THE BLUES TRADITION: BUILDING DIALOGICAL RELATION WITHIN UTOPIAN IMAGINARIES

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Chapter 7

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Abstract

The Blues, as a countercultural art form, has engendered dialogical consciousness – both in terms of production practices and the creation of broader relational ontologies. This conceptual investigation explores the Blues genre as an "axiology-in-practice" within African American alter-collectivities. Using imaginary reconstitution as a utopian method of analysis, and assemblage theory as a medium of musical understanding, the following piece investigates everyday utopias within Blues production. These everyday utopias have reverberating materializations within Black socioeconomic spaces. With the integral nature of dialogical art forms in crafting cooperative consciousness and collective survivance, the epistemology of the Blues genre becomes the foundation to an embodied ethical economic practice.

Keywords: axiology, alter-collectivities, utopian method, assemblage theory, blues music, co-operative economics

JEL-Codes: P13, J54, A13

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1.   Introduction: Utopia and Assemblages of the Blues

The Blues, as a polyphonic and dialogical musical genre, represents a countercultural art form within the African American musical tradition. Acting as a primordial source for genres like jazz, rock & roll, and hip-hop, the Blues has always functioned as a generative medium. While the Blues is often flattened to a metaphor of melancholy, this narrow understanding ignores alternative interpretations that are deeply rooted in material culture and production (Levitas, 2013: 34, 38–39; Neal, 1972). The emotional archetype from which the Blues springs is deeply embedded in slavery and work spirituals (Neal, 1972: 42; Wald, 2010: 12–15). Indigo was a major plantation staple until the late 1700s in both the Southern United States and Latin America. It was a labour intensive, but highly valuable, commodity that didn't shift production locales until the British Empire had increased control over South Asian supply chains. Lyrical lamentations became common, both in the Indigo production zones of the Southern United States and in the production zones of Tamil and Indonesia subsequently (Balfour-Paul, 2006: 181).

Material analysis moves the study of the Blues from existential to cooperative. Within the plantation environment, the Blues could function as an essential vector for critical resistance and collective identity (Neal, 1972: 42; Wood, 2017: 36). The existential nature of sadness and material vulnerability is cut through by a utopian incursion of solidarity and transformation (Levitas, 2013: 39, 186). The Blues becomes a counter-hegemonic force with a distinct 'Black artistic frequency' (Campt, 2018), that carries through to subsequent genres, particularly jazz (Wald, 2010). This distinct frequency is inherently a bricolage of African diasporic traditions, European traditions, along with Indigenous and Latin influences (Jones, 2015: 9; Davis, 1998: 136). A unique amalgam of Blackness lives within the system of Blues temperament, functioning less as a set of physical techniques and more a worldview and emotional stance (Jones, 2015: 8–9, 18). The temperament of the Blues goes far beyond sorrow to embody an eclectic Black reference/experience of inquisitive rebelliousness. The genre embodies collective defiance as an attitude toward life (Neal, 1972; Davis, 1998).

Bringing this attitude of communal defiance into the realm of economic and cultural analysis, the historian and geographer Clyde Woods (2017) performs a 'critical reconstruction' (Gilliland & McKemmish, 2018) of Blues epistemology – analyzing the development practices of Southern plantation elite through the lens of the Blues genre. Woods views historical archival research as "the examination and creation of proposals, not proofs" (Gilmore, 2017: xiv): creating a space for the presence of perpetual counterhegemonic alternatives (Gilmore, 2017: xv; Simpson, 2017: 31, 37, 128). Woods' critical reconstruction can also be performed for the 'alter-collectivities' (Murphy, 2018: 123) and utopian imaginaries that weave their way through the Blues tradition. Turning the focus of analysis from the epistemological realm of understanding to the realm of 'embodied ethical practice' (Simpson, 2017) moves practice and process to the center stage.

Sociologist Ruth Levitas (2013) considers the utopian method of imaginary reconstitution to be key to critical reconstructions of practice and process. Critical reconstruction of utopian imaginaries is particularly important in the face of a global rise in fascism and authoritarianism (Ressa, 2022), as well as the traumatic effects of climate change (Max-Neef, 2014). The present moment requires imaginations that restructure cultural desires and point towards alternative ways of melding desire and material production (Simpson, 2017; Guattari, 2008). Levitas defines utopia as "the expression of a distributed desire for a better way of being or living" (2013: xii, 187), bonding the concept to ideas of human flourishing (2013: 13–15, 187). Utopia can function as a process for change, criticism, and compensation (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 109). As a transcendent element of cultural surplus (Levitas, 2013: xvii, 5), utopia acts as an educative and regulative process where collective circumstances and actions can be evaluated.

Philosopher Felix Guattari (2008) underscores that 'expressions of distributed desire' can be easily coopted. Collective desire can be joined for collective human flourishing, or for far narrower ideas of flourishing – tailored to fascist ends. For Guattari, totalitarian systems of fascism or authoritarianism rely on collective desire just as much as inclusive utopian imaginations (163–164). Totalitarian and colonialist regimes frequently use art for propaganda and exertion of dominance (Benjamin, 1969: 11–12), for example music was a significant part of the Hitler Youth's ideological promotion (Kertz-Welzel: 2022: 34–35). Totalitarian systems collectively capture desires through the transformation of (re)productive forces and the relationships involved in processes of (re)production (Murphy, 2018). The seizure is a networked phenomenon. While the resulting collectivities can have impactful and horribly violent materializations, it is important to note that these constellations are knotted together around rigid structures. Only the bare minimum desire necessary for social unity is ever utilized in fascist constructions (Pajaczkowska, 2007: 149; Benjamin, 1969: 19–20). This is the fatal flaw of totalitarian systems. Desires are only loosely tied and shallowly embedded within material production – leaving opportunities for counterhegemonic alter-collectivities to exert forces and desires of their own.

To better understand the dynamic social chemistries of desire, and their links to material production, Guattari and his collaborator Gilles Deleuze designed the concept of assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 1994). The concept of an 'assemblage' is meant to capture a group of heterogenous components, along with their interactions and relationships (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 327–337). These heterogenous components can be types of beings or energy, material objects, symbolic artifacts, or elements of the surrounding environment. The importance of 'interaction' and 'day-to-day practices' differentiates an assemblage from an 'aggregate' (DeLanda, 2016: 20). The components and their interactions/relationships form an irreducible dynamic whole. However, this 'dynamic whole' is not viewed as a totalization of its components/singularities.

