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Mapping the Blues Women from margin to centre: A critical engagement with refusal in the Blues Women's soundscape and landscape

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Abstract

This project theorises with the Blues Women epistemology by evaluating the agentic potential found in Black women blues musicians' affective tools. More specifically, I use Sister Rosetta Tharpe as a theoretical case study for how the Blues Women were able to subvert their genre and exercise agency. This writing carefully investigates these subversions in the form of Tharpe's soundscape (her musical choices) and landscape (the geography of her stage) through elements of Black feminist theory, such as sensorial protest and Black geographical thinking, illuminating the complexity of her affective choices like amalgamating different musical genre conventions and developing a new, spiritually informed star persona. Consequently, such analyses reveal the meaningful agentic potential found in these affective tools, as the Blues Women demonstrate a commitment to a politics of refusal in their creative choices, a practice that is central to the blues epistemology and genre. This project, therefore, posits the Blues Women as sophisticated meaning-makers in their ability to challenge defining aspects of the blues genre through affective appeals of bodily sensibilities like sound and staging. In going beyond traditional sites of knowledge production and methods of meaning-making, I assert that examining the contributions of the Blues Women also demands finding new ways to document agentic potential, such as through elements of radical feminist storytelling.

Keywords

Black feminism, Black feminist geography, Blues Women epistemology, feminist refusal, sensorial protest

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Introduction

In June 2022, Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* (2022) introduced to the world a 'holographic rendering of Elvis Presley's life, dipping and darting through the significant events with little time to touch down' (Zacharek, 2022). Darting and dipping it does, often glossing over formative parts of Presley's life. For example, the first half of the film is dedicated to his adolescence, in which Presley splits 'his time between a juke joint and a revival tent down the road … in *Elvis* world, gospel and blues are literally connected by one dirt road' (Zacharek, 2022). Shortly after, Presley is portrayed on Beale Street with his fellow blues-and-gospel-singing Memphians, perhaps most significantly Sister Rosetta Tharpe. But with only one scene featuring Tharpe, *Elvis* darts quickly out of a more subversive narrative that explores just how intimately Presley's genius was influenced by Black musicians. Not only a powerful musical influence in Presley's life, Tharpe curated an amalgamation of blues and gospel with the electric guitar, paving the way for 'rock and roll', and is perhaps better described as a musical influence on the *world*. However, scholars acknowledge that Presley 'took the signifiers of black American sound and style, including gospel, and reinterpreted them for a mainstream youth audience that he, but not his black models, could access' (Wald, 2007: 145). Consequently, as summarised by Yola, the queer Black musician cast as Tharpe in Luhrmann's *Elvis* (2022), there is a 'gaping chasm' when it comes to recognising the contributions of Black female blues musicians, illustrated by Presley's induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1986 and Tharpe's posthumous induction in 2018 (Shannon, 2022). So, Luhrmann's directorial treatment of Tharpe is not only unsurprising but rather reflects the contemporary refusal to treat the contributions of Black women seriously and with meaningful theoretical merit.

It is with this context that this project begins, with the hopes of bringing the Black women blues musicians, or the Blues Women, from the margins into the centre for subversive appreciation of their ability to '*do*' blues, as inspired by bell hooks' (1984: 16) call for Black women to have a 'central role to play in the making of feminist theory'. I aim to examine new terrains to appreciate a Blues Women epistemology that celebrates their choices as both artists *and* theorists, as the Blues Women contribute a distinct and complex subjectivity to their blues.

Theorising with the Blues Women epistemology

My epistemological focus is informed by Patricia Hill Collins (1990: 48), who defines epistemology as 'the study of philosophical problems in concepts of knowledge and truth'. She also asserts that in writing that seeks to investigate the epistemologies of Black women, we must recognise that Black feminist thought is inherently 'subjugated knowledge' and therefore should move towards alternative sites of knowledge production, such as 'music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior', to articulate Black feminism (Collins, 1990: 48). To further illuminate the Blues Women epistemology, I turn towards alternative sites of knowledge production, which leads me to explore the meaning behind the Blues Women's creative choices in their soundscape and landscape. Therefore, I ask: How do the Blues Women engage in a politics of refusal? To explore this, I examine their appeals to bodily sensibilities, demonstrating that the Blues Women are sophisticated cultural producers and theorists whose refusal to replicate the traditional led them to explore possibility. In adding complexity and depth to the blues epistemology and genre, the Blues Women ask spectators, including myself, to find new methods of illumination and appreciation.

I critically consider two sites for engagement from the disciplinary perspective of gender studies, which can be understood as my roadmap to theorising within the Blues Women epistemology. First, I engage with the musical composition of the blues – the soundscape – to recognise the affective

