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# DEBT AND REDEMPTION IN THE BLUES

The Call for Justice

JULIA SIMON

## DEBT AND REDEMPTION IN THE BLUES



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# DEBT AND REDEMPTION IN THE BLUES

**The Call  
for Justice**

**JULIA SIMON**

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America owes to my people some of the dividends. She can afford to pay and she must pay. I shall make them understand that there is a debt to the Negro people which they can never repay. At least, then, they must make amends.

—Sojourner Truth (ca. 1870–71)

I was bawn a slave an didn know it. Yeah. My daddy was eight years old when slavery time declared freedom. The white people never did change it. I call myself a slave until I got somewhere along about foedy-five years of age. I had ta go by the landowner's word. Do what he said ta git a home ta stay in. An then when I make my crop, why he sold the cotton, an figgered it out his own way. An brought me out in debt.

—Mance Lipscomb, *I Say Me for a Parable: The Oral Autobiography of Mance Lipscomb, Texas Bluesman* (1993)

I had also learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice.

—Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958)



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# Acknowledgments

Writing about the historical use of debt as an instrument of oppression and bondage is deeply disturbing, to say the least. While the varieties of debt explored in the following pages highlight the ways it may be used to exert power over others, the call for justice that resonates in the blues is a reminder of our ingrained, and seemingly inexhaustible, sense of fairness and equity. In this respect, the blues also recalls our continual indebtedness to others. I owe debts to many colleagues, friends, and fellow musicians who have provided advice, conversation, inspiration, and lively debate around the ideas in this study. Among the many who have helped me, I especially want to thank Melanie Barbier, Noah Gynn, Rashana Lydner, and Dick Terdiman for sharing their thinking about some of the thornier questions related to forms of resistance and aesthetic production. I am grateful to Sallie Bengston at Nola Blue and Blue Heart Records, Mark Carpentieri at MC Records, and Bruce Iglauer at Alligator Records for answering questions about contracts with artists; I, along with the blues community, owe a special debt to them for continuing to support blues artists. Special thanks also go to Charles McGovern and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful engagement and constructive criticism of the work. Thanks also go to Nicholas Taylor for his meticulous copyediting. While the manuscript has benefited from their thoughtful readings, I take full responsibility for all the remaining flaws. I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to Ryan Peterson for believing in this project and carefully shepherding it through the many obstacles on the road to publication and to Kendra Boileau and Patrick Alexander for getting it over the final hurdles. Finally, I owe my musical and life partner, Charles Oriel, an immeasurable debt for engagement that constantly enriches my understanding of the depth of expression in the blues.

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# 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,<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.

# Sharecropping, Tenancy, and House Contract Sales

Aught's an aught, figger's a figger  
All for the white man, none for the n——.  
—African American traditional couplet

The rural blues articulates with particular force and clarity the experience of struggle under economic constraint that kept millions of African Americans in bondage well after emancipation. The reorganization of agricultural labor after the Civil War instrumentalized debt to keep a labor force bound to the land. This foundational rural, agricultural experience shaped many stylistic elements of the music that would come to be identified as blues. Field hollers, work songs, and other musical relatives—with their characteristic antiphonal structure, blue notes, verse patterns, improvisation, and other features—fed the creation of a genre of music that, although it would evolve over time, nonetheless always points back to this “originary” site of creation. Above all, the prominence of repetition in the blues echoes the reality of forms of bondage that shaped the lives and views of African Americans in the rural post-Reconstruction South. Repetition—in the A and A' lines, the similarity of the call and response, and the repeating chord progression, as well as the recycling of riffs, melody lines, and lyrical phrases from song to song—functions as an aesthetic reflection of the repetitiveness and inescapability of the crop cycle



under regimes of sharecropping and tenancy. Despite slight variations, formal aspects of the blues express the difficulty of instituting meaningful change.<sup>1</sup>

Big Bill Broonzy's "Plow Hand Blues" (1940)—recorded in Chicago, far from the depredations of sharecropping—gives voice to feelings of frustration, anger, and impotence produced by years of abuse. In the opening verse, a narrator identified only by the kind of labor he performs, describes a life of toil: "Plow hand has been my name now for forty years or more / Ooh, Lord, plow hand has been my name now for forty years or more / Now, I did all I could, ooh, Lord, trying to take care of my so-and-so." Despite the sophistication of the musical setting with piano and guitar characteristic of the period, Broonzy's vocal, and particularly the emotional delivery of the interjections *ooh, Lord*, hark back to a world of bondage for an audience of southerners and transplanted southerners. After forty years of scraping by—powerfully evoked in the understatement "I did all I could . . . trying to take care of my so-and-so"—the narrator proclaims his decision to leave this life behind. In the second and fourth verses, he forcefully announces, "I ain't gonna raise no more cotton; I declare, I ain't gonna try to raise no more corn" and "I done hung up my harness, Lord, I done stored my overalls away." By leaving farming, he seeks to forestall his own death, singing "Ooh, I'm through with plowing, woo, Lord, that's what killed my old grandpap." But, in a highly expressive final verse, Broonzy reveals that escape from sharecropping is a fantasy: "Every night, I'm howlin' 'whoa, gee, get up' in my sleep [2x] / Lord, I'm always settin' my back by and back, ooh Lord, to keep my little plow from going too deep." Despite the playful sexual innuendo of the final line, the emphasis on *every night*, achieved with a strained forte vocal delivery with tense phonation creating vibrations in the vocal tract, underscores the inescapability of farming as it haunts him in his dreams.<sup>2</sup> The mule commands that he repeats involuntarily bear witness to how ingrained this occupation is. The necessity of *setting [his] back* and attempting not to *plow too deep*, although sexually charged, also reveal the difficulty of ever actually escaping a life of tenancy. Broonzy repeats his lines consistent with the formal structure of the blues, enacting the inescapability he invokes. Indeed, the form of the blues contributes to the emotional complexity of the representation: while declaring his intent to break away from the cycle of agricultural bondage, he is nonetheless constrained by the form to repeat his lyrics and progression. The performance expresses not only the tangle of contradictory feelings associated with abusive situations and attempts to leave them but also the fraught emotions of those remembering them from the safe distance afforded by the Great Migration.

