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The Ethos of the Blues: An Ethnography of Blues Singers and Writers

Zoë Emilie Peterschild Ford
Bard College

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The Ethos of the Blues: An Ethnography of Blues Singers and Writers

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Zoë Emilie Peterschild Ford

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ABSTRACT

Dawn Tyler Watson, a blues singer based in Montreal, QC, performs a variety of genres. No matter what she performs, however, she continually expresses a blues ethos. Through improvisation and her resolute individuality Dawn writes and sings narratives always with a nod to the blues. What I call the “ethos of the blues” refers to a blues spirit that exists not only in music, but in literature, and in everyday life. Dawn’s practice reveals that blues is a music that values protective, generous, and exploratory narrative. As important as its storytelling quality is the genre’s Americanness. Blues, derived from a multitude of musical and cultural contexts—musics from and of the African diaspora come to bear on American life, American influence—lays at the foundation of American popular music. Blues as ethos aligns with the existentialism of American identity. Blues even acts *as* philosophy. I argue that Dawn—Canadian as she may be—registers the philosophical core of blues music in her performances and in her original compositions. This philosophical lens and literary quality of the blues makes Dawn not only a musician and vocalist but also a writer, an existentialist.

“All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.”

–Ernest Hemingway, *Esquire* (1934)

“Poetry, first of all, was, and still must be, a musical form. It is speech musicked... Just as Blues is, on one level, a verse form, so Black poetry begins as music running into words.”

–Amiri Baraka, *New Music–New Poetry* (1982)

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Introduction

I went to Montreal because I wanted to go somewhere that I had never been before, somewhere I had no ideas about. I went to Montreal to find music. On the second of three journeys north from New York I met a musician that opened a door to me— a practitioner of this most difficult trade, music— a musician to speak with about what, in fact, she does. Dawn Tyler Watson, blues singer, harmonica imitator, audience captivator, improviser extraordinaire. In this ethnographic exploration I engage Dawn and her writing (of songs and performances) in a conversation with other writers including Xam Wilson Cartiér and scholars such as Phillip Auslander, Tracy McMullen, and Robert O’Meally.

Montreal has a prominent jazz history, and I thought maybe there would still be some blues, too. Despite the numerous music awards for blues and jazz given throughout the province, and the genre’s prominence in written reports, I found blues hard to come by in Montreal. On my first trip north I heard all sorts of music from experimental electronic to screamo punk to French-Canadian reggae. The second time I went to Montreal my friend Alex took me to dinner at a restaurant hosting Dawn Tyler Watson’s Jazz Quartet that night. We saw their performance, and then I began to think of this project as an exploration of a blues singer and her stories, the narratives she weaves with her music and with her performances and herself. This ethnography represents, primarily through a case study of Dawn, blues singers as writers, improvisors, and negotiators of the music industry.

Dawn’s improvisation interested me from the first performance I saw, the way she led the crowd, the way she contorted her voice to sound like instruments, and her presence. I had been interested in blues as such a narrative music, and that first time I met Dawn, after the first show,

she told me she was— above all— a blues singer. And so she’s a writer too. Any teller of stories is a writer, too. Whether she’s singing a song she wrote or not, Dawn makes the music hers; it doesn’t sound like anyone else’s. She’s writing and it’s true¹. In her original music Dawn speaks autobiographically, but also as a songwriter stretches reality and creates fiction. She writes on classic blues themes but in a way totally her own. And that’s what blues is, at least to me.

Improvised individual narratives, whether in music or in being.

Dawn Tyler Watson, in concert, in the way she improvises a path through songs and between-song-banter, reminds me of fiction writer Xam Wilson Cartiér. Cartiér, a novelist of the jazz fiction genre, also speaks autobiographically through her narratives. Her two major novels, *Be-Bop, Re-Bop* (1987) and *Muse-Echo Blues* (1991), explore literature as a medium through which to produce music. Xam Cartiér looks to jazz and blues to guide the form and content of her narratives, as a spirit necessary to herself and her art; Dawn too.

Both Dawn and Xam mix fact and fiction in their expressions. I’m interested in the way autobiographical material meets the imagination to become something true to the artist. The way anything Dawn sings has a Dawn-spin on it, Xam’s writing could only ever be hers, too. But blues is so magical because of its individualism. Linda Dahl describes blues as a “personal commentary; tailored to suit the individual singer, and rough at the edges” (103). No two people sound like each other because no two stories are the same.

The connection between Dawn’s music and Xam’s writing is significant also because their art points to the fluidity of mediums. Dawn is a writer telling stories through her lyrics and vocalisms just as Xam is a musician in the lyric, melodic, rhythmic quality of her words. At the

¹ True in the way that Hemingway meant it.

same time, music and literature each have a particular relationship to popular culture, which means that these two artists' experiences of telling their stories differ entirely from each other.

Dawn and Xam both also take cues from the history of jazz and blues and the musicians and writers that preceded them. Dawn often alludes to older music when she performs, and Xam alludes to musicians and writers who came before her in prose. This reminds me of the way in which music and words—specifically in North American pop culture— influence each other and create each other, too. Artists have not only the historical past of their artform but also a larger cultural history and set of narratives. (The Beat poets would not have existed without Be Bop, and there's no Bob Dylan without Dylan Thomas.) We learn through older and other mediums. My work, too, of bringing these people together into a conversation in this paper, could not and would not have happened without Dawn, Xam, and a slew of other writers and musicians; it would not have happened without the progression of the discipline of ethnomusicology.

Robert O'Meally discusses in an essay a story from Ralph Ellison about learning to play the trumpet at a young age. A neighbor says basically that it would take time to be able to really say something on the horn, but that Ellison should try and imitate a blues singer, I guess both to try and learn those sounds specifically but also to know what it feels like to say something. And then as Ellison became a writer, that music permeated the words. His career as a provocative novelist hinges upon this relationship to music and the history of his discipline. In a similar way, Hunter S. Thompson, before he did any real writing of his own, copied manuscripts that Hemingway and Fitzgerald had written, just to know what it felt like to move over the typing keys and create something good and true. These fictional works influenced and commanded Thompson's journalistic style. Dawn's lyrics, but also her vocalisms, fashion narratives of their

own and express her life and they also point to past narratives of musicians and writers that lived and made art before her. Watching Dawn perform reminded me of the opacity of genre (the way you can't always tell what to call a music and how you shouldn't always try). In every music, in every narrative, is history.

Blues has a vocal quality that moves through any instrument playing it. The vocal quality adds to its narrative nature and makes the blues like oral poetry, lyrical poetry, and yet also like individual stories told that make up– and mark up– the everyday. According to Amiri Baraka in *Blues People*,

...blues, a vocal music, was made to conform to an instrument's range. But, of course, the blues widened the range of the instrument, too. Blues guitar was not the same as classical or "legitimate" guitar: the strings had to make vocal sounds, to imitate the human voice and its eerie cacophonies (Baraka 69-70).

Blues expanded the expectation for musicians to *say* something. Baraka reminds me that the lyrics in blues find echoes, like foils, in the sounds made to accompany them or in the sounds that drive a lyricless piece. Sometimes words and sounds say the same thing, and this idea from blues spiralled out into the popular music that the genre gave way to. An example that reaches far from classic blues– a Warren Zevon song– comes to mind. In "Billie Lee," from Zevon's *Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School* (1980), the refrain says "and sometimes I say things I shouldn't... like..." and then there's a harmonica riff. And this repeats. No words would do justice to the end of the phrase the way a lyricless melody would. He exemplifies in this line the necessary collaboration of words and music to express. Blues tells stories and uses voices like instruments and instruments like voices to add layers of felt meaning to these stories. Dawn's music tells stories and Xam's stories make music, and both are the blues. These "eerie cacophonies" are heard in both lyric and tone and they are the stories.

This paper addresses, through the example of Dawn, the symbiosis of literature and music, structural constraints and agentive outlets in the popular music industry, and the construction of musical narratives, both improvised and not. In the first chapter I will describe the trip I took to Montreal during which I first encountered Dawn, and I will discuss Tracy McMullen's themes of improvisation and generosity in jazz. In the second chapter I will address the second concert, a disco-oriented dance music set, as it relates to Phillip Auslander and expressions of personhood. In the third chapter I will talk about the third concert, a performance of Dawn's original music with an eight piece blues band, and Robert O'Meally's work on the connection between music and literature. When I first engaged this project the only thing I knew for sure was that it would connect with the blues. And it could have gone many ways. The first time I went to Montreal explicitly for this project, I had no idea of what I would find and what I would and could make of it. But Dawn and a highfalutin handful of scholars and writers and professors helped me along the way. This is how it unfolded. My project itself is an improvisation within a world of improvisation— the world of the blues.

Literature Preview

The scholarship that accompanies my fieldwork in Montreal has been pulled from several disciplines. The framework of this piece has been created from ethnomusicology, derived from anthropology, comparative musicology, folklorists; existentialism, combining philosophy and phenomenology; critical improvisation studies, a multidisciplinary field, framed in this piece out of music studies; cultural studies, which brings history, sociology, and anthropology together; and jazz and literature studies, comprehensive of blues and jazz in their sounded and written forms.