subversions of the Blues Women to their genre. Inspired by Saidiya Hartman (2019: 279) to refer to audio and musical composition as 'soundscape', I am also encouraged by soundscape ecological scholars Pijanowski et al. (2011: 1214), who define 'soundscape' as 'the collection of biological, geophysical, and anthropogenic sounds that emanate from a landscape'.[1] My engagement with soundscape asks me to turn towards the decisions behind the sound, revealing that the blues soundscape is marked by elements of 'refusal'. I focus on Tharpe's decision to further subvert blues compositional norms to create an agentic soundscape of refusal. Second, I examine the location of Blues Women performance – the landscape – with Latoya E. Eaves' (2017: 84) Black geographical possibilities framework, exploring the meaning of Blackness through analysis of 'the corporeal, the aesthetic, the creative, the spiritual' in addition to the physical geography. My phrasing of 'landscape' is meant to consider the literal landscape of the stage, resembling the traditional understanding in geography studies associated with landscape paintings (Mason and Riding, 2023: 770), as well as a landscape that considers 'embodied, affective, non-representational' contributions (Mason and Riding, 2023: 772). While I disentangle soundscape from landscape for organising purposes, my third and final analysis re-weaves them together, demonstrating the theoretical complexity added to the blues epistemology from critical evaluation of sensorial protest and affective landscape, united by a politics of refusal. I consider myself and other audiences as 'spectators' in an attempt to capture experiencing the expansive production by the Blues Women – one that requires more than just listening and viewing, and perhaps becoming a member of the audience of their multisensory performance to move beyond the cultural practice of 'dipping and darting' around the contributions of Black feminist thinkers. With this lens, the Blues Women formulate a distinct and meaningful epistemology that calls for new ways to appreciate their agentic acts.

Notes on doing feminist theory with the Blues Women

My writing follows a theoretical methodology that employs a variety of texts about blues epistemology, the Blues Women and Black feminism to construct my analysis. I first identify critical junctures in the blues epistemological analysis of gender and then examine such junctures through the lens of Black feminist theorists and the Blues Women. I often start with one text and follow that author's 'citational chain' – who they were citing in their writing – to inform which theorists I should engage with next, a practice defined by Sara Ahmed (2017: 8) in *Living a Feminist Life*. As a result, the documents I engage with could be mapped out like a tree, with each text branching into others.

It is through this practice that I discover a variety of intersectionally minded theories, from sonic curation to theatrical thinking. While the foundation of this article is in gender theory, the interventions and concepts are intimately influenced by sound studies, African American studies and geography studies. Therefore, my theoretical method resembles an archaeological excavation in which I uncover interdisciplinary theoretical analysis as it materialises. I am again guided by Ahmed's (2017: 15–16) method as a check of reflexivity, as she intentionally 'cite[s] feminist[s] of color who have contributed to the project of naming and dismantling the institutions of patriarchal whiteness'. In this writing, I purposefully choose to engage with Black feminist theory to appreciate Black feminists' theoretical contributions because this project calls for the illumination of a rich politics of gender, sexuality and class consciousness. The materials on the Blues Women and Sister Rosetta Tharpe are limited, so when I cannot cite a Black feminist thinker as one of my foundational texts, I turn towards Black feminist concepts as a generative practice. These theoretical interventions are read together with the choices of Sister Rosetta Tharpe as tools of illumination and appreciation so that she is ultimately considered a theorist alongside other Black feminist scholars.

I select Sister Rosetta Tharpe as my case for many reasons, starting with her posthumous fame as a great inspiration for musical legend Elvis Presley. Tharpe is often forgotten in retellings of Presley's life, largely attributed to her not being a white man (Wald, 2007: xi). Presley's musical contributions were considered among rhythm 'n' blues and rock genres, but Presley was typically labelled as a 'rock star' to avoid the 'negative associations' of Blackness of the blues (Redd, 1985: 40). But Tharpe's contributions exist outside of Presley's career, as well as other peers she is often compared to, and the most radical re-centring of her can acknowledge this historical context while moving far beyond it. Additionally, Tharpe has never escaped racialised genre labels that seek to categorise and make sense of her music via terms to which she did not consent or adhere; consequently, my engagement with Tharpe challenges normative encounters by thinking with Black feminism to subversively centre her Blackness and decision-making power as a musician. Furthermore, Tharpe was known to amalgamate a variety of musical and theatrical conventions – normative blues, rhythm and gospel practices – paving the way for 'rock and roll', complicating her *blues*-ness. Bringing Tharpe from the margins to the centre of the blues genre becomes an ongoing negotiation and therefore posits possibility for agentic potential. Finally, acknowledging Tharpe's theorising as a queer Black woman musician contributes to a radical and intersectional Black feminism, one that this writing remains committed to theorising with.

Soundscape

Agentic soundscapes

To best recognise the agentic potential of the Blues Women, I consider their soundscape – which consists of both the music itself and other auditory choices, such as volume, that encapsulate the sound of their landscape – as a sensorial protest that engages in a politics of refusal. While this project is not located in the disciplinary fields of music or sound studies, I adopt methods of listening and interpretation through Black feminist theorists Daphne Brooks (2021) and Saidiya Hartman (2019), who both pay attention to the soundscapes of Black women in their writing. Brooks (2021: 52) offers the generative concept of analysing *sonic curation*, a practice that 'aesthetically engage[s] and invoke[s] the historical, social, and political ideas and conditions that inform the musical work in question'. I use this practice of examining the sonic curation of Sister Rosetta Tharpe to analyse her soundscape, paying attention to the historical, social and political situation of the blues, and in particular the choices that distinguish the Blues Women as unique meaning-makers.