## Sharecropping and Tenancy

The end of slavery precipitated major shifts in the economic and financial underpinnings of cotton production, in particular, the demise of the factorage system and the rise of local merchants and plantation owners as primary sources of credit for laborers. Cotton production always operated according to a credit system for financing the staple crop.<sup>3</sup> Under the antebellum system, factors served as brokers between buyers and sellers and also functioned as suppliers to planters throughout the year.<sup>4</sup> Cash and liquid capital shortages existed even prior to the Civil War, necessitating the purchase of supplies by planters on credit backed by the crop as lien. As Harold D. Woodman explains, “The entire credit structure was built on the presumption that cotton, when it finally came to market and was sold, would cancel all debts. But this was not always the case.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the system often perpetuated debt through long-term loans over multiple years. This basic credit and debt structure also shaped the system that emerged after the Civil War: in a highly volatile agricultural market, purchases to continue farming require a lien on the future crop. The propensity to perpetuate debt that existed in the factorage system was carried forward into a new system, but now planters and local merchants attempted to shift debt onto laborers.<sup>6</sup>

By the 1880s, as part of an economic reconstruction that paralleled social and political Reconstruction, a new financial system emerged in cotton production: “Most growers now sold their crop immediately after it was picked to the plantation or crossroads village store where they had received supplies, clothing, and other goods on credit during the year.”<sup>7</sup> Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch highlight the emergence of tenant farming in the postbellum economy that paralleled other important changes, such as an increase in the number of “farming units” and the enhanced importance of the country furnishing merchant to connect growers to “textile manufacturers, importers, and wholesalers.”<sup>8</sup> In most regions, each sharecropper and tenant farmer dealt with the local merchant individually to purchase supplies on credit. In areas dominated by large tracts, plantation owners provided credit to a number of sharecroppers and tenants through a company store.<sup>9</sup> The increased importance of the local merchant and plantation commissary that accompanied the establishment of sharecropping and tenant farming as the predominant forms of labor, created a system in which the crop lien was paramount. Debt structured all aspects of existence.

Liquid assets were already in short supply in the antebellum period. With the dearth of currency and loss of other liquid assets (including enslaved

people) after the war, planters sought to reproduce as closely as possible the labor system under slavery. Crop production still required credit. Although wage contracts were tried immediately following the war, low cotton prices drove planters to offer shares of the crop in lieu of wages, extending the lien model from the crop to labor.<sup>10</sup> If the future crop could be used as a means to obtain credit to purchase supplies with a lien, why couldn't the same principle be used to finance the labor force working to produce the crop? In fact, this type of loan represents a mere modification of the earlier credit system that enabled planters to purchase enslaved people, who were considered moveable forms of property who also performed labor.<sup>11</sup>

Sharecropping and tenancy arrangements responded to other needs perceived by the planters, as well. Contracts bound labor to the land for a year, reducing the risk of default, particularly at crucial times in production, such as harvest.<sup>12</sup> Sharing in the crop was conceived of by planters as an inducement for laborers to work harder because of the stake in the outcome that shares theoretically represented.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, sharecropping and tenancy amounted to forms of control over workers, ways of making them stay in place, working throughout an entire crop cycle and beyond—Broonzy's "forty years or more."<sup>14</sup>

Most significant for my argument is the fact that an underlying debt grounds the entire system in this new form of labor organization. The supposition that cotton will somehow magically efface all debt is belied by the movement of credit and debt from merchants to planters to laborers. In other words, credit in the form of supplies is advanced from suppliers to merchants, and then to planters, who then turn around and extend "credit" to laborers. But this description is from the planters' perspective. Turning the relationship around and examining it from the laborers' side, it is more accurate to say that debt moves from merchants (what is owed to suppliers) to planters (what is owed to merchants for supplies) to laborers (what is owed for subsistence). In the end, as we will see below, the sharecropping arrangement ensures that what planters owed laborers was eventually all but eliminated from the equation. Fundamentally, debt structures all relationships, with the laborers at the bottom of the pyramid bearing the brunt of the perpetual shortages.<sup>15</sup>

