

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT:
Conversation with Robin Kelley

**UCLA campus in Robin's office, typical warm sunny day with blue sky.
A full book shelf, laptop on the table - maybe 5th floor of the History building.**

Keywords: the Blues. time. Blues time. Solidarity. Class. Race. Inside/Outside.
Identification/Disidentification. Rural/City. Exclusion/false inclusion. Revolution.

ROBIN: In '63 but then I had another copy, and I have a friend, he was in my office, and he's like, "*Blues People*, I can't find this in South Africa!" I said "Well, take mine". So now I went from having two to one. My other one is floating, but not my classic 1963 version.

ARJUNA: I tried to re-order it in the UK and it's not so easy.

ROBIN: Yeah, it's not easy.

ARJUNA: It's not so easy, in the US there are lots of copies floating around...

ROBIN: No, it's not so easy. And it's a classic, it definitely is a classic. I remember they had a big conference, 50 years. They had a 50th anniversary in 2013. It was a big deal.

ARJUNA: Did you present something?

ROBIN: No, not me, no. I've written about Baraka, but I'm not...I don't call myself a Baraka expert. And I've had too many conversations and too

many arguments with him to be able to, you know...although someone should write a really good biography about him.

Ok, so what do you want to talk about?

ARJUNA: We will start easy and I'll ask you a bit about how you know Denise and a bit about who you are, just for the record and then...

ROBIN: Well, you know Denise is like more than a human being!

(both laugh)

ARJUNA: Definitely.

ROBIN: I'm an atheist, but she is as close to an intellectual god as you could come up with.

ARJUNA: Yeah, for sure.

ROBIN: I have to say, and I don't really know many people that's as smart as...that's why I'm like, "Why do you want me involved with anything that you're involved in?" No one has, I think, written about race and reproduction of race, as in every single category—social, cultural, political, epistemological, ontological—with more clarity and power than Denise, you know? It's just that simple. And I have to keep going back and rereading her work over and over again. So, it's great that she does this kind of work, but I feel like I'm such a neophyte on all this stuff.

ARJUNA: She was excited to connect us and to have a conversation, even though she can't be here. We will go down to Death Valley in a few days, we'll film in the desert there.

ROBIN: Is this film thinking about the kind of climate catastrophe that we're dealing with? Is it something more than that?

ARJUNA: It is the third film we've made. We usually start with reimagining a foundational onto-epistemology. We did time...I mean, these are big things! We did time in the first film, we did ethics in the second, we're not finished with these but, just very loose introduction. And right now, we are thinking about subjectivity. And the way subjectivity as an interior process is responsible both for identitarian violence and also for exclusion of nature, and therefore violence and climate catastrophe violence against [? 0:03:29.3] nature.

ROBIN: The exclusion of nature, exactly. I hadn't thought about that. But that makes perfect sense.

ARJUNA: That is what we are thinking about. And then as we make that analysis, we start to imagine what other types of subjectivity, or subject formation? Could be from the quantum level, through to the cosmic, through to historical, through organic; we sort of gather, imagine and track. From my side, a big part of my side is aesthetics and sound, and I bring all the research into stuff like blues.

For the first project about time, I was looking at time stretching in UK Jungle, and Goldie... In the second film, I was looking at polyrhythms and I went to Haiti and I was making some recordings. So, I do a bit more the images and sound, and she does the thinking (*laughs*).

ROBIN: Right. Although they are kind of inseparable though?

ARJUNA: Yeah, you can't separate them, and we are often, like...it's a conversation.

[0:04:44]

ROBIN: It's funny because time is also one of the themes I ended up dealing with in that talk. The talk itself was less about the Blues, per se, as a form... in other words it was less...like Baraka would say, when he talks about swing, he says a lot of the critics move swing from *verb* to *noun*. And then it became a thing, rather than a people's capacity to create and invent. I was trying to get away from the blues as a form—a formal form, you know? (*laughs*)—but as a sensibility about time and social relationships.

The idea, the question, was what if “The Internationale,”—that great song of the 19th century which is still sung among the left today—were blues, and had that blues sensibility? And a lot of it did have to do with this question of time. I have a particular argument about the Blues being modern music, which is not consistent with what a lot of people think, and I can explain that, but this issue of time, of

blues time stretching;

it is flexible, improvisatory, and it is understood to be circular, because you're talking about—again I don't want to get back to the form, but you have a 12-bar form, which is cycles. And each cycle is not a return to the beginning, but a turn (*laughs*)—not a re-turn but a turn, like as revolution—to something else, to another verse. And each verse is its own story. And sometimes those verses are not necessarily connected.

And the verses are not necessarily verbal, either. And what I mean by that is it's not always words. The Blues, you know, is *played*...The Blues is foundational to jazz and instrumental music, and so you're still telling a story without words.

I thought about what you said about subjectivity, and new subjectivities seems to me, with respect to the Blues, would be one of those in which you don't have to have words. You know? Like, words are those things which are great and powerful in forms in communication but could also produce a kind of alienation from nature. I hadn't thought about that until you raised it, but it's that kind of stuff.