Hartman's (2019) engagement with noise strikes in her novel *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* offers the term 'soundscape', which guides my engagement and illuminates the agentic and affective potential of such soundscapes. This encounter shares inspiration with Suely Rolnik's (2011: 35) assertion that affective protest brings sensibilities 'into the realm of the visible and the speakable' so that creative forms such as soundscapes can be read as theory. In the chapter 'Riot and refrain', Hartman (2019: 264) uses critical fabulation to amplify the stories of Black women who were facing 'civil death' in the New York State Reformatory, Bedford Hills's Lowell Cottage. Reckoning with threats to their livelihood, the women turned towards a unique form of agency to convey their anger: 'Songs and shouts were the instruments of struggle. Terms like "noise strike" and "vocal outbreak" described the soundscape of rebellion and refusal' (Hartman, 2019: 279). Hartman helpfully grounds Rolnik's assertion in Black feminist theory, as 'Riot and refrain' explores how such a noise strike might be considered a 'soundscape' that conveys refusal. From this example, soundscape is offered

as a creation of noise through a variety of means, like breaking windows, shrieking, crying, smashing objects or pounding the wall as they did in Lowell Cottage (Hartman, 2019: 279). Hartman's soundscape, which she treats as a vehicle of protest, offers significant affective potential; the noise created through their protest demands more than just listening. Their soundscape also drew attention from local papers, labelling the protest as 'The Reformatory Blues' (Hartman, 2019: 284). As a result, creating a soundscape of refusal moves beyond something that can be heard and towards a way to exercise agency and power, as their noise becomes something to *feel* and act upon. With this, we can consider soundscapes as producing and agentic in their appealing to affective capabilities, developed through voice and other instruments of noise.

Given this theory surrounding productive, agentic soundscapes, I consider the blues genre similarly, as a form of sensorial protest by nature of its genre-defining conventions. Many compositional techniques of the blues fundamentally lend themselves towards 'refusal', a concept to consider in the Blues Women context. Hazel V. Carby's (1998: 472) writing develops a Black feminist definition of refusal by providing grounding for the Blues Women in the Harlem cultural renaissance, coinciding with the timing that Blues Women gained popularity, in which 'black women writers established a variety of alternative possibilities for the fictional representation of the black female experience'. Consequently, exploring possibility was a cultural practice for Black female writers and the Blues Women. Carby (1998: 474) writes that Blues Women 'explore the various possibilities of sexual existence' and therefore develop 'an alternative form of representation' that 'explicitly addresses the contradictions of feminism, sexuality, and power'. Zandria F. Robinson (2014: 50) similarly captures the importance of refusal in her rich definitional framework for a Blues Women epistemology:

> a mutable but remarkably stable intergenerational worldview pioneered by, but not exclusive to, black women, that rejects the marginalization and criminalization of those who exist outside of these established norms and gives voice to a different set of black experiences.

Finally, Brooks (2021: 27) explores the sonic performances of Black women artists, including the Blues Women, noting that they 'refuse the terms of being scripted as objects', instead designing 'disruptive and questioning definitions of a self that is intent on living a free life'. Brooks (2021: 436) also engages with Blues Women record-producer, critic and archivist Rosetta Reitz, who thought of the Blues Women as 'risk-takers who subvert and surpass convention'. Therefore, I assume an understanding of 'refusal' as *developing new ways of existing, doing or being*, a distinctly feminist practice that the Blues Women adopted to reject stereotypes and find freedom in their exploration of possibility, influenced by Carby, Robinson, Brooks and Reitz.

Compositionally, 'refusal' can be found throughout the blues, beginning with the use of an unfixed rhythm, which often starts as 'recognizable' but eventually abandons this pattern as the song continues (Smith, 1992: 42). Blues are also often played in the 'blue third', which commits to neither a major nor minor key, further developing suspense by never abandoning an 'out of tuneness' (Smith, 1992: 46). The other chords relied on are 'blue notes', which include flatted thirds and sevenths, developing a sense of sadness and pain in the music (Steinberg et al. 2012: xii). All of this is further bolstered by an anti-singing, 'moaning monotony' from the vocalist, which conveys 'unmusical communicative directness in the spoken commentary' (Smith, 1992: 43). Therefore, the compositional techniques that make the blues a distinct genre might be considered conventions of 'refusal', in which there is a paradoxical and decisive rejection of one rhythm and key, even a 'tension' interpreted in the texture of the music (Weisethaunet, 2001: 110). Hans Weisethaunet (2001: 101, 112) notes that the 'blue note' is not categorised by the musicians themselves but rather by scholars, like Smith, because

'the participatory processes of performance, time and tonality are felt rather than measured'. As a result, the interpretation of the blues composition as developing a politics of refusal comes from analysing the feelings raised by sonic curation of the music. Through this lens, the blues soundscape resembles Hartman's protestors as they find decision-making power through sonic elements of defiance and refusal.

Gendered blues

Given that Black men were the main cultural producers in the first iterations of blues music, the genre developed an implicitly gendered blues subjectivity. The abolishment of slavery in 1865 marked geographical and psychological freedom for Black men, while Black women were still relegated to domestic spaces (Davis, 1998: 68). As a result, the blues began as an overwhelmingly masculine pursuit and continued to carry association with the male subjectivity in further iterations of the blues. It was not until the 1920s that women blues musicians gained popularity, as urban spaces embraced their theatrical blues performances (Carby, 1991: 180). Consequently, there was a considerable dichotomous split in the kinds of blues that existed. There were masculine blues, described as 'downhome' or 'pure', while feminine blues were 'theatrical' and 'vaudeville' because they incorporated more elements of staging and excess (McGinley, 2014: 23–24). This theatricality pushed the boundaries of the blues as a 'mixed media show' through different modes of expression like dancing and acting (Lacava, 1992: 138). The Black women blues musicians were codified, therefore, as a distinct group within the blues musical tradition.

