

Introduction

Listeners most often associate the blues with emotional distress expressed by a lone individual who is or has been the victim of mistreatment. As a genre, the blues has not been understood historically as raising questions of social justice. Rather, the tradition is heard as giving voice to heartache and pain as a result of wrongs committed, usually in the context of romantic and sexual relations. Cheating and mistreating lovers cause narrator-victims to cry out against perceived injustice. Having ignored repeated warnings from friends, the narrator of Big Bill Broonzy and His Chicago Five's "Tell Me Baby" (1942) describes his discovery of having been victimized multiple times: "My friends all told me; I thought it was a joke; whoa, there is fire where you see a lot of smoke / Tell me baby, ooh, tell me, darlin', how many times." In this instance, not only is the narrator betrayed, but the lover cheats multiple times, with different men. The refrain "how many times?" underscores her incorrigibility and his repeated victimization. The romantic betrayal is sometimes represented as a kind of theft, as in Anna Bell's "Every Woman Blues" (1928): "If you see me stealing, please don't tell on me [2x] / I'm just stealing from my regular back to my used-to-be." The woman is "stealing away," resonating with an expression used under slavery,¹ giving to the former lover what the current one is due. In many blues, romantic betrayal is accompanied by financial exploitation, as unfaithful lovers take from the one they are cheating on to give to the one they are cheating with. "Fattening frogs for snakes," the colorful African American expression that appears in numerous blues songs, means feeding, clothing, housing, and/or giving money to someone only to have it benefit another.² Occasionally, blues tell the tale of infidelity from the perspective of the cheater rather than one betrayed. A repentant narrator in B. B. King's "It's My Own Fault" (1965) confesses, "Used to make your own

pay checks, baby, and bring them on home to me / I'd go out on the hillside, you know, and make every woman, good girl seen." Here, it's the hardworking woman who turns over her money to her faithless man, who in turn cheats with other women.

These songs recount a betrayal: the faithful lover is deceived—cheated out of love, affection, and, sometimes, material goods, including money—by the unfaithful partner. In a sense, the narrators assert that a contract has been broken. One lover believed that both parties shared feelings and care that they would keep exclusively within the relationship. Victimization occurs when one partner deceives and takes advantage of the trust of the other. Breaking the implied contract constitutes a wrong committed—an injustice—which also suggests a kind of debt. The faithful lover has been denied the fidelity, decency, honesty, and respectful treatment they were owed. Financial mistreatment, when it occurs, compounds the injustice.

As is already apparent, the mistreating or cheating lover represents broader socioeconomic forces. Broonzy's "Tell Me Baby," which underscores the repetition of infidelity despite warnings from friends, hints that the narrator has been the victim of other types of exploitative relations. The repetition of *how many times* in the lyrics prompts associations with other forms of serial victimization, inviting a metaphorical interpretation. For listeners, asking repeatedly *how many times* have I been and will I be mistreated calls forth racialized social, political, and economic forms of betrayal. Muddy Waters's powerful vocal performance in his cover of "Tell Me Baby" (1960) makes the anger and frustration born of repeated exploitation even more palpable than in Broonzy's original, with a suppressed rage that gestures beyond the romantic.³

The doubling effect achieved by using romantic relations to express frustration about other forms of victimization in the blues does not entail a direct, one-for-one substitution of themes and characters: the mean mistreater is not necessarily simply the mean boss man. Instead, the representational strategy employs human relations as metaphors for one another in ways that create parallels, overlaps, but also inconsistencies and contradictions. While one line or phrase in the lyrics may signal one meaning, another fragment may gesture by association in another direction. In the blues, verses about romantic betrayal are adjacent to lyrics about working conditions, creating a collage effect that stops short of making explicit connections. Interpreting songs requires listening to the lyrics and aspects of the musical performance in a way that is attentive to the historical circumstances in which they were created, picking up subtle (and not so subtle) clues about possible submerged meanings, and

enabling even contradictory interpretations to emerge. My interpretive strategy in the following study, attuned to the historical context of production of the blues, aims to foreground the target audience's likely understanding of layers of meaning in songs. In other words, I listen for the ways the music suggestively evokes parallel experiences of exploitation whose similarities resonate for listeners. In particular, I focus on forms of victimization that invoke debt, be it personal, emotional, psychological, financial, economic, social, or political. For an African American audience well acquainted with the blues, the polysemic themes and indirect forms of articulation deliver a powerful message related to a racialized history of mistreatment, and especially economic exploitation.

