

Article

“The Noise of Our Living”: Richard Wright and Chicago Blues

Jeff Wimble 

Music Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858, USA; wimblej23@ecu.edu

Abstract: Historicizing the musical genre known as “Chicago blues,” I further complicate Richard Wright’s already complicated attitudes toward “the folk” and modernity. Utilizing close readings of *12 Million Black Voices*, I show how Wright’s apparent denigration of the blues as an outmoded, pre-modern artistic form is dependent on his historical situation writing before the advent of a new electrified form of blues that developed in Chicago shortly after the book’s publication. Utilizing biographical details of the life of Muddy Waters, I show how his work as a musician in Mississippi, then in Chicago, and his development of an electrified blues style, parallels and personifies the shift from an African American perspective rooted in an agrarian, pre-modern south to an industrial, modern north documented so effectively by Wright. Furthermore, the Chicago blues musicians’ transmogrification of the rural Delta blues into an electrified, urban expression manifests the vernacular-modernist artistic conception which Wright seems to be envisioning and pointing toward in *12 Million Black Voices*.

Keywords: African American literature; blues music

1. Introduction

In the introduction that he wrote for St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton’s monumental *Black Metropolis: A Study of Life in a Negro City*, Richard Wright looked back on his time in Chicago and the importance of Drake and Cayton’s sociological research to his own budding sensibilities as a writer:

There is an open and raw beauty about that city that seems either to kill or endow one with the spirit of life. I felt those extremes of possibility, death and hope, while I lived half hungry and afraid in a city to which I had fled with the dumb yearning to write, to tell my story. But I did not know what my story was, and it was not until I stumbled on science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me. I encountered the work of men who were studying the Negro community, amassing facts about urban Negro life, and found that sincere art and honest science were not far apart, that each could enrich the other. (Wright [1945] 1993, pp. xvii–xviii)

It is this fusion of “sincere art” and “honest science” that makes *12 Million Black Voices* (Wright 1941) such a powerful work. In it, Wright presents a historical account of the black population in America, focusing especially on the Great Migrations of the first half of the twentieth century, in which a vast number of African Americans moved from the oppressive conditions of the rural South to the crowded industrial cities of the North. As is befitting such a grand narrative, Wright employs a highly formalized style of writing, unique among his works, using elements from the African American oral tradition as the basis of a new literary modernism.

Complicating the common understanding that Richard Wright took an ambivalent stance toward the relevance of African American oral traditions in an increasingly modernized society, I emphasize that in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright draws heavily on elements of black vernacular forms, particularly preaching and the blues. First, I will look at Wright’s unique mode of modernism, which is informed, I maintain, both by his understanding



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of modernity and of African American oral folk culture. Next, I show how Wright uses rhetorical elements derived from two important forms of the black oral tradition—the sermon and the blues—in *12 Million Black Voices*, and how these elements work together with the book's photographs to function as an example of a “community text,” in which the author/orator and the reader/audience both participate to construct meaning (Moss 2001, p. 203). Finally, I contextualize the above concepts in relation to concurrent developments in African American music, addressing the scholarly debate over Wright's assessment of the blues as an outmoded form of “folk” expression. While several scholars—including William Ferris (2008), Jack B. Moore (1995), John M. Reilly (1982), and Karen Roggenkamp (2010)—have noted Wright's drawing on elements of African American vernacular culture in his writing, I explore more deeply the specific oral patterns used by both Chicago preachers and blues musicians, illustrating how Wright employs these same patterns in *12 Million Black Voices*. Further, by contextualizing *12 Million Black Voices* in the time and place of Chicago's South Side during the 1940s, I show how Wright's apparently contradictory attitudes toward the blues in the book are reflective of the specific time that he was writing, especially in relation to the material conditions and artistic development of the style that came to be known as “Chicago blues”, specifically in the recorded output and documented performance practices of Muddy Waters, both before and after his arrival in Chicago. The artistic and philosophical connections between Richard Wright and Muddy Waters reveal the new literary and musical styles that arose on Chicago's South Side in the mid twentieth century as a kind of “blues modernism”, thoroughly grounded in the oral traditions of the rural south, even as it extended and extrapolated these traditions for a new life in the urban north.

2. An “Intensity of Feeling”: Wright's Uneasy Relation to Modernity and Folk Culture

Throughout *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright voices his conflicted stance toward modernity and modernism. Wright understood the Great Migration not only as a mass spatial transplantation, from the south to the north, or as only a cultural one, from an agrarian to an urban society, but as a temporal one as well, entailing nothing less than a virtually instantaneous shift from feudalism to modernity. In his preface to the book, he describes the Great Migration as “a complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization” (Wright 1941, p. xx). But for Wright, this was not a simple narrative of “progress”. On the one hand, northern industrial cities provided real opportunity to escape the horrors of the past and to realize the promise of a happier future, not in heaven, but here on earth:

They tell us we will live in brick buildings, that we will vote, that we will be able to send our children to school for nine months of the year, that if we get into trouble we will not be lynched, and that we will not have to grin, doff our hats, bend our knees, slap our thighs, dance, and laugh when we see a white face. We listen, and it sounds like religion. Is it really true? Is there not a trick somewhere? (Wright 1941, pp. 86–87)

Of course, there was in fact a “trick somewhere,” as Wright and many other African Americans realized when they came up against the alienation, exploitation, and more oblique but no less pervasive forms of racism that awaited them in northern industrial cities, where the disorienting logic of capitalism ruled with absolute authority, and moved in mysterious ways:

