

Attah, T. (2017). *Halls without walls: examining the development, dissemination and perpetuation of blues music and blues culture* Paper presented at the Royal Musical Association Annual Conference, University of Liverpool.

This paper presents an overview of the results of my research into effects of technological mediation and specifically, digital remediation, on blues music and blues culture since the proliferation of computer mediated communications (CMC) - the widespread availability of the internet - since 1996.

In other words, blues music and blues culture undergo transformations of form and circulation when oral practices are first committed to text as sheet music . Further evolutions occur as performances are remediated as phonograph records and through various broadcast media during the 20th century. Each successive transformation generates discourses of authenticity, ownership and value which enable and constrain definitions of blues music and blues culture.

These discourses have remained largely unexamined as part of the latest cycle of remediation to digital formats and computer-mediated virtual environments since 1996. This paper presents the results of examination on key sites to better understand and illustrate the development, dissemination and perpetuation of the discourse blues music and blues culture such as it is enacted on the internet in the digital age.

As part of our overview I'll be presenting ideas of discourse, orality, literacy and of course technological mediation. We will also contrast mediation with more problematic suggestions of technological determinism.

I will then illustrate the context of the research by introducing some of the theoretical issues and trends in the discipline, and by highlighting some of the methodologies that were employed during the project.

There are images here of Honeyboy Edwards as his career as a performer spanned the entire 20th century and next to him is B.B. King, the giant of blues music who passed away in early 2015. His death though has not prevented him maintaining a cultural presence via digital means, which we'll discuss later in the presentation.

The UK's biggest-selling blues album for the year 2011 was by white British comedian and actor, Hugh Laurie. The album of blues & gospel covers sold 129,000 copies making it a gold disc, and according to reviews website metacritic, received a "generally favourable," response.

Of the remaining 19 albums in the top 20 best-sellers for that year, 18 were by white artists. The single African-American entry on the chart was a 'Best-Of,' compilation by Etta James.

This is not to sneer at the idea of Caucasian millionaires capitalising on a music of black origin, or even to be distracted by notions of the blues becoming white; In simple demographic terms, black people make up less than 12% of the north American population and less than 3% of the population of the United Kingdom so inevitably, any truly 'popular' art form will always have a majority white audience in these territories.

What the album does is to demonstrate that the blues is still a commercial prospect and also that the genre retains a semiotic and stylistic coherence for audiences. In addition, the context and content of Laurie's performance draws on notions of 'authenticity,' and genuineness - as if, away from the make-believe of Hollywood, the performance of this *real* music is who the actor *really* is. The 2013 follow-up album "Didn't it Rain" similarly well, reaching #3 on the UK blues chart in its year of release.

How are these ideas of authenticity and honesty constructed, and in what way are they perpetuated? Despite being pronounced dead every 4-5 years since 1958, the blues continues to live in the public and commercial consciousness. How is this achieved? Through what method is blues music and culture developed and disseminated in a market characterised by digital media and online consumption? In short, how does the analogue blues survive in the digital age?

The title of Laurie's album suggests an exchange of opinions and ideas, or a discourse. Philosopher Michel Foucault explains that discourses have three key functions within the context of modern society. They ENABLE, they CONSTITUTE and they CONSTRAIN. In other words, discourses indicate who may speak with authority in order to define an object or field, and in turn, set the limitations of that object and discussion. In even simpler terms; the discourse creates the object.

That the blues HAS form in the 21st century indicates that someone, somewhere is talking about it. Who is doing so, through what media and to what effect?

Theorist Franz KITTLER explains that “technological manipulations govern what can in fact become a discourse,” which neatly plays into notions of the internet as a broad site of discourse.

In order to understand this, we need to consider ideas of orality - speaking, and narrative. To give an example of the flexibility of blues narrative and discourse:

The band musician W.C. Handy gave himself the title ‘father of the blues,’ as a direct result of having the first certified blues hit with Memphis Blues in the form of sheet music in 1912; in other words, he wrote the music down. His notation of what was until then a largely orally transmitted style helps to engender a distinction between a high- and low-blues performance culture. On the low side there is the non-literate folk tradition, and on the high- side there is the literate theatre tradition.

In the popular imagination, the blues comes out of the fields around the turn of the century and into the recording studios and is a style derived from the field hollers of slavery. It is a style predominantly performed and owned by men, and represents the primal, essential, un-commercial and unmediated cri de couer of a displaced and emerging nation.

Whilst this is not necessarily a lie, it is equally true that the blues was named and established by educated African Americans and initially performed by professional singers in an established performance milieu as part of an existing black performance continuum. From THIS point the blues are a style that is written down and performed principally by women backed by trained musical ensembles through vaudeville by the Blues Queens including Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and other professional entertainers firmly entrenched in a Western-European styled theatre- and stage- performance tradition.