However, the split was greater than just creative differences in performance, which Carby (1991: 180) captures in her assertion that 'blues history' is considered 'rural in origin and … produced by the figure of the wandering, lone male'. There was a fundamental difference in the subjectivity developed by the Blues Women, as 'women have had a history and experience of social frustration, subjugation, and silencing that brings with it the emotional center of the blues aesthetic' (Steinberg and Fairweather, 2012: xxvi). Shatema Threadcraft (2016: 112) supports this in her noting that Blues Women worked towards intimate equality through representation of Black female sexual desire, a distinct goal from traditional blues content that focuses on collectivity within the Black subjectivity. As a result, the existence of the Blues Women fundamentally questions the essentialist subjectivity of the blues.

Labels of 'authenticity' and 'tradition' are fraught with debate in blues epistemological scholarship because of this gendered split between blues performances. I echo the sentiments of Brooks (2021: 103), who states that she is not interested in 'excavating a "tradition" of Black women's musical aesthetics' but rather pursues Black women artists as 'sociocultural intellectuals and as archives of cultural memory'. I aim to jettison a conversation of establishing a Blues Women 'tradition' like Brooks, and instead consider where a politics of refusal might be found in the archival materials of Tharpe's soundscape.

Tharpe's blues subversions

Tharpe demonstrates refusal by amalgamating blues, gospel and rock by standards of genre – strategically introducing or foregoing musical devices and techniques. This much is generally demonstrated by the new name of 'urban blues' given to the blues of the 1940s – the time when Tharpe was at the height of her fame – which incorporated 'electric guitars, brasses, and drums' (Redd, 1985: 34). This directly challenges the first iterations of blues music, which often rely on percussion instruments alone

to create the musical backbone (Tracy, 2004: 123). By introducing new devices of musical technology, Tharpe challenged the blues as a genre, incorporating 'elements of gospel, blues, jazz, popular ballads, country, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll' (Wald, 2007: viii). In practice, this sounded like using 'vibrato, trills, enunciation, dynamic variety (variations in loudness), and melisma, a gospel hallmark in which the vocalist sings several notes within the space of a single syllable' (Wald, 2007: 42). This is echoed in Brooks' (2021: 452) encounter with integral Black feminist archivist Rosetta Reitz, revealing that Reitz referred to Tharpe's musical skill as more than just ability but rather 'technique as working in the service for higher interpretative powers' through 'baroque embellishments' or 'churchy riffs'. Likewise, Gayle Wald (2020: 11) uses the sonic metaphor of 'vibration' to describe how Tharpe's music haunts the canons and archives of blues and rock narratives, and musical expression as a whole. Clearly, Tharpe did not adhere to the normative ways of *doing* the blues, foregoing practices that used fewer musical devices and intentionally opting for a more decorated version through her technical prowess.

Furthermore, Tharpe played an integral role in compromising blues expectations as she is credited as the first Blues Woman to use an electric guitar, and as a rock and roll trailblazer with her song 'Strange things happening every day', an amalgamation of gospel, rhythm and blues (Wald, 2007: 68). Tharpe is also remembered for her use of volume: 'To be sure she got an audience's full attention; she pushed amplifiers to their ear-splitting limits' (Wald, 2007: xi). This itself was a 'strategy for being heard' in a sound and celebrity economy that privileged male blues musicians (Wald, 2007: 27). Tharpe took advantage of the possibilities afforded by the blues soundscape and, much like Hartman's protestors, she used sound – in particular, sound volume – to find a way to *decide* to be heard, a form of agentic power itself. Both parties leaned into the use of tools that appeal to the spectator's sensibilities as a strategy to be heard, demonstrating the significant agentic power held by devices of sound and their subsequent soundscapes. Tharpe's existence alone in the blues powerfully reminds us that the body can also serve as a 'site of resistance' and become a tool of protest through affective capacities (Nair, 2012: 789). We might read Tharpe's challenging of genres, introduction of the electric guitar and curatorial vocal techniques as intentional conventions of refusal in her soundscape, demonstrating ways to 'do' blues outside of the hegemonic blues practices, ones that vibrate both literally and figuratively.

In summary, soundscape is a promising space to interrogate where a politics of refusal – and an exploration of possibility – might reside through analysing Tharpe's sonic curation of blues. Given that the blues genre is inherently responsive to a specific location and temporality in the Reconstruction-era US South, the interpretations of refusal that are commonly found within the genre are unsurprising.[2] However, Tharpe's ability to explore further subversion through a rebellion against the limits of genre and normative practices demonstrates the theoretical merit of her sonic curation. Conceptualising these choices into a soundscape of refusal allows spectators to appreciate her strategic musical choices, like genre subversions with the electric guitar, which ultimately expands how to *do* blues.