No longer do our lives depend upon the soil, the sun, the rain, or the wind; we live by the grace of jobs and the brutal logic of jobs. We do not know this world, or what makes it move. In the South life was different; men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you, or killed you. The world moved by signs we knew. But here in the North cold forces hit you and push you. It is a world of *things*. (Wright 1941, p. 100)

These passages highlight the degree to which Wright's conflicted attitude toward modernity was rooted in his conflicted attitude toward capitalism—in his recognition that he and other African Americans simultaneously benefited from and were exploited by industrial capital. This conflict was also an essential component of Wright's vision of himself as a black modernist artist, based on what Paul Gilroy calls—in reference to W. E. B. Du Bois—an “intensity of feeling” inherent to the black experience in America (Gilroy 1993, p. 115), simultaneously entailing Wright's recognition of his role in the artistic traditions of the west even as he rejected and was rejected by many elements of that culture (Gilroy 1993, p. 162). Wright's modernism, in other words, is not only a modernism from the bottom-up, as articulated by Langston Hughes in writings such as “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (Hughes [1926] 1990), but also what Benjamin Balthaser has called a modernism “from the outside-in” (Balthaser 2013, p. 385), one rooted in class as well as racial consciousness. Focusing on the photographs in *12 Million Black Voices*, Balthaser finds Wright's interest in documentary photography an apt reflection of Wright's emphasis on visual metaphors throughout his writing, noting that Wright reformulated W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness as “double-vision” in order to highlight African American identity as existing both within and without the gaze of Western modernity (Balthaser 2013, p. 358). For Balthaser, this double-vision accounts for Wright's contradictory statements on modernity, as, for example, when he states that modernity is simultaneously rooted in the “deadly web of slavery” while being also the result of “higher human consciousness” (Balthaser 2013, p. 358). Thus, Wright understands documentary photography as a quintessentially modernist medium, being an “expression of a racial past as well as a liberatory future . . . containing technologies of liberation and domination” (Balthaser 2013, p. 358).

Double consciousness and double vision are apt metaphors for coming to grips with Wright, whose “hybrid identity as a modern man” (Gilroy 1993, p. 162) informs his varied perceptions of duality. For instance, the contradictions in documentary photography noted by Balthaser also apply to Wright's understanding of music in relation to modernity. Here, Ronald Radano's concept of “double hearing” (Radano 2003, p. 45) is useful for understanding Wright's contradictory stance toward the aural realm of African American oral tradition and blues music. “Double hearing” is especially apt for understanding Wright's orally infused modernism, because Radano uses the term to denote the areas of resonance between sound and text, a process of “listening” to the text—“a dynamic process in which orality moves through textuality and back around” (Radano 2003, p. 45)—which amounts to a new way of “hearing” the work of African American writers and, for that matter, a new way of “reading” the “texted history” of African American musicians.

While Wright maintained a complicated relationship with modernity and modernism, his relationship to “the folk” was no less complicated. As far back as the infamous literary “debate” between Zora Neale Hurston and Wright during the mid-twentieth century, Wright's stance toward African American vernacular culture has been hotly contested. Hurston, in her review of *Uncle Tom's Children*, maintained that Wright was “tone-deaf” in his treatment of black vernacular speech (Hurston [1938] 1993, p. 4), while Wright derided Hurston's use of dialect as a “minstrel technique” (Wright [1937] 1993, p. 17). William Ferris points out that “of all the twentieth-century black writers . . . Richard Wright has the most complex relationship to folk culture” because “unlike black writers such as Hurston and Walker who journeyed south to rediscover their folk heritage, Wright fled these worlds” (Ferris 2008, p. 541). Following the lead of June Jordan, William J. Maxwell, in *New Negro, Old Left*, outlines a more nuanced understanding of the Wright/Hurston debate, in which communism for Wright and anthropology for Hurston functioned as modernist discourses that were enriched, rather than hampered by, folk cultures. Maxwell points out that for Wright, the real worth of African American folk culture lies in its “revolutionary significance” when yoked to a broader nationalistic vision (Maxwell 1999, p. 178). Maxwell's interpretation is borne out in works such as “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, in which Wright notes the important cultural role that African American folklore

plays in an emerging black national consciousness, because it expresses “the collective sense of Negro life in America” and “marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old.” (Wright 1937, p. 406). In light of these points, and while bearing in mind his sometimes conflicted relationship to “the folk”, I maintain that a key point in understanding Wright’s artistry in *12 Million Black Voices* lies in recognizing the elements of the African American oral tradition that lie beneath the surface and that invest his narrative with a structural logic and unity of expression.

Wright himself acknowledged the influence of two of the most prominent African American oral traditions—the sermon and the blues—on his artistic sensibilities. For instance, in *Black Boy*, he recounts the poetically charged stories he heard in the sermons preached at his grandmother’s church:

The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fires, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth, of a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent, of voices speaking out of clouds, of men walking upon water, of God riding whirlwinds, of water changing into wine, of the dead rising and living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking . . . dramas thronged with all the billions of human beings who had ever lived or died as God judged the quick and the dead. (Wright [1945] 1998, p. 102)

Additionally, Wright likened his work as a writer to that of a bluesman “who sings the blues and it becomes a part of, an expression of, his whole predicament—his place in society” (qtd. in Lennon 1993, p. 240). The oral tradition thus infuses all of his writings, but *12 Million Black Voices* employs these elements in ways that are unique in Wright’s body of work. As Jack Moore has written, “the prose of *12 Million Black Voices* . . . is more oral and aural than any of Wright’s other book-length works” (Moore 1995, p. 143). In the book, Wright makes use of several oral and aural strategies that are hallmarks of both the sermon and the blues, strategies that can be understood in terms of their dialogic features. These include the use of shared knowledge, call and response, and personification.

