The Hidden Transcripts of the Blues: Subaltern Readings of Blues Music and Lyrics

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Abstract. Blues musicians are social actors whose lyrics have real meaning and consequences. Their lyrics are not confined to regions or musical genres. The Blues is mobile. It follows the same paths that people did, from which the migration narrative emerges as a dominant form of African American cultural production. Through migration narratives, African American artists came to terms with the massive dislocation of black peoples following migration. Without money to relocate, many African Americans were left in the South. Opportunities for them in the workforce were hard to find, and, by the mid-1930s, the effects of the Great Depression and racial segregation drastically limited black employment. For a black, blind musician, music offered a unique job opportunity, as well as a unique social perspective. Besides the few interviews that Blues musicians gave, their lyrics were their only words. It is an oral history of the times. Lyrics then became the primary method of analysis for such musicians. Poor or disabled black men and women were more likely to stay in the South. This article features three popular blind Blues musicians from the southern United States during the early 20th century. The songs of blind Blues singers exist in multiple forms and contexts and this study will, in-part, rely on elements of James Scott's "everyday resistance," and "hidden transcripts," along with Disability Studies' concepts of complex embodiment. Together, a complex reading of blind Blues musicians' life and lyrics offers a way to analyze both protest songs and leisure songs revealing the radical black imagination as a countercultural moment.

Keywords: African American, Blues, Culture, Music, American History, Social Commentary

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Introduction

There is no other American popular cultural form with as many blind entertainers than the Country Blues.[1] Nor is there any other genre of music with as many songs about being down- and-out as the Blues. The Blues represents the constant highs and lows of life - the worried mind. There are as many kinds of Blues songs as there are songs about having the blues: lonesome Blues, broken Blues, racism Blues, hungry Blues, woman Blues, fighting Blues, and the social Blues, to name a few. What many of them have in common, as Langston Hughes once wrote, is "the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying."[2] The Blues is African American acoustic guitar-driven folk music, while the Classic Blues is popular music with jazz accompaniment, and Ragtime is just piano honky-tonk.[3] Country Blues is less commercial than Classic Blues and Ragtime, and it could be performed solo, unlike the Classic Blues which relies on professional songwriters and jazz accompaniments. The Country Blues is rural, and with male guitarists, as opposed to the more urban, Vaudeville Blues performed by the Blues queens of New Orleans and Memphis that also employs subtle forms of resistance.[4] Some Blues songs represent James Scott's hidden transcripts that take place beyond direct observation of the dominant power, as opposed to the public transcripts of dialogue between subordinates and those who dominate the dialogue.[5] Blues music and lyrics take place off the mainstream stage. Scott believes that there is a divide between the behavior, language, and customs that dominated groups in public, and the language, jokes, and criticisms that structure their lives offstage. Both public transcripts and hidden transcripts have effects on everyday politics. The public transcript is the conventional pattern of speech for the dominated, through which they adopt the forms of deference and respect for the powerful that are needed to avoid conflict with the powerful. The hidden transcript takes place offstage, outside the intimidating gaze of power and is a dissonant political culture. Scott's hidden transcript permits him to communicate to the reader how it works through theories of ideology and hegemony. He argues that the hegemony of dominant ideas is only an uncritical observation of the performance of the public transcript. He suggests that the dominated are capable of their own criticisms. These musicians, while subsisting both inside and outside the labor system, were able to uniquely provide social commentary through their lyrics. Blues music captures elements of African American culture. As Ben Sidran explains, "black music is not only conspicuous within, but *crucial to,* black culture."[6] Shana Redmond goes even further by stating that black music often "functions as a method of rebellion, revolution and future visions that disrupt and challenge the manufactured differences used to dismiss, detain, and destroy communities."[7] She continues, writing that music is

more than sound, but a complex "system of meaning(s)...that mediate our relationships to one another, to space, to our histories and historical moments."[8] So, scholars "need to break away from traditional notions of politics" and question what resistance strategies and movements really look like, Robin D. G. Kelley emphatically states, while investing in the validity of oral history of the country blues.[9]

The Country Blues made its home in the American South during the early 20th century, but it was soon adopted throughout the states as a fresh, new sound by 1926, with Blind Lemon Jefferson leading the way. There are many different categories, or sub-genres, of Country Blues music styles. The Delta Blues, the Texas Blues, the Piedmont Blues, and the Classic Blues which inspired St. Louis Blues, are among the most recognized. The earliest sub-genres are the Country Blues or the Texas Blues, blowing off the dry, flat land of Eastern Texas and Arkansas, while the Delta Blues sprouted from the dark, rich soil of the Mississippi alluvial plain. The Country Blues is from a land of corn, peanuts, lumber, and soybeans. The Delta Blues, on the other hand, is centered on cotton. After much of the swamps had been drained, the land became a sultry, primordial twilight zone. It runs along Highway 61 from New Orleans, through Vicksburg, and all the way to Beale Street in Memphis. The land of the Country Blues, on the other hand, is flat, often dry and sunny, perfect for hitchhiking on highway 49 in Clarksdale to the Dallas suburbs. Country Blues is usually accompanied by a harmonica. Verses were "formulaic" in the sense that they were shifted at will within a given tune, and a gifted musician had a large repertory of verses formulas. This formulaic verse and guitar accompaniment dominated the Country Blues style. The Country Blues were set in a rural context during the 1910s and popularized in the Mississippi Delta region in the 1920s. While this was true in its beginnings, Country Blues also became popular urban music from across the country. Ferris is correct in describing the Delta Blues as "Characterized by use of heavy gravelly voice and the bottleneck style of playing," but he neglects to mention that by the 1930s, the Country Blues was just as popular in the urban north as the rural south.[10] Lizbeth Cohen writes that mass culture offered African Americans "the ingredients from which to construct a new, urban black culture" through commercial consumption.[11] Musicians like Lemon Henry Jefferson, Willie McTell, and Rev. Gary Davis capture how the Blues sprang from the rural, southern countryside, and moved into the busy northern cities. There were many exceptions as itinerant musicians traveled from place to place picking up new styles and leaving some behind for other musicians. The differences in musical context essentially end there. The styles of the Blues are so similar that it is not surprising that Blind Willie McTell, out of Georgia, played