Assemblages both influence and are influenced by their components. To emphasize this fact, the 'whole' is on the same ontological plane as its 'parts' (DeLanda, 2019: 11–12, 20; 2016: 12). This ontological equivalence opens space for components to have relations exterior to the dynamics within an assemblage – 'relations of exteriority' (Allewaert, 2013: 119; DeLanda, 2016: 10). The desires that these external relations channel, support, and create can generate new assemblages (Allewaert, 2013; Tuck, 2009). Assemblages can always recompose. New forms of synergy, 'emergence', can arise from new patterns of interaction and establish the conditions for new exercises of desire. For anyone willing to partake in the necessary weaving, alternative processes for melding desire and material production constantly exist (Guattari, 2008: 171; Murphy, 2018: 118–119, 123). These re-weavings do not need to be crafted from scratch. Many traditions of alter-collectivities, like the Blues tradition, already exist and can be operationalized (Woods, 2017: 34, 140; Simpson, 2017: 122–123, 142–143).

1.1.   Chapter Outline

Drawing upon 'Blues epistemology' (Woods, 2017), this study operationalizes the Blues tradition and the alter-collectivities of 'Black artistic frequency' (Campt, 2018) to build a critical reconstruction of a distinct embodied ethical practice. Ruth Levitas' utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution and Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory are combined into a utopian assemblage matrix. The two are woven together to construct a methodology that allows for analysing key elements of Blues production as a utopian ethic that can generate emergence. The Blues is fundamentally a relational ethic. For alter-collectivities with relational ethics, the "axiology-in-practice" - the contextualized valuation of "good relations", functions as an orienting and (re)productive technology (Liboiron, 2021: 7, 122–124). Reconstructing the ethical and embodied practice of Blues helps shed light on how an "axiology in practice" is formed and maintained. The restoration highlights how this embodied ethic can materially manifest within Black solidarity economics, and co-operative economics more broadly.

Section Two (The Hapticity of the Blues) outlines how reciprocal recognition is central to the Blues, as well as its polyrhythmic and polyphonic nature. The core elements of the genre are also outlined, focusing on *lyrics*, *improvisation*, *soundscapes*, and *self-expression/performance*. **Section Three** (Utopia as Method and Incursion) introduces the utopian imaginary as it relates to music in general and the Blues in particular, exploring foundational ideas of imagination and desire. Utopia is outlined as both a form of incursion and as a method of reconstruction. The three modes of Levitas' (2013: 73) utopian method are outlined: the 'archeological mode' for critical excavation and bricolage of assemblages; the 'ontological mode' for analysis of social interactions and processes of being; and the 'architectural mode' for constructions of utopian material manifestations.

Section Four (Building Polyrhythmic Assemblages of Desire) melds Levitas' modes of imaginary reconstitution (2013: 73) with the four modes of emergence within assemblage theory: expression, content, deterritorialization, and [re]territorialization

(Assis, 2021). The processes of 'coding' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 313–314; DeLanda, 2016: 22), 'differentiation' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 322; DeLanda, 2019: 15–16), and 'articulation' (DeLanda, 2016: 19–23, 103–109) are of central focus. Throughout this section, the amalgamation is used to analyze Blues polyphony and the core elements of the genre, particularly forms of improvisation. Within the **Discussion** section (Material Manifestations in the Solidarity Economy), the reverberations of the Blues through economic production are investigated. The cooperative development approaches of activist Fannie Lou Hamer are explored as foundations for modern co-operative enterprise networks, like Cooperation Jackson. The broader implications for co-operative networks are also examined. The chapter concludes with a final examination of the Blues as an embodied ethical practice, constructed for transformation – contextualizing the Blues tradition within larger 'desires of alterity' (Tuck, 2009; Rice, 2020). In this context, the Blues is seen as an artistic protest that cultivates resistance and crafts radical resurgence in the face of fascist and authoritarian gravitational structures (Simpson, 2017; Jones, 2015).

2.   The Hapticity of the Blues

In August Wilson's 1985 (82) play Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, the Blues Queen declares: "[Blues is] life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life." The assertion points to how the Blues has formed a musical and linguistic foundation for a myriad of other technical styles, from jazz to heavy metal and country, but also how it has functioned as a root structure for other art forms, from poetry to theatre and film (Wald, 2010: 76, 95, 122–123; Barlow, 1989: 337; Jones, 2015: 3). The affirmation makes another assertion: the Blues can function not only as a foundational methodology for art, but also as a process for broader understanding. In the previous lines of Wilson's script (1985: 82), Ma Rainey points out that "white people hear [the Blues] come out, but they don't know how it got there", framing the tradition as a unique and complex form of intelligence. Recognizing a classic 12-bar Blues chord, or a pattern of call-and-response, is the 'hearing', something anyone can readily grasp. The 'how it got there' is the embodied practice, a deeper and different endeavour entirely.

Any unique form of intelligence comes with its own epistemology and ontology, culture, and methodology. But most critically, any intelligence needs its own generative processes for emergence and resurgence – an embodied ethical practice for (re)production (Baraka, 1999: xii; Simpson, 2017: 151, 161). These generative processes require recognition to function, a "taking notice as sound" (Simpson, 2017: 181), or 'registration of frequency' (Campt, 2018). Reflection/self-recognition and reciprocal recognition are both modes of affirmative connection that can function as essential practices for building relationality (Simpson, 2017: 182, 185; Davis, 2008: 54). Critical recognitive practices of relationality are distinct from secular or humanist critiques of capitalism (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 253; Jones, 1963: 4–7; Liboiron, 2021). Black feminist theorist and visual culture analyst, Tina Campt (2018),

argues that 'Black artistic frequency', both visual and musical, fundamentally critiques infrastructures of aggregation and extraction through both modes of recognition. In the case of reciprocal recognition, hapticity – emotional labor across difference and/or precarity (Campt, 2018), is required. This emotional labor works simultaneously with semiotic, social, and material flows. Hapticity creates restorative intimacy, not empathy, but a continual algorithmic network of creativity. Building these "collective arrangements of enunciation" (Guattari, 2008: 160) are critical to constructing the articulation necessary for emergence to develop (DeLanda, 2016: 103–109).

2.1. Haptic Polyphony

The complex relational processes of the Blues help build a creative web of enunciation (Murphy, 2018; LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 247): from the individual technical constructions of performers to the wider alter-collectives that provide the "how it got there" aspects of Ma Rainey's statement. This web of enunciation was often a direct effect of the nomadic practices of artists, who travelled frequently, sometimes internationally, gaining new techniques from local music scenes (Wald, 2010: 76). Artist collaborations across geographies were common and the mentoring of fledgling musicians always involved a mutual process of learning (Woods, 2017: 170–171; Jones, 2015). This haptic socialization creates a conscious sense of collective emotional experience and a distinctive Blues milieu within this algorithmic network of creativity.