3. “Voices Are Speaking”: *12 Million Black Voices* as Community Text

As scholars such as John M. Reilly (1982) and Karen Roggenkamp (2010) have pointed out, *12 Million Black Voices* can be read as a kind of sermon, in which Wright makes use of several rhetorical devices employed by African American preachers. In African American churches, the sermon, as Beverly Moss writes in her ethnographic study of Chicago preachers and their congregations, is “as important to its community as the academic essay is to the academy” (Moss 2001, p. 202). A key feature of African American church sermons is their use of dialogic patterns, a characteristic most commonly known as call and response. Call and response makes the sermon a dialogue rather than a monologue. In other words, this event relies on active audience participation in order to make its text whole, and to complete the event of the sermon. The sermon thus becomes what Moss refers to as a “community text,” which “exists as a creation of a community of participants” (Moss 2001, p. 203). Many African American church ministers are well aware of this phenomenon and leave room in the preparation of their sermons for the congregation to complete the text by entering with their responses. As one minister told Moss, “*to have a silent congregation in a mainstream African American church means that the minister and his or her sermon have failed*” (Moss 2001, p. 203). The minister may give explicit markers through question words like *what* and *how*—denoting that he is requesting or inviting response on the part of the congregation.

Formalized dialogic patterns such as this comprise a significant part of a class of rhetorical devices that could be grouped under the general category of “shared knowledge”. It is these devices that turn African American preachers’ sermons into dialogues rather than merely monologues, making them “community texts” forged by a community of participants. While he lived in Chicago, Richard Wright came to understand the significance of this community of participants, primarily through the work of sociologists such as St.

Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, who studied the black community of Chicago's South Side. In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright artfully weaves sociological statistics from Drake and Cayton's research along with evocative photographs and a collective narrative voice rooted in the black oral tradition, to create a new kind of "community text"—a text that is created by a community of participants united by shared knowledge—speaking to the urban, industrial environment in which blacks from the south now found themselves. These dialogic patterns also figure prominently in the blues, which underwent a similar industrial transformation in Chicago, making the blues a similar kind of community text and expressive of similar shared knowledge, as will be explored in this section.

In order for a community text such as a sermon to be collaboratively constructed—in order that the preacher and the congregation may fully participate—the participants must share a vision of communal identity, and the sermon is a key site in the construction of this identity. The sermon is thus both a community text and a "community-building construct" (Moss 2001, p. 205), in which a preacher typically uses rhetorical devices to encourage active engagement on the part of the congregation. This includes the use of first-person plural pronouns and the use of shared cultural knowledge. Furthermore, as one Chicago preacher told Moss, "to be successful at using shared cultural knowledge as a strategy, the ministers must know their congregations well, they must make judgments about what their congregations know, what their congregations' expectations are" (Moss 2001, p. 206). In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright makes effective use of these devices of shared knowledge, most prominently in his use throughout the book of the first-person plural "we". This repeated use of "we" has the effect of cumulatively blurring the distinction between author and reader and between narrator and audience, until by the last lines of the book, "we" are all together: "We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them..." (Wright 1941, p. 147). The "we" at the beginning of the book, speaking for African Americans as "we black folk" (Wright 1941, p. 38), has by the book's conclusion broadened to include all members of the working class, suggesting that vernacular African American culture has become a blueprint or template not only for a new mode of modernism but for a new understanding of culture rooted in working-class identity at the national and transnational levels.

The sharing in the composition of an African American preacher's sermon and the collaborative construction of it, through techniques such as call and response and shared knowledge, represent another way that the boundaries between speaker/writer and audience/reader are blurred (Moss 2001, p. 205). In this light, the photographs interspersed throughout the text of *12 Million Black Voices* can be understood as a type of pictorial "response" to Wright's textual "calls". The photographs are a collective response both in the sense that they depict anonymous members of African American communities and in the sense that the photographs are not the work of any one individual but are drawn from the Farm Security Administration's collection. And because Wright wrote his text before he knew which photographs would be included in the book (Moore 1995, p. 145), he was acting like a preacher "leaving room" in his composition for this collective response.