Existentialism

In Walter Kauffman's anthology of existentialist writings, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Kauffman begins by saying "existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy." He emphasizes, too, the immense difference in tenets when any three existentialists are asked to explain themselves². Just as with improvisation, as with the blues, existentialism defies definition. The trait that unites the existentialists through time and media is their "perfidious individualism" (Kauffman 11). I argue that the blues depends as dramatically on individualism as existentialism, as improvisation does. And the ethos of blues is existential: its mood, its Americanness. I argue that Dawn is an existentialist by virtue of being a blues musician.

² Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and Franz Kafka, for example, agreed on very little.

Kaufmann's emphasis on the malleability of existentialism lends itself to this idea of blues as a way of 'doing' philosophy. Moreover, to whatever degree existentialism is not just a branch of philosophy, so too the blues is much more than a category of musical practice.

The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life— that is the heart of existentialism (Kaufmann 12).

And so too the blues. Existentialism does not belong to any genre of scholarship, rather its ethos permeates work and art that defy categorization. Blues is existential because of its content, its sentiment, and its equal concern with individuality.

Critical Improvisation Studies

Tracy McMullen's work in critical improvisation studies informs my first chapter. McMullen— a professor, jazz musician, and composer— posits a theory of *improvisativity* to combat the problematic and almost self-effacing nature of Judith Butler's *performativity*. McMullen restructures Butler's concept of the self/Other to emphasize the self, favoring the term "generosity" instead of "recognition" to describe the relationship between the inner and the outer that occurs through improvisation. In her essay entitled "The Improvisative", Tracy McMullen outlines *improvisativity* and *generosity* as ways to reframe critical improvisation studies. I apply McMullen's terms to this ethnography as a way to discuss Dawn as a generous improviser, the degree to which her improvisation accompanies a negotiation of the popular music industry, and also how Dawn's improvisation is central to the ethos of the blues.

Cultural Studies

Phillip Auslander's work as a scholar of cultural studies, and a professor of performance studies and popular music studies, informed much of my thinking surrounding the personhood of a popular music performer, the focus of my second chapter. Auslander addresses the lack of musical sound in performance studies, and urges ethnographers to consider the complexity of personhood, of the performance of popular music, and the nonlinearity of ethnographic and musical time. Auslander's essay "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto" lends itself well to the second concert, a dance music set of soul, disco, R&B, and funk. I apply his development of Simon Frith's "layers of personhood" to Dawn and her audience at Le Balcon.

Jazz and Literature Studies

Writer and professor Robert O'Meally works primarily in the field of jazz and literature studies. O'Meally's anthology of essays, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, provides an inclusive view of jazz and its influence on American culture as a musical form and artistic atmosphere. Articles from this compilation strengthened my understanding of blues and jazz and their social and cultural contexts in this country and the literary products that arose from the music. O'Meally's essay "Checking Our Balances: Louis Armstrong, Ralph Ellison, and Betty Boop" bolsters the third chapter, which discusses Dawn's performance of her original blues album *Mad Love* (2019). O'Meally's jazz and literature studies background provides encouragement and evidence for my claims of the innate connection between literature and music, existentialism and the blues.

Xam Wilson Cartiér, a writer of jazz fiction— but not of dissimilar circles from Robert O’Meally and scholars such as Amiri Baraka— informs points of comparison and contrast between writers and musicians. Dawn, performing blues musician, and Xam, jazz novelist, experience pop culture differently from their respective vantage points in music and in literature, but their involvement in blues, and the ethos of the blues, enhances the art of each. Dawn and Xam, different as their art is and as their backgrounds are, both improvise in the blues idiom and philosophize life through the music.

Concert 1: Jazz at the Upstairs Bar & Grill

20 September 2019

I drove to Canada. Tivoli, NY to Montreal, QC. Five hours or so, most minutes spent on 87 North. Light most of the way, sun setting as I crossed the ominous border. Robert Lester Folsom played through the speakers as I approached the gates and I lied to the Border Patrol officer not on purpose but by mistake as she was so unnerving and it made me forget my life and so I said *No, I have never been to Canada.*

I arrived in the dark and schemed around the city in my car, waiting for Alex to get off work. I met Alex in August on my first trip to Montreal, knowing nothing previously of the city except Leonard Cohen. Finally I parked at Alex's place. He took long to arrive, which I didn't mind, and I played guitar in my trunk and smoked and skated up and down his block repeatedly, too timid, as always, to try any tricks. Alex did eventually return from work and welcomed me into his apartment home kindly and warmly with beer and it was a nice place; he works hard. We sat and drank on the balcony.

I told Alex that I was unsure of the direction of my quest— How would I find music, or really get interested for that matter, in a scene I did not understand, tracking performers I did not know to look for? Where was I to go? I had gone— on my last trip to Montreal, the same night my brother and Pat and I met Alex— to a “cool” Blues Bar, but it was a kitschy attempt to remain retro, filling up with zombie people and plastic thru the hours. Was I to return there? Or to House of

Jazz, the tourist magnet, the jazz Hard Rock Cafe? *And how to address this (potentially unfounded) cynicism!*

So Alex had an idea and I needed dinner and to get to work. “I’ll take you to Upstairs Bar & Grill for dinner,” he said, “there will be music.” O.K. I said. Alex drove us there in his BMW station wagon, used earlier in the day to shoot a car commercial. Alex: freelance videographer, documentarian, extrovert.

When we approached the restaurant we heard sounds from inside but couldn’t get in. I needed to hear more of that wisping music! Alex and I looked at each other with grins. Five or six people stood in the doorway blocking entry, and beyond those standers I saw many full tables just full of people and all watching a stage I could not see. I snuck a peak around the obstacles and soon somehow the hostess sat all of us. The five or six people and Alex and me.

Then I laid eyes on the band: quartet with singer as soloist and piano, bass, drums. Small stage with piano falling almost off into the first row of tables in the audience. The bass player sat on a stool against the back window, drummer in the farthest corner, singer up front and center.

The hostess sat Alex and me in the far back at a weird communal table with a group of obvious Americans that made me feel like I’d been flashed back into Las Vegas, a place I’ve never been, will not go. *Who were these?* Alex, bolder than I, and also speaking significantly more French

than I, watched for a front row table to vacate, and he jumped at the opportunity when it came, motioning for a waitress to transfer our tab.

From the new table I could lean my elbows on the piano bench. Alex and I found our seats just as the second set began. It was exciting! I clutched onto a flyer I'd been handed at the door, but the only relevant information seemed to be the singer's name. Dawn Tyler Watson. *Now welcoming to the stage: Dawn Tyler Watson's Jazz Quartet.* Alex and I had arrived during the first set, and the band played three sets in all— a mixture of jazz standards and venue favorites as well as a few of Dawn's originals, the most jazzy of her sounds. And they seemed so friendly with each other, the musicians. Dawn and the bass player had a comic routine that was impossibly natural.

In one video I took at this first show, Dawn takes an instrumental solo: she raises the microphone and maneuvers her fingers as though she's playing a horn of some kind, and her voice sounded like that too. She made a vibrato'd sound like a trumpet or trombone could. Then her solo ends, and as the piano picks up the lead, Dawn steps away from the front-of-stage and leans against the back of the piano, listening and moving like an audience member to her own band. Dawn gives the pianist the attention a soloist deserves, and because she creates this atmosphere for her fellow musicians, they return the respect in her spotlight moments; they seem to have fun hearing each other play.

The *Improvisative*

This first show of Dawn's that I saw launched this project. I was in Montreal and I wanted to talk about blues and I did not know how. Alex's spur of the moment idea to check out Upstairs Bar & Grill and Dawn's generosity with me allowed the following conversation with Tracy McMullen's work. In her essay entitled "The Improvisative," Tracy McMullen theorizes the *improvisative* as a suggestion that "musical improvisation may offer insights into a conception of self and other different from the dominant model found in most cultural theory" (McMullen 115). The *improvisative* stands in contrast with Judith Butler's theory of the *performative* (Butler 1990). McMullen theorizes a self that is composed of multiple amorphous forms, and the *improvisative* joins this conversation because of how it applies to performers such as Dawn.

The *blueswoman* (Dahl 1984), the frontman— they bear the brunt of the exposition in a performance. Improvisation provides a means of navigating this spotlight for the *blueswoman* (or whomever leads) on stage. This center stage personality— Dawn, in the case of her Jazz Quartet— exercises agency and maintains narrative structure through the *improvisative*. For example, Dawn gives herself over to the music of her fellow musicians and physically removes herself from the spotlight to allow another sound and person in. How she weaves this into the story is part of her improvisation and of her generosity.

The audience experiences her generosity, too. Most people in Montreal speak English; Dawn's primary language is English. At this jazz show and at the two concerts I saw later, Dawn spoke French to become closer to the audience. She made a cute show of it, asking her band

members for help, though her French was just fine! But it lightened the tone of the performances to see Dawn chuckling with her fellow musicians about French words and Québécois idioms.