with Blind Lemon, from Texas, and Rev. Gary Davis, from South Carolina, ended up living in downtown New York City. Blues musicians traveled across the country constantly, from Texas to Mississippi, to Chicago and New York City, following the various migrations of African Americans. During the 1920s, Country Blues musicians traveled these routes north to Chicago, and then back down south. They played with one another, they listened to one another, and they had one thing in common: they were from the south, and their sound had never been heard anywhere else before. Together, they captured the era of the Country Blues.

Blind Blues musicians represent an even more subaltern, or hidden group. They were social actors. Their lyrics had real consequences and reflected society in the early 20th century. George Lipsitz states that the "relationship between popular music and place offers a way of starting to understand the social world."[12] Anxieties aired through music to capture important aspects of cultural conflict. Likewise, Blues culture and lyrics should not be simply taken as just music, but rather a composite of the African American milieu, for Blues artists' awareness and innovative position place them as a spokesperson for many aspects of American culture. Unfortunately, publications on blind musicians are inundated by the three major stereotypes of the blind in American culture: the blind beggar, the blind genius, and the superstition of sensory compensation.[13] The two most dominant stereotypes, the blind beggar and the blind genius, fail to account for the agency that blind Blues musicians held.

Examining the lives and lyrics of blind African American musicians not only offers an interdisciplinary look at subaltern groups, but captures the history and setting of the Blues, along with the era of popular Race Records. Lemon Henry Jefferson was the first to achieve national success as a Blues artist. Willie McTell captures the popularity of Blues' race records during the heyday of the 1930s. Lastly, Gary Davis' career shows the legacy of Blues music in American society. The image of a blind Blues player sitting in a train depot with a steel guitar on his lap singing songs about the rough life on the road is a staple of Blues iconography, but more so, it was a paying job, and it was just as rewarding as playing in local juke joints, to the point that Jefferson may have played along the street or the train tracks more than he did indoors. For us, Jefferson's use of his various environments allowed him a modicum of financial success, rare for Americans oppressed by both their race and physical impairments. These three artists represent a lifetime of Country Blues as a resistance to the dominant narrative of race and disability in America.[14]

Disability Studies takes an interdisciplinary approach to the intersections of the humanities and the social sciences. This critical analysis distinguishes itself

from the vast array of literature *about* disability instead of the subjective experience of people with impairment. Chris Bell's *Blackness and Disability* connects race and disability in a social lens, and, recently, Terry Rowden, Joseph Witek, and Luigi Monge have begun to probe the intersections of blindness, race, and music. Monge states that the "role of blind performers has unfortunately not been explored fully."[15] One way to analyze blind Blues singers and their music is by viewing it as a rhetorical trope of "otherness." Witek writes that "sightlessness thus becomes a version of black powerlessness," and that blindness in the Blues is not only a trope but a cultural metaphor.[16] Social constructions among power, race, and disability reveal connections between oppression and disability through rhetorical devices of passing and masquerade. Blind Blues musicians may have looked powerless, but they had a unique perspective of society, and an artistic way of critiquing it. The role of blind performers in Blues music has yet to be explored.[17]

The Blues also shows the exploitative side of disability. Black and blind bodies were oppressed, but while blind musicians tended to be treated as savants, these musicians turned disability into an advantage. It gave them a catchy stage-name and viable career. They forged alliances with nondisabled people in their lives. Their musical career also gave them control over their lives, and their resistance came from self-preservation. Some blind musicians were so good, and their blind monikers were so memorable, that several musicians who had no visual impairment, such as Eddie Lang and Ben Covington, took up the "blind" label, too. This is an example of the complex embodiment of blind musicians. Disability creates theories of embodiment more complex than the ideology of ability. These many embodiments are each crucial to the understanding of humanity and its variations, whether physical, mental, social, or historical. Complex embodiments are both social and physical, and while identities are social constructions, they are also complexly embodied.[18]