It is also true that the birth of the commercial blues takes place during the HARLEM RENAISSANCE of the 1920s - at the time, the greatest flowering of African-American

literature and artistry yet seen in the United States. The commercial blues was also born at a time of newspapers [the Chicago Defender], record labels [Black Swan] and theatre circuits [TOBA] expressly designed to cater to an emerging, sophisticated and lucrative African American financial market.

So what we have here is an example of technological mediation in the form of both sheet music on the one hand and phonograph recording on the other having a direct influence on the development and dissemination of blues music and blues culture in the early 20th century.

For an example of the effects of technological mediation in the blues, we can consider the case of musician Robert Johnson.

In the 1930s, as a learning musician Johnson is able to consume a wider variety of source material than his predecessors thanks to phonograph records and the radio. He is then also able to craft his own material in a media- friendly format that takes into account the reproductive constraints of the phonograph recording process : songs feature distinct lyrical themes, intros, verses & choruses, and each piece less than 4 minutes long.

In the 1960s, this material is re-discovered by an audience who is able to interpret the format in which Johnson had originally recorded; thus his music is understood and consumed by a new audience in a different time and space.

Having been canonised by influential musicians in the 1960s, the material is again re-issued during the 1990s in a digital format to an audience who are already familiar with derivations of the material and who are able to consume these primary sources. As I am sure you know, the Robert Johnson Complete Recordings have since sold over a million copies - proving once again, that a market for the material continues to exist.

It is important at this point to distinguish mediation from determinism. Johnson was a talented musician and the technology enabled him to enhance his skill and inform his activity, rather than determine it: in other words as technological ethnographer Christine Hine indicates in her 2002 study, technology allows us to do that which we would already have done and are doing to a greater extent and in new ways, rather than determining and dictating entirely new practices in human interaction with the world.

Folklorists such as Alan Lomax and Lawrence Gellert had collected African-American music during the 1930s and 1940s for sociological grounds, and talent scouts had since the first blues boom between 1920 and 1929 been recording local artists in the hope of generating stars and scoring hits. The collection and retention of material was highly subjective and inevitably, incomplete.

Specific blues scholarship emerges in 1959 with Samuel Charters' book "The Country Blues." The book lists folk blues artists based on their commercial success, and encourages readers to rediscover existing recordings and surviving performers.

Published on the eve of the folk boom in the United States, the book generated a wave of interest in the music of African-Americans which had two effects - (1) a new generation of folklorists set out to locate and return to prominence surviving rural blues performers and (2) a section of consumers & collectors, aggrieved that artists they considered superior to those included in Charters' book began to champion their favourites - critically, Charlie Patton and a certain Robert Johnson - and to impose ideas of retrospective continuity based on their subjective views of distinction and quality.

Results of this included artists such as Big Bill Broonzy mediating their performance practice to meet expectations of the audience - here you can see how he develops from an urbanised slick performer during the 1930s to a down-home sharecropper during the 1950s.

So, what we begin to see is a secondary audience emerging to classify the cultural output of a community from which are removed by time, space and culture. In other words, an all-white 'blues mafia' consumes phonograph records and applies aesthetic judgements about the cultural activity of black people.

I turn now to the context of the research.

In recent years, a new generation of scholars has sought to challenge accepted narratives from racial and gendered perspectives.

Ulrich Adelt's 2010 publication "Blues Music In the 1960s" re-assesses the role of promoters and producers in the blues boom and questions the motivation of those who sought and rediscovered blues artists who had faded from public view since the 1930s and

1940s. Adelt's challenge to 1960s research from a racialised perspective has brought him into direct conflict with David Evans, writer of the seminal work 'Big Road Blues,' who accused Adelt of '...missing subtleties of context.'

Similarly, Marybeth Hamilton's 2007 book "In Search of the Blues; Black Voices, White Visions,' examines the mediating role of white folklorists in the collection of much of the first wave of blues field recordings; author and historian Dave Marsh accuses Hamilton of making the experience of that music - however it was collected or obtained, by white consumers - '...almost irrelevant.'

Additionally, access to primary sources through electronic means assisted Elijah Wald in 2004 and Angela Y Davis in 1998 in their illuminating investigations of the context of performance milieu for Robert Johnson and the early blues queens respectively. Each of these authors has sought to bring new perspectives to the existing historiography of blues music and culture.

This study focused on communities who discover and perpetuate blues music and blues culture. In order to do this, two specific types of online community receive attention: the discussion forum, and the social network.

Whilst the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, a discussion forum differs from a social network in several important ways. Although both can be described as online communities and are accessed by computing devices, a discussion forum is primarily dedicated to the presentation or discussion of a single topic or focus, where a social network provides the opportunity for a more holistic presentation and interaction of individual members across several communal groups.