While many blues represent social and economic forms of injustice indirectly through romantic relations, some songs discuss them openly. Tom Dickson's "Labor Blues" (1928) describes in a straightforward manner the situation of gang laborers who are not paid for their work:

Said, good morning, captain; said good morning, shine [2×]
'Tain't nothing the matter, captain, but I just ain't goin'
I don't mind workin,' captain, from sun to sun [2×]
But I want my money, captain, when payday come

In this unusually pointed articulation, the narrator speaks to a *captain*, a form of address that identifies the situation as one of gang labor with an overseer, such as on a road or railroad or in a turpentine or levee camp. The greeting in response, including the racial slur *shine*, establishes a context of racialized hierarchy via a kind of shorthand. In the next line, the narrator declares his unwillingness to continue working. While accepting what can be presumed to be harsh conditions, including "workin' . . . from sun to sun," he now draws the line at not receiving money on payday and refuses to continue. The following verse establishes the ongoing nature of the exploitation: "Work me all this summer and started on this fall [2×] / Now, I've got to take Christmas in my overalls." Toiling without pay for months under extreme conditions has become unacceptable. The mention of summer, fall, and Christmas reminds us that manual labor often entails being away from home and family for long periods of time, even during holidays. The representation invites a comparison to slavery: unpaid labor in harsh conditions produces a denial of basic rights and a loss of freedom. The narrator's direct form of rebellion fulfills a wish fantasy for thousands of listeners who identify with the oppression but cannot speak out directly.

The remaining four verses of “Labor Blues” turn to sexual infidelity, hinting at connections between the two situations. Men away from home will turn to other women, some of whom will take their money: “Now, there t’ain’t no tellin’ what a Mississippi gal’ll do / Well, there t’ain’t no tellin,’ a Mississippi gal’ll do / She will get your money then pull game at you.” Like the captain who does not pay, the outside women might also take financial advantage. Likewise, women left alone without their men for months on end might also find satisfaction elsewhere. The last verse of Dickson’s song, which incorporates traditional lyrics, suggests this result: “Hey, tell me, woman, where did you stay last night? / Hey, it’s, tell me, woman, where did you stay last night? / Well, your shoe’s unfastened and your skirt don’t fit you right.” Itinerant labor creates conditions for sexual infidelity on the part of both partners, tightening the association between sexual and financial betrayal.

Calling out cheating, betrayal, and exploitation highlights injustice of various kinds. Whether in the context of labor or sexual relations, implied in the calling out of acts of injustice is the demand that something be done to rectify the situation. Our notion of justice calls forth the image of the scales, a metaphor borrowed from the world of weights and measures to symbolize equity and fairness through a process of balancing. The metaphor, used for economic exchanges, crimes and punishments, and even personal, spiritual, and moral accounting, asserts a measurability of harms done and implies that a remedy may be applied to restore balance. In other words, injustices assert a kind of deficit or debt, as we have seen in the examples of “Tell Me Baby” and “Labor Blues.” The person wronged is owed something, be it emotional, financial, or social. Redemption, the word I choose to designate rectification or remediation of debts owed for wrongs committed, is particularly apt because of its association with two very different realms: the economic and the spiritual. Repaying money (redeeming a loan) coincides semantically with redressing faults or sins (redeeming your soul). Balance or equity entails regaining something, whether a material good or a clean slate. The meanings of the word redemption remind us that debts may be material and immaterial, tangible and intangible.

Debt and Redemption in the Blues: The Call for Justice argues that the blues as a genre calls out forms of racialized economic injustice involving debt, most often signified as romantic relations. In *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, Clyde Woods recognizes in the blues not only an “aesthetic tradition” but also “a theory of social and economic development and change.” His reading of the history of exploitation in the Mississippi Delta “return[s] the blues back to its roots as a critique of

plantation social relations and their extensions.”⁴ Viewing Woods’s argument from another angle, the following study focuses on the critique of socioeconomic exploitation as it is articulated in the blues, rooted in a foundational experience of agricultural labor as bondage.