And then there's something else I just have to say this, Baraka...'cause Baraka had a lot to say about blues and time, not so much in *Blues People* but in later writings. And he has this line where he says,

*The past is also the future,
what is nigh is coming, Eve before Am.*

—Eve, capital-E, before Am, A-m—

*The present was here before it was the past,
and after it was the future.*

That's Baraka, you know?!

Then my teacher Cedric Robinson, who didn't write formally about the Blues, but I feel like I learned so much from him, he has his book called *The Terms of Order* where he talks about time. It is not primarily about that, but he talks about three kinds of time; linear time, cyclical time, and eschatological time, which combines linear and cyclical time. The

thing about eschatological time, is that's a time that actually has structured in it the notion of end times; that there's going to be...not necessarily the end, but the end of the beginning of *something*. So, it has elements of cycles but still has elements of linear.

I don't know if blues time is a fourth dimension...I mean, to me it is! But, or if it's a kind of esch...it's not really eschatological time, but if it is a fourth dimension, I don't know. Those are the things I was thinking about with respect to the Blues and time. "The Internationale," though, as a song is clearly eschatological, 'cause it's like...

*A better world's in birth.
The working class shall be the human race.*

(Robin laughs lightly)

You know?

ARJUNA: By its connection to Christianity...?

ROBIN: Exactly. That Christian narrative of end times and the new beginning, new possibilities, all that is in there.

*The earth shall rise on new foundations
We have been naught, we shall be all.*

A better world's in birth!

And yet, and I said this in my talk, the one thing about "The Internationale", is that there were verses that shied away from eschatological time. And actually, like the Blues really dwelled in the conjuncture of past-present; the conjuncture of the kind of pain and

depth of the reproduction of forms of racism and oppression, in this case working class oppression. And also, condemning those who perpetuate that kind of violence. But those are the verses that no one ever sings! I had to look it up. There was a stanza which, to me, captures the Blues sensibility by calling out truth in the system itself.

The stanza is,

*“The law oppresses us and tricks us,
The wage slave system drains our blood,
The rich are free from obligation,
The laws the poor delude,
Too long we’ve languished in subjection,
Behold them seated in their glory”*

—they’re talking about the bourgeoisie—

*“The kings of mine and rail and soil!
What have you read in all their story,
But how they plundered toil?
Fruits of the workers' toil are buried
In strongholds of the idle few,
In working for their restitution,
The men will only claim their due.”*

And that’s the Blues, to me!

ARJUNA: Sounds great.

ROBIN: Didn’t answer your question though.

[0:12:20]

ARJUNA: No, no, I mean, it's very interesting. I remember you talk a little bit about the form and then go to the sensibility. I was thinking a bit about blues in terms of space, kind of the blues note which becomes a pitch space.

As I was preparing to come here I was thinking about how this could be, like, a sharing space or a home, for displaced Native Americans it could be a home, also it could be a space for slaves or African Americans to create a note; to a turn, a fixed point, into....yeah...

And that seems like a social, an anti-property, there is some kind of...

ROBIN: No question about it. In fact, this is where, again I wanted to start with where Baraka says this line,

*red, old going out into black and coming back through blue Mood
Indigo*

but more importantly he says,

The Red what reading did re adding reproducing revolution

In other words... Actually, that's not what I wanted to say, it's the cycle part. But Baraka has this line where he talks about the Blues as a kind of, 'it is what it is and it's not what it is,' and the *not what it is*—which it is—is the rooted traditions in the history. Which, to me, speaks to that space more directly than what we think of as the modern Blues.

So, now we're not dealing with lyrics, we're not dealing with the 12-bar form, but like you're saying, the space of Black or African and Native musics have always been a space not of isolation, not of loneliness, not

of the individual mourning, but rather like a song for the morning. And not ‘mourning’ with a ‘U’ but ‘morning.’ A song for the evening.

A song that when you look at some films of, I think it was Tuscarora, maybe Choctaw, dances. They would dance in a semi-circle—sorry, they would dance in a circle—going counter-clockwise or sometimes clockwise, very much like what in West African tradition is called the Ring Shout. So, people are together with a dance, and the movement and the voice are inseparable and they create a space. To me, the space is made as much through the actual relationship of bodies to one another, or human beings and souls to one another, as much as it is by the notes they sing.

We often mistake the Blues, because so much of the modern Blues is sung by individual voices, much of the music it comes out of is sung in ensemble voices, without using an instrument. The body itself becomes the source for making the rhythm, talking about hambone (*taps rhythm on body with hand*)—beating on the heart, or beating on the chest. So, there is a kind of embodiment which, what becomes the Blues—which is not quite the Blues yet—is in relation to everything around it. And that’s where to go back to what we talked about at the very, very beginning.

The alienation between human beings and nature is not even there in these early forms of musical expression, despite the fact that some of those forms took place on the slave ship, where you have a singing and an artistic or cultural practice—I’m just going to stay artistic, but cultural practice—that is taking place in the holds of a ship, to lament the loss of a relationship to land. So, it’s not like you have to be on the land to reproduce that, but even the space of the hold of the slave ship is one

really important space where the Blues sensibility comes out, again in the voice, in the human voice.