The photographs also function as responses to the text on another level, apparent in the captions that accompany the photographs. A particularly illustrative example of this occurs on pages 49–55. First, Wright states, on page 49, "Our days are walled with cotton; we move casually among the whites and they move casually among us..." and the paragraph continues with a description of the oppressive plantation system. Then, a new paragraph starts:

We plow, plant, chop, and pick the cotton, working always toward a dark, mercurial goal. We hear that silk is becoming popular, that jute is taking the place of cotton in many lands, that factories are making clothing out of rayon, that scientists have invented a substance called nylon. All these are blows to the reign of Queen Cotton, and when she dies we do not know how many of us will die with her. (Wright 1941, p. 49)

Then, over the next six pages, photographs of cotton fields are displayed, accompanied by the following six captions: “Our lives are walled with cotton—We plow and plant cotton—We chop cotton—We pick cotton—When Queen Cotton dies . . . — . . . how many of us will die with her?” (Wright 1941, pp. 50–55). The learned, verbose wordings of the preacher, with his allusions to new scientific developments, technological innovations, synthetic materials, and alternative crops that may take the place of cotton, are followed by the response of the congregation, who repeat the preacher’s ideas but in greatly simplified iterations—an appropriate simplification in that it serves to foreground the photographs themselves. The narrative “we” in the textual utterances underscores that the congregation is engaged in a collective response to the preacher’s calls. Thus, the photographs, or rather the interplay of the photographs with the text, prompt readers into more active “modes of engagement” (Allred 2006, p. 555), in the same way that a good preacher motivates his congregation into active engagement with his own text.

The reference to “Queen Cotton” in the last example brings up yet another rhetorical device that is used in sermons as well as the blues: personification. Preachers use this technique to convey abstract principles and theological ideas in more concrete ways to members of their congregations. And just as a preacher will illustrate moral principles through the use of characters that personify a particular attribute—such as the Devil for evil or Job for patience—so too does Richard Wright impart societal structures with personifications: “Lords of the Land” designates the class of white southern landowners, while “Bosses of the Buildings” refers to the northern urban white factory owners. Abstract societal institutions, which Wright elsewhere in the book portrays as incomprehensible “cold forces” (Wright 1941, p. 100), are thus made tangible and comprehensible in the form of personifications.

In addition to “cold forces”, material objects are also personified in African American culture. When Memphis Minnie sang, in her recording of “When the Levee Breaks”, “Mean ol’ Levee, taught me to weep and moan” (Memphis Minnie 1929), she employed this device, attributing the human role of “teacher” to a man-made object, the levee. Wright also ascribes human attributes to man-made objects in his extended riff on the kitchenette, occurring on pages 104–111 of *12 Million Black Voices*, a passage that likens the kitchenette to a writer: “The kitchenette is the author of the glad tidings that new suckers are in town, ready to be cheated, plundered, and put in their places” (Wright 1941, p. 105). In this section, Wright also employs repetition, another rhetorical device used both by preachers and blues singers. Each paragraph in this section begins with “The kitchenette . . .”, and this repeated use of the phrase corresponds with a feature of sermons noted by Drake and Cayton, when they wrote in *Black Metropolis* that it was common to hear preachers on the South Side who “repeat phrases over and over with a rising and falling inflection of the voice” (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993, pp. 624–25). These examples illustrate the varied ways that Wright in *12 Million Black Voices* makes use of the African American oral tradition.

4. “Our ‘Spirituals’ of the City Pavements”: Richard Wright’s Chicago Blues

Midway through the book, Wright calls attention to two distinct modes of the African American oral tradition, the sacred and the secular, by including a mock sermon, printed in italics, immediately followed by an account of the Saturday night function at a “crossroad dancehall”, where revelers “slow drag, ball the jack, and Charleston to an old guitar and piano” (Wright 1941, p. 73). This juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular is an important feature of the blues itself, and there has long been a great deal of cross-fertilization between sacred and secular African American musical expressions. Yet despite the musical similarities between blues and sacred music, many African American communities maintained a strict cultural divide between the two musical realms. Chicago musician Big Bill Broonzy, for instance, recalls: “My mother was a Christian, my dad was a Christian . . . the whole family was all Baptists and they didn’t think it was right that I should go and play a fiddle, play the blues and barn dance songs and things like that. But anyway we went on through with it” (qtd. in House 1981, p. 41). Broonzy’s protege, Muddy Waters, recounts a similar

story: "My grandmother, she say I shouldn't be playing the blues. I should go to church, she'd tell me. But to this day I never figured out why people say that you sinning. Devil gonna get you if you play the blues. Yeah, call it devil's music" (qtd. in [House 1981](#), p. 41). Broonzy and Waters both articulate the sense that to play the blues was to violate a strongly held cultural norm and standard of morality.

Yet the blues and church music, despite serving very different functions and often being different in terms of lyric subject matter, nevertheless maintain a commonality of musical practices. Examples of common musical practices between the blues and gospel music include call-and-response patterns; lyrical repetition as a rhetorical device; lyrical personification of natural forces such as floods, droughts, and infestations; and, in musicological terms, the use of bent notes, flattened thirds, fifths, and sevenths ("blue notes"). As Angela Davis has pointed out in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*: "Despite the new salience of this binary opposition [between the old spirituals and the new blues music] in the everyday lives of black people, it is important to underscore the close relationship between the old music and the new. The new music had old roots, and the old music reflected a new ideological grounding of black religion. Both were deeply rooted in a shared history and culture" ([Davis 1998](#), p. 6). Davis, then, understands this "shared history and culture," what Moss has termed "shared knowledge," as a kind of nexus between the sacred and secular realms of African American culture, a nexus that complicates the facile taxonomic divisions of African American musical expressions into separate genres.