Blues hapticity also manifests in polyphonic musical structure. Blues polyphony – the multi-part, simultaneous, hetero-rhythmic, and non-parallel nature of the music – is a central part of the Blues' distinct practice (Arom, 1991: 37–39; Wald, 2010: 12, 36). Polyphony is a woven phenomenon: a dynamic bricolage of fibrillating molecular beats and percussive patterns, along with interjected sound (Davis, 2008: 59). Polyphony is a global musical phenomenon (Arom, 1991; Levitin, 2006: 13, 39). Specifically, traditional African music always functions with at least two rhythms, with wide variations in additive multiplicity across the continent (Davis, 2008: 58; Arom, 1991: 23). Black diasporic musical genres, like the Blues, often draw from West African traditions of polyrhythm, as well as motifs like call-and-response (Davis, 1998: 136; Davis, 2008: 58). In the widespread African practice (Arom, 1991: 23), a lead vocalist sings a line and other people around them reply, either echoing or singing a responsive phrase. Replies can be crafted with not only other people, but also instruments (Wald, 2010: 12–15; Campt, 2018).

This polyphonic enunciation was often viewed as a hostile force. Harry Anslinger, heading the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in the 1930s, viewed jazz and the Blues as direct threats to American society. Black artistic approaches represented 'anarchy' and their collaborative production methods were "a form of mongrelism": an unsanctioned mixing of cultures that could not be tolerated. As he put it, "the unbelievably ancient indecent rites of the East Indies are resurrected in the black man's music" (cited in Hari, 2015: 18). This was also a common fear among early colonialists.

They feared "amalgamations", or "syncretisms", between Old and New World cultures and races" (Allewaert, 2013: 18). The non-hierarchical cooperation, critical reflection, and flexibility seen in relational ethics like the Blues invokes a sort of terror. Ethics of relationality are horrifying to authoritarian regimes and cultures founded on sociologies of individualism (Allewaert, 2013: 6, 10–19; Hari, 2015: 18). Despite Anslinger's intentions of using the narcotics bureau for the eradication of this syncretic culture, tracking and jailing artists proved to be incredibly expensive. Blues and jazz networks were extremely difficult to penetrate since they were non-hierarchical, making tracing costly and often futile (Albertson, 2003: 54–55; Davis, 1998: 162–163). Haptic socialization wasn't just a force of cultural protection, but also physical protection.

2.2. Education and Maintenance

Distributed collaboration and polyrhythmic production require treating learning as a mutual process. Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (2015: 48) refers to this type of knowledge production and educational practice as 'dialogical learning'. Freire argues that dialogue indicates a certain kind of epistemology that emphasizes relationships – the foundation of recognition (Simpson, 2017: 185; Campt, 2018). Dialogue and collaboration in this view is a specific kind of participatory and relational knowing, not just a tactic (Freire & Macedo, 1995: 379). With this shift, the fundamental goal becomes creating a process of learning and knowing that involves theorizing about shared experience. This type of intelligence requires community. Dialogical learning acknowledges that knowing is not merely individualistic, but also social and inherently collaborative (Freire, 2015).

An embodied practice carries this idea further. Theory isn't merely intellectual, but material, emotional, relational, contextual, and personal – incorporating rhythms of the surrounding environment. Learning is 'from and with' oneself, the environment, and the community (Simpson, 2017: 150–151). Feminist scholar Angela Davis (1998: 57) views this as one of the most compelling aspects of Blues epistemology, it affirms community without negating individual feelings. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990: 214) echoes this, noting that Blues intelligence provides the possibility of production that suppresses neither the individual at the expense of general welfare, nor feelings at the expense of empiricism. This duality moves away from status quo colonial intelligence (Simpson, 2017: 149, 195).

Enacting and maintaining a different intelligence from the status quo requires and creates alter-collectivities: different infrastructures, metabolic patterns, webs of relation, and densities of enablement (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 249; Murphy, 2018: 109, 116, 119). The recognitive hapticity for enactment and maintenance can vary in form. Red River Metis scholar Michelle Murphy (2018: 121–124) outlines three recognitive practices that are key to the emergence and resurgence of an intelligence system, along with its associated alter-collectivities: 1) care of infrastructures; 2) generative refusal; 3) speculative futurity. Infrastructures redistribute and

circulate densities, whether affective or material. As future-making projects (Murphy, 2018: 121), they are key to transformation (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 245; Guattari, 2008: 163). Without the restorative intimacy of hapticity and alimentary infrastructure, other forms of infrastructure and cultural matrixes whither and lose effectiveness over time (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 245; McDougall, 2011: 76). To effectively critique infrastructures of aggregation and extraction, rejection of the status quo must be combined with the creation of possibility – a generative refusal. Black artistic frequencies like the Blues require restorative processes, like hapticity and alimentary infrastructure, to maintain such refusals (Campt, 2018; Jones, 2015: 17). Linking rejection to the creation of possibilities propels speculative futurity. This "imagination of flourishing, despite disposability" (Rice, 2020; Campt, 2018) is what makes a haptic intelligence like the Blues a radical ethical practice.

3.   Utopia as Method and Incursion

Poet and critical theorist Amiri Baraka (1999: xi–xii) asserts that deeper understandings of the underlying intelligence and embodied ethical practice of the Blues are still needed. Critical reconstructions are required. Levitas' (2013: 37, 217) utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution offers a useful starting point, providing an approach for exploring all aspects of alter-collective recognition. Imaginary Reconstitution builds a matrix for organizing affective energy (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 79, 82; Guattari, 2008: 164; Gabel & Kennedy, 1984), creating a 'cultural synaesthesia' that contributes to the imagining and enunciation of radical change. Cultural synaesthesia provides a 'cultural DNA' – a matrix for organizing the socio-diversity of cultural and affective information within a particular community (McDougall, 2011: 64–65). This synaesthesia gives a coherence to efforts for deeper understanding.

Cultural and affective (re)construction is a necessity for speculative futurity (Belcourt & Nixon, 2018). As a productive force (Greene, 1995: 5; Turino, 2008: 17), art has the capacity to assist with synaesthesia and channelling 'desires of alterity' (Tuck, 2009). Art facilitates the shifting of perception and perspective, enabling world-building, and generating novel patterns of action (Kertz-Welzel, 2022). Operationalizing the key elements of the Blues and the alter-collectivities of Black artistic frequency, through Imaginary Reconstitution, can build a critical reconstruction of Blues epistemology's distinct embodied ethical practice. The reconstruction also highlights how Blues sensibilities permeate movements for cultural and economic change.