In other words, social networking sites such as Facebook are focused on individuals and their multiple interests and activities. Exchanges within discussion forums are broadly text-based with the occasional use of audio or video material, whereas interactions across social media are heavily laden with digital pictures, moving images and sound.

Additionally, social network sites provide a volume and velocity of discourse fragments and participants which is amenable to study, where sites like twitter tend to be very fragmented, partially as a result of the 140-character limitations on format. In other

words, compared to Facebook, Twitter provides commentary rather than sustained community.

Finally, it is possible to have forums within social networks - and this study examined one such community, The Real Blues Forum.

I used several methods to gather and triangulate the data from online communities.

Critical discourse analysis sees language as a social practice, and seeks to understand power relations such as they are played out through sociolinguistics. Two particular elements are of interest within CDA; Transitivity - what is being said, and Modality - who is saying it, when, where, and how.

For example, when the 44th President of the United States holds a celebration of the blues in the White House and invites B.B. King, Buddy Guy and Mick Jagger to perform, his status as an African-American who has risen to the highest political office in the land lends his words dimensions of resonance, relevance and power - despite suggestions that his middle-class upbringing during the 1960s and 1970s may have eschewed blues music and blues culture.

Participant observation allowed me to become a part of the online communities I studied, and as a black musician I was able to engage with the community in meaningful ways. Online ethnography meant the keeping of notebooks and observations, as well as the gathering of evidence of interactions.

I conducted an online survey which drew a representative sample of 512 responses, and I conducted interviews with producers, consumers and cultural workers.

Under analysis, several discourse themes were consistent. Unsurprisingly, race in terms of blues performers was a frequent topic of discussion - particularly whether white people had the right to sing and play the blues.

The aim here was not to try and answer this question, but to observe how the internet facilitated the discussion. On the 10th May 2015, international musician and political

activist Corey Harris published a 2,000 word blog which insisted that white people had no right to play the blues, and demeaned the music by attempting to do so.

Within hours, several thousand replies had been posted to the blog, the most reasoned being from harmonica player and academic, Adam Gussow (pictured here). The four positions offered were basically that:

1. Harris' position is racist;
2. Suffering is universal (and whites suffer too);
3. Ability is beyond racial barriers & many white players are great musicians;
4. Blues was once the expression of blacks, but it now encompasses whites.

Of interest here was that Harris was able to make this cultural appropriation argument to a very large international audience and to engage with a published academic in a public space. It is the volume and velocity of the exchange that is of interest, as well as Harris' positioning as an organic intellectual as a foil to Gussow as the traditional academic. Similarly, the nature of the archive was examined. The internet allows for instantaneous access to materials, beyond the traditional boundaries of a physical library, a museum or an archive.

Pictured on the left is Mack McCormick - an organic intellectual and blues researcher of many years standing who passed away in October 2015 leaving a gargantuan collection of papers, pictures and audio recordings which only he could truly navigate. "the monster" as he called it contained materials of incredible importance to the blues community, including unpublished pictures of artists such as Robert Johnson. McCormick's view however was that the material was *his*, and that no-one had a right to it. This was challenged when a New York Times Reporter obtained some of the materials by deception and published them online. This contrasts sharply with Alan Lomax whose 60-years' of field recordings, notes and video were made public in 2013 as the Association for Cultural Equity.

This contrast here is to note how the Marxist Lomax planned for years to make his materials available whilst the conservative McCormick chose to retain his documents - placing them now in danger of being broken up or lost forever. The story also highlights the sense of entitlement harboured by those used to digital access.

There is a feeling that because digital technology *can* make McCormick's materials accessible, that they *should* be made accessible, despite the collector's wishes. Whilst as Derrida indicates, Archivisation produces as much as it records events, the proliferation of materials and uneven access generates what Wolfgang Ernst calls an Anarchive: unruly texts circulate in uncertain ways, free from the watchful eye of the librarian, potentially generating unforeseen meanings.

Finally, the study examined how people learn about blues history and musical practice using the internet. Of interest here was that YouTube facilitated communities of practice which were almost uniquely white, male, middle-aged guitar players teaching blues music. Second most common were harmonica players, followed at some distance by singers. It seems that with a very few notable exceptions - coincidentally guitarists Corey Harris and Eric Blackmon - the teaching of the blues style and techniques is a no longer an African-American preserve.

I turn now to the principal research sites, and the online audience for blues music and blues culture in the digital age.

The Real Blues Forum has existed in Facebook since August 2011 and at present has around 13,500 members. These individuals self-identify as blues fans and include some of the leading lights of blues scholarship over the last 50 years, as well as some of the more visible and active preservationists in the field. Amongst other things, the online survey revealed that the demographic for these individuals is that they are usually white, middle-aged and from the UK and northern United States.