Davis's insight is reinforced by Albert Murray, who in his seminal work *Stomping the Blues* writes: "In point of fact, traditionally, the highest praise given a blues musician has been the declaration that he can make a dance hall rock and roll like a downhome church during revival time. But then many of the elements of blues music seem to have been derived from the downhome church in the first place" ([Murray 1976](#), p. 27). Albert Murray has written extensively on the role of blues musicians in African American culture, highlighting the emotional complexity of the blues as an art form with the aim toward rectifying the common misconception of blues music as a defeatist expression of suffering and despair. To this point, Murray makes a crucial distinction between what he calls "the blues as such" and "the blues as music," with the "blues as such" representing the common notion of "blues" as denoting sadness, despair, and depression, while the "blues as music" is a kind of tool or weapon (which he has referred to as a "survival technology") that addresses this despair, but also confronts it and ultimately overcomes and rises above it. It is this essential resilience and optimism that Murray identifies as the most important part of the blues aesthetic. This last point is supremely important to Murray, upholding the blues as an autonomous art, while also maintaining that in heeding and honoring this autonomy, blues music serves a functional purpose in African American culture:

The fundamental function of the blues musician (also known as the jazz musician), the most obvious as well as the most pragmatic mission of whose performance is not only to drive the blues away and hold them at bay at least for the time being, but also to evoke an ambience of Dionysian revelry in the process. Which is to say, even as such blues (or jazz) performers as the appropriately legendary Buddy Bolden, the improbable but undeniable Jelly Roll Morton, the primordially regal Bessie Smith, played their usual engagements as dance-hall, night-club, and vaudeville entertainers, they were at the same time fulfilling a central role in a ceremony that was at once a purification rite and a celebration the festive earthiness of which was tantamount to a fertility ritual. ([Murray 1976](#), p. 17)

In portraying blues musicians' performances as rites of purification and celebrations, Murray expresses an understanding, common among many African American intellectuals today, of the blues as more than mere entertainment. Yet with the exception of the brief, intriguing passage on page 73 of the book, Richard Wright does not seem to place much importance on the blues in *12 Million Black Voices*. The old spirituals of rural southern life have been replaced by modern, urban musical styles, which serve as "spirituals" of the city pavements" ([Wright 1941](#), p. 128). Yet, while admitting that blues music does offer some

trite enjoyment, a “string of ditties that make the leaves of the trees shiver in naked and raucous laughter”, he ultimately rejects the blues as being no longer relevant to modern, urban life, claiming that the blues simply “are not enough to unify our fragile folk lives” ([Wright 1941](#), p. 75). Here, some scholars have understandably taken exception, pointing out that Wright relegates the blues to “mere cultural residue”, and see this as an “important limitation” of his “metanarrative of progress-through-migration” ([Allred 2006](#), p. 565). Yet I think there is a deeper way of understanding Wright’s seeming underestimation of the blues, which requires situating Wright’s claim in its historical musical-cultural context.

First, it is important to keep in mind the year in which Wright made this claim, in connection with the historical development of the blues as its musical expressions became more urbanized as a result of the Great Migration. At the time *12 Million Black Voices* was published, in 1941, the blues was still very much a rural musical style. While a style of blues that is commonly known as “urban blues” had developed in northern US cities during the 1920s and 1930s, this genre is quite different stylistically from traditional blues styles based in the rural American south. So-called “urban blues”, epitomized by the recorded output of Bessie Smith, featured vocalists steeped in the blues tradition and was performed using many of the mannerisms of blues singers and instrumentalists, but much of the repertoire was drawn from Tin Pan Alley and Broadway show tunes. Furthermore, in search of a more lucrative commercial success, many of the traditional elements of the blues vocabulary—such as bent notes, grunts, harmonic clashes, and extended instrumental techniques—were toned down in recordings of “urban blues”, resulting in a sound and musical vocabulary more akin to vaudeville numbers than traditional blues. Bessie Smith herself, the highest-paid black entertainer of her era, was a fixture on the vaudeville circuit, selling USD 6 million worth of records over a four-year period ([Thompkins 2018](#)). Meanwhile, due in part to the work of mobile recording projects like those of Alan Lomax, the rural sound of Delta blues was also being disseminated throughout Northern American cities via the distribution of “race records” in black neighborhoods. I make these distinctions between urban and rural blues in order to highlight the musical characteristics and performance practices that make urban blues a distinct genre from rural, Delta blues. I do not mean to imply a value judgement of one style over the other, or to suggest that one style is more “authentic” than the other. Indeed, “authenticity” is a problematic term I will critique in the next section.

5. Muddy Waters’s “Screaming Blues”

Although blues musicians, like other African Americans, had begun arriving in great numbers in Chicago from the south for many years before the publication of *12 Million Black Voices*, there was still no distinctly identifiable blues style unique to Chicago. The Delta blues musicians who did migrate to Chicago during the first decades of the twentieth century found it difficult to find an audience for their music. There was a small demand for Delta blues, serving a niche market for some displaced African Americans who longed for the familiar sounds from down home—an example of what Farah Jasmine Griffin has called “the South in the City” ([Griffin 1995](#))—but by and large, most urban African Americans were ready to move on. When Muddy Waters arrived in Chicago, eager to make a career of music, he found to his dismay that “the blues didn’t move anybody in the big city. They called it sharecropper music” (qtd. in [Bone and Courage 2011](#), p. 101). Blues music was seen as a throwback to an earlier agrarian life, and consequently as a reminder of the hard times that many were all too eager to leave behind them. The general attitude in Chicago thus seemed to be in keeping with Richard Wright’s assessment that the blues were no longer relevant to urban, modern African Americans. But if we trace the development of Waters’s music, we can see blues music itself and African Americans’ relation to it change dramatically as a result of the new urban environment.