Landscape

Possibilities in Black feminist geography

Continuing my objective of exploring Blues Women's refusals, I turn away from the music itself and towards perhaps a more unlikely space of meaningful epistemological work: the geography of blues music. However, I move beyond the symbol of the plantation, the commonly accepted geographical nexus of the blues epistemology (Woods and Gilmore, 2017: 5). This movement is intimately guided

by Eaves' (2017: 81) theorising in 'Black geographic possibilities: On a queer Black South', which seeks to 'interanimate geography and Blackness' by focusing on 'the ways that Black subjects undertake space-making practices within a specific set of circumstances and expands Black spatial possibilities, thereby enabling inquiry and resisting homogeneity'. I appreciate Eaves' (2017: 82) work for multiple reasons, first stemming from her careful attention to the US South as an often forgotten, rich and nuanced cultural identity that relies on 'historical moments and iconography' *and* 'structures of power and knowledge formation'. Second, Eaves writes from the lens of Black feminist geographies, a line of thinking that insists on the 'inseparability of race, gender, sexuality, and capitalism, as well as the commitment to critically engaging and transforming the power-laden category of "human"' (Hawthorne, 2019: 4). Eaves (2017) also parallels the thinking of many Blues Women scholars as she theorises beyond the plantation with Black feminist geographical thinking. Specifically, she offers a 'Black geographic possibilities' framework, which relies on the 'corporeal, the aesthetic, the creative, the spiritual, and the elemental … to read into the meaning of Blackness, its accompanying implications of oppression(s), and its futuristic possibilities' (Eaves, 2017: 84). Essentially, Eaves suggests that when considering geography, we miss important meaning-making if we think through merely symbolic topography. Her framework suggests that possibility can be found when critically considering the landscape of the blues, an understanding of geography and space that encompasses appeals to the sensibilities, like Rolnik (2011) and Hartman (2019). Her affectively minded guidance allows spectators to continue to imagine beyond the traditional landscapes of the blues and appreciate the creative tools of refusal in the Blues Women epistemology.

Therefore, I am led to the work of Paige McGinley (2014) as she suggests that the stage is an important spatial node of the blues, something that I consider to be an extension of the blues landscape with Eaves' guidance. McGinley (2014: 24) examines the intersection of geography and gender, suggesting that Blues Women develop 'theatrical blues' through staging, costuming and other elements of theatricality, providing a significant space for gendered analysis. I argue that Sister Rosetta Tharpe found room for subversion in her landscape by adopting two tactics of 'theatrical thinking', through star persona and staging via props and costuming. Tharpe's unique on-stage persona of *religious rock and roll*-er, as well as subsequent staging choices based on this persona, provides a rich site of analysis for exploring the agentic potential of theatricality, moving away from a symbolic understanding of the blues geography and towards mapping an affectively minded landscape that demonstrates the Blues Women's agency through *theatrical* refusals.

Blues star

I begin with the notion that star persona is a 'manufactured' reality when considering how the Blues Women cultivated their respective images of stardom to illuminate spaces for decision-making power and self-determination (Dyer, 1986: 2). Persona creation and maintenance extend far beyond a star's personhood and towards the many elements of theatricality, which reinforce the imperfect representation of the private individual who inhabits it. This includes 'obviously stage-managed public appearances, and also of images of the manufacture of that "image" and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it' (Dyer, 1986: 7). Stardom was contradictory for Blues Women who often complicated the 'theatrical I and the autobiographical I' by singing from the first person and merging their onstage and offstage personas (McGinley, 2014: 71). In other words, their star persona invited imagination and interpretation in the overlap of their public and private lives. Such a practice not only involves the audience in the meaning-making of the star persona but also places a distinct emphasis on spectatorship of the star herself to reveal what might be 'authentic'.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe's careful curation of a specific star persona provides a fruitful site for an illumination of refusal and agency. Tharpe openly discussed her religious beliefs and proclaimed that her talents were 'divinely inspired' by God (McGinley, 2014: xi). This is why she claimed the title of 'Sister' in her name as a musician – meaning that her spirituality could not be dissected from her music or stardom for spectators. As a result, she used conventions described earlier to fuse 'sacred and secular traditions', further complicating genre (Millard, 2004: 24). This worked to her advantage in garnering a cult-like audience because she appealed to the 'enormous popularity of swing' and blues while also appealing to the 'cultural weight' of Black spiritualism (Jackson, 2004: 83). But it also was detrimental at times; the music industry had little room for 'spiritual concerns' illustrated in the message of her music and her religious spaces criticised her co-opting religious music for social dancing (Jackson, 2004: 84). As a result, Tharpe had to constantly 'shuttle between the church and entertainment worlds', facing criticism for her involvement with the Cotton Club in New York City, a known spot for swing (Wald, 2003: 411). Because the musical and the spiritual world were often in tension, Tharpe's star persona can best be understood as complicated.