Again, to connect the Native American and African traditions, you think about blue notes as notes that stretch. That stretch pitch. Stretch pitch in many, many ways. So, what are the instruments? A drum you change the pitch because it's made of skins of animals. Stringed instrument, the banjo is an African instrument. Or you think about stringed instruments in Native traditions, of stretching pitch. The voice, of course, stretches pitch. No fixed pitches, that's not really it. And then on top of that we think about things like the falsetto. I don't want to get too technical here, it's not about technical. It's about what people are willing to do with their bodies to produce the sounds that make a connection to the land and to each other. And so the falsetto voice is as much a Native American practice as a West and Central African practice. So, imagine those things coming together. And talk about a stretch of pitch, it's singing outside of what your natural speaking voice is, because in some ways it's a very spiritual thing.

But something happens in the late 19th century, in the early 20th century, where the modern blues comes into being and gets reformulated as secular, as sometimes individual "I" pronoun music expressing heartache, pain, sometimes humour. And that is performed. That's not the case with the juke joints. The juke joints were the idea of playing the Blues, people go out and dance to it. But the idea of performance which then ties to all these different aspects of modernity. One is recorded music. What do we know about the Blues? We know a lot of it from recorded music.

The themes of sung blues, first by Black women and then by Black men, Delta blues, those themes are...so much of it is about modernity. The freight train or the passenger freight train replaces the slave ship as a mode of transportation. But in this case, one is the mode of transportation for captivity, the other one is freedom. And the sound of the train, industrial sounds. I'm a little bit contrary given all the scholars that write about the Blues and think about it, they are always searching for the origins and the roots going back, like how far back can we go? Ancient Egypt...

ARJUNA: Something about Islam and...*(laughs)*

ROBIN: Exactly. But I'm with Baraka in that there is more than one moment of blues. I love that line which I can't find here, where he says...Oh yeah, I think I read it before, he says, "blues times stretches, is flexible..." Wait that's not it, those are my words.

He says, "the present was here before it was the past, and after it was the future." And so that idea that, if not that it's cyclical, it's sense of return, but there is something about the modern Blues which brings with it everything of the past but breaks with it. And that break, that rupture, is actually worth exploring. I'm not into nostalgia *(laughs)* at all.

[0:22:12]

ARJUNA: It seems that the most significant break is the movement from outside to inside. Or, from agrarian to "worlds are open."

ROBIN: Absolutely.

ARJUNA: But I'm more interested in the outside/ inside. The weather. You still get the weather quite often in a lot of blues songs. I guess this disappears the more urban it gets, or there's longing, like there's that Muddy Waters song, "Cold Weather Blues", imagining what it's like in the South. This kind of movement and loss, I guess. Or break with the environment; the effects of farming and agricultural lifestyle.

ROBIN: Exactly, yeah. The thing about the agricultural, I think that's a really good point, it's a really important point. One of the things that's interesting, though, about that moment, is that for so many Black people who did not own land...for all the romance around land and the soil, and the character of rural community, the Blues flowered at the moment of the Great Migration, which was the term they use. Exodus, you know? (*laughs*) Exodus is different from being forced to flee. Well, no, actually I shouldn't say that. There is a certain kind of force that makes you flee. But exodus is also the possibility of a new beginning.

I'm not saying that people romanticise the city but, given the fact that even landowners were losing their land. Or the homesteaders, if you think about the first significant great migration in the post reconstruction period, wasn't to cities, it was to Oklahoma, it was to Arkansas, it was to anyplace where the Homestead Act was in play. And what was the Homestead Act? The Homestead Act was taking Indian lands and making them available for settlement. So that is one of the ironies. A lot of the Black towns; Boley, Oklahoma, Langston, Oklahoma, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, some of those towns were the product of Homestead, especially in Oklahoma where you're settling on Indian lands. And then you're competing with white people who were settling on Indian lands. And you're trying to create a town just for

Black people to protect them and that's the 1870's-1880's. And they start to die.

That notion of the homestead still holds onto the kind of romantic relationship of having land for themselves. But based on what? Based on property ownership. And I hate to...I'm not trying to badmouth my people or anything, but property is property, which is different from a conception of land which is not owned but used in the service of community and advancement of social life. And then suddenly the city becomes not so much attractive, but really the only option.

You're right, the whole orientation, Black women's blues, were about city pretty much, or new migrants. Then the return to the Mississippi—Delta blues—was a way of, I think the attraction was the nostalgia for the countryside, for the Delta, for Yazoo River area. But even then, if you think about some of the earliest blues on record like Charley Patton, he himself who is Native American. That goes back, I don't know, maybe it might be 1913-1914? Really, really early recordings. It may not be that early, but they're very early on. A lot of those lyrics are about romantic relations, social relations, sometimes about flight. But they are oftentimes things we associate with urban life, but in rural areas. Like, the juke joint is a rural space, but it has all the components of a kind of hardcore urban life; hustlers, women, commodification of sex, violence, guns, all that stuff is there. But because cities become the new space of Black settlement and because cities become the most important space for Black—well I shouldn't say Black—for consumption, an urban blues makes perfect sense.