For example, John Tefteller (pictured here) spent £29,000 on a single record in September 2013 with the intention of digitising the content and making it available on a re-mastered CD. He is featured in a number of articles and books, and is a vocal member of the forum. Similarly, Joe Bussard has for many years made it his business to collect records and make them available for a nominal price via cassette. Bussard has featured in several film documentaries about his collecting.

I also engaged with performers who admitted to feeling constrained by notions of race and gender as well as being subject to the whims of this powerful and vocal demographic

group who were slow to engage with new technology, on occasions at the expense of a younger and more vital audience. Awards ceremonies such as the Grammys and the Blues Music Awards were investigated. Whilst performers recognised the power and value of such awards, RBF members were sceptical of the ceremonies, complaining that their favourite (dead or commercially unsuccessful) artists were not recognised.

An interesting split emerged here. Tefteller and Bussard both complained that .mp3 and the internet made it hard for them to make money from the sale of their re-mastered collections, whilst other fans admitted that they used the format to acquire rare and hard-to-find material. Predictably, artists embraced the format as a promotional tool, expressing unanimously that it opened markets and empowered them personally.

The conclusion reached based on evidence was that the relations enacted in the community were concerned with power; the power to direct the discourse, the power to consecrate and recognise new and existing artists, the power to retain control of objectified cultural capital and accrue social capital within the group, and ultimately to decide what is and what is not blues.

To give an example of how this power manifests - I have the mission statement or the rules of conduct for the RBF.

The Real Blues Forum is a private forum dedicated exclusively to the appreciation of blues music as played and sung by African-Americans.

Posts that are outside the Real Blues Forum parameters will be deleted without notice. Posters who ignore the guidelines will be banned.

We use the standard blues discographies as the parameters for posts in the RBF. Godrich & Rye, Fancourt & McGrath and Ford & McGrath.

Critically, the three discographies are written by three pairs of white listeners, and the main text - Godrich and Rye, is continually expanding edition by edition to include increasing numbers of gospel groups, and white artists - presenting an obvious challenge to the RBF rules.

As things stand, the group recognises Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters and Quon Willis - a young black blues guitarist from Georgia. The membership does not however recognise

Eric Clapton or Keith Richards as being connected to blues music - the same for Steve Wold (Seasick Steve).

Special abuse is reserved for Joe Bonamassa, despite his constant and relentless homage to his blues forebears, significant charity and teaching work, prodigious skill as a musician and the fact that he was endorsed by both B.B. King and Buddy Guy. The same is true for Clapton and Richards; despite their constant driving of audiences towards the blues and their recognition by giants in the field such as Muddy Waters, it seems that the members of the RBF know better than Guy and King what counts as a blues musician.

The RBF also maintains its own private archive of materials. In this respect it offers a valuable service since many of the magazines and periodicals which it has in its restricted stock - only around 5% of the total membership has access to these materials - are unavailable elsewhere. However, again, I draw attention to the a poster here for the Mississippi blues fest 2015.

In this we see the restriction of objectified cultural capital. Whilst I was able to access the scanned newspapers and digested music in the archive(s), the majority of ordinary members are not.

This is a festival staged by the African-American inhabitants of Greenwood, Mississippi - the place that Robert Johnson, Guitar Slim and Howlin' Wolf's guitarist, Hubert Sumlin originated from. So - black people from a black town but on a festival of what they call blues music featuring exclusively black performers - but this does not qualify as *real* blues according to the members of the RBF, who dismiss it as "pop". Interestingly, this was the way that Muddy Waters was dismissed by the Blues Mafia in the late 1950s.

Ultimately, the members of the RBF believe that they are concerned with the preservation of the authentic blues. However, as Alan F. Moore indicates, authenticity is nothing which is inherent in a piece of music or a practice - authenticity is something conferred by a social group.

The RBF are also very concerned with their own authority and expertise as connoisseurs of the blues, taking their self-appointed role as gatekeepers to the style seriously. That they are members of a secondary audience, removed by time, space and culture from the practice that they valorise appears unimportant.

That they are at odds with the Grammy organisation and wider audience in determining who or what is blues seem to be a badge of honour. Pictured here are Grammy nominee Janiva Magness, Grammy winner Bobby Rush, film-maker and musician Dan Auerbach of the Black Keys and performing artist O.B, Buchana - all of whom are considered blues artists by their audiences and academies, and all of whom are dismissed by the 13.5 k members of the RBF.

In conclusion, the 13.5 thousand members of the RBF believe that they are maintaining a gatekeeping function which dismisses such as Jack White as blues interlopers, they are in fact guarding a single synchronic moment in blues history.

There is a far wider and larger audience who listen to blues music who undertake the important work of grooving to an ongoing diachronic tradition - and ultimately, it is they who will carry the music forward into the future.

I note here some further areas for research, but ultimately, I thank you for your time in allowing me to share this very brief overview.

