herself while forming a performative bond with the listener. In effect, she sings to herself while singing to others, but the song does not necessarily sound or mean the same thing to both parties. Still, the self- and other-audience both inflect the song. As Gertrude Stein has it in Everybody’s Autobiography, she writes for herself and strangers. This emergent form of disjunction with and from the self65 is what leads Luc Sante, in “The Invention of the Blues,” to describe the blues66 as an important development in American modernism. Here we are spanning time, but it is a contingent, cumulative, even self-reflexive time. Blues forms are certainly aware that they are being followed (by themselves and by other, stranger selves).

62 This is complicated by the race record era of the 1920s, during which time country blues singers were eventually recorded (again, after classic blues was recorded). Not only did the proliferation of phonographic records provide a blues artifact, but it circulated country blues, making its more private expressive sensibilities public. “Classic blues was entertainment and country blues, folklore” (Jones 105), but both had become artifactual (and commodified) by the late ’20s. They also became ripe fields for floating signification, doublespeak and encryption, all under the sign of accessibility.

63 which projects and reveals trouble
64 as the song sings to her, or sings her
65 which flows along the line of alienation specific to commodity forms in production and consumption, to which performance points
66 and more specifically, country blues, particularly because he concerns himself with the innovations of individual, primarily male, itinerant musicians