The Blues: Archive and Genre

As is apparent in the examples cited above, my archive is capacious. My definition of the blues extends from the professionalized forms of the women’s classic blues recorded in the 1920s through to the present day. Focusing on musical features such as antiphonal structure, pentatonic or modal scale, blue notes, repeating chord progression, and an AA’B lyric structure, I use formal and stylistic markers to determine what constitutes “the blues.” Genres of music emerge over time, as performers create a form whose features become recognizable both to the performers themselves, to a public and, eventually, to critics and scholars. These forms are shaped by material circumstances (such as the availability of instruments, technological capabilities, and the socioeconomic conditions of the musicians and their listening publics), as well as types of musical knowledge (such as the ability to read music, play certain instruments, and manipulate technology) and, eventually, modes of commodification. With all new forms of music, performers, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, experiment with the materials at hand—instruments, musical forms, venues, audience, et cetera—and produce new sounds that sometimes evolve into something that attains recognition with a genre name.

The case of rap is instructive for its relatively clear point of origin in the South Bronx in the late 1970s. Tricia Rose persuasively argues that a particular set of socioeconomic and political circumstances led to the creation of hip-hop’s aesthetic of “rupture and flow” that included rap as a musical form.⁵ Yet, among genres of popular music, rap is something of an outlier for the relative ease with which a plausible narrative of origin may be established. Nonetheless, like other genres, rap does not arise *ex nihilo* but evolves out of a variety of other aesthetic practices: Jamaican sound systems, dub and dancehall, radio DJ banter, the African American toasting tradition, and so forth. Rap’s commodification also presents challenges to understanding and defining the genre: early practitioners, despite the form’s reliance on sampling, understood it as a live performance art and declined opportunities to record. For this reason, many fans, critics, and scholars view the earliest commercial

success, the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979), as an "inauthentic" production.⁶

Compared to rap, the blues as a genre presents far more significant challenges in delineating a narrative of development with a particular place and time of origin and specific features that define it. Moreover, as in the case with rap, its complicated relationship to commodification raises significant questions around "authenticity" related to the music's degree of negotiation with and mediation by the white dominant culture. A version of the musical practice that has come to be called the blues was likely occurring in multiple places in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries across the South. In rural agricultural areas, in semirural small towns, and in urban areas, musicians in tented shows, on the vaudeville stage, in honky-tonks, on porches and street corners, in jukeboxes, and at picnics, performed music with techniques and features that we have come to identify as blues devices. These practices include a pentatonic scale with flattened "pitch areas," particularly at the third and seventh degrees, and traditional lyrics, riffs, and pieces of melodic lines that are borrowed and recycled from song to song.⁷ Most often, lyrics consist of couplets organized in a three-line verse structure, with a first or A line repeated with slight variation (A'), followed by the B line that may or may not rhyme. While the three-line verse form became standard, other forms with different numbers of lines also exist, but repetition is key: not only are lines of lyrics repeated with variation, they are also repeated from song to song. This loose structure enables improvisation in the moment in response to present circumstances—events that recently happened, a fleeting thought or feeling, or suggestions from those listening. The music is antiphonal; the vocal and instrumental lines enact a call and response. The chord movement, whether over twelve bars (which became standard) or some other number of measures, relies heavily on the tonic or I chord, providing ample opportunity for instrumental improvisation. Most progressions display movement to the subdominant or IV chord and to the dominant or V but rely heavily on the I or tonic. Each cycle through the chord progression features a "turnaround," usually two measures in duration executed on the tonic, that simultaneously wraps up the current chord progression and sets up for the next go-round.