So how do sharecropping contracts ensure that debt ultimately settles on the laborer? Both the language of the contracts, when they were written, and the practices around accounting and settlement enabled coercive and exploitative practices that weaponized debt. Written contracts, using the language of wage labor and shared expenses, made it seem as though the laborer was

being paid in a future share of the crop. In fact, the cropper or tenant works without pay for a year. This unpaid labor on the crop should be considered as credit extended to the planter and was often supplemented by additional labor invested in the planters' other property—gin, shed, wagon, plows, and work animals. The language of “sharing expenses” in the contract masks the unequal nature of the relationship by embedding unremunerated labor in the process of production. More importantly, while the contract fails to recognize this “advance of credit” by the laborer to the planter, it does delineate the conditions for debt by laying out the credit terms with interest for the “furnish” provided by planters to laborers. In this arrangement, supplies are advanced to workers, and

the landlord or merchant takes a lien on the tenant's crop for the debt thus incurred. The usual carrying charge is a flat 10 per cent. But most of the food and clothing are advanced to the tenant after March; the debt is paid when the cotton is sold in September. “Ten per cent interest” on money for three and a half months is an interest rate of 35 per cent per annum. The “credit price,” usually charged on goods consumed in the spring, commonly raises the total annual interest to 50 per cent or more, and so the tenant family's two-hundred-dollar income is actually worth much less than that in cash.<sup>16</sup>

The supplies advanced to sharecroppers and tenants constitute an advance for subsistence, like the “overalls” that Broonzy's narrator intends to “store away.” As a plow hand, he requires the advance of supplies because he is not being paid for the labor he performs.<sup>17</sup> Using a “credit” system to gouge workers for their own subsistence, all the while keeping the standard of living at an absolute minimum, enables landowners to shift debt and increase profits.<sup>18</sup> The furnish makes the planter appear to be the creditor in the sharecropping arrangement, however, it obscures the fact that the planter is also a debtor to the worker for the labor being advanced on credit. In this respect, the sharecropping contract contains an embedded paradox: The planter is both creditor and debtor, as is the laborer. In the accounting at settlement time, this paradox will be “resolved” through coercive practices that shift all debt onto the laborer.<sup>19</sup>

Accounting and, particularly, settlement practices ensured that most sharecroppers and tenants did not make money; many did not break even, ending the year in debt. Bluesman Mance Lipscomb, who grew up in rural East Texas, claimed that in a lifetime of farming, he only made money one year: “Man,

I was at home on a fawm. But I was treated so bad on it, that I never could inherit nothin. Ever year I'd git in debt, a little deeper an deeper. They jst kep me in debt so they could work me, you know."<sup>20</sup> His understanding of the abuse perpetrated by the landlord is echoed in Federal Writers' Project interviews and other fieldwork sources that document laborers who kept their own books and knew exactly what they were owed. As one sharecropper recounted to a Federal Writers' Project interviewer:

We always had trouble settlin' wid Mr. Anderson. One year I got me a book and ask him to set down everything he charged us wid in my book, so I'd have it in his own figgers when de year ended. But he said he wouldn't have it dat way; one set o' books was all he aimed to keep. So den I got to askin' him every week what he was chargin' us wid, and my daughter set it down. At de end o' de year we got Mr. James to add it up on de addin' machine. We handed it to Mr. Anderson when we went to settle, and it made him mad. He said we'd settle by his figgers or get off'n his place, dat nobody should keep books but him on his farm.<sup>21</sup>

Intimidation, coercion, and violence often prevented sharecroppers and tenants from challenging the accounts kept by the landowner.<sup>22</sup> Numerous sources recount tragicomic stories of sharecroppers holding back bales of cotton in attempts to challenge planters' "accounts." Once the hidden bale is revealed, "accounts" are recalculated and workers are told that they still "broke even," underscoring both crooked practices and the inability to argue for what is rightfully owed.<sup>23</sup> Even those few sharecroppers and tenants who ended the year with some money were encouraged to spend it and, thereby, perpetuate the cycle of indebtedness.

The cycle of debt effectively immobilizes the labor force and creates a buffer for the planter against rapacious creditors (banks, insurers, mortgage holders, and merchants) by allowing for the absolute minimum amount of capital to be expended on subsistence for workers, while at the same time enabling the debt to be transferred to the lowest caste in the economic pyramid.<sup>24</sup> Jacking up the price of staples purchased on credit and then failing to pay "wages" at settlement time because of crooked accounting practices creates a system from which the tenant cannot escape.<sup>25</sup> As Ned Cobb (aka Nate Shaw) so ably summarized the situation, "You want some cash above your debts; if you don't get it you lost, because you gived that man your labor and you can't get it back."<sup>26</sup> When Broonzy's plow hand hangs up his harness and stores his overalls away, he not only quits a life of agricultural

toil, he also abandons the tools purchased on credit that enabled his economic bondage.

## Settlement, Reckoning, and Accounting

The inordinate significance of settlement day is overdetermined and extends beyond the question of survival and subsistence. The balancing of accounts that occurs puts a value on the work of the previous twelve months, but it also has a determining effect on the future. As cultural historian Lawrence Litwack emphasizes, this settling of accounts represents a particularly painful form of betrayal for African American laborers, given the history of slavery. Emancipation held out the promise of remuneration for labor because being paid for work represents one form of freedom. Settlement day provides a spectacular staging of judgment, when values are assigned, debts are assessed, and futures determined. As Litwack characterizes it, “‘Settlin’ time’ became ‘the moment of truth.’”<sup>27</sup> But it was also the moment of revelation of an unconscionable imbalance of power: the planter holds the lien, sets exorbitant credit rates, charges fees, keeps all the books, and sets the price of and sells the crop. The fact that most sharecroppers never received a written statement of debts and credits only adds to the surreal nature of the situation.<sup>28</sup> Bluesman David “Honeyboy” Edwards recounts a typical story of settlement from the time when he sharecropped with his father in the Delta that makes explicit how settlement day even determines the future:

Every year when you settle up at the end of the year, you settled up with the boss. “Well, you done good this year, old boy. You come out \$250 in debt.” That’s behind. That’s the truth! Then he turn right around and ask, “What you want, boy, for Christmas?” That’s to hold you for the next year! “How much you want for Christmas?” “Well, Mr. So-and-So, I need about three, four hundred dollars.” That’s the money you should have cleared out from your crop. But he doing that to hook you for next year. He let you have that, and you laugh, go on into town, get a lot of candies, cakes, and stuff, drink a lot of whiskey. And we stuck for the next year.<sup>29</sup>

Settlement effaces remuneration for labor already performed and extends debt into the future, tying the sharecroppers to the land. Not only are sharecroppers not receiving what they are owed, they are being told that aren’t owed

anything or that, in fact, *they* owe, all of which seems to contradict reality.<sup>30</sup> But the white planters hold all the power. If the planters say the laborers owe, they owe. Not only are accounts “not settled,” a counterfactual is established and perpetuated through intimidation, domination, and threat of violence. In this respect, settlement day represents the ultimate form of betrayal. So, what options remain? You can move, but what does this accomplish? It may enable hope that things will improve in another location, but the likelihood is that moving will end with a repetition (with variation) of the same.<sup>31</sup>

The repeating cycle of the chord progression in the blues perfectly embodies the trap of sharecropping: There is no escape. Like Broonzy’s plow hand, if you try to make a change, reality reasserts itself.<sup>32</sup> The last two measures of every iteration of the blues progression serve as a reminder of the inescapability. The “turnaround” both wraps up the current set of chord changes and sets up for the next go-round. In this way, the concluding gesture of each cycle through the progression of twelve bars evokes the finality of settlement time at the end of twelve months, as the progression returns to the tonic in a feeling of closure. But at the same time, the two measures set up for the next set of chord changes, opening up a new cycle. The simultaneity of closing and opening mirrors the sense of inescapability at the termination of the present year’s contract—often in debt—foreclosing the possibility of escape from repetition of the same pattern of exploitation. Whether you stay put or move to another plantation, the pattern, like the chord changes, will repeat. So, the end isn’t really the end, change isn’t really change, forward movement feels cyclical, and scores are never settled.

While the form of the blues reflects the socioeconomic reality, some songs also address the insecurity of existence on the margins. Mississippi John Hurt’s “Blue Harvest Blues” (1928) paints a bleak portrait of the risk of destitution that farming presents. Hurt’s invocation of the precarity of existence relies on menacing lyrics referencing dark clouds, bad luck, anxiety, depression, and feelings of desertion and abandonment. The musical setting employs a repetitive plucked fill, sometimes repeated twice and sometimes three times. The irregularity of the fill contributes a sense of randomness and contingency to an otherwise predictable form, underscoring instability and uncertainty, even amid repetition. In the third and fourth verses, Hurt sings:

Harvest time’s coming and will catch me unprepared [2×]  
Haven’t made a dollar, bad luck is all I’ve had  
Lord, how can I bear it, Lord, what will the harvest bring? [2×]  
Putting up all my money and I isn’t got a doggone thing

While the overseer and landowner are absent from the portrayal, the risk and sacrifice required are highlighted by the uncertainty of survival. The final line, “With my heavy burden, Lord, I wished I was dead,” focuses on the despair of someone unable to see any way out other than death. In some respects, although it avoids blaming a landlord or indicting the system, Hurt’s bleak insistence on tenuousness and precarity makes a radical statement. Well acquainted with the poverty of farming in the Delta and hill country around Avalon, Mississippi, Hurt’s depiction foregrounds the risks inherent in various forms of share and tenant farming.<sup>33</sup>

Walter Davis’s “Howling Wind Blues” (1931), recorded three years later during the Depression, draws an explicit connection between the working poor and those bound by convict labor. Set against a sophisticated, urban-style piano accompaniment and clearly articulated vocal delivery, the lyrics paint a general picture of hard times forcing people into situations equivalent to the chain gang.<sup>34</sup> Most significantly, the final couplet oddly asserts both reassurance that things will change and an ironic rejoinder, in the B line, that they won’t:

People talk about the time that they never have seen before [2×]  
But hard times is knocking on everybody’s door  
Poor people are like prisoners, but they just ain’t got on a ball a chain [2×]  
But the way they are faring, I do swear it’s all the same  
There ain’t no need to worry, times will bring about a change [2×]  
And if it don’t, I swear it will always be the same

The almost mocking piano fills, particularly the rapid chromatic descents after the first half of the final couplet, reinforce the cruel undermining of hope in a better future. The certainty that things will remain the same prevails over any sense of coming change. Resignation seems to win out over hope for a better future.