That's the other thing I can't emphasise enough. What does it mean to turn a music that was inseparable from everyday life and from worship and from just the work of creating social life, and turning that into a commodity for sale? Suddenly you've got bands who are singing songs or performing songs that really have no ownership—when I say ownership, I mean no organic relationship to—to make a record. And that circulates for audiences, consumers, most of whom are not necessarily Black. It's just the early race records. It had a Black constituency, but a lot of white folks, you know?

ARJUNA: This is sometimes where the question of the roots comes into it as a kind of marketing, as a way to authenticate, commodify.

ROBIN: Absolutely.

ARJUNA: I like to recognise that, but I also like to think of the latent potential that, even as it's commodified, even if it becomes pop music today, there is still maybe hidden? Or there is that latent solidarity, and that sensibility that I which I intuit to have solidarity or a subjectivity which is oriented towards solidarity, social life.

ROBIN: Oh yeah! Not only do I agree with that but I actually think that part of the commodification in music is precisely to strip that latent sense of solidarity. I have a student who wrote about this. We think of the Blues as Black music. Now, more recently, we think of it as Native music as well, Tuscarora, Choctaw, Cherokee musicians. But the music industry went out of its way to racially designate music. I mean, so many of the songs that everyone was performing—and now I'm not just talking about the Native/Black relationship—the white Appalachian music.

Have you even seen this movie called *Louie Bluie*? You've got to see this movie! It's from the 1980s. It's a documentary about this amazing Black dude who grew up in Appalachia. In Appalachia in the coal mines of West Virginia, everyone was listening to the same music. There was no distinction between bluegrass as white music and blues as Black music, that was just music. And then the industry comes along and says, 'look, we're going to pigeonhole you. because you can't market—This bluegrass group can no longer sing the old-school blues and the blues singer can't sing...' So, in some ways, the potential for solidarity across lines of race within the class are assaulted. Like, purposefully deliberately assaulted. (*hits hand on body*) Like, "You can't do this."

So, *Louie Bluie* is a story about growing up in Appalachia, and he goes to Chicago and becomes a local blues—I mean, he's not famous but he tells the story of his life. When he got to Chicago the only gigs he could get were at these mafia owned bars. And he would have to sing in Italian. And they loved it! But he could do that. He just talked about what the music did for his life. It really did underscore both the fungibility of those boundaries or those distinctions, that they're really not that sharp, but also the policing of them. Because if you really, really listen to his story, the implication is that had there not been the kind of cultural police, or the policing of his own artistry, he would be very famous. And it is precisely because the policing... And not just famous but actually could have made a living.

ARJUNA: Modes of exclusion, "This is the type of music you're allowed to perform," "This is Black music".

ROBIN: Exactly. But I still believe the very sensibility that we're talking about in terms of the Blues and what precedes the Blues continues into forms of vernacular musics; it may not be the Blues, the other forms, early hip hop...and it always has that dimension. Solidarity is a tricky thing. It is not necessarily easy. And even forms of solidarity often depend on modes of exclusion.

[0:33:30]

ARJUNA: Can you say a little more about that?

ROBIN: (laughs) Well when we think about; what is the basis for solidarity? Sometimes the basis—and I'm not saying I agree with all this—but sometimes the basis is kind of perceived to be a 'quid pro quo.' That is, we are both experiencing forms of exclusion, oppression, segregation, violence, and it makes sense to help each other out, to protect ourselves against that. So, there are cases where if you're not in agreement, you are not going to stand in solidarity with someone else unless you give something back.

I think we come out of a tradition in where 'quid pro quo' is actually secondary, in that you stand up for justice. And you stand up for justice means you even for people you don't like, or the people who don't identify with you are the ones you stand up for. And that's very different. But modes of exclusion mean that if you don't share certain kinds of elements of the culture or certain kinds of experiences, then you don't really belong with us.

We have modes of exclusion certainly in the gendering of solidarity. If you basically say solidarity is about communities and communities

coming together, well how are communities being defined? They are often defined as having male leadership. Heterosexual cis gendered male leadership. Or it could be something else. It could be colour. And on top of that, within the communities that we see as subjugated communities, Native American, Black, there's all these internal struggles.

A mode of exclusion might be within an African American community to pretend as if there is not internal class struggle, to pretend like the Black elites who are signing the very legislation that are putting people in prison in large numbers somehow are part of the same community. You end up silencing those who have a critique of them. And the same with Native Americans. The idea of a Native identity is so historically new given the kinds of long-time struggles, even before the invasion taking place. That's not to say that...I mean, there's no world I can think of, certainly not Africa, the Americas, anywhere, where every single human being lives in great harmony because you have differences of resources, class, language, certain kinds of power, spiritual power, spiritual difference, and it just comes with the territory.