3.1.   Utopia as Incursion

Levitas (2013: xi, 17) argues that every utopia is a dynamic process, with the capacity to create an opportunity for a holistic exploration of limitations and possibilities – a key part of problem-solving and generative encodement. Defining utopia as a process, instead of a classification or goal, allows utopia to function as a method for hapticity. It contributes stability to the continual algorithmic problem-solving taking place

in any network of creativity. Haptic creativity requires an 'epiphanic quality' (Levitas, 2013: 14, 39, 186) or daybreak (Simpson, 2017: 193): an 'intersubjective zap' (Gabel & Kennedy, 1984: 4, 31–32). The intersubjective zaps of hapticity make shared understanding possible. This "mutual recognition on a meta-plane of reciprocity" (Gabel, 2015) builds utopian energy and makes imagination possible. Linked to futurity and hapticity, utopia as method is not a static construction, but a connective process of incursion.

3.2. Blues by Utopian Method

The utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution is inherently critical and cyclical, using three distinctive modes: the archaeological mode, the ontological mode, and the architectural mode. These modes are not truly discrete (Levitas, 2013: 6–18, 153–154). They simply assist in shifting focal emphasis. Like a process of dynamic mapping (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 80; Simpson, 2017: 15–16), they are used in a provisional and reflexive manner, with looping being expected throughout.

3.2.1. Archeological Mode

In the archeological mode, excavations and reconstructions are conducted of both artifacts and cultures. The archaeological mode is a critical bricolage, with explorations into contradictions and dualities (Levitas, 2013: 154; Simpson, 2017: 201). Excavating the utopian infrastructures of the Blues requires investigating the *lyrics* of the genre as a form of critical communication. The Blues has provided an important means of information infrastructure, particularly when open discussion could lead to swift retaliation in the censorship regimes of the plantation class (Du Bois, 1935). The genre became an alternative form of transmission, analysis, interaction, moral intervention, and critical observation (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1998; McGinley, 2014). Lyrical texts were reinforcing structures for building a composite view of American society from the bottom. They functioned as integral forms of cultural opposition. Keeping with African custom, these texts were not linear, but circular and indirect in their discourse (Barlow, 1989: 325; Wright, 1971: 333–334). Spoken word was used as an endogenous catalyst for claiming and shaping African American culture (Barlow, 1989: 326).

Blues critiques the socio-economic status quo by centering on the voices and experiences of the most affected. Blues singers frequently operated as "organic intellectuals" (Carby, 1998: 476). The lyrical discourse both fractures the dominant language and unveils the hidden realities of the marginalized, making it an inherently oppositional system of explanation (Woods, 2017: 16–17, 39). Performers functioned within a liminal space, where they were doing both entertainment work as well as cultural work – escape and fantasy weren't the goal (Carby, 1998: 475; Davis, 1998: 28–29). Blueswomen often articulated and embodied the social relations of their existence, as well as the contradictions of Black displacement. For example, Bessie Smith wrote and sang several songs about imprisonment, such as "*Jail House Blues*", "*Work House Blues*", "*Sing Sing Prison Blues*", and "*Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair*"

(Woods, 2017: 166). Tensions between critical communication and market drivers meant that the goal of cultural work often came into conflict with the profit goals of record companies. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's song "Chain Gang Blues", critiquing the convict leasing system, had to be edited for recording. Lyrics pointing to the inordinately long sentences for African Americans committing petty crimes, or breaking Black Codes, were removed from the song (Davis, 1998: 102–103).

3.2.2. Ontological Mode

The ontological mode eschews a search for paradise (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 82; Levitas, 2013: 180). Ontology speaks at the level of affect, desire, and normativity – normative ways of being and ways of being otherwise (Levitas, 2013: 177). Making space for exploring ethical embodied practices diminishes the distance between ordinary moves of (re)production and extraordinary moves of change and transformation (Levitas, 2013: 189; Simpson, 2017: 150–152). Focused on orders of social relations, connective processes are a central concern (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 83). ***Improvisations*** and the involvement of the audience made Blues a collective art form, with supportive interjection, as well as kinetic call-and-response exchanges (Davis, 1998: 56–57; Campt, 2018). These interactions achieved catharsis, euphoria, transcendence, and social bonding (Barlow, 1989: 327) – building long-term collective memories, consciousness, and deepened solidarity (Davis, 1998: 58). Similarly, ***soundscapes*** were important methods for evoking tonal memories and creating an immersive context. Blues songs were composed with screams and hollers, along with sounds of movement, pain, ecstasy, violence, weather, animals, and machinery. Tonal chords and polyrhythms could be stacked as fluid locomotions, crafting an energy release for musical tension (Woods, 2017: 288). Pioneers of these methods included performers like Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Muddy Waters, and Billie Holiday. These techniques all created specific and purposeful dissonance that possessed a subversive character (Barlow, 1989: 325; Wald, 2010).

Self-expressive performance offered Blues artists another way to hold articulative and emergent capacity. Expressions of the pain of grinding poverty, the frustration of constant stress, as well as the joy of family or community could be fully expressed (Woods, 2017: 36). Mannerisms, dancing, and calculated cadences were used to enhance communication with the audience, while developing a unique artistic voice (Barlow, 1989: 326). Blues artists developed carefully crafted personas that pushed against constraining acceptability politics. These personas allowed Blues performers to seize on artistic flamboyance and act on their fantasies (McGinley, 2014: 66). With outfits that featured pearls, gold, feathers, and rhinestones, Black female Blues artists represented a sharp contrast to the one-dimensional and docile Black heroes that were often created by and for white culture. Their aesthetic experimentations often challenged standard images of Black performers, while stretching the collective imaginations of Black culture (Barlow, 1989: 327–328; Davis, 1998: 38, 137).

3.2.3. Architectural Mode

In contrast to the archeological mode of critique, utopia in the architectural mode centers speculating alternative possibilities. Focused on the materiality and construction of transformation, the mode addresses the transformation of wants, satisfactions, and needs (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 83; Levitas, 2013: 218). Alter-collectivities are central and act as matrix of 'synergetic satisfiers'. Synergetic satisfiers – forms of Being, Having, Doing, and Interacting (Max-Neef, Elizalde, & Hopenhayn, 1992: 24–28) – can both address needs while also stimulating and contributing to other requirements. The attention to 'satisfiers' shifts away from the interest in 'wants' that is common in traditional economics, (Smith & Max-Neef, 2013: 143, 172–187): actively building a modified constellation of normativity (Levitas, 2013: 179; Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 27, 163; Simpson, 2017: 218).