## Chattel Mortgages, Group Loans, and Predatory Lending

As we have seen, settlement day often ended with sharecroppers or tenants in debt or having “broken even.” Even in instances when they cleared some money, the amount was usually quite small and they were encouraged to spend it on goods that could not aid their economic advancement. In some instances in which the share tenant or cropper ended the year in debt, a chattel mortgage



on goods, livestock, or future crop production secured the “loan.”<sup>35</sup> The lien on moveable property—for example, household goods, tools, or livestock—supposedly secures the advance of credit for subsistence. In the event that settlement day reveals a deficit, the planter or merchant can seize the collateral in lieu of payment for items purchased on credit. Seizure of tools and livestock prevents the share tenant from receiving the same share arrangement in the future, as most share tenants received two-thirds to three-quarters of the harvest, as opposed to the half received by croppers who owned no stock.<sup>36</sup> In other words, securing the “loan” with tools or livestock represents an even greater risk to the share tenant who, at the hands of an unscrupulous landowner, will find himself descending the socioeconomic ladder.

The use of household goods as collateral underscores another unscrupulous practice in the credit system of the agricultural South. These goods are usually not part of the “credit” arrangement of furnishing, which normally covers seeds, fertilizer, clothes, and food. Chattel mortgages on household goods enable the planter to seize personal property as “collateral” for a loan, by tying this property to the extension of credit for farming and subsistence.<sup>37</sup> The attachment of property in a chattel mortgage enables sharecroppers and tenants to be “cleaned up” by the planter, as Ned Cobb would put, causing them to lose almost everything.<sup>38</sup>

Many blues songs reference collateralized loans in themes of collection and repossession. While these songs often situate repossession in an urban setting, rural agricultural workers were quite familiar with the practice of seizure, creating thematic continuity between the rural and urban blues.<sup>39</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Empty House Blues” (1929) offers a succinct statement of a common predicament in its opening couplet: “The furniture man, he done been here and gone [2×] / Taking all my furniture, didn’t left nothing for me to sit down on.” Recorded nineteen years later, Muddy Waters’s “(I Feel Like) Going Home” (1948) emphasizes the suddenness and trauma of dispossession: “When I woke up this morning all I, I had was gone.” A more unusual depiction is offered in Sonny Boy Williamson I’s “Collector Man Blues” (1937), which employs musical and lyrical techniques to evoke the feelings associated with being hounded by a collector. The song opens with an oddly disorganized musical backing that leads with the harmonica and adds guitar and piano. A spoken voice addresses an unnamed person and sets the scene: a collector is at the door and the narrator directs his interlocutor to respond. The spoken delivery is backed by a seemingly unrehearsed musical part that reinforces the feeling of being caught off guard, unprepared for the situation. While the piano and guitar are almost in sync, the harmonica defies

the common rhythm, a musical equivalent to the narrator's refusal to deal with the collection agent directly. The instruments do not settle into a common pulse until the fills at the end of the sung A line of the first verse. The spoken lyrics and disorganization in the rhythmically uncoordinated opening of the song correlate to the threat of disruption and violence experienced when repayment is demanded of someone without resources. Like the musicians not quite ready to produce a polished performance, the debtor is not prepared to pay.

The form of address in the song—to a second person directed to deal with the collector—serves a number of important functions. First, the odd form of address enables the presentation of information from the debtor's perspective. Rather than a direct confrontation between creditor and debtor, the listener hears about the debtor's plight as told to a sympathetic interlocutor. Second, not responding to the collection agent underscores the dearth of options available. Indeed, the debtor's lack of action contributes to the feeling of being trapped. The presence of the second person does not change this fact but merely embeds within the situation another person who can only function as an intermediary. But, third, the implied interlocutor creates the possibility of a collective experience of debt, thereby suggesting that debt could be understood as more than an individual problem. This implication extends out to the audience members, who are encouraged to identify with the two interlocutors and imagine themselves in such a situation. Fourth, the address to a second person and its implications for audience identification highlight the ways debt tends to isolate and cut individuals off from the community. Indeed, the musical struggle for coordinated group effort among the instruments in the introduction parallels this tension between individual and community in the plight of people caught up in a predatory credit system. Coordinated group action is difficult, sometimes even dangerous; because of this, individuals are often left to fend for themselves.<sup>40</sup> The attempt to include another person in the collection situation and, by implication, the audience of listeners, opens up the possibility of recognizing group victimization.

Indeed, the song recounts a familiar situation for the audience: "Sonny Boy ain't got a doggone thing." The narrator directs his interlocutor to inform the collection agent that he intends to repay his debt in the future: "Well, you can tell him I said come back tomorrow," or, perhaps more realistically, "Tell him, but someday I'll have some money." Addressed to his intermediary, the promise of eventually having money and escaping the cycle of debt feels more hopeful than had it been spoken directly to the creditor. In the context of the song, the expression of hope extends out to the audience already identifying

through the second-person form of address. Although the promises in such situations are familiar and may provoke a skeptical response, the imaginative dialogic setting of the lyrics works against cynicism to ally the audience with the narrator. The song offers no solution for the ongoing struggle of debt and repossession, but it does offer a representation that reaches beyond the creditor-debtor conflict to engage a broader community.