To McMullen, the topic of “recognition” does not belong in conversations about music and specifically about improvisation; recognition evokes approval and validation. Butler’s *performative* has this outwardly facing stance. McMullen instead proposes that “generosity” fits the discussion of improvisation better. The *improvisative* encourages generosity because it favors a lean toward the self as opposed to the Other, as McMullen points to the self as the only body necessary to improvise. *What does the self look like performing to an audience, what does the self sound like?* Recognition, conversely, refers to a responsive Other: an audience, a collaborator. The framing of generous improvisation allows for the conversation to be about what musicians and improvisers give to the world as opposed to what they are focused on receiving from it. McMullen emphasizes that “if both self and other are phantasmagorical, separation between them does not exist. If they both don’t exist, then how can we argue that they are two different things?” This abstraction frames the self as incorporative of the other, not distanced. McMullen’s concepts and Dawn’s interactions with her band and with her audience promote the inclusion and giving attitude of generosity. Blues acknowledges hardship and it responds with generosity. This is a part of the ethos of the blues.

According to McMullen, musical improvisation serves as an example of, or as a platform for, generosity in extramusical arenas, too. The generosity expressed in the improvisations of the music spills over into the life, the extramusical interactions, which in turn infuses the music with generosity. I’m reminded of this moment at Dawn’s jazz concert when her banter with the audience became more exuberant, and the audience responded by becoming more lively as well—

the two energies influenced each other. Dawn exhibited a courteous generosity physically and verbally with her fellow musicians and with her audience at each show. Each time it came time for another band member's solo, Dawn stepped aside, away, and out of the light for the focus to shift onto another person, instrument, and sound.

I would like to expand McMullen's words *improvisative* and generosity to extend to the obligations of a performer. Even in genres in which the performers are outwardly provocative, or in the case of individuals operating outside of the code of their genre, a lot of pressure falls on the frontman to create atmosphere, physically and sonically. A lot of expectations fall on the *blueswoman* but through improvisation and personal expression the linearity of that narrative is disrupted. Through the *improvisative* Dawn sings and sounds narratives that either abide by or disrupt the expectations and conventions of genre, venue, audience. McMullen's *improvisative* seems to include a cyclical generosity, oscillating between the musical and extramusical, the self and the other. Dawn is generous with her audience. Off-stage she was also generous with Alex and me.

Those moments when Dawn steps out of the light— literal or figurative— demonstrate her generosity. She steps away, I gather, to give her band members space and respect and also surely to gather her thoughts, too. It must be so hard to think out there up in front of a crowd, center of attention and light— how can there also be room for *you*.

After the quartet's third and final set, Alex bounced out of his chair to confer with Dawn. Ever the networker and courteous self-promoter, but also sincerely appreciative of her music, Alex handed Dawn a business card. I introduced myself next and the three of us spoke about

music, about us, about anything; it was an easy conversation to have, for Dawn was so kind and fun with Alex and me. I asked Dawn a couple of questions and became intrigued by her relationship to blues. She referred to herself as a blues singer, and then later, when speaking about an upcoming project, she put a playful pout on her face and complained about having to make a jazz album. She sighed when she said it, and I wondered what the trouble was. Her comment reminded me how difficult it must be to be a musician by trade. Dawn is so giving with her audiences, but I think she makes compromises for them too. “I wanted to play Hound Dog,” she said with another little grimace. I thought of Big Mama Thornton’s version of the song, because I know it better than Elvis’s, and I wondered why Dawn didn’t or couldn’t sing it then and there³.

Dawn did get to sing “Hound Dog” the next night at the show I saw at Le Balcon, and these concessions to the audience, venue, Industry, these are a part of the generosity, too. At Upstairs I think she did not sing “Hound Dog” because she knew it was not the time nor place for it (though I wish it weren’t so!). That adaptiveness, perceptiveness is generous.

Structure and Agency

Even Dr. Thompson had to bear the balance of his individualized journalistic style and the demands and deadlines set by the Men with the Money!

³ Big Mama Thornton had a significant presence in Canada during her touring years, and performed at Doudou Boicel’s Rising Sun blues & jazz festival in Montreal. I wonder what version of the song Dawn thinks of (I’d like to think it’s Big Mama Thornton’s version, because Elvis “stole” it from her).

Within and without music we each know the balancing act between autonomy and the placation of authorities. The popular music industry is wrought with struggles between its structures and participants (agents). Blues, though it can be structured and formalized too, allows for transition between other genres. After all, blues lies at the roots of all American popular music, arguably all North American popular music. Dawn joins them together in this way. Thomas Porcello describes Alfred Schutz “[adopting] a phenomenological stance favoring the socially informed experience of live performances, and suggests that one should focus on performers’ and listeners’ interpretations of the “signs” of a historical musical culture out of which musical works arise” (Porcello 493). It strikes me that Dawn, as a blues vocalist, caters to a lot of history. Her performances seem to capture with their fluidity both the story of the *blueswoman* and the story of Dawn the woman herself.

As I consider Dawn and the ways in which a blues singer must wrestle with the frustrations of structure, I wonder about the way I’m writing this ethnography, too. The negotiations of structure and agency, as a blues singer in Quebec or as a ethnomusicology student in New York, are as opaque as genre or improvisation. What of this writing is fabrication for the sake of satisfying the institution and the reader and what are the words that I really can’t keep off the page. How could anyone (even me) parse it out? Part of the irony of performance is that no one person can ever truly know which permutation of a performer exists at any given time on a stage or a page. The juggling of Industry and autonomy is hazy. Agents– singers, musicians, writers– and structures– the Industry, the Press– all improvise. Blues, however, provides a means through which to ellide structures and exhibit agency.

Dawn's negotiation of this tension manifests in her setlists, in her costuming, in her stage banter. While much of the stricture that Dawn faces comes from constraints of the Industry and of genre, surely constraints exist on an individual, personal level too. I have overheard conversations and comments in which Dawn expressed a need to satisfy a certain visual aesthetic, whether hers or her band's or the venue's. "I've decided that it's too weird to wear all black in a performance" (if the entire band is also in all black); of a brightly colored poncho she said, "it's too ethnic". Whether or not the color of poncho makes or breaks an event is not the point. Rather, I'm interested in the compromises made by an artist of varying degrees of importance. At what point does an artistic choice become an unacceptable compromise, and what is deemed acceptable in order to have a career in music?

Dawn and the Ethos of the Blues

Artists of popular music, in order to participate in the industry, must conform to a genre or a scene. Certainly there are exceptions, but ultimately a performer shapes themselves— or else they are shaped— into a certain type of performer. In the case of Dawn, she's a blues singer, as she said, and she allows that mood to carry through other sets she might perform. I think that's a way of maintaining authenticity in the face of having to please a venue, an audience, a promoter. The example of "Hound Dog" demonstrates Dawn negotiating her own musical preference and the expectations of the audience.

Dawn infuses blues into each song that she sings, whether blues, jazz, soul, R&B, disco, funk, avant garde... name it. She fits her voice to whatever piece she sings; it's dynamic in both range and tone. This jazz show featured her voice as multiple: harmonica, trumpet, voice. Dawn

makes jazz– for example– her own in a very blues-oriented way. When Dawn sings jazz it’s like you can *hear* the impossibility of jazz without blues. For Dawn, blues interdigitates with all of her music, all of life, or as Linda Dahl says, blues is “rough at the edges.”

In the middle of the twentieth century blues singers were pushed toward folk music because people “wanted the idea and not the person” (Oliver 2006). Blues was forced into the folk arena as audiences demanded performers not for their individuality but for their ability to tell stories and sing songs of an older generation and to create therefore some kind of “historical musical past,” a nostalgia (Oliver 76)⁴. Blues became a thing for the public to idealize (fetishize?), particularly the female vocalists, the *blueswomen*. Although it gave way to a dozen new genres, classic blues itself began to slip away after this time⁵. Jazz and rock ‘n’ roll represent two avenues that saved the lineage of the blues. Sure all musicians feel pressure, and all genres deliver it, but perhaps this fabricated expectation on blues musicians makes it especially difficult for the singers to hold onto authenticity as they participate in the Industry. At the same time, blues as a genre demands authenticity at its core. What a fine predicament the *blueswoman* finds herself in.

Despite society’s efforts to confine the blues, the genre has nonetheless escaped definition. In a 1972 interview for *Living Blues Magazine* singer Esther Phillips said about the blues:

I just consider myself a singer. I’m not locked in any one particular category, I like it better like that. I like good songs that I can relate to, and it doesn’t have to be a...whatever it is; if I can relate to it and I think I can do something with it, I do. I don’t ever want to be locked in just one position of just singing the blues or

⁴ Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James come to mind, brought out of “hiding” (normalcy?) in the 1960’s to stand for old “original” style Delta Blues.

⁵ Until the folk revival of the 1960’s brought acoustic blues back (in a way).

just singing jazz or just singing rock ‘n’ roll. I like to be able to do a variety of songs, ballads and things (Phillips 1972; O’Neal 386).

The way Esther Phillips discusses her singing as untied from genre reminds me of Dawn Tyler Watson. While Dawn described herself as a blues singer, I wonder if she didn’t mean something including but not limited to genre.

What if blues is not a genre at all? If we can describe the blues as something other than a category in the charts, perhaps Dawn Tyler Watson and Esther Philips have similar sentiments about their responsibilities to the genre as performers. In enthusiastic reviews of Dawn’s music, from Montreal and elsewhere in North America, you hear both that she is a true and original blues singer, and a consensus that she expands traditional blues, infusing half a dozen other genres. No matter the song or the time she has a bluesness in her voice.