The 'polyphonic utopian model' (Campbell, 2021: 44, 50) of the Blues manifests itself in the collective ideas of flourishing that reverberate through Blues production. Blueswomen were often prolific entrepreneurs, developing Blues networks as starting points for diverse careers in dance, film, and theatre (Lewis, 2022). Performances by Black female artists were critical for the economic survival of large populations of personnel, a rare situation in the late 1800s and early 1990s (Davis, 1998: 137). When viewed in the context of Blues dialogue and collaboration, these practices of female Blues artists speak to a deeply lived understanding of how social and economic production are one dynamic (Hall & Chimurenga, 2017: 199). Their networks of production highlight how everyday actions and processes can craft micro utopias.

Levitas (2013: 214) notes that the term 'architectural' is hotly debated in academic discussions of utopia: the idea of 'architecture' in the context of futurity may be too restrictive. The use of the term 'architecture' constrains imagination to the realm of blueprints and actions of command, normalizing dominance and nonconsent (Simpson, 2017: 161) – a direct opposition to the idea of hapticity. Making is about the processes of formation, the flows and transformations, not just the final products (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 377). Creative moments of generation are followed by analytical moments of interrogation (Levitas, 2013: 198). These two moments together create a form of generative refusal that emphasizes emergent futurity. With futurity as an emergent state, the generative mode of utopia becomes musical, not architectural (Unger, 2007: 117).

4. Building Polyrhythmic Assemblages of Desire

As a framework that emphasizes connective processes, assemblage theory is particularly useful as a medium for further enhancing the understanding of the Blues' polyphonic utopian model. The term 'assemblage' is an imprecise translation of the French word 'agencement', which translates to "in specific connection with" (Phillips, 2006: 108). Components in an assemblage have their own materiality and expressions. They can also be a part of different assemblages, at different scales

(DeLanda, 2016: 75). Connections are given priority. The interactions and relationships between component/entities provide the nature and capacity for an assemblage to act upon semiotic, material, and social flows (Assis, 2021: 17–20; Campbell, 2021: 44–47). An assemblage acts as a 'relay concept' (Assis, 2021: 11–12): it is a linking mechanism – an interplay between organization and continuous change (Venn, 2006: 107). Thus, complexity is an inherent factor in assemblage theory. An assemblage is not an agglomeration (DeLanda, 2016: 9–11, 20, 43; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 327–337). The inherently connective nature of hapticity and artistic frequencies, as well as the ontological focus of the utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution, make assemblage theory an effective avenue for moving past structuring the architectural to weaving the musical.

4.1. Assemblage Theory and the Chemistries of Blues Polyphony

To manage this complexity, assemblages are often viewed as a tetravalent ecology (Assis, 2021: 12–16; Stover, 2021: 60–61). Here, valence is used in the chemical sense of the word (Stover, 2021: 57): an element's ever-shifting capacity to bond with other elements. Valence is an ever-changing relationality. It operates in the rhizomatic connections that are the center of assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 6–7, 505–6). The tetravalent nature of an assemblage is represented with two axes: Content and expression are represented on one axis, with [re]territorialization and deterritorialization represented on the other. The four forces act upon each other, creating an ongoing milieu (Stover, 2021: 55).

4.1.1. Content & Expression: Connecting Counterculture and Encoding Collaboration

Content and ***expression*** have a transversal relationship. Content includes both material and immaterial entities, as well as actions – a proliferating matrix of currents, bonds, and nodes. The 'sympoietic acts' (Stover, 2021: 62) occurring between components/bodies produce more content. Expression encapsulates the production and enunciation of currents: the regimes of signs, codes, and logics, along with their incorporeal transformations. Their axis maps a series of distributive relays (Stover, 2021: 63; DeLanda, 2016: 74). This relay between content and expression produces a unique frequency.

At the technical level, this relay can be seen in the improvisational elements of Blues polyphony like intercutting, counterpoints, or call-and-response. Expressive singularities constantly punctuate and embellish, even as rhythmic syncing occurs. Intercutting and syncopating components form the foundation of hapticity and broader sociality of Black artistic frequency (Campt, 2018). At the level of performance, the queer aesthetics and ***articulation*** of many blueswoman point to another synergistic relay of content and expression (Lewis, 2022). Blues artists like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Gladys Bentley, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters highlighted their sexual orientation in ways that were impossible in other mediums

during the period – building intersectional counterhegemony into their routines and lyrics (Lewis, 2022; Jones, 2015: 11–13). For example, Rainey famously composed "*Prove It on Me Blues*" in 1928, referencing her arrest for throwing an illegal queer 'indecent party', and using lyrics to flaunt queer independence (Phillips, 2020; Davis, 1998: 39). This lyrical content was mixed with a very particular aesthetic articulation, making use of drag king expression. Her distributor, Paramount Entertainment, used an advert that showed Rainey in men's suiting, blatantly attempting to seduce two women on a street corner, in front of police (Albertson, 2003:117–116; Halberstam, 1997: 113). Both the rejection of traditional gender roles through entrepreneurship, and blatant exploration of sexuality, point to the primordial role of the Blues in Black radical feminism (Davis, 1998: xix-xx). Counterculture and transgressive relays were deeply embedded into the emergence of Black alter-collectivities.

Expression through improvisation is also an important mechanism for polyphonic coding. **Coding** is a manifestation of values, survival, and goals. It helps maintain distinctiveness, creates narratives, and provides protective opaqueness (DeLanda, 2016: 38; Simpson, 2017: 209). Polyphony functions as a maintenance mechanism through its profound effects on both performers and audience members. Jazz improvisation stimulates and builds different neurological areas and pathways than classical performance. Solo improvisations temporarily deactivate areas of the brain responsible for monitoring and correcting goal-oriented behavior. Targeted pattern-breaking occurs, suggesting that 'letting go' is an important part of building new frameworks. The 'trading fours' common in Blues and jazz improvisation, where musicians take turns doing solos, is processed by the brain in the same way as complex verbal conversation (Sherman & Plies, 2023: 36–39; Keltner, 2023: 155). Over time, structural networks in the brain are altered (Sherman & Plies, 2023: 49). This result is seen in frequent listeners as well (Levitin, 2006: 238–239). The nervus system and the dopaminergic circuitry registers the music as an experience of reciprocity (Dana, 2018: 88–90, 2023: 75): opening our consciousness to exploration (Keltner, 2023: 152), and simulating complex problem-solving (Davis, 2008: 59). Simulations of collaborative and active decision-making encode a different type of ethic and understanding at fundamental levels (Jones, 2015: 3).