The Musicians and their Lyrics

One of the earliest Blues founders was Blind Lemon Jefferson. He was the blues personified. He played the Blues. He traveled like a bluesman, and he was blind, a stereotypical signifier of a Blues musician. But more than any of those things, Jefferson played the slide-guitar with a tenderness that matched the sad, strained voice that made him an American music icon. Jefferson first recorded in 1925, but Country Blues records did not appear in large quantities until the following year. Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds' 1920 hit, "Crazy Blues," was the catalyst for the popularity of Jazz and Blues music in the United States. By 1923, Bessie Smith's contract with Columbia Records, and Ma Rainey's title as

"Mother of the Blues" signified the financial impact of the "blues," whether the acoustic guitar-Country Blues or the jazzy Classic Blues of Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith. Record companies soon noticed the demand for African American Blues records – specifically for Black consumers – and created the genre of ethnic music, otherwise known as Race Records, to rival the commercial success of African American women vaudeville singers. Gramophone owners and emerging record executives recognized the potential of reproducing Black music for a mass audience. The female-dominated Classic Blues needed a rival, and they found it in the male acoustic-driven Country Blues.

The second example is one of the complex embodiments. Blind Willie McTell represents locations and forms of embodiment from which the dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism. A complex embodiment contributes to intersectionality, and the idea that analysis of social oppression takes into account overlapping identities based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability. Oppression is driven by social ideologies that are embodied, and because ideologies are embodied, their effects are readable, and must be read, in the construction and history of societies.[19] While McTell's blindness was a disadvantage on occasion, he also used it as part of his schtick. His blindness became a marketing tool. It was part of his advertisement, as well as a form of self-preservation. He used it to make a life and career for himself, gaining respectability where society had deemed him a lesser human being both racially and physically. The hidden transcripts of Blues musicians reveal free spaces where African Americans could take their culture back and reinforce their sense of community.

Reverend Gary Davis represents the last case study of early blind Blues musicians. Davis, dubbed as "a likely successor to the great folk singer, guitarist Lead Belly," captures the complex life, and moreover, the complex embodiment of a blind, black, male Blues musician. By the time of the memorial concert in 1950, Davis had given up writing Blues songs and instead committed himself to the church. But like itinerant musicians, independent preachers relied on their ability to perform for donations. Davis had gone from having the potential of being Lead Belly's successor to street singing and storefront preaching, surviving on donations in New York City. Likewise, Davis' name change captures the thin line Blues musicians walked between secular and religious. Both genres, secular or spiritual, use tactical lyrics to describe black life, blindness and American society in general. Davis' life and career illuminates the relationship between physical impairment and the political, social, and cultural environment of the United States at the beginning of the 20th century by edifying the often-contentious marriage of religion and the Blues and capturing how both offered a legitimate source of employment to disadvantaged African Americans.

Together with Scott's notions of hidden transcripts, a complex reading of blind Blues singers' life and lyrics offers a way to analyze both protest songs and leisure songs in tandem, revealing the "radical black imagination as a social movement."[20] Yet, it is more intricate than that. Blues musicians sang about a variety of social aspects, often because of discrimination and not songs specifically *about* discrimination. The blurring of so-called protest songs reveals that discrimination was often a part of every aspect of black life. For example, songs of escape - travel/leaving/journey - may not have been overt protests, yet they still capture the consequences of a segregated society. Other songs, such as songs of leisure, reveal how African Americans survived and thrived in such a society. Finally, some songs are only slightly veiled criticisms of American society. The hidden transcripts of Blues songs become masks that allow the musicians to say publicly what they cannot say directly to the face of the dominant power structure.

The Blues as a Hidden Transcript

The early 20th century is the historical moment in which Blues musicians found themselves. The Blues hey-day was the post-World War I era of the Great Migration, the Great Depression, and Jim Crow segregation. Blues lyrics are texts to be studied because they documented these events from the frontlines. Blues are historical artifacts and analyzing the social and political language of lyrics captures power relationships and further reveals American society as a whole. Each musician displays the intersectionality of race and disability by capturing themes of space and mobility. The impact of the Harlem Renaissance thought was national just as the routes of black musicians mattered more than the roots of black music. Blues music followed migrants north into the cities. They carried the musical form along with their suitcases. This was not only a connection to their past life, but it became popular music in the north as well.

These musicians expose the complex concept of embodiment in masquerade by claiming disability as a marketing tool. Tobin Siebers states that the notion of masquerade is an opportunity to rethink "passing from the point of view of disability studies because it claims disability as a version of itself rather than simply concealing it from view."[21] Blind Blues musicians did more than just claim their disability; but made it into an image of commercial success. All of these concepts illuminate the hidden transcripts of race and disability in Blues music and American society.

"Where there is power there is resistance," Michel Foucault wrote.[22] Resistance comes in a variety of forms. James Scott points to the political significance of language in power relationships and the resulting resistance to the dominant

narrative. Society's dominant narrative can be called the public transcript. The other side of this, the hidden transcript, is the result of oppressive policies and harsh penalties for disobedience and open criticism, but the subaltern is careful in their speech around those in power so their "repressed speech" or hidden transcript is redirected to others. Political actions often take forms that are designed to obscure their intentions or cover up their apparent meanings.[23] It is this redirected speech that contains politically charged dialogue. And while subordinates rarely embark on open rebellions, they do resist domination through other forms, such as music and lyrics. This is reminiscent of the "blues matrix." A "complex, reflective enterprise" with an "enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed."[24] We may refer to this as the metadata of resistance; the thoughts, sounds, beliefs, and tactics that collectively help create a social movement. Scott explains that while the resistance found in hidden transcripts does not constitute organized resistance, it is "the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow."[25] Some Blues songs represent countercultural movements and can be read through hidden transcripts.