Despite this, Tharpe never shied away from uniting her faith and music without precedent. She continued to play spiritual music at secular venues, including the Apollo Theatre, Café Society and Carnegie Hall, in addition to the Newport Jazz Festival, all while donning a fur coat (Wald, 2006: 93). Tharpe also kept the title of 'Sister' as she pioneered further into secular performance landscapes, maintaining the 'specific tradition of respectful address within the African-American Holiness church' (Wald, 2006: 96). Her transcendence of religious boundaries is especially impressive considering the gendered expectations to which she was held. As Wald (2003: 414) reminds us, neither the religious nor music spheres of her life afforded 'freedom from gender definition'; however, 'neither shut down women's ability to define gender, either'. Consequently, we can appreciate how Tharpe opted to never compromise her faith-based approach to her music, uniting what might have been considered rigid spiritual ideals with the glitz of stardom. This created a new kind of stardom, the 'gospel star' (Wald, 2007: 173). Therefore, despite being held to gendered, religious and genre-based scrutiny, Tharpe's challenging of these boundaries in developing her star persona demonstrates her refusal of prescriptive practices and the agentic potential of the theatrical landscape – an essential terrain for interrogation to understand Tharpe's innovative and unique star persona.

Wearing the blues

Staging through props and costuming can be considered a natural extension of star persona, as clothing and sets often reinforce a theme or image that a star is trying to cultivate. Turning towards the literal composition of the stage allows us to materially analyse where the Blues Women found self-determination via clothing, but also another landscape to theorise around a Blues Women epistemology. For example, early blues staging of performances by 'Black Minstrel' groups included developing 'plantation settings' through symbols such as the banjo and ragged dress to develop stereotypical slave characters (Clark, 2023). This is fundamentally contrasted by the visual theatrics of the Blues Women: a bejewelled, gilded aesthetic that wholly rejects the scenery of the desolate plantation. Carby (1998: 481) asserts that the physical presence of the Blues Women was:

> a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire.

This stark contrast developed a 'cognitive dissonance' that requires conceptual mapping from the spectator as the Blues Women outright refused to represent the 'histories of chattel' (McGinley, 2014: 55). In doing this, the Blues Women refused stereotypes of the mammy figure that was often expected to represent Black women on stage, replacing this with affluent displays (McGinley, 2014: 55). More precisely, the Blues Women's refusal to stage their blues using plantation imagery and disruption of cultural representations of Black womanhood demonstrates where they found new methods of refusal within the staging landscape of their blues.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe, however, allows us a more intimate look into why this kind of subversion is so powerful and how the Blues Women transcended physical understandings of landscape and geography. Tharpe was described as 'glamorous' like many other Black women performers (Wald, 2007: 155). However, she was described as simpler than most other Blues Women: '[she] preferred coordinated gowns or suits, usually white, worn with matching earrings and heels … [she] added wigs, hats, furs, and decorative flowers' if she wanted to be fancy (Wald, 2007: 82). Wearing such clothing was certainly a departure from the plantation aesthetic, but she rarely matched the outrageous opulence of some of her fellow Blues Women, like Bessie Smith.

Despite underscored costuming and staging, Tharpe was involved in a meaningful refusal of typical blues theatricality during filming of *The Blues and Gospel Train* (1964), a TV show broadcasted live and taped by Granada Television in Manchester, UK, in an attempt to make the Southern blues legible to a transatlantic audience (McGinley, 2014: 149). Set at a defunct suburban Manchester railroad station turned into 'Chorltonville', a pretend town in the Mississippi Delta region, *The Blues and Gospel Train* was a Hollywood-style, fantastical staging of a rural rail depot in the Deep South (McGinley, 2014: 188). Such imagery reflects a long history of 'black musical tropology', in which trains are often used as a symbol of the blues to capture the 'temporal aspects of life' (Maxile, 2011: 596). The show sought to create 'an imagined Mississippi' that captures 'blues in its "natural" environment', conveniently leaving out imagery of violent racism that often accompanied the geography they attempted to replicate (McGinley, 2014: 152). Such staging choices perfectly reflect the original intention of the blues to use the site of the plantation to explore Black subjectivity post slavery.

However, Tharpe refused to adhere to this conventional blues aesthetic landscape in *The Blues and Gospel Train*, described as 'unhappy at being lumped together with performers who dressed informally and play up their rural bona fides' (McGinley, 2014: 158). Instead:

> Tharpe, in her high heels and elegant coat with a glittering collar, threw the stereotypical surroundings into sharp relief … her glamorous appearance on the broken-down props of the stage set invited a cognitive dissonance that denaturalised the minstrel aesthetic. (McGinley, 2014: 158)

The case of Tharpe and *The Blues and Gospel Train* epitomises a greater dilemma of representation; the theatrical thinking of staging fails to truly replicate the US South because the geography simply cannot be captured through devices of translation in this case. As a result, this replication can at best be considered an imagination of the US South, easily slipping into a mistranslation, or even romanticisation, of the geography. However, Tharpe illuminates how the imaginative offerings of theatrical thinking can be used to transcend the shortcomings of replication by imagining an entirely *new* aesthetic – the glitz and glamour of the Blues Women. Her opting out of the minstrel aesthetic not only refuses to replicate respectable imaginations of the normative blues topography but also demonstrates that costuming and props can offer agentic power through the disruption of stereotypes and the imagination of alternative possibilities. In summary, investigating Tharpe's landscape, through elements of star persona and staging, demonstrates her tendency to challenge and refuse iterations of the blues,

expanding how blues can be *done*. The impressive extent to which she capitalises on possibility within the blues can only be captured by moving beyond a rigid understanding of geography and towards more affective landscapes such as these elements of theatrical thinking.