Blues is about individuality and not imitation and it is that individualism that often cascades into wide understanding. Personal expression hits harder than universals sometimes. My first impression of Dawn was that I found her voice incredible, and I told her, foolishly, after that first concert, that I wished I could sing like her. But it doesn’t serve to harbor a jealousy of someone’s voice, and she reminded me of that. She had pegged me for a singer and that had been my response. But she just looked disapprovingly at me and said *No*, that I just had to learn how to sing like myself. Dawn’s individualism and the way she encouraged that confidence in me to speak too is an imperative in the blues ethos.

I watched her captivate the audience of the Upstairs Bar & Grill that first night, and I would later see that magnetism repeat in other performances. The charm and youthfulness Dawn exudes on stage transfers between venues and genres. The other thing the reviewers discuss is this energy, this stage presence, and we are in agreement there. Her generosity and uniqueness as

a performer illustrate her blues disposition and demonstrate how bluesness comes through not just in the tonality, in the scale that backs a song, but also in its attitudes and sentiments.

Alex and I went to some weird late night bakery after we left Upstairs and then found a dreamcatcher earring on the sidewalk and Alex's treat was too sweet for him but he ate it anyway and then we got in the car. He played music from a French film he had just watched out of the speakers, and it made the liveness of Dawn's quartet all the more visceral. That night as I readied for sleep on Alex's couch I wondered about Dawn and her love of the blues and what she said about learning to sing like yourself.

Concert 2: Dance Music at Le Balcon

21 September 2019

I woke up and went for breakfast with Alex at Café Joe down the street from his apartment which took too long (but tasted excellent). Then I parted with Alex and later he sent along Dawn's phone number and encouraged me to reach out. She had told Alex she'd give him a guestlist spot at her next show, but he couldn't go, and so I texted Dawn. She said kind words and See You Tonight.

I got to my too-nice, thank-you-dad, only-this-once, it's-school-related hotel and went to the roof to get an image of the city from above. A tall hotel downtown sees a lot. Montreal is a geographically satisfying city and by foot or bicycle you can understand its geometries quickly. From a bird's view you get something different about how all the parts construct a whole—Montreal.

“Are you from Alberta?” A man asked, eyeing my boots as we awaited the elevator to descend from the roof. I puzzled over this...what could he mean? I know next to nothing about Alberta except that it's Joni Mitchell territory. I furrowed my eyebrows at him. “You don't usually see boots like that in Quebec,” the fellow continued. When I told him of my California roots he frowned and boarded the dingy elevator. Is Alberta Canadian cowboy country? Confusion in French Canada.

Dawn hails from Ontario– Neil Young country. The music scene in Montreal– according to local musicians including Alec, resident rock ‘n’ roll bassist– differs greatly from Toronto. Alec described Montreal as a ‘cover town,’ tribute bands, where Toronto promotes more originals and individuals. I wonder what caused Dawn to leave her native province in search of an education and a career in Montreal? Perhaps Montreal’s historical relationship to jazz and blues has something to do with it.

After a silent elevator ride with the puzzled and ponytailed French Canadian, I sat at the hotel bar, looked at a map, and tried to make sense of everything, tried to write it all down. I prepared myself to record and tell the story, still unsure of the What-Is-The-Story of it all. I jotted down a few disordered phrases. I took out a book of Thompson essays and tried to absorb his attentiveness and sear his words into my brain.

Then I walked in the thick fall air and went to Dawn’s show at Le Balcon. Dawn’s show. Dawn’s band’s show. Dawn & The Jamm. I approached the wrong entrance of the venue and got lost and had to be led through the bowels of a church to find the place, but at last I did. My name was scribbled in a list with a few others on a post-it note stuck to the coat check window. I felt like an insider, privy once again to Dawn’s generosity.

This band differed completely from the band the previous night at Upstairs, the music entirely different too. This was much more Pop. The electrified dance band. Electric bass, guitar, drums,

tenor saxophone, and Dawn. The saxophonist doubled as a backup vocalist, too. Here, of course, the singer is the soloist, front and center.

Dawn's set at Le Balcon opened with "What's Going On" Marvin Gaye, "Dock of the Bay" next, then "Baby, I love You" the Ronettes, "Hound Dog," "I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)," "Summertime," "Mr. Big Stuff" Jean Knight, "Lady Marmalade" LaBelle, "Signed Sealed Delivered" Stevie, "Hot Stuff" Donna Summer, "Disco Inferno" The Trammps, "Boogie Oogie Oogie" A Taste of Honey. A set of Big Hits, you know.

"Layers of Performance"

In his essay "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," Phillip Auslander addresses the ways in which a performer of popular music is forced to reckon with several selves, or rather varying degrees of reinvention, caricature, and concealment of the self. Auslander redefines sociomusicologist Simon Frith's three "layers of performance," allowing for simultaneous enaction by the performer of their 'real person', 'performance persona', and 'character'⁶. These layers of personhood describe the degrees to which one can ever be oneself on stage. "That these three signified presences admittedly are often difficult to distinguish from one another," says Auslander, "does not diminish their heuristic value" (Auslander 6). Auslander makes the same distinctions between layers as Frith does, but Auslander admits their convolutedness. The three categorizations of personhood bleed together impossibly, especially in popular music where a lot of performers produce "heavily autobiographical" material (Auslander

⁶ The real person is the "performer as human being," the performance persona refers to a "star personality or image," and the character explains the personality adopted for a song, or rather adopting the personality *of* a song (Auslander 6).

7). Dawn, like every performer, musical or otherwise, has to wrestle with her presentation. How do you decide how to comport yourself on stage? *Do* you decide? In the context of this more disco, soul, funk-oriented concert, Dawn performed differently, presented herself differently, than in the Upstairs/jazz context of the previous night.

Dawn dressed up more for Le Balcon, dressed like a star, a notch up from the comfortability of the Upstairs Bar & Grill. Maybe the dance music made her feel more flamboyant or the pressure of the dark tablecloths in the crowd. She likes sunglasses, Dawn does. She performs in sunglasses. But they aren't the dark kind to block light. A faint purple tint, nothing more.

Hexagons. An illusion? A look?

According to Richard Schechner, "performance is always a matter of the performer's not being himself but also not *not* being himself" (Auslander 6). This makes sense given Auslander and Frith's theorizations of the layers of performance and McMullen's idea of the improvisative. Auslander's comment about the complexity of pop performance due to autobiographical material also applies to Dawn. Her original music depends on self-reflective material, but even singing dance hits is partially an autobiographical act for whomever performs it.

Part of this oscillation between character, persona, and the real person depends on what art a performer pursues. Satisfying the Industry means catering to certain of its demands. A performance persona must meet requirements. How you *look* is crucial. "Musical genres and subgenres define the most basic and important sets of conventions and expectations within which

musicians and their audiences function” (Auslander 10). Auslander makes the obvious point that performance personae rely on genre, as genre is one of the Industry’s great constraining factors.

Auslander’s commentary on genre as a primary influencer of performers is only problematic in the way that it might inadvertently reinforce the divisiveness of generic categories. While he acknowledges the incompleteness of Simon Frith’s “layers of performance” due to Frith’s supposition that the three parts separate nicely, he seems uninterested in– or unable to realize– the fact that this murkiness applies to genre, too. Auslander references an article written by Sheila Whiteley that discusses Mick Jagger’s physical emulation of Tina Turner on stage, but he gets stuck on the fact that Jagger performs rock ‘n’ roll while Turner performs soul music. Jagger taking notes from Tina Turner does not necessarily have to do with genre, however. The appeal of her look, of her moves, wasn’t necessarily about the genre called Soul. While Auslander acknowledges the impedance of genre on the freedom of performers, genre proves something to transcend, too.

I think of Dawn as a performer and I remember her physical performance just as well as I remember the sounds and the words. So much of a musical performer’s ‘character’ lies in their physical manifestation. A musician in performance depends on the way they look, in addition to the way they sound, to produce an effective story. (Xam Cartiér has an intrinsically different relationship to physicality in her art than Dawn does. Does she ever read aloud her written words? How would this live performance create something new?) Auslander posits that “by encouraging close readings of performances by popular musicians, readings that attend to the particulars of physical movement, gesture, costume, and facial expression as much as voice and musical sound,” conversations about performance can move beyond sonic quality (Auslander 3).

Another structure that any popular music performer must negotiate is the audience. The show, in many ways, depends on them. “Auslander considers the audience as actors who have tremendous influence over performances they attend. Conventions for audience behavior, like those of musical performance itself, are genre specific” (Auslander 13). The conventions for disco, with its fast pace and heavy drum beat, invite dancing and movement. That night, Dawn, a blues singer, led a disco performance— a weighty assignment. Watching Dawn perform jazz at Upstairs and then disco at Le Balcon made me wonder if the dance music felt like more of an act to her because of the genre’s code. Perhaps the expectations of the audience based on the premise of a “dance band” makes acting the part more fun, or less.

This disco set had an unlikely twist: the dance floor was clogged with furniture! *Why are there chairs here?* I thought. *This is dance music.* What did this clash require of Dawn? Perhaps, even, something humorous or mischievous was added when she walked in the room in which she was about to play a disco set and saw a floor full of chairs and table-clothed tables. This audience and the geometry of the venue made Dawn’s job that night difficult. The audience was impaled on the crook of two conflicting sets of conventions: tables and chairs vs. disco music.