4.1.2. Deterritorialization and [Re]territorialization: Destabilization through Conjunction

The other axis of *[re]territorialization* and *deterritorialization* are frequently simultaneous or cyclical, not linear. Old normativity breaks as a new one forms. Both create boundaries. They are organizing practices with the capacity to sort new materials and facilitate routine (DeLanda, 2016: 38). Territorialization/[re]territorialization is a form of provisional *differentiation* and stabilization. Territorialization can occur from both conjunction and disjunction of relationships. This is also true for deterritorialization. It does not just occur through the disjunction of relationships, but also the articulation of new ones (Stover, 2021: 63; DeLanda, 2016: 160). As the mutuality-based learning processes in the Blues genre demonstrate, conjunctions can destabilize as well.

Conjunction as deterritorialization also highlights how necessary deterritorializations can be for novelty (180 Studio, 2020: 189–191; Davis, 1998: 136).

By featuring perspectives like convict leasing and migrant work, while also highlighting the concerns of Black women of all sexualities, the Blues set the foundation for a feminism that puts marginalized women at the center of economic thought (Davis, 1998: x; Hall & Chimurenga, 2017: 199). In contrast, the African American elite used a particular type of exclusionary community building: territorializations featured bourgeois coercions of sexual purity and strict conceptualizations of "true womanhood" – linking an inherent inferiority to poverty (Davis, 1998: 38–44, 65). The Blues threatened the "uplift ideology" of the Black elite, which required upholding ideas about respectability and maintaining a private nuclear family unit (McGinley, 2014: 22, 48–49).

The response to this threat often surfaced as a critique of soundscapes and lyrics, with these elements being labelled as "abrasive" and "ignorant" (Barlow, 1989: 327), or "incomprehensible", and "unacceptable" (Hari, 2015: 18). Policing linguistics allows for the maintenance of territorialization, and the suffocation of diverse discourses and perspectives. It also renders social inequality invisible by disassociating lyrics from their socioeconomic critique (Freire, 2015; Woods, 2017: 33–34). Blues artists were well aware of their exclusion from the realm of elite Black communities (Davis, 1998: 172). Blues challenges the assumption that knowledge and language should be clear and easily consumable to those near the top of socio-economic hierarchy (Freire, 2015; Woods, 2017: 289). Incommensurability shouldn't be viewed as an inherently damaging development in coding. Differentiation and transformation require a level of incommensurability to be truly generative. Michif scholar and environmental scientist Max Liboiron (2021: 136–137, 156) notes that some level of incommensurability can be highly productive, often acting as a key aspect of generative refusal. The Blues genre requires engagement, not consumption, which indicates drastically different ideologies and schema. Exclusion compelled the territorialization of alter-collectivities with different dynamics of haptic collectivity (Davis, 1998: 44), building utopian visions that were in direct opposition to elite futurity (Carby, 1998: 472).

4.2. Mapping Processes with a Utopian Assemblage Matrix

To be considered an assemblage, an interacting network of entities must exhibit both '**relations of exteriority**' and '**emergence**'. Both defining processes assist in building a healthy tension between stabilization and change within the tetravalent field (DeLanda, 2016: 11–20, 88). Emergence, the dynamic process of development or evolution, generally includes a lifecycle: 1) the formation of a network through shared meaning and purpose; 2) formations of hubs that act as communities of practice; 3) the development of systems of influence; 4) normalization of new practices and values – a new normativity (Wheatley & Frieze, 2006; Holley, 2012). Relations of exteriority are the autonomous interactions of components – the agency and autonomy of component entities to build new connections or change the nature

of existing connections (Allewaert, 2013: 119; DeLanda, 2016: 10, 33, 73). These two core processes form points of intensity, or spaces of rest. They are represented through the background shading in Figure 1. Both processes are a feature during periods of territorialization/reterritorialization, as well as deterritorialization.

Figure 1: A Utopian Assemblage Matrix
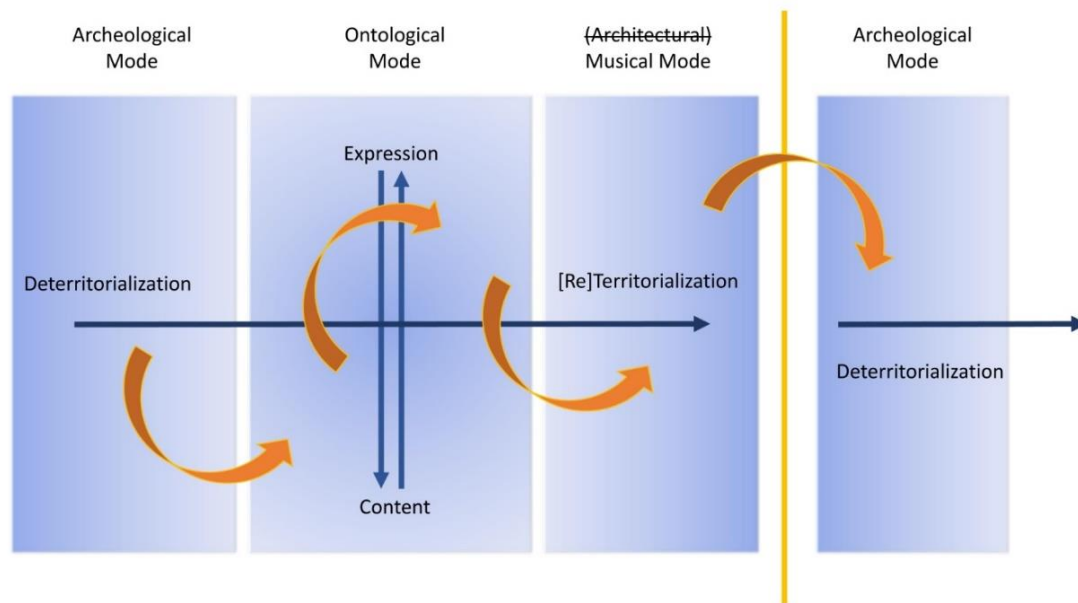
Source: The construction of a utopian assemblage matrix, with a rhythm of consciousness visualized as a wave, meeting concentrated areas of sensemaking. A representation of assemblage tetravalence is imposed upon Levitas' (2013a) utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution. This configuration functions as a representation of the (re)production of Black artistic frequency of the Blues occurring through ethical embodied practice.

While the tetravalence of assemblages is often expressed with content and expression on the x-axis (Assis, 2021: 16; Stover, 2021: 60–61), in this case deterritorialization and [re]territorialization are placed on the x-axis. This maintains the processual and cyclical nature of the utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution. Only one full cycle is represented, but the beginning of another is placed to hold onto the iterative nature of the dual processes at work.