Halls without walls: development, dissemination and perpetuation of blues music and blues culture in the digital age

Dr Tom Attah
Leeds Arts University



- sheet music
- phonograph
- broadcast
- video

What are the effects of digital remediation on blues music and blues culture?



Agenda

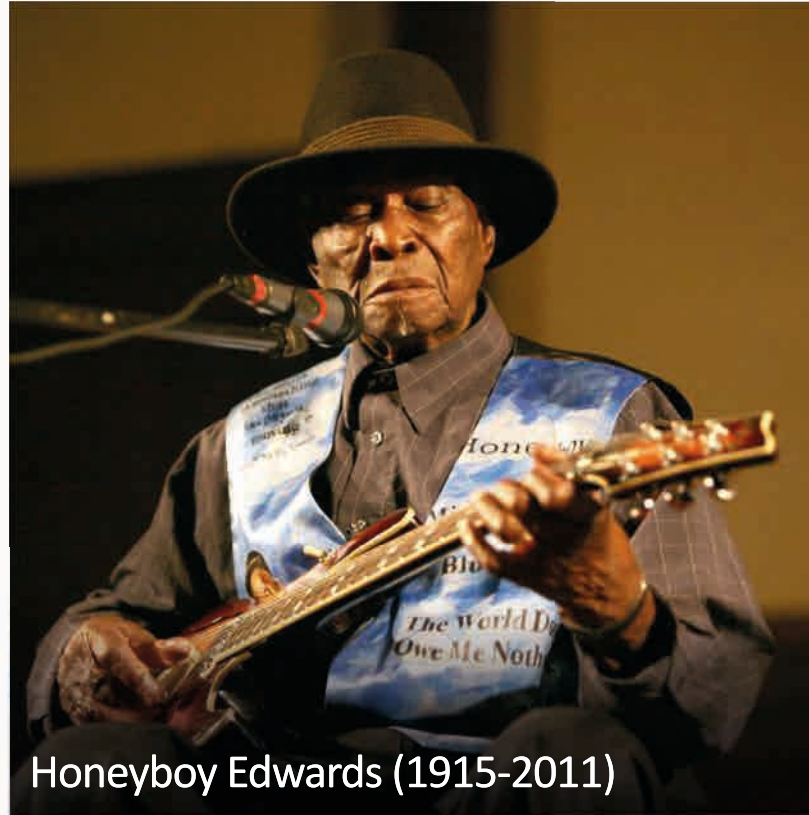
Overview

- Discourse
- Orality
- Technological Mediation

Research Context

- Existing Scholarship
- Trends in the discipline

Methodology



Who is making
what available to
whom, and how?

Mediation
vs.
Determinism



Hugh Laurie: Let Them Talk

The Artist

- Comedian, Actor & Musician
- British, living and working in America

Implications

- Blues still a commercial prospect
- Genre retains semiotic coherence
- Authenticity

The image shows the cover of Hugh Laurie's album 'Let Them Talk'. It features a close-up, black and white portrait of Laurie's face, looking slightly to the right. The text 'HUGH LAURIE' is at the top in white, 'LET THEM TALK' is in the center in large, bold, yellow and blue letters, and 'Released 2011' is at the bottom in white.

HUGH LAURIE
**LET THEM
TALK**
Released 2011

Gold Disc
(129,000 copies)

Context
& Connotation

Discourse

■ Enable

- Provide the context for discussion
- Nominate who may participate in that discussion

■ Constitute

- Define and situate the object in reality and context

■ Constrain

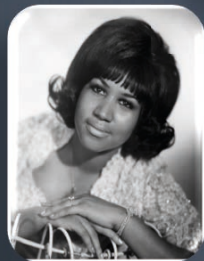
- Set the boundaries of what the subject may or may not do



Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

Blues Narratives

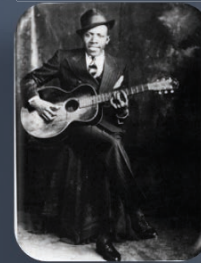
Literate
tradition



1900



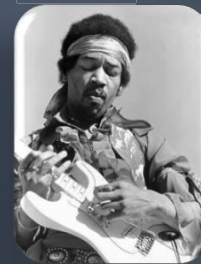
Non-Literate
tradition



1935



1969



Technological Mediation in the Blues

1930s

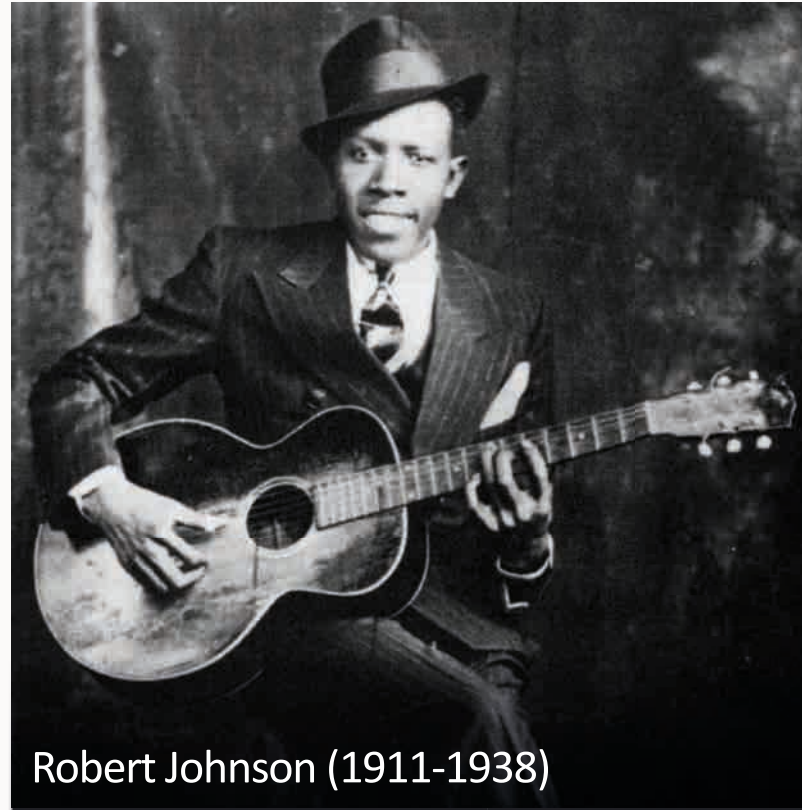
- Phonograph records and radio broadcasts allow Johnson to consume varied styles and sources

1960s

- Recordings re-issued by Columbia and canonised during the folk revival as a seminal text by collectors and musicians

1990s

- Complete recordings reissued in digital format



Robert Johnson (1911-1938)

Construction of material to fit the medium

Material in a format coherent to contemporary consumers

Mediation vs. Determinism

20th Century Historiography

Subjectivity

Partially synchronic material

Retrospective Continuity

Altering of facts to fit a specific worldview

Perspectives

- African American consciousness
- Hermeneutic issues & 'signifying'



Revisionists vs. Revivalists

Narrative Challenges

- Ulrich Adelt vs. David Evans
- Marybeth Hamilton vs. Dave Marsh

Reinterpretation of Sources

- Elijah Wald
- Angela Y Davis
- Patricia Schroeder

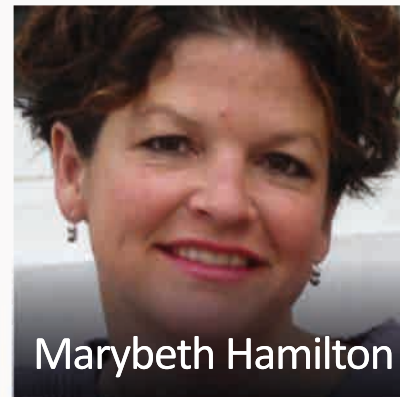


Ulrich Adelt

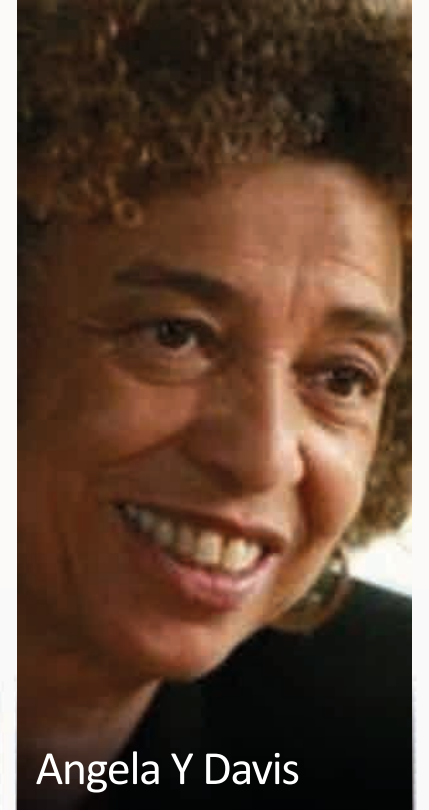
In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions (2007)



Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black & White (2010)



Marybeth Hamilton



Angela Y Davis

Sites of Discourse

Communities of Practice

- *Social Network Sites*
- *YouTube*
- *Discussion Forums*
- *Twitter*
- *Selected Blogs*



Who is saying what
to whom, where, &
how?