This can be heard, for example, in the earliest recordings of Muddy Waters, widely recognized as the “father” of modern Chicago blues. Waters was recording blues even before he arrived in Chicago. Alan Lomax, in his capacity as an archivist of American folk

songs for the Library of Congress, was traveling through the South in 1941 using his mobile equipment to record musicians for the purpose of documenting the music for the library. It was on this trip that Lomax encountered Waters and recorded him on the front porch of his cabin ([Gordon 2002](#), pp. 36–38). Lomax returned on another recording trip in 1942, and again recorded Waters at his home.

These recordings, collated in the collection *Muddy Waters: The Complete Plantation Recordings*, reveal a young musician thoroughly steeped in the Delta blues tradition; the recordings consist of performances by Waters—accompanied only by his acoustic guitar, and sometimes one or two other musicians—and the repertoire is drawn from staples of the early blues. These recordings document that as late as 1942, Waters was still performing in a traditional rural style, and had not yet developed the musical elements that would become identified with the Chicago blues style.

Waters's increased frustration at trying to make a living at sharecropping seems to have prompted him to move to Chicago in 1943 ([Gordon 2002](#), pp. 64–67). Once there, he soon met Big Bill Broonzy, who, having already been in Chicago for over twenty years, was a veteran of the city's nightlife and music scene. Broonzy recognized the younger musician's talent and drive, and became a mentor to Muddy. Broonzy showed Waters around the house-party circuit and also began hiring him for club gigs ([Bone and Courage 2011](#), p. 101; [House 1981](#), p. 8), and Waters soon began leading his own band. In addition to his apprenticeship with Broonzy, Waters encountered a slew of other blues musicians—including fellow future luminaries Willie Dixon, Jimmy Rogers, and Otis Spann—also newly arrived from the South.

By the 1950s, the collective performance practices of these musicians would coalesce into what has become widely known as "Chicago blues", characterized by the use of solid-body electric guitars and loud, often distorted amplification, which in turn engendered a stylistic shift to heavier bass and drum patterns. These characteristics were an inevitable outcome of musicians playing to be heard in noisy, crowded venues. In the older, rural blues music, musicians often performed in relatively intimate locations, such as a front porch or in someone's living room, as solo acts, or sometimes in loose-knit ensembles of two or three players.

Besides the scope and setting of musical ensembles, there were other musical differences in performance practice between the rural Delta blues and the urban Chicago blues. Rural blues musicians would often switch to chord changes in the blues progression arbitrarily, when they felt like it. For instance, in Muddy Waters's first version of "You're Gonna Miss Me" recorded by Alan Lomax in 1942 at Waters's front porch in Mississippi, the blues form is not yet fixed as the 12-bar progression it would coalesce into in Chicago just a few years later. In this version, Waters deviates significantly from the standard 12-bar blues form. After a four-bar intro, Waters begins the first chorus (00:00:14), adhering to the standard form. The second chorus (00:00:53), however, contains only three beats in bar four, deviating from the standard 4/4 metrical pattern of the rest of the song. The third chorus (00:01:30) also skips a beat in bar four. The fourth chorus consists of a guitar solo played by Waters and adheres to the standard 12-bar blues form. The fifth and final chorus (00:02:43) again skips a beat in bar four, and adds one beat to bar eight, resulting in a five-beat measure ([Waters 1942](#)).

These deviations from the standard 12-bar blues form are typical of the Delta blues. Solo performers in this style changed chords and altered meters at will, feeling no compulsion to adhere to consistent forms. Musical time in this rural blues style, like the time of agrarian society in general, was fluid, non-standardized, and resisted quantification into neatly measured, repeated units. The conception of musical time in Delta blues can thus be understood as an aural expression of the pre-industrial sense of time that Richard Wright describes in *12 Million Black Voices* when he writes, of life in the old South: "The seasons of the year form the mold that shapes our lives, and who can change the seasons?" (64). Likewise, the new rhythmic and structural concepts—such as the standardized 12-bar form described earlier—that were developed in the Chicago blues style are indicative of

the larger change in the concept of time that occurs in the change from pre-industrial, agrarian rural cultures to industrialized urban cultures. This shift from fluid notions of time based on the position of the sun in the sky and the changing of the seasons to a universal standard time entails a fundamental shift from circular and malleable senses of time to linear and rigid senses. Thus, we see carried out in musical performance practice Wright's theory of the Great Migration not only as a cultural transplantation from an agrarian to an urban society, but also as a profound temporal shift, comprising "a complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization" (xx). In Chicago, the necessity of musicians functioning together as a band, as a tight unit, resulted in the metrics of blues music becoming more measured and standardized. The primacy of the 12-bar blues form became established among urban musicians, and this form was largely unvaried from tune to tune.