Tenants and sharecroppers were not the only ones to experience debt in the form of attachment, as we have just seen in examples from urban representations of repossession. In various work camps tied to railroad, road, levee, and other forms of labor, in which workers received a wage rather than a share of the crop, attachment was also practiced to deny payment and prevent workers from leaving. Similar to the attachment of crops used to bind sharecroppers to the same plantation indefinitely, in other contexts the extension of credit with a lien on future labor hinders mobility. In a conversation recorded by Alan Lomax between bluesmen Memphis Slim and Big Bill Broonzy, they discuss work camp practices that resemble the usury of the plantation commissary or merchant store. Although the dollar amounts are likely exaggerated, the practices described nonetheless ring true:

Memphis: Yea, and the most of us didn't know how to read and write and figure . . . (Big Bill: That's right) . . . and so they charged us what they wanta . . . (Big Bill: Yeah that's right) . . . they charged us \$25 for a side of side meat or something like that, and we have to stay there until we paid for that and we didn't know how we were getting—maybe we get 25 cents a day . . . (Big Bill: That's right) . . . or something like that, so when he get ready to leave says "Well you owe me \$400 . . . (Big Bill: That's true, yeah) . . . I mean for eating and sleeping."<sup>41</sup>

The practice of charging for subsistence closely resembles the credit system of the plantation and begins to shade into debt peonage, particularly in the case of being charged for a mule owned by the company. The bluesmen explain:

Big Bill: And then, if you—suppose you be working a team of mules, and one of them gets his leg broke and you have to kill him—that's your mule.

Memphis: Then you work the rest of your life.

Big Bill: That's your mule. You bought that.

Memphis: Until you slip off . . . You bought that, what you gonna say? If you say anything, maybe you go like the mule did, Huh!

Unlike the sharecropping situation where, in principle at least, you can walk away, the work camp situation more closely resembles debt peonage and convict labor (“Until you slip off . . .”), which I discuss in detail in the following chapter. For now, suffice it to say that “voluntary” debt shades easily into “involuntary” debt, and predatory lending practices extend beyond the plantation system to other forms of labor. Coercive forms of debt designed to constrain labor were ubiquitous in the rural Jim Crow South.

## Legal Constraints

In addition to the constraints imposed by liens and other forms of attachment, the New South enacted legislation to immobilize labor and enforce the racialized power relations of credit and debt. Many of these laws imposed restrictions that curtailed freedom to the point of recreating involuntary servitude. While I address coercion and compulsion aided by the state in detail in the next chapter, it is important to recognize that legal restrictions buttressed the economic system that imposed debt on sharecroppers, share tenants, renters, and camp laborers. As Pete Daniel highlights, these laws form part of a system that concentrated power in the hands of landholders and merchants: “Enticement laws, emigrant agent restrictions, contract laws, vagrancy statutes, the criminal-surety system, and convict labor laws snared many laborers. The laws and customs that covered the South gave landowners and merchants increasing control over rural workers.”<sup>42</sup> As many scholars have pointed out, this web of laws largely reproduced labor conditions under slavery by enforcing a kind of involuntary servitude.<sup>43</sup> By imposing these restrictions, they all but removed the freedom to choose whether or not to work and for whom. In this important respect, they made the “voluntary” less voluntary, coercing African Americans into labor situations that, as we have seen, then imposed debt to create a type of bondage.

The blues archive documents the slippery slope between voluntary and involuntary forms of labor. But it is important to point out that many bluesmen and -women became musicians to escape precisely the kinds of labor situations I have been discussing.<sup>44</sup> Charley Patton, David “Honeyboy” Edwards, Memphis Slim, Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, Son House, Muddy Waters, B. B. King, and countless others exercised agency and performed as musicians in order not to sharecrop, tenant farm, or work in a labor camp.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, many recount stories of being picked up for vagrancy and being forced to work for periods of time.<sup>46</sup> Those who managed to earn a reputation for themselves

through live performance and recording were often lucky enough to escape the cycle of debt imposed by labor conditions across the South. As R. A. Lawson points out in reference to the sexual appeal of rambling bluesmen, they earned cash to purchase “flashy clothes, jewelry and even automobiles”<sup>47</sup> and operated outside the credit-lien system. Despite, or perhaps because of, this liminal status of having managed to evade the snare of the debt system, blues musicians provide insight into the plight of workers and document the difficulty of maintaining a clear distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of debt.

While some blues songs make direct reference to debt, the vast majority represent personal relations in ways that evoke economic relations, as in Robert Johnson’s line in “Travelin’ Riverside Blues” (1937): “She got a mortgage on my body, Lord, a lien on my soul.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than confront the credit-lien system head-on, they reconfigure landholders as women and tenants as men in order to examine the power relations and, in particular, the forms of betrayal rife in the system. As we saw with Dickson’s “Labor Blues,” lyrical associations develop between unfair labor practices and betrayal in love, typically in a composition pattern of verses that freely flows from one topic to the next. Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Peach Orchard Mama” (1929) uses metaphor explicitly to conflate a sexual relationship with a labor situation:

Peach orchard mama, you swore nobody’d pick your fruit but me  
Peach orchard mama, you swore that no one picked your fruit but me  
I found three kid-men shaking down your peaches tree  
One man bought your groceries another joker paid your rent [2×]  
While I work in your orchard and giving you every cent

While the sexual innuendo of the peach orchard is typical of songs of infidelity, this blues emphasizes the linking of financial and sexual betrayal. In a fairly predictable way, the first verse establishes the standard metaphor of the body, sexual favors, and fruit, as well as the peach orchard mama’s sexual infidelity. The second verse develops the connection between sexual betrayal and financial gain. By bestowing favors on “kid-men,” the woman in the song gets her groceries and rent paid, all the while extracting sexual fidelity and financial support from the narrator of the song. Jefferson’s elongation of the penultimate words of the B lines, “peaches” and “every,” voices the feeling of victimization that accompanies realizations about betrayal, both sexual and financial. The pointed and ironic use of the word “work” to describe the sexual relationship (“While I work in your orchard”) draws the associative link

between being coerced into and ensnared in unfair labor contracts and being seduced into an exploitative love relationship. Like the typical exploitative labor contract, the terms of the “contract” between the peach orchard mama and the man are hidden from the exploited party: he believes she is monogamous and, therefore, gives her all his wages. The song voices despair at the realization of having been taken advantage of.