Methodology

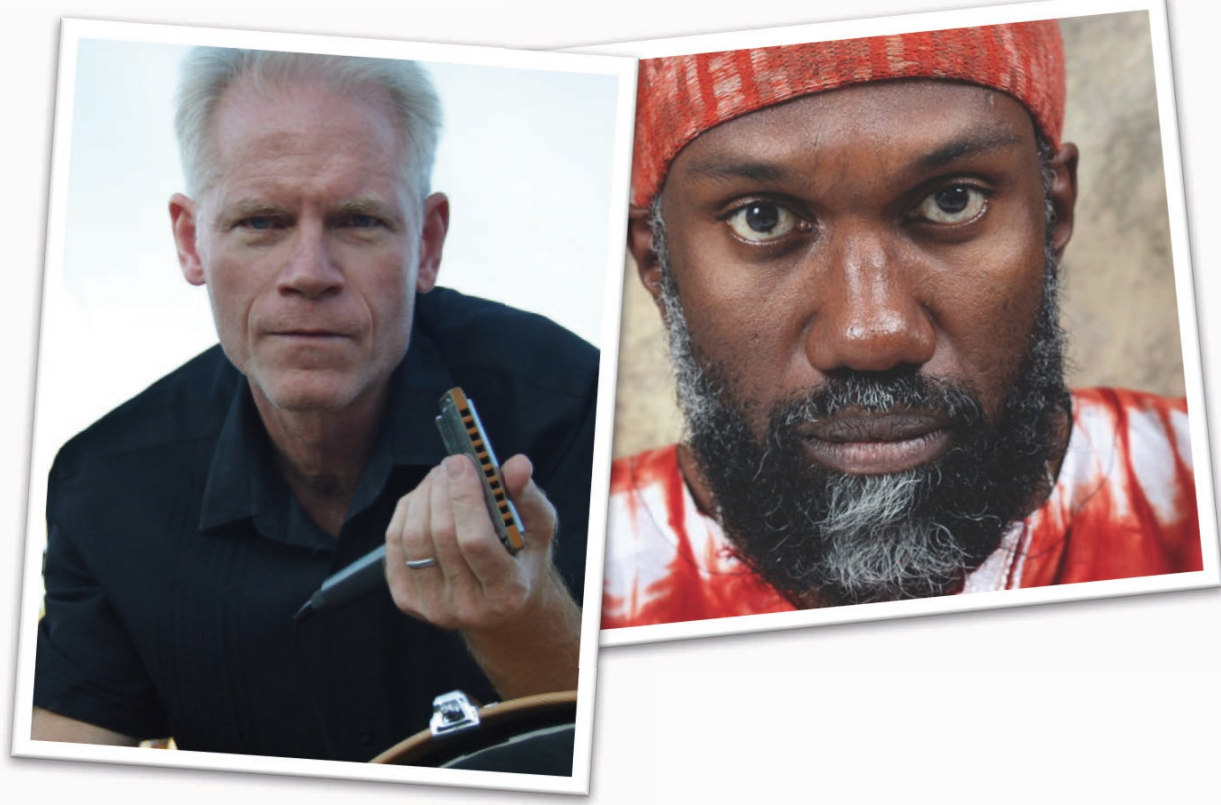
- *Critical Discourse Analysis*
 - Transitivity – what is said
 - Modality – who, where, how
- *Participant observation*
- *Online ethnography*
 - Facebook
 - YouTube
- *Questionnaire*
- *Interview*



Barack Obama & B.B. King (2013)

Research themes

- *Race*
 - The use of blogs
 - Corey Harris vs. Adam Gussow
- *Blues is Black Music! White people have no right to play it.*
 - Harris' position is racist;
 - Suffering is universal (and whites suffer too);
 - Ability is beyond racial barriers & many white players are great musicians;
 - Blues was once the expression of blacks, but it now encompasses whites.