The Chicago musicians' primary determining innovation, the switch to electric from acoustic instruments, was prompted not so much by any aesthetic choices as by the exigencies of Chicago's crowded, noisy, South Side nightclubs. As Muddy Waters succinctly put it, "Couldn't nobody hear you with an acoustic" ([Rooney 1971](#), p. 112). And as Richard Wright put it in *12 Million Black Voices*, "The noise of our living, boxed in stone and steel, is so loud that even a pistol shot is smothered" ([Wright 1941](#), p. 108). Solid-body guitars were capable of being played much more loudly through amplification than traditional hollow-body electric and acoustic guitars, which tended to feed back more easily, even at relatively low volumes. Thus, solid-body guitars were a more practical choice if a musician wished to play at loud volumes. Solid-body guitars were essentially slabs of wood with the bridge and electronic pickups screwed directly into the wood. This construction made the solid-body guitar all but inaudible when played without an amplifier, but their lack of acoustical resonance became an advantage when plugged in to an amplifier, because the lack of vibrating parts made for a very stable, pure, electronic signal capable of loud amplitude. In contrast, traditional hollow-body guitars had the pickups mounted on top of a very resonant soundboard, and also employed "floating" bridges that rested on top of the soundboard, as on a violin. This construction made for a loud resonant tone when played acoustically, but these resonances presented many problems when amplified. Furthermore, the Chicago blues musicians' switch to solid-body guitars was also prompted by economic factors: the simplified construction of the solid-body guitar meant that they could be mass produced in factories rather than handmade by individual luthiers, which resulted in lower costs of production and hence lower prices for solid-body guitars. In fact, many jazz guitarists of the time considered solid-body guitars to be mere toys, and not real instruments. But the Chicago blues musicians used instruments that were economically accessible to them and used their instruments' strengths to their advantage in constructing a new sound for a new urban environment. With the ensuing popularity of Chicago blues recordings, this new sound defined the musical aesthetic standard for a younger generation of musicians and listeners who would make it the cornerstone not only of blues but also of subsequent styles of rock and pop music.

Elements of the earlier Delta blues had coalesced into an urban style that was loud, raucous, and featured driving rhythms—all enabled by the adaption of the standard 12-bar blues form, which allowed for drums, bass, guitars, and vocalists to move together as a unit. The new electric blues sound was hard and aggressive, a reflection of the harsh urban industrial living conditions in which the music was developed, and which Wright documented so vividly in *12 Million Black Voices*. The stylistic evolution that occurred in a matter of a few years in Chicago, as the blues morphed from a rural to an urban expression, was thus an aural iteration of the larger phenomenon Wright described in the book, that of the abrupt, jarring shift from feudalism to modernity. The new Chicago blues was perfectly suited to the environment in which it developed, which is probably why it initially met with such confusion, even outright hostility, when it was performed to audiences from outside of this environment. For instance, Robert Palmer describes the problems Muddy Waters faced in the 1950s when he first played his electric blues to audiences in England, who were

largely unaware of the new blues and in fact were only just beginning to appreciate the older, rural Delta blues styles:

Muddy, innocent of this audience's expectations, cranked up his amplifier, hit a crashing bottleneck run, and began hollering his blues. SCREAMING BLUES AND HOWLING PIANO is the way that Muddy remembers the morning's newspaper headlines. "I had opened that amplifier up, boy, and there was these headlines in all the papers. Chris Barber [English "trad-jazz" trombonist who led Waters's backing band for the English tour], he say, 'You play good, but don't play your amplifier so loud. Play it lower'". Paul Oliver noted wryly in *Jazz Monthly*, "When Muddy Waters came to England, his rocking blues and electric guitar was meat that proved too strong for many stomachs," but the tour turned out well after Muddy toned down a bit. He was more than willing to be accommodating. "Now I know that the people in England like soft guitar and the old blues", he told *Melody Maker*'s Max Jones shortly before he left to return to Chicago. (Palmer 1981, pp. 257–58)

Waters toning down his blues in response to audiences' reactions can be understood as an example of how the blues functions as a "community text", being constructed by a community of participants, and also demonstrates how a blues performance, like a sermon, depends on "shared knowledge" specific to that community of participants for its successful reception. If the performance or sermon is delivered to an audience outside of that community—who do not share the same cultural knowledge, as was the case with the audience Waters encountered in Britain—the blues musician's and preacher's messages are likely to fall on deaf ears.

As the electric, "Chicago-style" blues became established as a musical form that was played primarily by and for working-class black urban audiences, the older, acoustic "country blues", which had previously been marketed as "race records" to black audiences, began to be marketed by record companies and concert promoters as "folk blues" to white audiences. This marketing phenomenon became known in the 1960s as the "blues revival." Many older, rural blues musicians, such as Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, and Sleepy John Estes, were suddenly called out of obscurity to enjoy a newfound popularity performing on the college circuit and at folk festivals (Narváez 2001, p. 32). This recycled form of "folk blues" carried an ideological component that placed a premium on "authenticity"—with the genuinely authentic blues musician being an African American from the deep south who was also a hard-drinking nomadic hobo, riding the rails and renouncing commercial success as he (the nomadic lifestyle was not so accessible to women) documented the working class in his lyrics. In recent years, several scholars—including Jeff Titon (1993), Elijah Wald (2004), Marybeth Hamilton (2004), Patricia Schroeder (2004), and Karl Hangston Miller (2010)—have challenged this pervasive mythology (O'Connell 2013, p. 62). In the mid-twentieth century, however, before such revisionist scholarship occurred, "authenticity" was fetishized to such an extent that white promoters would sometimes alter the performance practices even of urban blues musicians, who were not playing in the acoustic folk style that had recently become popular and lucrative as a counterforce to the electric Chicago style.