Many of these songs are, in fact, political according to John Greenway's definition of protest songs. "These are the struggle songs of the people...they are songs of unity." Greenway goes on to state that protest music is "class conscious... for economic protest is often synonymous with social protest."[26] The Blues, Lawson writes, "were conceived, inherited, and reshaped by aspiring professional musicians who saw music as a countercultural escape."[27] African American musicians did not sit idly by as a vassal of white control but used their music to define themselves and disseminate their struggles. Gary Davis suggests that all humans will one day be morally judged by God in his song "There's A Destruction In This Land":

Oh Death, he keeps on riding,
And he's knocking at every door.
He's calling for the rich,
Just as well as for the poor.
Can't you see, can't you see,
Men and women passing into judgement,
Everyday.

Some black performers saw themselves as messengers of a counterculture that threatened the dominant white power structure. They expressed their political identity through their music.[28] The Blues began as underground music, sung in homes and house parties. Jazz and the Classic Blues were much more

mainstream and often relied on white funding and popularity. Even Handy's song about finding the creator of the Blues in a southern train depot contains the revealing lyrics:

Money dont [sic] exactly grow on trees,
On cotton stalks it grows with ease.
Every poor kitchen there's a cabaret.
Down there the boll weevil works,
while the darkies play.

The inability to exist as a black person without entering the white system of society as social commentary was obvious, but at the same time black musicians masked their lyrics in order to employ what W. E. B. Du Bois labeled double-consciousness. "One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."[29] African American musicians used both sides of the color line to achieve success, which also showcased opposing identities. Their double-consciousness allowed for a black consciousness that was socially charged. Lawson suggests that interpreting the Blues as counterculture allows modern evaluators "to understand that blues musicians were necessarily accepting of prevailing Jim Crow social norms while at the same time hoping to evade or subvert them."[30] Some Blues songs were countercultural tropes that illuminate dominant power structures and resistance to Jim Crow. These were communicated through veiled and coded language masks. Paul Gilroy agrees, writing that musicians derived "their special power from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which periodize modernity."[31] The Blues musician was confined to racial stigmata, but many of their lyrics countered traditional African American stereotypes, revealing a black consciousness of protest rather than the primitive, subservient representation constructed by folklorists and the record industry. Because the Country Blues was a part of these structures, they were able to comment on these representations. This is their double consciousness.

Historian Tyina Steptoe's *Houston Bound* captures this notion of space and its importance to marginalized groups by showing how people of African or Mexican descent "faced exclusion from certain spaces, but they also forged social spaces that allowed them to solidify their racial subjectivity in a new place." Black musicians understood this as well. While Steptoe does not use Scott's term of hidden transcripts, she similarly states that "forms of popular culture like music can help us uncover 'hidden histories' that go untold in official narratives.[32]

Blues lyrics captured their history when no one else was. Likewise, their critique of society is unique to the Blues' music form. Few sources were documenting the lives of black southerners, so the Blues became both an outlet for frustration, along with a social history of their existence.

Leadbelly's song, "Bourgeois Blues," often covered by Jefferson, comes traveling the country performing for folk music societies and recording race records. It is a more obvious critique of social inequality in the country.

Me and my wife went all over town
Everywhere we go, the people would turn us down
Lord, in the bourgeois town
Yee it's a bourgeois town
I got the bourgeois blues
Gonna spread the news all around

These lyrics, besides the obvious complaints regarding racism, also exclaims that they are going to share this with their friends and neighbors.

Me and Martha, we were standing upstairs
I heard a white man sayin' "I don't want no niggers up there"
Lord, he's a bourgeois man
Yee, it's a bourgeois town
I got the bourgeois blues
Gonna spread the news all around

Here, we have the subjects' bemoaning racism in the housing market. Jefferson himself would come across this not only in segregated housing developments but sun-down towns where an African American traveling may be arrested or worse traveling through such towns and villages across Texas.

Them white folks in Washington they know how
To call a colored man a nigga just to see him bow
Lord, it's a bourgeois town
Ooh, the bourgeois town
I got the bourgeois blues
I'm gonna spread the news all around

Finally, this song follows the thread of societal racism to Washington D.C., and the lawmakers of the country, proclaiming they are going to expose them to the world.