To go back to 'The Internationale' and the whole notion of eschatological time, I personally don't think there are end times. I don't think that's ever going to happen, where we're going to reach that point where, "the working class shall be the human race." Of course, I learned that from Cedric Robinson, who's like, we pretend as if the working class is a universal subject when actually it's a projection of Europe. So, there's never going to come a time. The best we can do is figure out a way to repair our relationship to the earth, take away weapons so that we don't damage the earth or each other so badly, and then find new ways of negotiating difference, not resolving them—I

don't think that's possible—but negotiating difference that are not destructive and violent. And that's going to be the constant struggle. As opposed to, ok, we've reached end times and oh, here we are together. I mean heaven is not even like that! Because if it was and heaven was really like that, then we wouldn't have a hell, you know? So, the dialectic continues.

[0:38:21]

ARJUNA: Trying to decide whether to keep going down solidarity or come back to sensibility.

ROBIN: Well, what do you think? It's not like I'm making any sense! *(laughs)*

ARJUNA: No, it's great, I'm enjoying what you have to say. Maybe a little more on solidarity. I was thinking a bit about instance of false solidarity, where like Israeli Zionists claim for the land, claiming solidarity with Native Americans. It's kind of like, 'We're both indigenous and therefore'... I don't really have a question, but we were talking about modes of exclusion and talking about modes of false inclusion as well.

ROBIN: Right, exactly. That's a really good example, that's an excellent example. It's an example that requires the complete erasure of the indigenous Palestinian population and Bedouin population, just basically saying, 'you don't exist.' And that is exactly the colonial narrative, that is the classic settler colonial narrative. The Afrikaaners showed up in South Africa, and when they got there, they didn't see any Africans, so they kind of took land off, saying these Africans came out of nowhere, and they became the invaders. The idea of the virgin land of North America.

In every one of these instances, though, in order to produce that narrative, it required both erasure and the production of a settler identity. And what is interesting about a settler identity is that not every Jew in Israel in its early formation could share that settler identity. The Mizrahi were not necessarily seen as the Ashkenazi were, but eventually over time they had to make a deal. I just think it's so fascinating that the first Black Panther Party of Israel were not Palestinians but Mizrahi Jews, who saw themselves as excluded, oppressed because they're Arabs. And then over time the incorporation...I'm not saying that there are not still forms of expression and inclusion, there's no question about it, but over time we got this kind of interesting incorporation into the settler mentality.

North America the same thing. One of the big problems, and I've written about this, I'm not the first but others—Peter Linebaugh especially, talk about how when European settlers came here to North America, they brought with them all forms of unfree labour, including indentured servants who were basically a form of slave. They couldn't hold them on the farms or plantations because they ran away along with Africans and joined Native American groups. It wasn't until they were able to have the capacity to both militarily challenge indigenous people and find a way to...the only way they could figure out a way without militarily challenging the indigenous peoples, is to convince those indentured servants that they are on the path to settlers.

So, it took this whole long process. Not of tightening the bounds of slavery, because they were already tightened from the beginning, but of using land, muskets, the promise of capital accumulation to convince all those white people going native to basically stay on the plantation

and join the settler class. And that's hard work. So that creates the myth of the working class settler story. It's not that the Virginia Company, or all these British companies backed by British capital or Dutch capital, it's not those companies that are bringing with them formerly incarcerated white people to work, it now becomes pioneers. And once that narrative works they can make a claim to the land in a way that erases indigenous people or treats them as the invader. And then, because of the point we're now at, you've got Black people—I mean just saying it now—who take pride in being settlers; “Oh yeah, my people they might have been Africans but they settled this part and that part.” And these same former slaves end up being incorporated into armies of pacification, buffalo soldiers, things like that. That's not all of them but it's enough to basically reproduce this narrative. Again, it's in the name of solidarity, in the name of identification with natives, which psychologically is really complicated.

It's a classic case of identification/disidentification. It's like, you project onto the bodies that you are killing yourself. And I didn't know this, I was reading a book that talked about the play *Oklahoma* and I guess in the original novel it was based on, at the very end all the settlers say, “Well, we have native blood.” Of course, that's not in the movie, but again it's a projection, you engage in violence, you eliminate people, you force them into reservations and then you name all the land after the tribes and indigenous people that you dispossess. You keep the names, you even keep elements of ritual, and you identify with them and you say, “Well, we're the native population.” That is the kind of stuff that the Blues comments on, this absurdity.

[0:45:15]

ARJUNA: I'll come back to the blues in a second but do you think a class analysis would avoid this process of identification / disidentification? Generally speaking, identity politics not paying attention to class can produce this fractioning or all these kinds of narratives, this myth making...

ROBIN: Well, I think it can do both. It could push back against it and reproduce it at the same time, it just depends. It depends on how we think about whose class analysis? What does a class analysis actually do? The way class analysis functions at least in North America—I can't speak for everywhere...well, I know South African history and South Africa for a long time it was like this as well. But for North America, a class analysis isn't always about recognising the class divisions within subjugated communities. A class analysis is simply recognising wide oppression. That is not, to me, a real deep class analysis. But the way that we think about it, the fact that we have a discourse in the United States of Black people, Latinx, immigrants as a social category, and the white working class, you know? (*laughs*) As if the rest already had that.