The use of the credit system lexicon in songs about sexual and love relationships highlights the difficulty of maintaining a clear distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of debt, especially in songs that depict love as a force beyond the narrator’s control. Memphis Slim’s “Lend Me Your Love” (1941) is fairly typical of songs that use the vocabulary of mortgages and loans to humorously portray powerful external forces at work in love relations:

Now, lend me your love, baby, please lend your love  
Lend me your love, baby, lend me your love  
I know you hear me keep moaning just like Noah’s dove  
You got a mortgage on my love, you know, there really is no doubt  
You got a mortgage on my love, there really is no doubt  
But someday I’m going to find another woman that’s gonna buy your  
love mortgage out

The pleading of the opening verse establishes the dependent and supplicatory nature of the relationship, as the narrator begs for a “loan.” The second verse changes the dynamic only slightly by casting his own love for the “girl” as mortgaged. In the language of credit and debt, he already owes the love object his sexual attention, establishing the one-sided nature of the relationship: he is beholden to her, but she is not bound to him in the same way. The final line of the song hints at the lack of control in both amorous and credit relations: the narrator fantasizes about someday getting out from under the burden of an exploitative relationship. Imagining finding another woman to “buy [the] love mortgage out”—someone to, in effect, “take over the loan”—suggests finding a new partner who reciprocates his feelings. It also seems to imply finding a woman to support him financially (paying off the debt). Despite the updated, sophisticated vocabulary, the dream is not unlike the hope of finding a new, less exploitative plantation to work. The power of Memphis Slim’s elegant and dramatic piano work contrasts sharply with the supplicatory nature of the lyrics and the seeming powerlessness of the narrator in the love relationship. The playful yet masterful instrumental work seems to lend support to the hope for escaping

exploitative relations in the future in its performance of agency and control, despite being ensnared.

## Contract Sales and Wage Garnishment in Chicago

So far, I have focused on share tenant, sharecropping, and wage labor relations that almost inevitably incurred debt for the laborer and, thereby, immobilized African American workers in the Jim Crow South. I now turn to parallel forms of exploitative contracts in the North, specifically contract sales of houses and installment plan sales on goods that very nearly replicated the conditions of perpetual debt found in the South. Indeed, some have labeled the installment credit leading to continuous debt in the North an “urban sharecropping system.”<sup>49</sup> While the migration North promised better wages, the housing situation in Chicago created conditions in which African Americans were dispossessed and exploited because of a confluence of factors.

The history of racial segregation in Chicago brings together many forces that shaped an environment in which Black homebuyers were victimized by predatory forms of lending. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, racial boundaries between neighborhoods took shape in Chicago with the use of restrictive covenants to bar white owners from selling to anyone other than white buyers, increasingly concentrating African Americans in specific geographical areas.<sup>50</sup> As Allan Spear argues, in the 1910s “the development of a physical ghetto in Chicago, then, was not the result chiefly of poverty; nor did Negroes cluster out of choice. The ghetto was primarily the product of white hostility.”<sup>51</sup> Out of necessity in the form of multiple socioeconomic and political pressures, a “Black metropolis” emerged during the teens on the South Side of Chicago with its own institutional structure, “a city within a city.”<sup>52</sup> By the time of the First World War, when African American migration north increased because of better-paying jobs due to the wartime demands of industry, the lines of the “Black belt” in Chicago had already been established. As more migrants moved north seeking employment, the racial boundaries in housing remained fixed and grew even more entrenched. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, in their pioneering study *Black Metropolis*, estimate that the Black population in Chicago increased by more than forty-three thousand during the Depression: “With the collapse of cotton tenancy in the South, and because of discrimination in the dispensing of relief and emergency employment, thousands of Negroes set out for Chicago.”<sup>53</sup> Restrictive covenants and

white hostility continued to hem in the growing population. By the 1940s, residential conditions on the South Side were deplorable. Drake and Cayton cite remarks made by the chair of the Chicago Housing Authority at the 1944 Mayor's Conference on Race Relations concerning conditions in the Black belt: "In 1939 there was an excess population of 87,300 persons, measured by citywide standards of density. Since then an estimated 60,000 or more persons have moved into the area to accentuate an already bad condition."<sup>54</sup>

The overcrowding produced a higher incidence of communicable diseases (especially tuberculosis), high mortality rates, lack of social services, high crime rates, and other "ghetto conditions,"<sup>55</sup> but rents remained exorbitantly high. Segregation produced and enabled financial exploitation in the form of differential rents across the city. Arnold R. Hirsch, describing the period during and after the Second World War, writes that "rents in black areas ranged from 15% to 50% higher than that paid by whites for similar accommodations, the Illinois Inter-Racial Commission wrote in 1944. The difference was especially great, they added, in *areas just beginning the process of racial succession*. By 1960, even after a decade of new construction, the rents paid by blacks were still 10% to 25% higher than those paid by whites for equivalent shelter."<sup>56</sup> The italicized phrase in Hirsch's penultimate sentence references the result of the pressures of segregation and a continually growing population: African Americans began to settle in communities bordering the Black belt.