Other songs were not so obvious as social critiques, such as "Bad Luck Blues" by Lead Belly's traveling partner, Blind Lemon Jefferson. Bad luck songs stood for social injustices, like poverty, poor education, limited civil rights, incarceration and political exclusion, and were more veiled commentary of the reality of being black. Lawson agrees that the Blues music form was "conceived, inherited, and reshaped by aspiring professional musicians who saw music as a countercultural escape from economic and social subservience."[33] The Blues is the key to understanding these hidden transcripts, forms of resistance kept out of sight from the dominant power, that must be viewed as countercultural escape. This is the daily struggle of oppressed groups, and the mask that musicians wore by design. They were behind-the-scenes discourses; their invisibility was a tactical choice. It is the hidden part of the Blues transcript.[34]

"Bad Luck Blues" captures the necessity of travel to find work and the lack of suitable clothing but also reveals racism and the preponderance of segregated rail cars with the lyrics "Sugar, you catch the Katy, I'll catch the Sante Fe. Doggone my bad luck soul, kicked off the traveling train."

I wanna go home and I ain't got sufficient clothes
Doggone my bad luck
Wanna go home and I ain't got sufficient clothes
I mean sufficient, talking about clothes
Well, I wanna go home, but I ain't got sufficient clothes.
Sugar, you catch the Katy, I'll catch that Santa Fe
Doggone my bad luck soul
Kicked off the travelin' train.
I mean the Santy, speakin' about Fe
When you get to Denver, pretty mama, look around for me.

Blind musicians represent an even more subaltern group, and their messages were also hidden transcripts to the power structure of normality, which also dominated public discourse on disability. Lennard Davis wrote that while scholars have acknowledged aspects of racism, sexism, and class bias, their "very practices of reading and writing, seeing, thinking, and moving are themselves laden with assumptions about hearing, deafness, blindness, normalcy, paraplegia, and ability and disability in general."[35] The critique of the social definition of normalcy and ability are also hidden transcripts. Just as the "conceptualization

of race, class, and gender shape the lives of those who are not," we can read about the social construction of disability in the early 20th century.[36] For example, Rev. Gary Davis' song, "Lord, I Wish I Could See," captures being both blind and black, using visual cues, along with the line "someone like me" that may be taken as someone blind, poor, black, or otherwise oppressed.

It was a time when I went blind,
Was the darkest day that I ever saw,
was the time when I went blind
Lord nobody knows like me,
the trouble I do see.
I'm away in the dark. got to feel my way,
Lord there nobody cares for someone like me.

This song can be read in a number of contexts. "Lord, I Wish I Could See" can be taken as social, political, or personal commentary on life in general. The hidden transcripts of Blues music are not entirely political or apolitical. Resistance can be political or apolitical, or both, or neither. This is what makes a hidden transcript covert or masked, yet overt enough for audiences to understand and possibly relate. Resistance comes in such a variety of forms. The binary between protest and leisure songs does not exist, just as songs about pleasure, profit, and pain may contain a variety of topical material.

The occupation of a Blues performer relies on this critique because Blues musicians coexist on record and anonymous clubs, outside the immediate control of the dominant class where "they are likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced." Scott points out specific forms of this offstage dissent in his work – linguistic disguises, ritual codes, taverns, fairs, and the "hush-arbors" of slave religion.[37] This is exactly how Blues singers communicated critique, through linguistic disguises and codes. Blues singers also performed these songs in the taverns and fairs of the American south. Their taverns were juke-joints, and the fairs resembled the train platforms and sidewalks occupied by the masses of people in southern towns. Yet, while there are certain similarities between the subjects Scott elucidates and Blues singers, the Blues singers performed in social spaces unique to southern black culture during an era when African Americans were second-class citizens, and their plight ignored by white civic leaders.

The oppressed, aware of their condition, manage their behavior and discourse to their own advantage. Their discontent, or weapon of the weak, "displays itself in patterns of resistance, pilferage, foot dragging, sabotage, etc.,

which never boil over and which are expressed verbally in metaphor."[38] Blues musicians exemplify these expressive verbal metaphors. Davis' "There's A Destruction In This Land" also contains visual cues, as he asks his audience, "Can't you see?" There is destruction in this land. The metaphors in their song lyrics are often aimed directly at the dominant narratives in attempts to critique, explain, bemoan, or otherwise lambast the dominant power structures.[39] The song exemplifies this by imploring listeners to acknowledge the "sins" of the country and their effects on both the rich and poor. He insinuates that these sins affect everyone in the country, and all will be held accountable, regardless of their race or class.

There's a destruction in this land
Can't you see[?]
Now you see how God is riding
Through this old sinful land
So it pays you to be ready
Have your ticket in your hand
For my God is still-a-riding
And he's taking on every hand
There's a destruction in this land
Can't you see[?]

There's a destruction in this land
Can't you see[?]
There's something I want to tell you
And I want you to know
Oh Death, he keeps on riding
And he's knocking at every door
He's calling for the rich
Just as well as for the poor
There's a destruction in this land
Can't you see[?]

While songs like these serve as a release-valve for anger, it is more importantly a form of self-preservation and livelihood. First, their position as a musician is a career. For blind Blues musicians performing was both their labor and their livelihood. Second, employment as a musician does not fit comfortably in the norms of American careers. This career placement situates the musician *within* society, as a contributing member of society, yet the musician also exists *without* society as the function of a traveling performer is not a typical, or normal, career. Similarly, being a musician with visual impairment rests outside

the physical characteristics of an average musician. Lastly, the blind Blues musician exists on a plane that neither the typical American worker nor the seeing musician can perceive. The blind musician exists then, both as a part of society and apart from society. Take the two sides of a coin, for example. If the typical American worker exists on the head side of the coin, and the transient musician exists on the tails side of the coin, then the blind musician exists on the third side of the coin, the edge, resting precariously in between the common laborer and the seeing performer. This allows the blind musician to comment on society in ways neither the everyday employee nor the seeing musician can. It also allows for a much more diverse critique of society than either of the others may achieve because blind Blues musicians hold a unique advantage to comment on social events.