For instance, when Bill Grauer, a producer for the Riverside label, recorded the album *The Folk Blues of John Lee Hooker*, he refused to let Hooker, a Detroit-based blues musician, use his electric guitar and amplifier (with which Hooker had already made several popular recordings), and "put him in the studio with only a Goya acoustic guitar" (Narváez 2001, p. 32). According to Orin Keepnews, who wrote the liner notes for the album, the resulting recording proved that Hooker was "a most *authentic* singer of the way-back, close-to-the-soil kind of blues" (Narváez 2001, p. 32, emphasis added). For the recording session, Grauer had intended Hooker to sing songs by Leadbelly—an itinerant laborer, ex-convict, and singer who had recently found widespread popularity among young white collegiate audiences—but Hooker was unfamiliar with Leadbelly's songs, and in fact had never heard

them, which indicates the extent of the cultural gap that had quickly developed in the way folk blues and urban blues were marketed.

For that matter, the very concept of “folk music” as a separate style provoked the ire of many blues musicians, who astutely saw through the racialized marketing hype of concert promoters and record company executives. Chicago blues musician Big Bill Broonzy, for instance, in a spoken-word introduction to his rendition of “This Train”, recorded sometime in 1956 or 1957, stated that “all the songs I’ve ever heard in my life are folk songs, I’ve never heard horses sing none of them yet” (Broonzy 2000). Robin D.G. Kelley has astutely noted that Broonzy’s statement constitutes a humorous yet pointed challenge to the constructedness of the “folk” (Kelley 1992, p. 1403). In his critique of the term “folk,” Broonzy anticipates the work of scholars such as Kelley himself, who have argued that the term “folk” is imbricated with class, gender, and race, making the term ultimately not merely about musical tastes but about power (p. 1408). Albert Murray was also suspicious of earlier attempts at marketing African American music as folk music, pointing out that many of the “race records” of the 1930s that were presented as the work of musicians who were “instinctive” and “self-taught” were more often than not merely derivative and conventional (Titon 1993, pp. 222–23). Such reactionary and cynical uses of the term “folk” by music industry marketers then were a far cry from the vernacular folk modernisms articulated by Richard Wright and Muddy Waters, relegating the “folk” as a safe haven for musical conservatism and white consumption rather than as the basis of a radical new African American modernism.

It must be borne in mind that before the so-called “blues revival,” the development of an electrified, urbanized style of Chicago blues occurred well after the publication of *12 Million Black Voices*. But by the time he was writing for the French periodical *La revue du jazz* in 1949—after blues music’s electric turn had occurred, and after the new blues style was being heard on records that were being reviewed and selling well outside of Chicago—Wright made it clear that blues music was very much relevant to modernity: “The blues could be called the spirituals of the city. They are the songs of simple people whose life has been caught up in and brutalized by the inflexible logic of modern industrial existence … blues are as natural for the black people as eating and sleeping, and as a rule they come out of their daily existence” (qtd. in Ferris 2008, p. 542). Not only does Wright now identify the blues as an expression of “the city” rather than the country, he also recognizes the blues as an expression of modernity, finding that the music had become a technology of survival for “black people” eking out a “modern industrial existence” and fulfilling a spiritual need similar to the way that the religious songs of the black rural south had done, but now secularized and urbanized for the north.

Aided with the historical knowledge of Chicago blues music’s development into a modernist art form in the late 1940s and early 1950s, one can understand why, in 1941, when blues music was still associated with rural southern life, Richard Wright could state that the blues had no power to “unify” African Americans’ “fragile folk lives” (Wright 1941, p. 75). If he had written *12 Million Black Voices* only a few years later, when he was writing for *La revue du jazz* and by which time the hard-edged and industrial urban blues was in full swing, his assessment of the blues would have been very different.

Wright’s thinking evolved continuously throughout his life. His changing relationships with the Communist Party and Black Nationalism, for instance, are apparent in his writing and have been well documented in recent scholarship. What has received considerably less attention is the way Wright’s stance toward the blues, as an expression of African American folk culture and modernity, also evolved. As this essay has shown, the claim made in *12 Million Black Voices* that the blues “are not enough to unify our fragile folk lives” cannot be taken at face value. First, contextualizing this claim reveals that it was made at a time before the blues had coalesced into the modern, urban, electric style that came to be known as the Chicago blues. Second, the narrative style employed throughout *12 Million Black Voices*, full of rhetorical devices derived from the blues and African American preaching, belies the idea that the blues and other African American vernacular forms were insufficient to provide

the basis for a new modernism. Through his nuanced understanding of the sermon and the blues, as well as his skill in deploying these traditional oral forms in a new modernistic expression informed by the social sciences as well as art, Richard Wright, in *12 Million Black Voices*, demonstrated how these modes of the African American oral tradition adapted to meet the requirements of modern life in urban environments, fulfilling Langston Hughes's promise that an African American artist who embraced African American vernacular culture, "especially for literature and the drama", would find "a great field of unused material ready for his art" and an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand sufficient to furnish "a lifetime of creative work" (Hughes [1926] 1990, p. 965). Similarly, Muddy Waters, in his transmogrification of a rural folk music into a vital, modernist expression—through his use of new electric instruments and a codification of loose Delta blues forms into a tightly structured standard 12-bar urban blues form—is an example of the kind of musician Langston Hughes foresaw when he wrote that "our folk music, having achieved worldwide fame, offers itself to the genius of the great individual American Negro composer who is to come" (Hughes [1926] 1990, p. 966). Here, then, in the work of Wright and Waters, were the manifestations of the literature and music that Langston Hughes had envisioned years earlier in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes [1926] 1990, p. 966).

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