Dawn improvised her way through the show, regardless, and the audience did too. In this room, the only place to dance was right in front of the stage, so you wound up taking a stage of your own if you dared to dance. In order to dance this audience would have to take the stage, as Dawn does, but they are not (mostly) a part of the blues world, and certainly not there to be the frontman. Dawn played music fit for movement as a room full of people sat awkwardly in their dark seats.

Caught between conventions of the physical space (tables) and the genre (dance), the faces in the room looked funny and, exactly that: caught. Some of them probably do live in a world of blues, but the atmosphere constricted the power of the sound. Some times that evening at Le Balcon felt tense because of the tables/dance music friction, but Dawn did her best to finesse out of awkwardness quickly. She struggled to build an emotional connection between performers and audience. (In a chair you can't even connect with yourself.)

It was one of those times the frontman had to lead and make the structure work. (*You try never to let a moment fall down, but sometimes it's like trying to keep a carbon dioxide filled balloon afloat!*) Dawn improvised generously at this show in spite of– or because of– the collision of physical space and the genre. Captivator of rooms. Even still, she could not get these people to dance but for a song or two. *Those tables!*

Every once in a while, every ten songs or so, Dawn would turn to the guitarist and say, with conviction, “play me a blues in E”. And those weren't *Hits*, and despite the guitarist's seriously stiff nerdiness, they sounded true and seemed more exciting to her, to me. Maybe these blues numbers were a way back to her power spot, her home base: 1 4 5. Part of Dawn's notable stage presence is this ability to conduct mood into a room through improvisation, through narratives⁷. This narrative told of a blues singer wanting to break out of the prescription of her set.

Christopher Small “characterizes musical works as actions undertaken by the musicians rather than works written by composers” (Auslander 4). While Small's work references the symphony and classical music at large, I feel that a characterization of Dawn's performances too

⁷ In her 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech Toni Morrison described narrative as “one of the principal ways in which we acquire, hold, and digest information.”

requires this consideration. I like this idea of musical works and performances as “actions undertaken by the musicians” because it implies agency on the part of the musical performer. At the same time, this phrasing also allows for the fact that a performance, a musical work, is something to “undertake”; the language reminds me of a task. Action can demand compliance with something, a force more powerful. In each performance Dawn *undertakes action* and constructs a narrative and at once works to satisfy the presumption of Industry and audience. Agency then lies in the construction of a narrative that weaves through the permutations of a performer as their character, persona, personality. The momentousness of maintaining oneself throughout a performance. An individualization of genre.

I’m interested in this third and outermost layer of personhood, character, as a version of hiding, escaping, or protecting oneself. Persona, too, in a less dramatic sense, provides cover. Physical persona, aural persona, these provide a guise under which a person can rest themselves a little, but a character is a cloak. The shaping of one’s character on stage evidences the negotiation between personal authenticity and the norms of the genre. Characters make this easier, and are inevitable anyway. These layers of personhood exist just as temporally as music. Unfixed; responsive. The character, the persona comes through on the outside, what meets the eye. Because these parts of the self exist internally, it is a perfect space within which to improvise.

Liveness vs. Recorded Sound

Phillip Auslander’s “Manifesto” makes my work possible also because it opens a discussion of the performed versus the recorded, and Dawn’s musical life looks so different

when you only look at her recorded albums. So much of her identity as a songwriter depends on the performativity of each piece, the presentation of the music. Yet, to say that a recording is not a performance is misinformed.

The media economy of popular music thus dictates that sound recordings be considered performances, which is how listeners experience them...Despite the physical absence of the performer at the time of listening, listeners do not perceive recorded music as disembodied (Auslander 5).

Listeners are unlikely to forget that a person performed each song that becomes a recording.

Dawn's recorded music made sense to me because I had seen her perform. Still, it is a tall order to fit all of this into a .wav file or a CD. The recorded work of a performance artist provides only a partial picture. I wonder if Dawn feels this way, or if the recording has its own appeal over the live performance? Is there less pressure to perform in the recording studio than on stage? More?

Phillip Auslander mentions Simon Frith's idea that recorded music is a performance in the instance in which you listen to it. Frith says:

To see music is to see it performed, on stage, with all the trappings. I listen to records in the full knowledge that what I hear is something that never existed, that never could exist, as a 'performance', something happening in a single time and space; nevertheless, it is *now* happening, in a single time and space: it is thus a performance and I hear it as one [and] imagine the performers performing (Frith 1996; Auslander 5).

Music in its sound recording form reminds me of the written word because of their parallel relationships to temporality. Dawn's albums, the recordings, the CDs I have in my car— these products resemble the written word because they stand in time the same way but change with each interpretation. The narrative of Dawn's recorded songs will always be the same just as the narrative in each of Xam Cartier's books will always have the same words, but everything

becomes a new performance with each read, with each listen. *The story is the same and yet it is so different!*

Auslander follows up to emphasize that listeners experience recorded sound as multidimensional.

The experience of recorded music as performance derives not only from our direct somatic experience of the sound and our sense of the physical gestures the musicians made to produce it but also from various forms of cultural knowledge, including knowledge of the performance conventions of particular genres of music and the performance styles of specific performers (Auslander 5).

Auslander speaks about the physicality that still exists in sound recordings of music. A performer, a person still moved and made gestures as they recorded the music, and the listener will likely move and gesture in their own way as a response⁸. So then, what is it like for Dawn to perform a song live that has this other recorded life, a shelf life.

Multiplicity of Performer/Person

Dawn Tyler Watson emanates warmth, invitingness, positivity. This presence, in combination with the sound of her voice, draws the audience it seems. But, naturally, it is presentational too. The warmth Dawn exudes on stage is different due to it being a “performance.” According to Auslander, we, as ethnographers, should be “suspicious of any supposition that musicians are simply ‘being themselves’ on stage” (6). Fair. Something innate in the word perform makes that obvious. Any person who pays attention to themselves surely thinks about how they act differently depending on the social strata of the moment: each friend

⁸ In the deconstructed (isolated) tracks of Marvin Gaye’s “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” you can hear him moving around on the vocal track as he sings and keeps in sync with the song. Throughout the entire track, whether he’s singing or not, you can hear Marvin Gaye’s foot tapping; you can hear him listening to the music as it’s made.

sees a different side of us than our family does, our bosses, new acquaintances. How, then, could a performer expect to hang on to themselves and not the smudgy blend of person/ persona/ character through the whole wild ride. If you cling too closely to yourself maybe that's when you get lost.

You are a real person, you have a performance persona, or a few, and you play a character as you play each song, but you're also a writer, and you're constructing the tangled web that joins these three points, these tiers in the layer cake, and maybe you can get lost there too constructing your story but as you're constructing it you're also wondering what it is and will be and is it you?

In addition to Simon Frith, Phillip Auslander turns to author Eugenio Barba for terms to aid his descriptions of popular music performance. Barba describes actors (performers) as possessing a 'fictional body', and scholars including Auslander and Susan Fast have now applied his term to musicians:

It seems to me that the fictional body of a musical performer is the body of his performance persona, a body whose appearance is made to conform to the image of that persona...the performers are not the sole authors of the personae they perform in these many contexts: producers, managers, agents, publicists, and the entire machinery of the music industry collaborate with artists, and sometimes coerce them, in the construction and performance of their personae (Auslander 9).

This 'fictional body' depends on the restrictions of structure and the freedom of agency allowed in a performer. Auslander's theorization of Barba's term highlights the degree to which a performer rarely has complete autonomy over their personae. Because the 'fictional body'

performs the persona, and because both are housed in the ‘real person,’ all the selves work in tandem.

In an Auslander-ish way, Professor Thomas Porcello states that “one never dons a single identity to the total exclusion of others” (Porcello 488). This sentiment lines up with Auslander’s three layers of performer-personhood and the way they bleed together and envelop each other, and I am guided back to my query about autobiography in performance art. Auslander’s concept of the character extends from the performance personae– “this character may be the implied narrator of the song or a subject described in the song.” Dawn, a blues singer, and Xam Cartiér, a fiction writer, make autobiographical work but they speak through a persona or character to share that. It strikes me that Xam writes like live music in this way, as her writing blends the layers of personhood with purpose with a similar fluidity in time to a musical performance. But because it is literature, Xam does not have the same pressure to keep time as a live musician does.

When Dawn has to put on an act, play a certain part for a given venue or audience, what is that like when she must, at the same time, perform her original music– music that, arguably, speaks about the true Dawn, the person, the personality. What happens when the character has to play that show. Disguise, protection. Protection via performativity. But for all the concealment of self, surely there is revelation, too. What narrative does she make up and string together or give into? What image does she leave for her audiences to pick up on and interpret?

During the show at Le Balcon, before *Let’s Get It On* by Marvin Gaye, Dawn leaned into the microphone and said, “Wherever you are, I want you to take the one you love, put them in your arms, and swing them real close.” The crowd hardly moved. But does it really matter that

no one danced upright, that maybe people only moved physically in little ways? It struck me as more of an atmospheric thing: Dawn creating a narrative that includes closeness and reveals in the sounds of the music a tenderness. I wonder though, does that awkwardness affect the performance, affect the performer? When Dawn said those words they rolled out of her naturally, but I wonder if the disco/soul/funk atmosphere didn't encourage her toward that kind of banter, too. It's interesting to consider if this moment were in a live audio recording: if this concert had been taped, the listeners would hear Dawn invite her audience to get up and swing with their people, but in a recording you would not know about the chairs, hear the chairs, and so the atmospheric impetus for the phrase would carry through well.