When resistance occurs in public, that is, in front of the powerful, scholars fail to note such transcripts because of the subtle, evasive speech genres in which they are expressed. One such form of hidden transcripts failed to be explored by historians is African American Blues songs, specifically the songs of blind Blues musicians. The placement of blind Blues musicians offers an even richer plethora of social comments because of their ability to exist between the musician and the worker. "Identity is not merely that which is given to an individual or group, but is also a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, an objective social location and group history," Linda Martin Alcoff writes.[40] This is an example of a complex embodiment as blind Blues musicians represent locations and forms of embodiment from which the dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism.

Gary Davis may have felt the effects of similar racist treatment when he wrote "You Got to Go Down," revealing hidden transcripts through his lyrics.

You better learn how to treat everybody,
For you got to go down. You got to go down.
You better learn how to treat everybody,
You got to go down. You got to go down.
Ashes to ashes and dust to dust,
The life you're living won't do to trust
You better learn how to treat everybody,
For you got to go down.

This song represents the day when "everybody" must stand in front of the heavenly gates and face judgment. This song is not an overt protest, nor is it explicitly denouncing racism, but Davis certainly experienced racism while per-

forming in the black cultural center of Durham, North Carolina, in the 1920s. It was the subtleness of songs like this that allowed musicians to criticize society without being overtly political and, therefore, eliminating the risk of retaliation. It was also a technique used by performers through the malleability of the lyrics. This could just as easily be a song about a deceitful friend or an unfaithful lover depending on the interpretation of its listeners.

Yet, Davis' use of the lines "you better learn how to treat *everybody"* suggests the entire society must be prepared for judgment day. Critiquing society behind the veil of a mask is the nature of hidden transcripts. Most likely though, an open-ended song such as "You Got to Go Down" allows the performer or listener a release-valve to their anger or sadness -- their blues sharpening the ability to control emotions and anger and furthermore protecting them from retribution. A comparison of both the hidden and public transcripts of each group offers a fresh way to understand resistance to dominance. Blind Davis' *You Got to Go Down* is first a religious song about facing your sins on judgment day but secondly serves to alleviate the sins of segregation and the hope that such white sinners will repent before the end of their life.

Such songs present an African American's agency, and the struggle for respect which Black repression and resistance are inextricably linked. The songs merge oral history with lyrical artifacts. Through music, lyrics, recordings, and interviews conducted with Davis and McTell, along with Lemon Jefferson, we can understand the relationship between physical impairment and the political, social and cultural environment by tracing both the public and hidden transcripts of Blind Blues musicians.

The theory of complex embodiment allows race and disability to be read in tandem. It allows for intersectionality and the idea that the analysis of social oppression takes account of overlapping identities based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability. Oppression is driven by embodied social ideologies. Such embodied ideologies and "their effects are readable, and must be read," in the construction of society.[41] Some bodies are excluded by dominant social ideologies. This means that these "bodies display the workings of ideology and expose it to critique and the demand for political change."[42] There is not a universal definition of disability because it is a lived experience. Therefore, the lived experience of Blind Blues musicians can be a sociopolitical text to be read.

Blues Music as a Unique Career

There was a time when a steady source of employment for African Americans was difficult to find. Careers for blind African Americans were even more difficult to secure. Performing the blues was a career choice and a form of re-

sistance to oppression. Blues music, whether male or female, able or disabled, served then as both a successful occupation and a way to express dissatisfaction at their predicament, while simultaneously bemoaning their low status in society. The male-driven Country Blues often tackled more volatile forms of racism and classism because they were less popular, and, therefore, less noticeable than Classic Blues lyrics. Although female Blues singers like Bessie Smith addressed social issues like sexism, their music was often censored by white music executives and publishers. Scholars like Danette Marie Pugh-Patton have explored the "representations of racism, sexism, and classism" as "subthemes" in their music and lyrics.[43] So, the Blues were not simply songs "created by men," or women, "at leisure, with the time and opportunity to play an instrumental accompaniment to their verses," as Oliver believed in his early book on blues music culture.[44] Black musicians may have been near the bottom of the U.S. social hierarchy, but that did not mean they were powerless. The need for self-preservation was also the economy of the musician. Likewise, Blind Blues musicians used music performance as self-preservation. Put simply, it was a way out of pauperism or low wage, often laborious employment. Music pays. The dominant source of income for rural, southern African Americans was sharecropping, and it did not pay.