Research themes

- *Race*

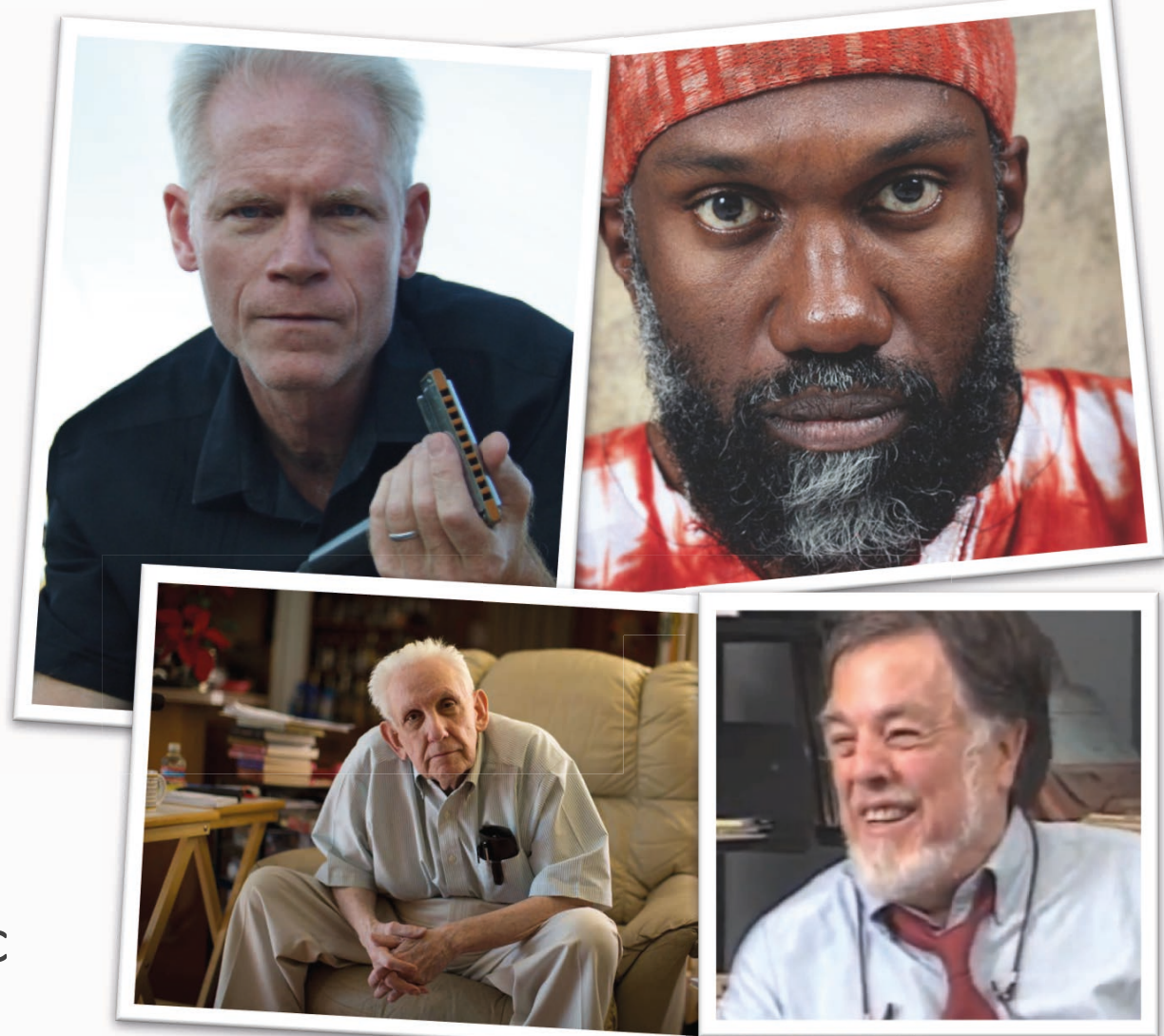
- The use of blogs
- Corey Harris vs. Adam Gussow

- *Archive*

- Mack McCormick
- Alan Lomax
- Entitlement to materials

- *Academy*

- How do people learn about blues music and blues culture?
- Who has the right to teach about blues music and blues culture?
- Enculturation, Acculturation, Education, Schooling



Research subjects

- *Online Audience*
 - The Real Blues Forum – 13.5k
 - White, Male, 55+, UK & US
 - Gender & race representation
- *Performers*
 - Liveness, deadness
 - Awards ceremonies
- *Remediation*
 - .mp3 and circulation
- *Conclusion*
 - Discourse, consecration, power



RBF "Mission"



- *The Real Blues Forum is a private forum dedicated exclusively to the appreciation of blues music as played and sung by African-Americans.*
- *Posts that are outside the Real Blues Forum parameters will be deleted without notice. Posters who ignore the guidelines will be banned.*
- *We use the standard blues discographies as the parameters for posts in the RBF.*
- *Godrich & Rye, Fancourt & McGrath and Ford & McGrath.*



Robert Johnson (b.1911)



Muddy Waters (b.1913)



Quon Willis (b. 1995)



Eric Clapton (b. 1945)



Keith Richards (b.1943)



B.B. King & Joe Bonamassa



Joe Bonamassa (b.1977)



Seasick Steve (b.1940)

Power & Knowledge

■ *Anarchive*

- *Written texts, magazines*
- *Rare photographs, video*
- *Audio texts*

■ *Synchronic vs. Diachronic*

- *Concern for definitions*
- *Distinction*
- *Gatekeeping*



Thematic summary

- *Authenticity*
- *Authority*
- *Consecration*
- *Expertise*
- *Connoisseurship*
- *Hyper-reality*
- *Control*
- *POWER*



Janiva Magness



Dan Auerbach



Bobby Rush

Conclusion

*Curation of a specific
synchronic moment*

vs.

*Creation as part of an
ongoing diachronic
tradition*



Further research

- Extension beyond internet & virtual spaces
- Effects on living performers in physical space
- Representation
- Repertoire
- Creativity



Thank You!

Dr Tom Attah
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