Perhaps I should not have been so frustrated with the audience for sitting down, but I decided I could justify my irritation if I danced for at least the final number. I had seen a woman at the table in front of me lean in toward her date across the table and ask him to dance. He crossed his arms and shook his head and sat far back in the chair. I wanted to give something back to Dawn, so when she announced it was the last song, I got up and I made that woman dance with me.

Phillip Auslander concludes his article on a point relevant to this discussion and to discussions that I have had with Dawn: he suggests that “audiences can avail themselves of most of the same means of expression as popular musicians themselves in their responses to them, including playing music” (Auslander 13). My encounters with Dawn featured her encouragement of my life as a musician. After that first concert at the Upstairs Bar & Grill, Dawn and Alex and I

spoke about whether or not we were musicians, and Dawn scoffed at our empty disclaimers and said that surely we were musicians, too.

Personhood and Time

Dawn may not be fully aware of the times at which personality gives way to persona, to character, just as I am not. In my experience as a person, even as a musician (*maker of music*) myself, it seems impossible to tell even within yourself where you (the person) end and you (the performer) begin. Alfred Schutz speaks of music as having a similar quality, and Thomas Porcello addresses this idea: just as personality is fluid and ethereal, depending completely on moment-in-time, so is music.

Schutz argues that while musical inner time moves irreversibly forward in the flow of outer time, the composer can control this movement in ways which refer the listener backwards: “The consciousness of the beholder is led to refer what he actually hears to what he anticipates will follow and also to what he has just been hearing and what he has heard ever since this piece of music began. The hearer, therefore, listens to the ongoing flux of music, so to speak, not only in the direction from the first to last bar but simultaneously in a reverse direction back to the first one” (1971[1951]) (Porcello 494).

Time in music reminds me of personhood because it is multidirectional and dependent on history, the present, and that which has yet to happen. During a popular music performance, the performers and their musical production each interact with time and self nonlinearly. One way in which I see Dawn do this is through the ethos of the blues. The tenor infused in each of her performances alludes to a blues past, present, future. *How can anything end if time clocks on?*

The “evanescence” of sound, “its relationship to time,” marks a great difference between the sounded word and the written word, too. “Sound exists only when it is going out of

existence” (Ong 71). Xam Cartier, while a musician and improviser herself, relates differently to time than a live performer due to her pursuit of the novel. Although improvising, Cartier has a means of looking back at her improvisations: a written record. She can therefore manipulate her improvisations prior to their consumption in a way that Dawn cannot do with her music (with the exception of its recorded form). Live music requires immediate and timely improvisation from Dawn.

Concert 3: *Mad Love* in Montreal North

11 October 2019

Later in the fall I returned to Montreal to see a third and yet different performance by Dawn. I was dreading this trip— I just couldn't make it fit nicely into the week. The day of Dawn's show I frantically left class with no plans except to jump into the car and whip myself up the interstate. Still in Tivoli at noon, a performance in North Montreal to make at 6:30 in the evening. It was going to be close. I made a heavy-footed pass at it and wheeled into the parking lot of the Cultural and Community House of Montreal North with 36 minutes to spare.

I had left in such a rush that I had not gotten a ticket for this "sold out" show. Had I just driven 270 miles only to turn around, having seen no show, made no notes? Well I pleaded with the gentleman handling tickets and ticketeers. *I'm outta time I'm out of luck haven't got a dime or a buck but please let me see this show tonight?* He said he wasn't sure, but as they began scanning tickets I inserted myself into the line and the man winked and waved me through. Seated at last, I began to rest my brain. Though the day was far from over I wished to take it out and set it down to cool off somewhere. but brain stayed and I fought away sleep and frustration to listen to the sounds.

Sitting first row front and center I saw little of the audience behind me. Something about the show at Le Balcon, the dance show impeded by chairs, put a sour taste for the audience in my mouth, and so I did not mind not seeing them. It allowed for focus, too. A fellow sat next to me with a big glowing grin on his face and told me he had traveled far. He came often to Montreal

from elsewhere in Quebec to see music, and to see Dawn. We agreed that no one sounded the way her voice did. And so this man and I sat right in the middle together as if the whole show had been for us and from time to time we looked at each other and made silly faces to show that we both knew when the sounds were best.

The band, an eight piece blues band including Dawn, played through Dawn's newest album, 2019's *Mad Love*. Each of the three times I saw Dawn perform she was the only woman in the band. It caused me to think of the gendered divide in music— and specifically here in jazz and blues— between instrumentalists as typically masculine and vocalists as typically feminine. While this certainly is not true across the board, the roles of musicians are difficult to separate from their genders. According to Linda Dahl, “jazz means improvisation, and the prevailing view, at least until recently, has been that instrumental improvisation means assertiveness means masculinity” (36). Dawn's jazz band included three men and herself; Dawn's dance band included five men and herself; Dawn's *Mad Love* album band included seven men and herself. Her role as the female vocalist is explicit here. She challenges these standards by improvising solos in the sound of harmonica and horn with her voice through the microphone. Whether Dawn accepts the trope of the *blueswoman/jazzwoman* (Dahl 1984) or not, I am wondering how it affects her performance, her character on stage. “Entertainment with a smile has a distinctive social value, says Ellison” (O'Meally 281). This phrase evokes the politics of both race and gender. “Entertainment with a smile” in the world of *blueswomen* distinctly references women serving men and the fact that women are expected to smile to ease social tensions, whereas men are not, or at least not in the same way.

After the show I walked outside to a booth where Dawn's friends sold CDs and t-shirts. I had ten Canadian dollars and ten American dollars with me which was certainly not enough for anything really but Dawn's friend Laura was there and she handed me a CD anyway. We all chatted, Dawn, Laura, and me, and they let me trail them around as they broke down the show and packed up.

At some point, knowing how far I'd travelled and how late the clock looked, Dawn asked me where I intended to stay that night. I had asked Alex but he had to host someone else that night and then I got lazy and I did not get much further with my plans. Late and dark and in foreign territory. Dawn was impressed by the hours I'd driven. I figured I could drive some of the way back into New York before sleeping to rest; I had not thought about it really. Laura, the friend, was driving back south to Plattsburgh. Dawn said if I loved blues that I had to go with Laura. I wanted to, but I felt like, *how can I stay with this person? This is both too generous and also weird.* "The ethnographic encounter is highly dynamic, unfolding in time as does the experience of performing or hearing a piece of music" (Porcello 489). After much deliberation I humbly agreed and thanked both Dawn and Laura sincerely.

Laura and I got in our cars and she said to just follow her. *Sure*, I thought, *I shall follow this woman for seventy miles.* And so I did and it was ok. At the border we made our only stop. She engaged her turn signal and swept into the Duty Free parking lot. Such a weird scene in there with casino-goers and tourbus foreigners, a few dozen people raking up liquor and perfume at

midnight early October. We tooled around and Laura bought wine and then we got back on the road and I followed her quick darting tail lights through the dark into New York.

As I trailed her into Plattsburgh she parked on the main street and got out of her car. Very tired but up for anything and surprised by nothing at this point I found a parking spot and jogged across the street to meet her. She took me to some bar up a set of stairs that sometimes had good music, she said. Laura seemed to know a lot of folks in there, but she did not explain. This night the bar hosted “Emo night,” and some twenty-something wailed away at “How To Save A Life” by The Fray on a black acoustic-electric guitar. I knew the name of this place once but I can’t seem to remember. We left quickly (and thankfully) and walked down an alley to another venue where Laura said she brought artists. I finally got to know then what exactly Laura does. She scouts out and tracks down bands to come play in Plattsburgh, primarily blues and its affiliates. That’s how she met Dawn many years ago.

It was a toy trip town late at night and it was hard to figure out where I was and Laura kept referring to places we had already walked past as we snaked the streets but it only made me confused. I was glad when we returned to our cars and eventually landed in her driveway at the end of a road at the end of a very long day and long night finally ending in Plattsburgh.

Laura’s is a nice farmhouse blueshouse type place tucked at the end of the street *At the Dark End of the Street*. She has so many instruments in there and records and rooms and everything has decoration. When there aren’t any visiting artists in town, and therefore staying in the house, she

is alone in there with all those instruments and records and rooms. *So many songs!* We drank the wine and she generously showed me many of her blues artifacts: a wurlitzer, an old Hammond b3, 78s (Pinetop Perkins, Mississippi John Hurt), a photo she took of Rhiannon Giddens and the Carolina Chocolate Drops, one of BB King, a guitar signed by Taj Mahal, among others– A blues shrine, dedicated to the old and the new, the kings, queens, pioneers. I was not invited or allowed to play any of the instruments. I understood. And then finally I slept– *I haven't slept in this big a bed in this nice a house in what feels like a very long time*, I thought to myself. I think I dreamt of blues.

Later I got to thinking about Dawn and about Laura and about their generosity. I got to thinking that blues is the connecting thread. Dawn's lyrics in blues style are not so different from her blues style mentality and extramusical comporment. The ethos of the blues is present not just in sound and lyric, but in gesture, attitude, conversation. I see blues in the music I heard Dawn play and also in the way we spoke of music. I saw it in Laura's house; I read it in Xam Cartiér's writing.