Davis, Jefferson, and McTell's parents were all sharecroppers at one time. Sharecropping was a rigged economic system that kept workers in perpetual servitude. "The country is rich," Du Bois once wrote, "but the people are poor." Du Bois placed the blame on the persistence of debt.[45] Litwack goes so far as to call the sharecropping system unfree labor, or "a new slavery" resulting in the "condition of peonage."[46] Beginning immediately after the Civil War, sharecropping, or tenant-farming, was organized to maintain the southern plantation economy by taking advantage of African Americans' vulnerable economic position. This was bolstered by Jim Crow laws that effectively limited black ownership of land. Sharecropping allowed blacks to work a section of land owned by a white businessman and in turn they were forced to deduct a portion of their crop yields for the use of the land, as well as for the credit of food, shelter, and clothing. After their seasonal lease, sharecropping farmers almost always found themselves inundated with debt.

Music was a way out of the sharecropping lifestyle. Music was also an outlet for frustration. The resistance of Blind Blues musicians comes directly from this self-preservation and their subaltern status in American society. This dual position allowed blind musicians to deny the dominant narrative that their impairment dictated. Finding gainful employment as a disabled member of society, is first a form of self-preservation. Along with sharecropping, disabled African Americans were relegated to unskilled labor during the Progressive Era as race

management and labor were intertwined.[47] Secondly, public performance sets the stage for critiques of society. As Colin Gordon rebuked Foucault, "the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one" that "resist[s] any simple division into the political and the apolitical."[48] Thus, the need for studying non-confrontational protest must be connected to other cultural forms: in this case, Blues music. Lyrics allow the performer, as well as the audience, to participate and to enact their personal desires, frustrations, and hopes. Forms of resistance must be re-examined, and Blues lyrics must serve as texts to be analyzed.

So, how do we analyze these texts as hidden transcripts of the Blues, and furthermore, the preponderance of blind bluesmen? Kelley offers a panacea, suggesting we revise working-class politics by working from the bottom up, "starting way, way below."[49] And if we learn to listen closely, we may find that seemingly powerless people have various ways of explaining their world.[50] First, we must locate the public transcript of a society. Both the dominant and subordinate enact public transcripts when in dialogue with one another. The public transcript is the relationship between the dominant and subordinate that represents the encounter of the public transcript of the dominant with the *public* transcript of the subordinate. One example of an exchange of public transcripts may be a front entrance to a movie theater declaring "whites only" and the subsequent response of an African American's decision to enter the rear of the building. The public transcript is most often a formal dialogue between the "dominant and subordinate in which the subordinate acknowledges his place" in the social hierarchy.[51] Yet, on the way through the alley to the rear of the theater, black patrons often remarked on such racist treatment with anger, sadness, or satire. Here is where you encounter the hidden transcript.

Notes

1. I will use the term Blues or Country Blues to designate the acoustic musical form from the amplified, Electric Blues, as well as the more jazz-assembled classic or Vaudeville Blues. The Classic Blues is dominated by female singers with jazz accompaniment. The Country Blues was performed by nearly all males, save for some exceptions of dirty, or barrelhouse blues musicians like Lucille Bogan. The Country Blues, or Blues, was acoustic and often consisted of traditional black folk songs earning the title Downhome Blues. The Electric Blues came after the Second World War. Going electric presented the ability for musicians to manipulate music like never before. Whereas the Country Blues is an acoustic performance, usually with a stringed instrument, guitar or harmonica, and a singer. The latter of these may change, but the Country Blues has always been acoustic. Geographically, the Country Blues does not mean music from the deep south, but simply

music from rural cultures. These forms of music are also often individual, guitar-driven and acoustic. Therefore, my use of the Blues represents acoustic, rural music with guitar accompaniment, rather than the female vocal based blues exemplified by Bessie Smith.

2. Langston Hughes. The Best of Simple (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), viii.

3. Jeff Todd Titan, Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), xvi-xvii.

4. Women in the Classic Blues form also employed subtle forms of resistance. In Tera Hunter's To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), she states that the "social space created by African-American women became a domain where they could wield power in their own right," 85. Also refer to Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." Radical America. Vol. 20, No., 4, (1986), and Angela Davis. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday (New York: Vintage, 1999), that charts a history of classic blues women and protest. Daphne Duval Harrison, Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s (New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers University Press, 1988), and Danette Marie Pugh-Patton, "Images and Lyrics: Representations of African American Women in Blues Lyrics Written by Black Women." PhD diss. California State University, San Bernardino, (2007), have used a textual analysis to their lyrics, which may also be read as hidden transcripts.

5. James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) and Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

6. Ben Sidran. Black Talk (New York: Da Capo, 1971), xvii.

7. Shana Redmond. Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1.

8. Redmond presents ideas of interdisciplinary and tools of ethnomusicology, textual analysis commonplace within cultural studies, the literature of diaspora, and social movement theory. She offers a book that centers music "because it creates collective engagement in performance and contributes to a dense black performance history that continually configures black citizenship through shared ambitions," ibid.

9. Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: Free Press, 1996), 4

10. William Ferris, "Blues Roots and Development." The Black Perspective in Music, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1974). 124.

11. Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919 – 1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 147 – 148.