4.2.1. Emergence and Hapticity: A Creative Commons

Emergence, with its heightened moments of consciousness, often drives contextual understanding and sensemaking, working symbiotically with haptic interaction more broadly. These points of intensity symbolize spaces where a strong ethos, or a sense of "right relations" (Liboiron, 2021: 122–124), can be crafted. Emergence is just as important to deterritorialization and analytical discovery as it is to the formation of practice. The wavelike nature of these heightened encounters is depicted in Figure 1's twisting arrows, building the woven attributes of Black artistic frequency into the overall matrix. Network density, the degree to which entities are linked together, is a critical emergent property. This is important to assemblages forming synergetic properties (DeLanda, 2016: 10–11). Additionally, feedback loops are important parts of sensemaking and thus central to emergence, providing necessary information

gathering and transfer. System boundaries are also equally important for learning, regeneration, and information stabilization (180 Studio, 2020: 179–180; Stover, 2021: 58). These conditions and properties flow from reciprocal relationships, thus hapticity is a key part of emergence. For the necessary co-presence to occur, an expenditure of attention and emotional labor is required (DeLanda, 2016: 28; Campt, 2018).

On the micro scale, this expenditure of attention can also be seen in Blues elements like the counterpoint. Counterpoints are loosely structured exchanges between vocalists and/or instruments. These exchanges can be melodic or rhythmic, building a musical bricolage of relationships (Arom, 1991: 41–43; Wald, 2010: 14–17). Counterpoints require deep listening. As a form of improvisation, their high expenditure of attention utilizes neurological activations for complex problem-solving, a different set of neurological pathways from musical composition (Sherman & Plies, 2023: 49). On the macro scale, reciprocity and relational labor can be seen in the intellectual property norms. Blues songs were never considered the personal property of their composers or performers. A Blues song written or sung by one performer, could be heard, remembered, revised, and sung by someone else (Carby, 1998). Following African diaspora oral traditions (Davis, 1998: 136), songs were treated as collective property and disseminated through touring musical groups and festivals, in a similar fashion to folktales (McGinley, 2014: 23). Styles, knowledge, and methods of critique and resistance could be pooled. The socialization aspects of sharing worked in tandem with dialogical learning, creating a sort of creative commons.

4.2.2. Relations of Exteriority: Fugitivity within the Break

The singularities that characterize relations of exteriority allow for moments of rearticulation. Evolution is impossible without these diverse exterior relations and contrapuntal interventions (DeLanda, 2016: 62; Simpson, 2017: 163–165). Valence is a critical mechanism of exterior relationality. Valence is affected by new relational conjunctions. Assemblages are never totalizing. No matter how stabilized an assemblage has become, events and diverse exterior relations can always lead to recompositing or deterritorialization. The possibility of fugitivity and alternative 'paths of flight' (DeLanda, 2016: 128) are always present. Black artistic frequency functions through polyvalent relationality (180 Studio, 2020: 189–191; Campt, 2018): exterior relationality is just as critical as established internal patterns of relation (Jones, 2015: 203). Again, these processes are seen at both the micro and macro scale: within the macro socioeconomic critiques in lyrics and countercultural performances, as well as within the micro scale of compositional elements like the break.

If counterpoints are a lively and complex conversation, a break is an unexpected interjection. Breaks are the intense "syncopated 'off-beat' lines" that crisscross and interfere with the previously established rhythms (Davis, 2008: 61; DeFrantz, 2010: 31). They are the crossroads of a performance, adding vital liminal spaces into established patterns (Jones, 2015: 11). Polyrhythm relies on the multiplicity of possibilities that breaks provide. 'Positive shocks' of moderate frequency enhance creativity by creating

new ties in an existing network, altering communities of practice (Soda et al., 2021: 1174). In a problem-solving scenario, even interjections that would be considered 'useless' or 'incompetent' have advantageous effects, producing benefit cascades (Shirado & Christakis, 2017: 373). Any interjection forces a change in pattern dynamic, while enhancing the reliability and overall speed of functional solution discovery. Breaks provide the cascades to give paths of flight necessary kinetic energy. This chemistry defines what pathways are supported and/or desirable and which are not (Levitas, 2013a: 177). The polyvalence within alter-collectivities builds constellations of co-resistance, allowing paths of flight through inward reflection, or through outward generative refusal. The networked fugitivity within these constellations is the foundation of both futurity and transformation (Simpson, 2017:212–217; Stover, 2021: 73; Martineau, 2015).

5.   Discussion: Material Manifestations in the Solidarity Economy

With its critical engagement against status quo socioeconomics, the Blues has always had a countercultural economic perspective. However, the 'axiology-in-practice' of the genre opens its own unique opportunities for economic transformation and futurity. The dialogical engagement and mutuality that ground Blues ethic have reverberations that reach far beyond artistic production (Hall & Chimurenga, 2017: 199; Woods, 2017: 218). Like Blues production, co-operative production requires various forms of haptic interaction. Co-operative principles like 'concern for community', 'education and training', and 'cooperation among cooperatives' (International Co-operative Alliance, 2021) all work to enhance social relationships. Sociologist Michael Gertler (2006: 2, 10) argues that co-operatives have a dual nature: they are both enterprises and associations, functioning as a synergetic satisfier. Thus, they require 'axiology-in-practice' just like the Blues. The creative commons and dialogical learning style seen in Blues production indicate possible ways to enhance the effectiveness of the associative aspects within co-operative production.

The reverberations and active utilization of the Blues ethic can be seen in Black development projects. Historically, co-operative organizations and communal land have been integral parts of the African American resistance to racism, economic injustice, and state paternalism (Woods, 2017: 38; Nembhard, 2014). In the 1970s, Fannie Lou Hamer built on this co-operative legacy by forming the Freedom Farm in Mississippi (Lee, 2000). The Freedom Farm focused on cultivating community sovereignty. The purpose of the farm was to address the needs of African Americans and the rural working-class who were displaced by increased mechanization of agricultural production. Hamer's development organization established structures and processes for community farming initiatives, cooperative housing, and cooperative enterprise incubation. Seed banks and livestock exchanges were created. At its peak, the cooperative had 680 acres of land devoted to cotton production, a daycare center, 200 units of affordable housing, and a garment-manufacturing plant. The approach allows for the development of the entire community, rather than the creation

of monopolistic hierarchies that control relationships and exchange (Hamer et al., 2011: 141). The legacy of the farm continues in Mississippi through modern projects like Cooperation Jackson (Davidson, 2017: 140–141), which builds organizational capacity, autonomous power, and material self-sufficiency through land trusts and community assemblies (Akuno, 2015: 2). The organization focuses on the same imaginations of 'just transition' as Hamer's Freedom Farm (Akuno, et al., 2022). These initiatives and exchanges build a territorialization based on connection, crafting alter-collectivities designed to enhance haptic capacity and visions of futurity.