The formal and stylistic features of the music bear a strong resemblance to forms that existed under slavery. In particular, the antiphonal structure and improvisational character of the music hark back to the a cappella forms of both work songs and spirituals of the antebellum period.⁸ Repetition and recycling from a stock of common lyrics (like the ones in Dickson's final verse of "Labor Blues") and riffs enable creativity and originality in the form

of variation in performance, resulting in an unstable conception of a “song.” Other aspects of blues strongly resemble work songs, such as the pause that often occurs in the articulation of lines of lyrics that echoes the rhythm of work songs that pause to allow for the falling of an ax, hoe, or other tool. The pause also facilitates call and response, prevalent in both work songs and spirituals. The blue notes or neutral tones that fall somewhere between major and minor intervals link the music to a tradition of spirituals, work songs, and hollers that deploy melismatic bends to emphasize the emotions of the singer in the present moment. The same effect is achieved with a variety of instrumental techniques—bends, trills, slides, mutes, and the like—resulting in instrumental lines that strongly resemble vocal ones. These musical features and others, performed in a variety of settings, ultimately function as signs that conjure the historical lineage of the blues as a genre. No matter the context, the musical signs reference not only a particular type of “folk” music but also the rural, agricultural conditions that gave rise to it. In other words, deploying these musical signs invokes the rural blues as a point of reference for many forms of music: blues, but also jazz, rock, R&B, soul, et cetera, that use its signature features.

By this I do not mean that the rural blues is the historical site of origin and, therefore, a more “authentic” form that is foundational for the genre as a whole. Rather, I mean that the blues as a genre is an idea, a category, and a construct that relies on the rural blues as a posited point of historical and geographical origin for definitional purposes. For the array of songs that forms the genre (and associated genres), the rural blues functions as a kind of North Star, in relation to which all other incarnations take their positions.⁹ Whether it is the roughly contemporaneous “professional” forms, such as W. C. Handy’s sheet music, *Tin Pan Alley*, or other songs produced for minstrel shows; or the urban blues, such as Lonnie Johnson’s recordings of the 1920s; or later urban incarnations in Chicago, Memphis, and elsewhere; or even the rock blues of the British Invasion, all *blues* directly or indirectly reference a rural musical tradition.

The blues’ ability to conjure a world of labor relations that closely approximates slavery and, therewith, a history of African American subjugation, distinguishes it as a genre from other forms of Black music. Specifically, the evocation of the historical crucible of racially segregated forms of domination in the rural areas of the Jim Crow South makes audible a call for justice that references interwoven forms of economic, social, and racial exploitation. This world is distinctly different from the world of slavery evoked by spirituals. Spirituals—and their musical descendants, gospel and soul—posit salvation

and future liberation founded on faith. By contrast, as we will see, the blues indirectly represents a world of inequality and injustice without faith in religious redemption. Likewise in contrast to the blues, musical forms like jazz, R&B, and funk offer celebratory inventiveness in the face of discrimination and oppression born of urban life. In these forms, lyrics most often take a backseat to instrumental virtuosity and well-coordinated group productivity. Improvisation, syncopated rhythms, and dance grooves in these genres eschew invocations of individual pain and instead invite forward-looking creativity and community involvement. By contrast, the blues, with its individual perspective and references to the past, represents a form of aesthetic expression linked to a history of economic bondage revolving around debt.

Recognizing and Defining the Blues

The early “blues” was likely performed by people from different backgrounds, with varying amounts of musical ability and knowledge, on a variety of instruments. Part of the difficulty of establishing a developmental narrative of the blues comes from the fact that those imposing the label in the early twentieth century largely came from outside the culture that produced and listened to the blues.¹⁰ Anthropologists and folklorists, as well as relatively more professional musicians like W. C. Handy and vaudeville performers, came into contact with a musical culture with inconsistent performance practices and features and described or adapted it for their own purposes.¹¹ They helped to construct the category of “blues” as a way to identify a set of practices, but also to sell music in shows and as sheet music, further complicating both the identity of the object and its narrative of origin.

Folklorists and record company personnel involved in the genre’s reification and commodification added further layers of difficulty for establishing a definition and site of origin for the blues. The tendency among folklorists to attempt to distinguish between “authentic” and “inauthentic” music responded in part to the written and recorded archive shaped by profit motive.¹² The pressures of capitalism collided with folkloric incarnations of romanticism to further problematize the definition of the blues as a genre. For better or worse, the developmental narrative established for the blues associated specific musical features with a rural, folk origin that was adapted and developed through multiple different, and often simultaneous, iterations.