12. George Lipsitz, Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place (New York: Verso, 1994), 3.

13. Rowden, The Songs of Blind Folk, 11.

14. The first texts that addressed Blues music in a social context were Samuel Charters' Country Blues, Paul Oliver's Blues Fell this Morning, Lawrence Levine's Black Culture and Black Consciousness, and R. A. Lawson's Jim Crow's Counterculture. Seminal books on the Blues by Oliver and Charters offer fascinating narratives, but only

touch on themes of race and disability, while focusing on the history of the genre and its musicians. Levine, though, perceived the Blues as a confluence of commercial and folk, religious and secular music, with African American thoughts and values. More recently, Lawson argues for the idea of Blues music as a form of protest and counterculture.

15. Luigi Monge. "The Language of Blind Lemon: The Covert Theme of Blindness," Black Music Research Journal, Vol. 20, No., 1, (Spring 2000), 74.

16. Joseph Witek, "Blindness as a Rhetorical Trope in Blues Discourse," Black Music Research Journal, Vol. 8, No., 2, (Autumn 1988), 39.

17. Witek, "Blindness as a Rhetorical Trope," is an early look at the theme of blindness in the Blues and notes the rhetorical trope of "otherness" that can be applied to Luigi Monge's "The Language of Blind Lemon: The Covert Theme of Blindness," Black Music Research Journal, Vol. 20, No., 1 (Spring 2000) expansive analysis of blindness and blackness. Monge also considers the role of lyrics and visual references in Blind Blues musicians. Chris Bell, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal," The Disability Studies Reader. 2nd Edition. Ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions, Ed. Christopher Bell (East Lansing: University of Michigan State University Press, 2011), asserts "normality" as whiteness and merges blackness with disability as a "triple consciousness," and argues for a race and disability analysis," 379. Finally, Dea Boster. African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800 - 1860 (New York: Routledge, 2013), and Terry Rowden, The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2009), charts the history of both blindness and blackness in U.S. society up to the Country Blues music era noting stereotypes of disability and blackness, and the response of some dissident groups. Boster believes that some slaves used disability, and their social constructs to their advantage, either to get out of work, resist violence, or "feign" their impairment, 298. Rowden "the stories of blind and visually impaired African American musicians have mirrored the changes in America's image of African American and the social possibilities of the black community," 1. Rowden charts the three major stereotypes of the blind "bard," the blind beggar, the blind genius, and sensory compensation, and acknowledges no role has been more strongly linked to blindness as music, 11.

18. Tobin Siebers, "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment - For Identity Politics in a New Register," The Disability Studies Reader, Edited by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010). Siebers argues that by claiming disability as a positive identity, individuals who identify positively with their disability status lead more productive and happier lives. This is similar to minority identity politics. If we think of disability as ability, or complex embodiments, it changes the meaning and usage of ability itself. Disability is not a physical or pathological condition, but a social location complexly modified. Identities, narratives, and experiences based on disability have the status of theory because they represent locations and forms of embodiment from which the dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism. "Identity is not merely that which is given to an individual or group, but is also a way of inhabiting,

interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, an objective social location and group history," 272-273. History shows us that those in power have the ability, or authority, to manipulate the same oppressive structures depending upon the same prejudicial representations, for the exclusion of different groups. This can be seen most predominantly in segregation and Jim Crow. Minority identity and complex embodiment allowed people in marginal social positions to theorize and criticize society differently from those in dominant social locations.

19. Tobin Siebers, "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment - For Identity Politics in a New Register," The Disability Studies Reader, Edited by Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 2010, 321, 323-333.

20. Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), x.

21. Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade," 5.

22. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction (New York: Vintage, 1990), 95-96.

23. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 136.

24. Houston A. Baker, Jr. Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3 - 4.

25. Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 273.

26. John Greenway, American Folksongs of Protest (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 10, 240.

27. Lawson, Jim Crow's Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), xi.

28. Ibid, 198.

29. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Dover, 1994), 2.

30. Lawson, Jim Crow's Counterculture, 17.

31. Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73.

32. Tyina L. Steptoe, Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 10 - 11.

33. Lawson. Jim Crow's Counterculture, xi.

34. Scott, Domination and the Arts, 183.

35. Lennard J. Davis. Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body (New York: Verso, 1995), 4-5.

36. Ibid, 2.

37. Scott, Domination and the Arts, xi.

38. Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 29.

39. Ibid, 350.

40. Linda Martin Alcoff, Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42.

41. Siebers. "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment - For Identity Politics in a New Register." 1.

42. Ibid.

43. Danette Marie Pugh-Patton, "Images and Lyrics: Representations of African American Women in Blues Lyrics Written by Black Women." PhD diss. California State University, San Bernardino, 2007.

44. Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 5.

45. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 84.

46. Litwack, Trouble in Mind, 140, 165. For a more nuanced explanation of black "peonage" refer to Pete Daniel, The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

47. Paul R. D. Lawrie, Forging a Laboring Race: The African American Worker in the Progressive Imagination (New York: New York University Press, 2016), charts how race management and how race and labor informed the political economy of fit and unfit bodies. Thus, the black body became both a category of analysis and policy makers turned to Taylorism to define the difference between fit and unfit bodies, and skilled and unskilled labor.

48. Colin Gordon, quoted in Scott, Weapons of the Weak, epigraph.

49. Kelley, Race Rebels, 4.

50. Lipsitz, Dangerous Crossroads, 181.

51. Scott, Domination and the Arts, 13.

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