The application of this type of relational ethic can scale to much larger projects. Started in 1956, the Basque co-operative network Mondragón has made use of relational frameworks to drive their competitive strategy of continuous innovation (MacLeod & Reed, 2009: 111). Mondragón includes 81 co-operatives and 12 R&D centers, with 70,000 members and 104 plants in 37 countries – with organizations ranging from automobile and technological production to university and technical school training, along with retail and agricultural production (Mondragón Corporation, 2024). The Mondragon Complex has a co-operative development bank called the Caja Laboral Popular. For a co-operative firm to use Caja's financial, analytical, and business development services, a contract of association must be established (Thomas & Logan, 1982). The Caja functions as an important form of financial alimentary structure, with finance being viewed as an instrument of transformation. At least 10% of yearly revenue is spent on community projects and cultural education (Thomas & Logan, 1982: 25). In addition, Mondragón has moved to 'network-of-teams' models (MacLeod & Reed, 2009; Thomas & Logan, 1982). The approach focuses on team-based production that facilitates participation, multi-disciplinary interaction, autonomy, and shared responsibility/leadership (MacLeod & Reed, 2009: 128–129). Using innovation strategies like these make use of the same mechanisms at work in Blues improvisation, shifting the cognitive pathways at work and changing the ecosystem in which production occurs. The lived experience of collaboration, whether in work or community, allows for a shift from viewing resources as scarce, to working on increasing resource supply in a collective manner (Gertler, 2006: 9; McMurtry, 2009: 72–73).

With the growing size of the social economy, strategies to realize unique 'axiology-in-practice' become even more critical. The social economy now makes up 2% of global GDP, with a reported annual revenue of over $95 trillion USD. The sector is now larger than the apparel industry and almost twice the size of the advertising industry (Bonnici et al., 2024: 10). As the sector expands, haptic infrastructure must match pace. North Carolina's State Employees Credit Union is an excellent example of successful scaling. The credit union has built large-scale alimentary structures using dedicated volunteer staff and grassroots movement tactics. The organization has 1.8 million members and gains around 85,000 members each year (Schlachter, 2012). The credit union has 244 groups made up of twelve-member units who engage the larger membership base on various issues and ideas. Regular dinners and potlucks, as well as phone banking are used to make sure each member is engaged directly at least once a year. This makes the process of engagement more distributed,

freeing up managers and the board to do other pressing work. It also enhances complex decision-making by providing critical information transfers. The dual nature of the social economy demands ethics become a woven practice: not just expression, but content; not just a critique, but generative refusal.

6.   Conclusion: Imagining Futurity Beyond Survival

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017: 228, 182) argues that "the act of presencing is the act of creating the future". 'Presencing' operationalizes 'desires of alterity' (Tuck, 2009; Rice, 2020). Philosopher Audre Lorde (2007) views this affective capacity as a core foundation of alter-collectivities. Creating a utopian assemblage matrix, by melding the utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution with assemblage tetravalence, is one method of presencing. Presencing the 'axiology-in-practice' of the Blues tradition illuminates the processes and structures that support the alter-collectivities of Black artistic frequencies. The Blues creates polysemic assemblages (DeFrantz, 2010: 33): layering rhythmic ideas, song, dance, scenery, props, and narrative. The woven bricolage of the Blues realizes relational epistemology and ethics through every scale.

The 'axiology-in-practice' of the Blues provides a framework for the creation and maintenance of cooperative endeavors. The Blues reframes cooperative labor as less 'economies of scale' and more as 'economies of network' (V. Zamagni, 2014: 197), putting co-operatives in a unique position to fortify distinctive economic connections. The relational nature of Blues epistemology permeates through technical production, performance, learning, as well as artist and audience engagement (Jones, 2015). Support of haptic labor happens at both the micro and the macro scale – from the protocols of improvisation to the principles of knowledge sharing. Breaks and interjections are the celebrated singularities of survival, not foreign invasions. Whether building the quiet euphoria of reflection or the loud euphoria of exuberance (Campt, 2018), Black artistic frequencies like the Blues provide one option for a foundation within which resurgence/emergence can flourish.

As mentioned previously, polyphony is a global phenomenon (Arom, 1991). The reverberations of polyphonic epistemology can be seen in a variety of arenas, far beyond radical Black artistic frequency and its echoes through conceptualizations of co-operative development. Critical relational approaches can manifest in movements for sustainability, like Bangladeshi movements for just transition that draw upon Nobopran Andolan oral and musical traditions for 'axiology-in-practice' (UBINIG, 2017). They can also manifest in approaches to data governance, like Māori organizations using the 'axiology-in-practice' of Tāonga to codesign distributed sovereign data infrastructure for census and environmental sustainability needs (Te KāHui Raraunga, 2022; Waatea, 2024). The diversity of methodologies speaks to the networked and musical nature of transformation and the utopian nature of human flourishing (Stover, 2021: 73).

Finding spaces for a relational 'grounded normativity' (Simpson, 2017: 182) and 'reality testing' (Hassan, 2022) becomes a pressing necessity in moments of authoritarianism (Ressa, 2022; Gessen, 2017). The 'integrity of consciousness/conscience' (Hassan, 2019: 225) is constantly violated for the manipulation of decision-making (Hassan, 2019: 87; Gessen, 2017). Authoritarian and fascist regimes are radiating gravitational structures of isolation (Hassan, 2019; Gessen, 2017). The effects are stark, whether someone is past the event horizon or merely in the plunging region (Alexander, 2016; Hassan, 2022). Reconnective experiences are the foundation of resistance: to fight a fascist surge, one must weave a relational mesh for the maintenance of physical and mental freedom (Hassan, 2019: 204; Ressa, 2022: 261–262). Here again, Mondragón is a valuable example. The organization was born in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, expanded in the crucible of Catholic Nationalism and the rise of Francisco Franco's authoritarian regime, and thrived through multiple recessions (Thomas & Logan, 1982: 17–34; MacLeod & Reed, 2009). Networked co-operation isn't just a workable foundation for survival, but also our best-known chance at paths of flight towards thriving.

If networks are to be the core driving force underlying self-organizing transformation, relational methodologies are required (Holley, 2012: 10, 177; Tuck, 2009). Through the Blues tradition, this chapter's utopian assemblage matrix works to bring relational methodology into the realm of co-operative 'axiology-in-practice'. Building and using this matrix merely begins a push towards the 'critical reconstructions' (Baraka, 1999: xii) that move closer to a resurgence of grounded normativity in the constellations of Black radical imagining (Simpson, 2017: 182, 192–193; Hill-Jarrett, 2023; Kidane & Mire, 2015). As the jazz saxophonist and physicist Stephon Alexander (2016: 9) aptly puts it, "Let us improvise".

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