While we cannot know for certain the geographical location of the blues’ origin, the genre’s musical characteristics are fairly settled and have come to

define the blues as a genre. These features, identified by the disciplines of musicology, ethnomusicology, and folklore studies, with their Euro-American biases, are meaningful in opposition to other musical practices that are usually framed as more “professional,” meaning they are technically and formally more learned and sophisticated, as well as deliberately “commercialized.” By contrast, the blues in its earliest form is defined in much scholarly reception as “spontaneous,” less formally fixed, and practiced by performers outside the bounds of commercial forms of music. In other words, the blues is defined as a type of folk music issuing from a particular African American folk.¹³

The understanding of folk music coupled with the stylistic features that have come to define the blues link the socioeconomic context of rural, agricultural life to forms of musical expression. Specifically, the plantation context of monocrop agriculture, with large concentrations of African American labor bound to the land in various financial arrangements, responds to some of the constraints imposed by a conception of folk music free from commercial and professional interference. The developmental narrative of the blues emerging out of work songs (indeed, a plausible one) adds further support to the association between the blues and plantation (and other) forms of rural labor. The lack of formal musical training and the common stock of traditional lyrics and riffs correlates with the folkloric conception of music practice.¹⁴ In this respect, the segregation and exploitation of the rural Jim Crow South provide necessary ingredients for recognizing the genre as a form of expression characteristic of members of a particular subordinate group. In other words, baked into the description and definition of the blues as a genre is a rural place where it was born and developed as a result of specific socioeconomic conditions.

We can never know if the blues were born in the Mississippi Delta, as Alan Lomax and others would have it, or simultaneously emerged in a variety of settings.¹⁵ But, in a sense, the site of origin does not matter. What matters is the system of musical categorization and definition that we continue to deploy that relies on a developmental narrative. In other words, although we may explicitly reject certain elements or even all of this narrative of the birth of the blues, nonetheless our modes of musical perception are still shaped by it. When we identify a song as a blues or when we characterize features of jazz, rock, country, or other genres as bluesy, we indirectly invoke the archetype of the rural blues as a point of reference and, by association, its historical context of origin. Antiphonal structure, blue notes, AA'B lyric structure, and the other blues features reference a world with specific conditions in which this form of expression was particularly meaningful.

As African Americans migrated from the South, musical practices also moved and new forms of blues developed. Responding to a variety of new conditions in an urban environment, such as level of noise, conceptions of race, class, and identity, as well as new forms of racial antagonism and oppression, the blues evolved new regional forms often performed on electric instruments and in new configurations. Migration patterns shaped by material factors, like railroad lines and the availability of better-paying jobs, influenced the evolution of the blues. To take one example, the Illinois Central Railroad and industrial jobs made Chicago the most logical destination for Mississippians residing in the Delta: “By 1930, the largest population of Mississippians outside the state was in Chicago.”¹⁶ The style of the blues characteristic of the Delta, with slide acoustic guitar in open tuning (and sometimes harmonica) with raspy, forceful vocals, evolved into the Chicago blues. Electrifying instruments to compete with urban noise necessitated refining and distributing musical roles among members of what eventually became a six-piece band. The persona of the singer also adapted to the urban environment, resulting in the construction of a more self-conscious mode of presentation with bravado and braggadocio. But despite the differences between, for example, Lomax’s recording of McKinley Morganfield performing “Country Blues” in Stovall, Mississippi, in 1941 and Morganfield’s recordings as Muddy Waters for Chess Records from the late 1940s through the 1960s, one recognizes a clear continuity of sound. Whether it’s the recycling of traditional lyrics with variation, the use of riffs and standard guitar lines, the melismatic tones, or the suppressed rage in vocal delivery, it is difficult not to hear echoes of the musical and, therefore, historical past in the later recordings.