So, a kind of extreme, really limited Marxist class analysis would say all these people actually have more in common simply because they don't own capital and their labour is exploited, or they are just excluded from the economy altogether and they live precarious lives. 'Look at all they have in common, so therefore let's develop new forms, new subjectivities around one's relationship to capital.' But the problem is that when you dig deep, a deep class analysis will see that even within those, there are forms of exploitation and hierarchies.

ARJUNA: Asymmetric power.

ROBIN: Oh yeah. I've written about the 20th century. In the South there were miners—miners meaning working in coal mines or steel workers—white steelworkers, whose wives had enough money to pay a domestic worker. And the domestic worker is always Black. What does that mean in terms of their solidarity? What does it mean in terms of the history of rural organising with the same farmers who may have small landholdings and struggling, struggling with middlemen, struggling with merchants, struggling with the market for cotton or for corn or whatever? And they are in the same organisation with people who pick the cotton, who chop the weeds for the cotton, who bale the cotton, and they're landless, or they're sharecroppers who work the land on the land of the smallholders. Their interests are at odds. And unless we can understand those kinds of tensions and have a class analysis that is nuanced enough to understand that, it's not the answer, it's the easy answer. Because one of the things that "class analysis" does in the way it's used—now I've got my fingers up like fake scare quotes—is it erases other forms of difference, and demands an erasure of forms of social identity that matter a lot for people's ability to reproduce their own selves and sanity. So, it's very, very tricky. And I'm one who really does think hard all the time about class, and who also thinks really hard about the way that subjugated groups have their own bourgeoisies and elites that play a role in keeping people down.

[0:50:06]

ARJUNA: Yeah, it's complicated. And it seems like there's a trend, or social forces, social determination, but like, you have class analysis or you have Marxism, and then you have identity politics and it's kind of swinging back... I mean, I'm not old enough to see the cycles, but in the

art world we are swinging very much into identity politics without class. I guess in the '70s it was more...I don't know.

ROBIN: Well, you could go back to the 1870s and you could see some of that. It has been going on for a long time. But for me I guess, I don't necessarily see...

Well, let me put it this way. When we dig underneath the surface, what appears to be a swinging pendulum from class politics / identity politics, is really a swinging pendulum from one form of identity politics to another. And so, what passes as class politics is a form of identity politics that is making certain demands on other forms of identity by saying what Cedric Robinson says, and that is that there is a kind of universal identity, and that identity is the working class, or the proletariat as a universal subject. And then that, of course, erases other modes of subjugation, which then the pendulum swings back and then it's like, 'You're not paying attention to us.' I think that the pendulum needs to stop swinging, just stop it, and then just look at it all together. And I think when we look at it altogether—that's why I really like the work that you're doing—it really does come down to creating new subjectivities.

Identity politics as we knew it is bankrupt! I just really do think that. Class politics as we knew it is also bankrupt, as we know it. So, what does it mean to make new subjectivities? That is, to hold onto things that matter, but then to be open to new possibilities, new identities.

If we come back to the Blues, I think the Blues to me was such a dynamic music precisely because it was in some ways an overthrow of

certain traditions. I think politics going forward has to overthrow certain contradictions.

The most exciting thing happening to me in terms of subjectivities has to do with gender and sexuality. And I'm not saying because it now rises to a level of universalism, I'm not saying that. But rather, there is something that disrupts the old pendulums in a way that even feminism as we knew it in the past didn't quite do. And now the question of making a distinction between one's assignment at birth and then one's gender identity breaks the biological. It breaks the physiological. It allows for the breaking of other things. Like skin colour, texture, language. It allows for a kind of fluidity and that fluidity is important because the fluidity itself allows for a richer and deeper sense of solidarity; one that doesn't require leaving stuff at home but requires what I think is the most important part of solidarity, not one's ability to see oneself. In other words, empathy is a terrible thing, empathy as the basis for solidarity is horrible because you're basically saying, 'If I don't identify with the person, if I can't see myself in that person or those people then I can't be in solidarity.'

If you break away from empathy and get to the question of fluidity and freeform, then suddenly you have the basis of a solidarity that is based on experimentation, on learning, and actually getting out of your comfort zone to identify with those with whom you *can't* see yourself. And that to me is the key thing.

This book I'm writing about Grace Halsell, not that it's important, but part of its inspiration comes from James Baldwin. James Baldwin had this line and I can't remember exactly, but he was basically saying to white people, 'your freedom depends on you knowing my story, not me

knowing yours.’ I know yours! But once you know mine, that means you are going to step out of what’s normative for you, your comfort zone.

I think the fluidity of gender now...which is dangerous, because of course to be transgender to be gender fluid often times makes you a target, puts a target on your back. The fact that there is violence directed at trans people suggests to me both the danger and the possibility of that kind of fluidity. So, I think we are in a really interesting place, so long as we don’t fall back onto sameness as the basis of solidarity. And as long as we don’t fall back into really bad economic analysis, because one of the problems I think with class analysis is that most people who engage in a popular setting just don’t understand how economies work. It’s just basic like that. And how privilege works. And how systems are reproduced. That to me is a whole different story for a different film, for your fourth film, I guess, ha!