Weaving soundscape and landscape

As stated previously, the experience of a Blues Women performance cannot extract the content of the music – the soundscape – from the landscape that stages it. It is important to weave these concepts together and understand them as intersecting. In examining the sonic curation (soundscape) and the geography (landscape) of the Blues Women together, I theorise that these spaces reveal tools of refusal that expanded their self-determination and subverted historical stereotypes of Black women. In returning to the language of my original question, the Blues Women's soundscape and landscape illuminate a politics of refusal, demanding attention to alternative sites of knowledge production that appreciate the strategic choices of the Blues Women, especially their affective tools. It is important to contextualise that Tharpe's disruption of normative and hegemonic understandings of Black respectability was done with resources to which many other Black women did not have access at the time, such as the wealth and attention that came along with celebrity. Despite this, Tharpe serves as a powerful example of how the Black women subjectivity undermines *intersectional* oppressions, challenging interlocking stereotypes of gender, race, class and more.

Blues Women coalitional politics

Threadcraft (2016: 111–112) wrote about the intersectional dimensionality of the Blues Women, noting that they resisted 'the tendency to view the realm of sexuality and emotion as lower-order and functional' and called attention to 'the physical, emotional, and sexual needs of the black body'. The Blues Women developed a Black feminist freedom that is intimately and intersectionally minded, calling the body to attention through sensorial and affective appeals. This ushers in cultural transformation, in which the 'gendered consciousness' transformed collectively held and generationally inherited memories of slavery, reconfiguring them to reflect the social constructions of their choosing: love, sexuality, womanhood, etc. (Davis, 1998: 47). We might think of the Blues Women, then, as a sort of political coalition as per Liza Taylor's (2022: 21) writing because, in their pursuits as musicians, the Blues Women operated as a form of political coalition by 'theorizing from below and from within lived struggle' through their joint engagement in a politics of refusal. Their commitment to finding possibility and agency through affective tactics is a brilliant calling for the challenging of rigid cultural hegemony.

There is still more to be revealed through a greater genealogy of the affective tools of Black women within cultural, and specifically musical, geographies. For example, we might consider how the overlapping genres of women of blues, rock and roll, disco, house, R&B and pop music further shape understandings of Blackness, queerness and womanhood through musical archives (Pawel, 2021: 23). The soundscapes and landscapes of contemporary Black women cultural stars continue as a rich space of deconstructing and reconstructing the possibilities of Black womanhood. In fact, Beyoncé's (2023) *Renaissance World Tour* has been described as exploring 'Afrofuturism': imagining 'a world where women in all shades, sizes, and orientations can be as sexual as they choose. A world where Black people are self-empowered and unapologetic about it' (Owens, 2023). Beyoncé's tour was labelled a 'spiritual revival', similar to Wald's language in the title 'Reviving Rosetta Tharpe', with both projects articulating the complexity of Black female subjectivity and spirituality (Owens, 2023; Wald, 2006).

I find the writing offered by Carby (1998: 482) particularly inspiring in her consideration of Gayl Jones: 'The power of the blues singer was resurrected in different moment[s] of black power'. There is certainly a trail of resurrections of the Blues Women that operate today, and appreciating them calls for an exploration of new terrains. Brooks' (2021) *Linear Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* is a brilliant and thoughtful archival encounter that heeds this call. Brooks (2021: 80) candidly asks 'whether we might be able to imagine a pop (culture) life with Black women at its full-stop center rather than as the opening act, the accompanying act, or the afterthought'. Brooks' project is felt deeply with Luhrmann's *Elvis*, which would have told the story of Sister Rosetta Tharpe if the project radically and unquestionably appreciated the contributions of the Blues Women. To continue answering this call, I am personally inspired by Annie Goh and Marie Thompson's (2021: 4) understanding of cyberfeminism as a project that directs 'critical and creative attention towards both technological presents and possible futures'. Exploring technological practices, in both their current operations and future imaginations, seems like a fruitful terrain to interrogate contemporary soundscapes and reveal new ways to understand Black feminist refusal, placing Black women musicians at the full-stop centre.

Returning to feminist methodology

Sadly, while Tharpe transcended boundaries of gender, genre and sound, remembrance of her contributions, and even her existence, is limited. Tharpe was laid to rest in an unmarked grave, a symbol of 'the fragility of memory, especially our memory of those who, like Rosetta, never fit neatly into the usual boxes' (Wald, 2007: 216). Her achievements simply cannot be captured by hegemonic means and, as a result, are often left out of archives remembering the blues. Reviving her contributions requires the appreciation of the tools that made her *un*memorable by cultural standards. Exploring spaces where possibility is found, like soundscape and landscape, illuminates how complex the offerings of the Blues Women are, especially those who have been canonically marginalised, unwilling to fit within the boundaries decided for them. Possibility and refusal can also be found in the 'casual omissions, the deliberate silences' of Black women's voices (Farmer, 2018: 293). Many scholars, archivists and theorists work tirelessly in this investigation, disrupting the matrices of power across disciplines that have made the theorising of the Blues Women 'unmemorable'. Robinson (2014: 53) states that 'a blues women's epistemology is inherently contradictory because it must speak back to power through the existing modes of engagement and power structures'. While I agree with and appreciate Robinson's understanding of the Blues Women as 'speaking back' to power structures, especially in her contextualisation of singer Erykah Badu, I believe that Sister Rosetta Tharpe speaks back through new modes of engagement in familiar terrains: landscape and soundscape. Robinson (2014: 54) is similarly committed to the project of 'paying careful attention to the experiences of blues women on the margins'. So, perhaps the most meaningful reconciliation is that the Blues Women provide such a breadth and depth for analysis in their 'doing' of blues, that we can find a rich articulation of feminism in both their engagement with hegemonic practices of power and their refusal to replicate such practices. The Blues Women's existence is refusal in a genre and epistemology of refusals.