The rural blues taken as point of reference enables an understanding of the genre as comprising a network of interrelated songs that ultimately point back to this archetypical aesthetic form and its historical and geographical “context of origin.” So why privilege the rural blues if we question all or part of the developmental narrative of origin? As I have suggested, the formal and stylistic features that define the blues cannot be divorced from this posited site of origin. But also, and more importantly, the rural blues give voice to what Woods identified as “the blues epistemology,” a kind of consciousness within African American culture after Reconstruction that “grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it.”¹⁷ Direct experience with forms of domination and oppression that came the closest to reproducing the conditions under slavery gave rise to the rural blues. This intimate contact with new forms of bondage post-emancipation produced a musical form that directly and indirectly calls out the racialized

forms of injustice suffered by African Americans, both in the rural South, but also in other places in diaspora.¹⁸ Blues devices, whether deployed in blues or other types of music, refer to this musical tradition and the socioeconomic conditions with which it is associated, conditions that themselves refer back to slavery. In other words, even if we rely on features like pentatonic scales, I-IV-V progressions, wailing tones, or traditional lyrics to identify a piece as a blues, we need to recognize that those elements form part of a musical sign system that references a rural form of music born in a specific exploitative, rural, agricultural context.

Debt and Racialized Injustice

The racialized injustices called out in the rural blues, as we will see, revolve around conceptions of debt that I highlighted in “Tell Me Baby” and “Labor Blues.” Wrongs committed create a sense of something owed. But the story of debt in the blues is more complicated. Not only is there an accumulating debt for wrongs committed, but much of the injustice is perpetrated through the imposition of debt. In effect, debt is doubled: not only are debts owed for mistreatment, but debt is weaponized to impose financial burdens on African Americans. These economic machinations, in turn, create a broader racialized social injustice that amounts to a collective debt owed. In other words, to take the straightforward case of Dickson’s “Labor Blues,” gang laborers work under inhumane conditions without pay. They are owed a specific financial debt. But their exploitation also creates a collective social debt owed for injustices perpetrated. In more complex formations, as we will see for example under sharecropping, debt is fabricated, manipulated, and imposed to constrain, immobilize, and victimize. In those scenarios, the injustice called out is not only a demand for payment owed but also a calling out of fictitious debts created to exploit.

If the metaphor of the scales implies the possibility of eventual justice through restored balance—a kind of redemption or equality—maintaining someone in perpetual debt signals an effort to dominate—to deny equality to subjugate and exploit. The history of racialized socioeconomic domination as articulated in the blues resonates with efforts to impose, prolong, perpetuate, and even render permanent, a state of dependence and obligation akin to slavery. The blues reveals a history of the use of debt to extract increasingly more from the person(s) in debt. From the perspective of the blues, debts mount over time, and their redemption is indefinitely postponed. Despite

this bleak history of the (ab)uses of debt, the blues nonetheless retains the debt metaphor and its attendant conception of the scales for its both positive and negative connotations. For, although relations of obligation have been manipulated historically in the service of white supremacy, the metaphor of debt contains within it its own eventual resolution: all debts imply a restoration of balance. And although balance never existed in the first place, nevertheless, the use of the metaphor generates the expectation of equality and a reckoning in the future. In other words, embedded in the metaphor of debt is redemption predicated on a realizable form of justice.

The blues reflect the perspective of those on whom debt was used literally as a means of exerting control. For an attentive audience, the evocations of the pain of being romantically and sexually victimized echo with the deep history of racial domination and abuse that provided the context that shaped the blues as an aesthetic form. *Debt and Redemption in the Blues* traces the history of debt as represented in the blues to uncover a demand for reckoning. Excavating layers of debt imposed in multiple ways as a racialized weapon, my reading of the direct and indirect modes of representation in the blues provides a means for restoring a complicated history from the side of those victimized.

Listening to the blues with an ear attuned to the issue of debt and eventual redemption requires tracing a history of economic relations buttressed by political and legal maneuvers in the service of racial domination. In the following study, I explore the complex history of the weaponization of debt from the slave trade through to the present day. I unearth a complicated subject position for those on whom debt is imposed. Largely barred from property ownership and paradoxically accumulating debt as they work, African Americans hemmed in by the structures of sharecropping, debt peonage, convict lease, and perpetual obligation nonetheless exercise agency in complicated ways. The blues is a product of these circumstances, a peculiar, immaterial creation of subjects bound by perpetual debt. As acoustic object, the blues is commodified when recorded or sold through live performance but also challenges our understanding of commodification under capitalism. On my reading, the blues articulates the paradoxes generated by the complex web of racialized debt. In the lyrics, formal properties, and musical performances of the blues, I locate the nuanced rendering of a history of debt obligations, as well as a call for an anticipated redemption in a justice to come.