Blues is More than Music

O'Meally regards Louis Armstrong not only as a jazz musician and singer, but as a blues player, and he discusses that bluesness exists outside of genre, outside of music even.

As a consummate player and singer of the blues, Armstrong was involved, day in and day out, with the comedy at the edge of tragedy that defines the fundamental blues mode—wherein typically the performer counts the teeming troubles of the world and then laughs at them, the tragic facts typically trumped by an ironically comic punch line. As a form blues is characterized by “unobtrusive irony” and a

staunch refusal to be sentimental or mawkish, however lovelorn the lyrics or moods (O’Meally 285).

I think of Dawn’s lyrics and look at the videos I took at her shows and I think of how the narratives of her lyrics and how her performances too negotiate the relationship between the tragic and the comic. Blues is so many things and as elusive as improvisation to define, but “resiliency and spiritual equipoise,” Robert O’Meally says, “define the blues along with the music’s awareness that “the real secret of the game is to make life swing”” (O’Meally 291). This description manifests in Dawn on stage– her attitude, her musical professionalism, her resiliency. Dawn on stage looks as though she has mastered how to be up there, wherever *there* is, and the swing is ever present in each song. Ralph Ellison says blues is a “tragicomic frame of mind.” He describes the blues as “an attitude toward life which looks pretty coldly and realistically at the human predicament, and which expresses the individual’s insistence upon enduring in the face of his limitations, and which is in itself a kind of triumph over self and circumstance” (Ellison 1966; O’Meally 285). Dawn’s music, or at least the album *Mad Love* from this third concert, evokes a similar blues realness– an acknowledgement of the ironies and weirdnesses of life. Dawn’s banter is rarely humorless, and when it is, she’s being sincerely serious. What Dawn does requires balance and range.

Her stage presence, the dynamics with which she interacts with her audience, demonstrates a representation of the blues, and her bluesness felt most inescapable here at this show. The lyrics of Dawn’s compositions spoke of her own expanded take on blues subjects into the Now. I think blues is for Dawn what it is meant to be. An outlet, a connection. *Mad Love* contains songs that could only ever have been written by Dawn, songs in which she even refers to herself, and the album also features pieces that seem to come from a bluesness bigger than

herself, not vague but inclusive. Blues is circular in this way– the music demands living life like blues (in its “tragicomic” sense) and also then living life necessitates blues music, writing, expression.

Dawn’s original music is heavily influenced by her lived life, and yet I’m brought back to this idea that the performer cannot quite ever be themselves on stage. Is it not bizarre to speak of your true life through the guise of a ‘character’ or at least ‘persona’ (Auslander 2004)? Also circular are the impossible-to-distinguish layers of personhood cake that Auslander bakes. Dawn is her characters, her personae, and the real person.

Trace and Ambiguity

In an article entitled “Traces of Derrida in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” (1995), Phillip Page explores the correlation between the philosophies of Toni Morrison and Jacques Derrida. Page references novelist Toni Morrison’s interest in “the ambiguity of presumed dualities,” and how Morrison, like Xam Cartiér, makes her prose musical. I share this interest in ambiguity– as does the music. How can we presume to draw any line so clearly? For example, the improvised and the non-improvised are impossible to distinguish from each other, even by performers themselves. Blues is ambiguous. *What would Descartes say?*

Morrison’s 1992 novel, *Jazz*, the second book in a trilogy, features a protagonist by the name of Joe Trace. Philip Page views this character as working alongside Derrida’s theory of “*trace*”.

For Derrida the *trace* designates the play or oscillation between a presence, a thing-as-it-is, and an absence, an other. It is “the intimate relation of the living present to its outside, the opening to exteriority in general” (Speech 86) (Page 56).

Joe Trace in *Jazz* functions as a symbol of temporality. He lives in the past, in his mind, due to the lost-ness of his mother, but he also allows this fact to permeate his present and his future as he creates his mother in other women that he meets. His “oscillations” through time cause both an absence and a presence within him. I would like to apply *trace* to blues music as a genre.

Trace is a better way of saying what I have been aiming to get at about blues as a genre: there are *traces* of blues in countless other genres and in individual performances. Dawn puts a *trace* of blues in each song she sings, a *trace* of its ethos.

Xam Wilson Cartiér and Dawn Tyler Watson

Jazz does for Xam Cartiér what blues does for Dawn Tyler Watson. Cartiér imbues jazz into each morsel of her writing; it is the connecting thread. Her novel *Be-Bop, Re-Bop* embodies jazz. Jazz sings through in the rhythm, rhyme, and recursion of the prose, as well as in the novel’s proposed morality and thematic content. Cartiér, a dancer and pianist as well as a writer, is a musician at her pith. Her commitment to the overlap of mediums recalls the incomplete, processual, amorphousness of improvisation. Rayfield Allen Waller, in reviewing *Be-Bop, Re-Bop*, states that the book “constructs a story which builds its narrative sweep upon the polyrhythmics of Bop” (Waller 796). This reference to a simultaneity of rhythms describes the complexity of Cartiér’s narrative. This musicality partially exhibits itself in the lack of linearity in her protagonist’s timeline. Cartiér’s unnamed protagonist in *Be-Bop, Re-Bop* modulates with purpose through tenses and time periods without seeming to get lost.

Jazz here represents at once the necessity to improvise a way through difficulty in life outside of music, and a history, related for the protagonist to her family and to blackness in

America. The musicalness of Cartiér's writing bolsters the prominence of these themes. Cartiér creates her own rhythmic syntactical style. She appropriates punctuation— particularly dashes, ellipses, parentheses— to sew proto-sonic dynamics into her narrative. She musically moves through images, emotions, events, with idiomatic language and phrasing guiding the way. The first movement of the piece:

We're all, all of us are musing over inscrutable chalices of highballs, including me in spasmodic sweet-sixteenhood, thanks to the blessing of mother-gone-from-the- room, but now Vole's back, so here's my solo, about to be crimped... (Cartiér 4).

It is all here. Rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, melody! The author's references to musical life and musical features breathe dynamics into the black-ink words on 2-D tree-wood paper. Cartiér's words emanate process. She references the lyrics of others (e.g. "You don't miss your water 'til your well run dry") and creates her own sonic imagery (e.g. "under-musical silence"), adding what she must consider the dynamism required also of be-boppers. Almost every passage evidences the musicality of her prose.

Another way in which Xam Cartiér imbues musicality into her writing is through what she describes as "*fants*." She improvises these sections on behalf of herself or her protagonist, bits and pieces written here and there. The *fants* are often but one line, a single measure insertion to punctuate time, and sometimes they last for pages. These passages are musical because they disrupt the linearity of the story and play with rhythm and tone color as a horn or a piano might. These *fants* remind me of Dawn's "instrumental breaks," when she uses her voice to sound like an instrument. Melodic phrases are important to Dawn's music because they say a lot in their tonality, timbre, timing without words at all.

For an alternate look at a written attempt to be a jazz musician I look to Jack Kerouac.

Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* comes to mind. He opens the 242 choruses with this statement:

I want to be considered a jazz poet
blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam
session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses;
my ideas vary and sometimes roll from
chorus to chorus or from halfway through
a chorus to halfway into the next.

With this preface he launches into a book-length poem. Kerouac's jazz is more formulaic here than Cartier's. As someone who finds strength in Kerouac's stream-of-consciousness writing, I feel that he may have (or I may have) missed something with *Mexico City Blues*. The poem resembles the rest of his work in its content, but the declaration of intention at the beginning leads *on* more than leads *into*. The voice of both his prose and poetry is meant often as an ode to be bop; this is his most straightforward effort.

The improvisation, lyricism, and sophistication that he admires in bop does appear to me elsewhere in his writing. At times, for example, in his novella *The Subterraneans* (1958). Considering the two works in terms of musicality, *Mexico City Blues* looks like an imposter next to *The Subterraneans*. Having said this, if Kerouac wrote *Mexico City Blues* as a "blues" written by a "jazz poet," then a blues written by a jazz poet it is⁹. Perhaps, given the innate subjectivity of this academic exploration into improvisation, one should not (I should not) forget the innate subjectivity of this academic exploration of improvisation!

⁹Allen Ginsberg describes Jack Kerouac— in the dedication of *Howl and Other Poems*— as someone who "spit forth intelligence into eleven books written in half the number of years (1951-1956)...creating spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature." Who am I to dispute Jack Kerouac's individuality as any less authentic than Dawn's? Kerouac cultivated his own individual, improvisatory bluesness.

I mention Jack Kerouac for the same reason I mentioned Warren Zevon in the introduction: in order to foreground the wide range of artists for whom the blues and its ethos makes their work possible.

Xam Wilson Cartiér renamed herself “Xam” because her given name did not seem to suit her. Speaking of musicality, Xam means “harmony” in Senegalese. Her improvisatory attitude toward life as well as writing presents itself even in her choice of what to call herself. The way Cartiér discusses jazz and discusses its involvement in her characters and in her writing demonstrates her commitment to music as a necessity to her work and life, inside and out of sound.

Every time I read [Richard Wright or Chester Himes] they suggest a new possibility, like music. The very best music, you can listen to again and again. Because I was getting something different every time I played it. And I wasn’t through with it (Cartiér interview 1990).

Is that not what music or literature is when it is alive! This unwringable rag that is artistic expression— is this not as close as one gets to infinity?