[0:56:48]

ARJUNA: This sounds great. I was also thinking about fluidity and the perceived threat of gender fluidity and trans identity, but I wasn’t really thinking about that for this conversation (*both laugh*) so I am not gonna...I might put it aside, or maybe let me think about it for a moment...

Let’s come back to the blues a bit and think about the sensibility, talk a little bit about the sensibility and where the form and the sensibility meet; in the voice and in the kind of trembling voice, the pitch shifting falsetto trembling voice. Which is in normal speech where a person is overwhelmed with emotion, whatever emotion their voice is no longer the...it’s just the pitch-bending, essentially [? 0.57.58] For me, that’s

where the form and the sensibility...that's one of the tunnels between them. I'm not sure what the question is yet, but thinking a bit about the pre-lingual or the non-linguistic which you were talking about in terms of gender assignment, how there is much in the Blues of this affect. I don't want to go too much into 'affect theory'... But I guess just the voice and the role of the voice in blues, in solidarity, in social gatherings, in a kind of, perhaps, non-representational politics or in a kind of non-identificatory, non-naming, but still embodied...

ROBIN: Right. One aspect of it I guess you could talk of is, in blues...basically so much Black vernacular—and probably Native music, I don't know enough about Native music—not all sounds are words. In fact, a lot of sounds are not words. The grunt and the moan, the holler. You've got what they call field hollers, field hollers really are hollers. These are really emotive forms of expression. They both function to express things without words, they function musically, and they also function in a pre... What's the world I'm looking for? A technological era before amplification, so pre-amplification.

Part of that unique sound is about trying to sound...bring your voice over the din of everything that is going on around you, which includes crowds of people, which includes machines, which include just the sound made [1.00.26]. So, being able to project your voice, that's why when you hear early blues on record it's like that really nasal thing, you know? And that is how people had to sing to get it above. But that still doesn't speak to the non-verbal. And that is something that's very much in the sacred tradition, that's where the sacred and secular are not distinct here.

In the sacred tradition it is not unusual to be possessed and speak in tongues. Now, to say that's not language is a mistake. It is a language. It's a language that only the most blessed can understand, but *everyone* knows what it means. You don't have to understand it to know what it means. I think the Blues tradition is a lot like that, which is why, again...I think the most important music of the 20th century coming out of the United States was jazz, instrumental music for the most part, not always, but instrumental music that was able to reproduce the human voice. And to reproduce the human voice was not about reproducing words but reproducing the kind of guttural expressions, gestures, moans, shouts, screams, you know?

This is what Fred Moten talks about when he talks about Aunt Hester's scream, and Frederick Douglass and the continuation of the scream, the shout, as this quite powerful mode of expression which runs through the music. There is nothing avant-garde about avant-garde except for the fact you have a group of musicians who are returning back to old, extreme versions of old traditions.

The other thing about the Blues is that there may be North American routes but think about how quickly it spread around the globe! You don't really have to understand the words in English to be able to identify with the music. Nor do you have to know anything about Black traditions or Black history. There is a sense there that these are a people who are survivors, who are poor—and when I say 'poor' that's kind of tricky because these are people who take great pride in their ability to accumulate wealth, to look like they have money.

The most famous iconic picture of Robert Johnson is in that suit, he's not dressed up as a farmer. But being poor means to be denied a

livelihood, and so much of the stories being told in the Blues are about how to get a livelihood, whether it's by hustling, or not having one, or escape. There is something about that survivor instinct, those elements of it, which are quite powerful for people around the globe, I think. This is not rich people's music.

One other thing, too, just has to do with how we think about the Blues as vocal music. Because on one hand there is a strong instrumental tradition, but there is something about the lone voice; that the Blues is something you can carry with you without instrumentation, without accompaniment, not unlike a church. In so many Black sacred traditions—or for that matter, Native traditions—you don't see a lot of, -and again I don't study this, but most of what I've seen, besides drum, you don't see a lot of instrumentation. The voice is dominant, the voice is powerful. And sometimes all you need is that, just a voice or voices. Some churches in the Black tradition don't allow for instruments, like maybe an organ or a piano but you can't have a drum or anything like that. Others, the Holiness Church you've got drums or what not, but the fact that you have whole church traditions without any instruments at all, and it's the voice, and these are voices that are untrained.

Have you ever heard of lining hymns? Oh! It's a kind of music, it's a sacred music which is led by...let me see if I can find an example here...
(keyboard typing) You have a leader and the notation is something that you won't even recognise. It's like a very odd notation, and the shape notes, it's called shape note singing. I have some examples on my computer of shape notes, but it's the most amazing thing. Let me see if I can find an example here of shape note singing... It doesn't require a trained voice, it doesn't require precision with regards to pitch. And on

the contrary, you have to be really skilled to do shape note singing. I can't find my example but look it up if you can.

ARJUNA: It's called shape...?