As Wald (2007: 219) asserts, we need:

> acts of revival that work against forgetting, reversing the neglect of African American women's contributions to American music … if the name Sister Rosetta Tharpe is unfamiliar, the reason is perhaps not that Rosetta has been forgotten, but that history failed to *get* her in the first place.

The point of reconciling the soundscape and landscape of Tharpe is to find new ways to *get* her, to illuminate what others have missed. In going beyond – by going into soundscapes and landscapes, into sites of knowledge production, into methods of meaning-making to *get* the Blues Women beyond Sister Rosetta Tharpe – I also call for new ways to document this, through tactics of feminist storytelling like Ahmed (2017: 15–16) suggests with her citation policy. Like intentionally referring to cultural producers as 'theorists'. Like taking a text and reading it with Black feminist theory to illuminate where intersectionality might be missing. Like asking what we consider to be a valuable or appropriate 'text' of theory and who it privileges. A project of the Blues Women epistemology requires fundamental transcendence of what we know and transformation of how we think. All of these practices demonstrate how Tharpe, an artist and theorist who lay at the fringe of her genre, can be recentred with Black feminist theory, just as bell hooks (1984) called for, demonstrating just how 'central' their role is in developing alternative ways of *being* and, in this case, of *doing* the blues. They were not the first to challenge norms and they certainly will not be the last, but the Blues Women offer a meaningful articulation of refusal in Black feminist thought. As Brooks (2021: 81) reminds us, 'Reckoning with [Black women artists'] sounds reminds us that everything is possible'. The map can be changed, and the margins can still become the centre.

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Notes

1. 'Soundscape' is a term that is used, and therefore can vary, across disciplines. This project sits at the crux of sound and media studies and geography studies, meaning that scholars like Pijanowski et al. (2011) are helpful in terms of bridging the gap between landscape and soundscape. The term was originally popularised by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer (1994: 3) in his book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, as an account of the 'relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change'. Fellow sound studies scholar Ari Kelman (2010: 229) continues the intellectual project that Schafer incites, arguing that Schafer's understanding of 'soundscape' 'refers to background noise' which 'both attracts our attention and helps us make meaning out of particular sounds and ways of listening'. However, Kelman (2010: 228) also notes that a variety of different scholars who employ the term 'soundscape' 'describe a particular set of relationships that involve sound and social phenomena', and refers to their use as 'fraught and inconsistent' with Schafer's original definitional framework. Ultimately, my use of 'soundscape' in this article similarly attends to sound as related to social context, but dissimilarly in terms of the specific differentiation of foreground and background noise. Instead, I understand 'soundscape' to be layers of sound in the Blues Women's music which are related to sociocultural context, and therefore the manipulation of sound can be understood as the exercising of agency. I choose to cite Hartman (2019: 279), rather than other scholars, as my main influence in using the term 'soundscape' for multiple reasons. First, Hartman's (2019: 279) engagement with noise strikes as 'soundscape' of 'rebellion and refusal', which I explore in the 'Agentic soundscapes' section of this article, poignantly captures the agentic potential found in soundscapes and is more in line with how I proceed to understand the term. Second, my methodological priorities, specifically my use of Sara Ahmed's (2017: 15–16) practice of building a citational chain which intentionally 'cite[s] feminist[s] of color' who share similar theoretical obligations, make citing Hartman as the most influential thinker in this decision meaningful.
2. As an intellectual discipline and epistemology, the blues responded to the Black lived experience following the Civil War, Emancipation, the Reconstruction era and the overthrow of Reconstruction in the US South (Woods, 2005: 1008). Reconstruction, the period following the Emancipation Proclamation signed into effect by US President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, from a policy standpoint involved the integration of Black individuals into American society and labour forces following the abolishment of slavery, illustrated by the passing of the 14th Amendment in 1868, which provided equal national citizenship and rights to Black individuals (Foner, 1987: 880). However, the blues epistemology is more concerned with the social effects of Reconstruction policy and the subsequent overthrow of such policy. Bruce E. Baker's (2007: 11) *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* delves into the role of social memory 'as a tool to build Jim Crow', another term used to describe the overthrow of Reconstruction. Two leading scholars and historians on the blues epistemology, Clyde Woods and Ruth Gilmore (2017: 47), write in *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* that 'The blues became the channel through which the Reconstruction generation grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it'. Resistance to both policy and social-based changes of Reconstruction meant that the blues 'became an alternative form of communication, analysis, moral intervention, observation, celebration for a new generation that had witnessed slavery, freedom, and unfreedom in rapid succession between 1860 and 1875' (Woods and Gilmore, 2017: 58).

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