Context and Methodology

Each of us has a different relationship to structure (and agency) than we would have without the work done in our respective disciplines and lineages. My work as a student and an ethnographer depends not only on ethnographers that came before me that shaped and expanded the discipline of ethnomusicology, but I also owe my ability to engage Dawn and Xam and their artistic practices to them and to their predecessors in blues music and jazz fiction, respectively. For each of the three of us, the possibilities of our disciplines have expanded due to the work done before us, for us, affording an altered relationship to structure and to agency at this time. The following section aims to situate Dawn Tyler Watson, Xam Wilson Cartier, and myself in our contexts.

I flew home to California in November of 2019 and on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving went with an old friend to a used bookstore we love by our favorite cafe. There under the pretense of finding material to read for this project, but drowning in volumes of my favorite writers— Didion, Hemingway, Mailer, Thompson— I happened upon a title that caught my eye: *Muse-Echo Blues*. *What's this!* I wondered. The rhythm and rhyme of page one hooked me in, line and sinker.

Finding Xam in this way marks one of many instances in which I happened upon the foundational elements of this project serendipitously, and part of the interest of this project has been creating it as I go, improvising. Finding the What-Is-The-Story of it all in a tale of blues music and storytelling has been the fate of these pages. As I journey and I write down moments

and connections I discover the moments and connections I should write down. The recursiveness of this process reminds me of the walk I took in Plattsburgh with Laura, and it reminds me of the way Xam Cartier writes.

The processual nature of writing and performing music, of writing and reading a novel, carries over to the composition of this ethnographic work. I, like Dawn and like Xam, depend on the improvisational, the impossible fluidity of time, and the interpretation of time through music and words. For the composition of this project I have looked to recent ethnographic writers such as Thomas Porcello. Porcello discusses “print-through,” the “characteristic of magnetic (analog) tape, whereby any stored signal is transferred through adjacent layers when the tape is wound on a reel,” as a metaphor for ethnographic practices (485).

The ability of the metaphor of print-through to raise questions about ethnographic representation is an issue of time and the boundaries around experience, all the more so when the ethnographic project concerns music and the human experiences involved in its creation...Recent admissions that the ethnographic present is a potentially fictionalizing trope suggest the utility of writing strategies that— like print-through— disrupt its inner logic, creating reading experiences that construct the implicit “togetherness” of researcher, researched, and reader in new ways” (Porcello 487)

Porcello has guided my allowance for nonlinearity in my descriptions of the field and my treatment of these moments with relation to scholarship. Jumping off from the point these scholars led me to, I do my best in this project to expand somewhat upon their notions.

While Porcello advocates for the “production of music in [a] recording studio” as a musical practice to observe and then echo in ethnographic writing, I would argue that the chaos and nonlinearity of live performance could achieve even a better influence on ethnographic practice. *Sometimes there's talking between songs.*

This ethnography depends on the post-structuralist expansion of the field of ethnomusicology that has taken place over the past several decades. In his article entitled “Landmarks in the Study of Improvisation,” ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl discusses the latency of scholarly attempts to address improvisation. The several interrelated disciplines that could have engaged the subject did not until the twentieth century. Ethnomusicology, as a discipline, waited until the 1970s to realize the importance of the Improvised to the field. For a long time, and perhaps still, there was more written about improvisation in the tradition of historical musicology than in the tradition of ethnomusicology. Because I began this project in the fall of 2019 I have had the advantage of arriving into ethnomusicology at a time when improvisation receives acknowledgement, at least more than it ever has before in academia¹⁰.

This project means to engage blues music and its enactors as more than musicians and singers— for blues is in the sentiment, the ethos. Just as improvisation and narrative each have both musical and extramusical applications, so too does the blues. I don’t see why Ralph Ellison isn’t a blues musician simply because he happens to write literature. Xam Cartier certainly writes words that bounce off the page rhyimically and melodically like music. Conversely, when Dawn tells a story through lyrics that necessarily makes her a writer.

I engaged with this project primarily as an observer, as a participant-observer, and as an interviewer, although my interviews with Dawn amounted more to casual conversation. After I saw the first show at the Upstairs Bar & Grill I reached out to Dawn and she put me on the guestlist for her concert the following night at Le Balcon. With the third performance I just

¹⁰ And I am bringing this project to a close in May of 2020, when the planet has been thrust into an extreme mode of improvisation by the COVID-19 crisis!

lucked out. I made audio recordings and video recordings on my TASCAM and my phone as I conducted this fieldwork in Montreal and I wrote down everything I could think of on whatever scraps of paper I could find. I have a plastic folder of receipts, coasters, graph paper, and napkins, stained with coffee and manic pen-scrrawl. I'm grateful for those disorganized, scattered notes and the detail they allowed into this work. Without the words that I forced myself to write down for some nameless reason this weird ethnographic exploration of narrative would have felt thin.

I spoke to Dawn at each of the three performances that I saw, and I remembered and wrote down what I could. She seemed to speak openly with me, and so "interviews" turned rather into conversation. Dawn made my fieldwork easy with her attitude of inclusion, her generosity. We grinned at each other early in our first conversation at the mention of the blues. She looked so excited when I said that I favor blues music and she said she did too and there was such a camaraderie in that reciprocated understanding of how important the music is.

This weird time of social distancing has also caused an interesting twist in this project: fieldwork would be impossible now. I cannot go to Canada comfortably; I cannot even go to the General Store here in town comfortably. The importance of music in its recorded form and of "televised" live performance have just increased tremendously. Improvisation has just become paramount in an entirely new way.

Concluding Moments; a Smattering of Thoughts

It occurs to me that part of my interest in writing this ethnographic narrative is a curiosity about what it is like to be a performer. What is it like to be a blues singer and really *do* it. This culture has such a fascination with stardom, and we romanticize popular music along with everything else. I have fought this curiosity and fallen prey to it too¹¹.

The many facets of this project including the blues, phenomenology, existentialism, improvisation, personhood, and performance connected in my mind before I could explain the way I felt their overlaps. The unfurling of this project required me to (be willing to) put words to a set of images, to give a semblance of concreteness to untethered ideas. Blues music has always struck me as philosophical, historical, and timeless. Identifying what it was that drew blues close into phenomenology and existentialism began as a frustrating task, because their relationships were so ineffable to me.

I lump together the ethos of the blues and the ethos of phenomenological existentialism because they strike me with similar energy. Both collide so strongly into Americanness. Blues is of American soil, the same American soil of torrid history and of the premise and promise of perpetual forward-facing motion. The “American Dream” is predicated on an idea that there is always more, betterment to be had, upward motion, Lift. The American Dream, or the lack thereof, fosters an existentialist premise in American identity, and a similar yearning spirit drives the ethos of the blues¹².

¹¹ “Some days the bear will eat you, some days you’ll eat the bear” (Joan Armatrading).

¹² For American existentialist literature look to Saul Bellow, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Carson McCullers, Toni Morrison, Walker Percy, Richard Wright...

So, I think Dawn Tyler Watson is as much a writer as Xam Cartier because of how each of these artists works with the philosophical and the musical. This conversation means to incite inclusivity and open endedness so that we might, more fully, discuss the conjunctions between music and literature, improvisation and performance, self and other, not as dichotomies but as concepts that inform each other.

Phenomenology takes observation and description of the everyday— an attention to the mundane, specific, individualized interpretations of detail— and turns it into song and story.

If I want to tell you about a heart-rending piece of music, phenomenology enables me to describe it as a moving piece of music, rather than as a set of string vibrations and mathematical note vibrations on which I have pinned a personal emotion. Melancholy music *is* melancholy; a sweet air *is* a sweet air; these descriptions are fundamental to what music is (Bakewell 42).

Phenomenology informs the language of blues music and literature, and certainly my fieldwork and this ethnography, and allows us to better illustrate what we mean, what we feel.

Brent Edwards, in an essay discussing how literature can “write” music, also advocates for a complication of formal dichotomies such as “orality/literacy, craft/politics, and (inarticulate) music/ (articulate) writing.” In figuring out how literature can make music and how music can create narratives, an emphasis on fluidity rather than division creates a more holistic, and altogether more interesting, consideration of these arts, and of life.

Starting from such a sensibility, we would read less for proof of proper translation, expecting the literary to capture the oral on the page; black poetics might instead cohere around the vicissitudes of that interface, around the fascination with edges, openness, fracture, ventilation that we encounter so often. The espousal of what eludes: what Zora Neale Hurston calls “angularity”; what Brathwaite calls the “submarine unity”; what Richard Wright calls the “Form of Things Unknown”; what Audre Lorde calls the “open word” (Edwards 1998; O’Meally 580-581).

Edwards promotes an inclusivity of thinking here that allows for Dawn Tyler Watson to be a singer and a writer and an existentialist, Xam Cartiér to be a novelist, a musician with words, a lyricist in prose. It matches with a phenomenological approach too: I hear Dawn sing and it sounds like a story. I read Xam's writing and I can hear music.

"We die," Toni Morrison says. "That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives." Morrison realizes in this quote the inability of language to encompass everything and yet its massiveness in terms of revealing, sharing our lives. Whether it's music, prose, poetry, an indistinguishable amalgamation of mediums, it can all be bluesness, blues music, long as you're saying something about what it's like to *be*.

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