ROBIN: Shape note or lining hymns, shape note singing. Oh, you know I could just do it this way (*types on keyboard*) ...shape singing, ok, ok this might be... it's also not necessarily specifically a Black tradition, but Black people do it. You can see it in the Appalachia. This may be a good example of it, but it's not the best, it's not the one I like, but...Sorry, I've got this plugged in, that's why...(*music plays from computer, ensemble singing*) [?] Yeah... (*stops music*)

That's not a good example, because I want the Black example, actually. "Spirituality, jazz and spirituality" (*types on keyboard*) ...Well, I can always send you a link to something...let's see...Because I would play this in my class and students would be like, "I can't believe that's music". It's always ensemble, you would look at the notes and you would sing some kind of approximation to it. You have a leader who would sing a part, lining hymns. And no, I will not find it of course. Anyway, that is basically my take on some of that stuff.

ARJUNA: That's great, thank you.

ROBIN: I'm listening in case you have something else, I'm gonna listen and look because if I could find this...

ARJUNA: That is plenty of material. I maybe have one more question and I'll let you get back to your day.

ROBIN: Yeah. I'll walk out with you, I gotta go home and cook dinner.

[1:09:30]

ARJUNA: Just to kind of loop back to the gender fluidity, I was thinking about what you were saying about how blues is something that people carry within them. It is kind of a migrant or diasporic or just kind of...I don't like the word nomadic but this thing that you carry the Blues with you. And then gender, we carry both genders within us and...

ROBIN: Or...or multiple! (*laughs*)

ARJUNA: Multiple genders and at many different times. But even at a biological level with the DNA we...and I guess making that connection, this kind of latent potential.

ROBIN: Yeah. And I know you began with this question about the latent potential of blues for solidarity and I definitely see that. The thing that concerns me—and this is just my own thing, this is why your films going to be really great—is in the way that in the 21st century it's all mediated. Like, there's no...I'm not saying that the 17th century was like a purer moment, or the 19th century, or the 20th century. But there is this film called *Rumble* and it's about the Indian traditions of blues and rock and roll. The whole thing does build on this idea of solidarity, saying that there are these narratives about predominantly Black men, slave ships of Black men coming to the South—which is not really true, this is just all made up stuff, I mean it's not exactly how it happened—but that you have these predominantly Black men coming from Africa. And then the Native men in the South were enslaved, shipped off to the Caribbean leaving the women behind. So, the Black

men on the ships and the Native women left behind produced babies, and that's why 85% of the Black population is Native. Well, that's not exactly what happened, but that narrative then is seen by millions all over the world who are fascinated by this relationship, now thinking about the Native American / African American connection to the Blues through reproduction, and it is a narrative that's really invented.

What gets left out of that story? Unfortunately, what gets left out, is that the Cherokee, for example, and the Choctaw, the tribes that were both sort of sources of blues independently, but also got swept up into the category of the 'civilised tribes' own slaves – African slaves, or the African Americans, who, during the civil war and after, played a role in slaughtering Native peoples. Or the Homestead Act, where creating Black towns on the grounds of Native peoples. So that story gets erased for the sake of a good movie which then projects out to the world a sense of solidarity without the *price*; the mediation of how it happens is the concern.

So, to me, that's not blues. That goes against the Blues because the Blues would embrace the Trail of Tears and slavery, in other words, all the terrible things that happen. It would tell the truth about those things. And do so in a way with a little bit of humour, a little bit of sadness, a little bit wryness, and all of that would be there. And that is where I was making a connection between—in my talk but also, I think this relevant here, the last thing is—the relationship between the Blues and what the surrealist writer Pierre Naville calls 'revolutionary pessimism.' Revolutionary pessimism as opposed to Afro-pessimism. By revolutionary pessimism he was referring to this readiness, this kind of acknowledgement that we are facing catastrophe, and that it is around the corner.

For Naville, writing in the era of Stalinism, he is rejecting Stalin's claims that 'socialism is going to save the day and that the Soviet Union is doing so great,' and rejecting the social democrats who were saying things like, 'well, you know what, we can win the revolution by electing people, and we can elect the socialists into power.' He is seeing social democrats killing communists, he's seeing Stalinists killing communists too, and he's saying we need to be prepared for the worst.

So, that is revolutionary pessimism, and that is the Blues. It's revolutionary and it's pessimistic, it's not entirely 'present-ist', nor is it about despair. It's not about melancholy, it's not about being bitter. Genuine pessimism is the recognition that the catastrophe is coming and will be fought, it must be fought, that our whole future depends on our resistance to it. That in some ways is really the essence of the Blues; it is really facing the truth head on, not making it neat and nice, not creating a solidarity that's based on sameness or similarity or roots, but also a solidarity that is actually recognising difference, oppression, violence, even within and among people you're building solidarity with. And recognise that as a real history that we need to move beyond rather than pretending it doesn't exist. That, to me, is what it's all about.

ARJUNA: That's great, thank you.

ROBIN: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

ARJUNA: Very nice chatting.

Transcript by Collective Text
(Monia Dafa & Emilia Beatriz with the artists)