As African Americans began to acquire the financial means to purchase homes, they faced multiple obstacles. The history of segregation, enforced by restrictive covenants, limited available real estate and produced a dual market.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, real estate agents created separate lists of properties: those available to white and to Black buyers. The segregated housing market was also supported by financial and insurance institutions that engaged in "redlining," which created further roadblocks to African American home ownership:

Appraisers ensured segregation through their property rating system. They ranked properties, blocks, and even whole neighborhoods according to a descending scheme of A (green), B (blue), C (yellow), and D (red). . . . If a neighborhood had black residents it was marked as D, or red, no matter what their social class or how small a percentage of the population they made up. These neighborhoods' properties were appraised as worthless or likely to decline in value. In short, D areas were "redlined," or marked as locations in which no loans should be made for either purchasing or upgrading properties.<sup>58</sup>



Redlining eliminated the possibility of obtaining a conventional mortgage for the African American buyer because of the lack of availability of mortgage insurance, even from the Federal Housing Administration.<sup>59</sup> Unscrupulous real estate agents and other speculators exploited the gap between the needs of African American buyers and the lack of available conventional funding and housing stock. Using a combination of scare tactics to obtain houses at relatively low prices and usurious contracts, speculators to a large degree mirrored the contractual conditions of exploitation found in sharecropping arrangements.

Neighborhoods adjacent to the Black belt on the South and West Sides were targeted by speculators who used a variety of “blockbusting” tactics; often, they attempted to create “panics” by having African Americans frequent businesses and parks, giving the impression that they were moving into the neighborhood, in order to induce white homeowners to sell.<sup>60</sup> The speculators purchased the properties, sometimes at fair market value and sometimes at discounted prices, and then turned around and resold them to African Americans at inflated prices. According to John R. MacNamara, who worked with the Contract Buyers League to seek justice for victims of predatory lending in the 1960s, the markups between the price paid by speculators to white owners and the price charged to Black buyers ranged from 50 to 175 percent.<sup>61</sup> Because the African American buyers could not obtain conventional financing through a mortgage from a bank or savings and loan, they entered into “contract sales” or “installment land contracts.” Under these agreements, buyers put down a cash sum and financed the remainder through a loan from an investment company that was usually a front for the speculator. The terms of the contract sale provided that equity in the home did not accrue to the buyer until the entire amount of the loan was paid in full, meaning that property ownership remained with the speculator. Furthermore, if one payment were missed, the buyer-tenant could be evicted. Loan interest rates were often the maximum allowed under Illinois law, 7 percent.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the inflated sale price, hidden fees were often tacked on, sometimes at the time of the sale, and often subsequently, in the form of “required repairs” paid for by the buyer-tenant, to force default and eviction.<sup>63</sup> Much like the hidden fees tacked on at settlement for sharecroppers, homeowners found themselves facing bills for services of which they were unaware. As in the sharecropping context, there was no accounting provided.

Evictions were easy to obtain under Illinois law until a ruling in 1970 changed practices. Prior to that time, the only two criteria considered relevant in an eviction hearing were “Did you receive the notice? and Did you make the

payment?”<sup>64</sup> Any testimony about extenuating circumstances, including the terms of the loan, was inadmissible. Buyers lost their down payments as well as all subsequent payments made on the loan—in other words, their entire investment in the property. Speculators then turned around and resold the property for pure profit. Mark Satter, an attorney who represented numerous clients victimized by contract sales in the 1950s and early 1960s, estimated that “speculators were robbing Chicago’s black population of one million dollars a day.”<sup>65</sup>

The pivotal role of property is strikingly similar in the forms of racialized predation represented in contract sales and in sharecropping and tenancy contracts. Liens and attachment robbed agricultural workers of their wages by barring them from owning the product of their labor. Hidden fees and crooked accounting practices ensured that croppers and tenants were denied property rights and instead faced crippling debt. In the Chicago housing market, contract sales blocked the accrual of equity in real property even as payments were made. Hidden fees, in the form of additional insurance or repairs required because of building code violations, padded the already inflated payments made on loans for overpriced property financed at high interest rates, precipitating default and eviction. In the end, home ownership was denied and speculators grew wealthy by “baiting” African Americans with the ever-elusive promise of owning real property.<sup>66</sup>

In a similar way, installment payment plans for goods also used the lure of property to exploit and despoil, particularly African Americans. Satter, the attorney who fought house contract sales, also attempted legal redress for cases of wage garnishment linked to installment plans. Beryl Satter, his daughter, writes, “Illinois law also made wage garnishment extraordinarily easy. It permitted the use of ‘wage assignment’ forms—contracts in which the customer promised that if he or she was late with a payment the merchant could go directly to the customer’s boss and collect a portion of his or her wages. No court order was necessary. Illinois also allowed retailers to require customers to sign ‘confession of judgment’ forms, which nullified in advance their right to defend themselves in court should their creditors pursue legal action against them.”<sup>67</sup> Not surprisingly, the ease of garnishment enabled unscrupulous merchants to collect sums directly from employers far in excess of the sums actually owed.<sup>68</sup> Like Memphis Slim’s and Big Bill Broonzy’s depiction of the situation of gang laborers in camps, garnishment could lead to perpetual economic bondage. Given these conditions, it is no wonder that Dorothy Tillman, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference worker who moved from Alabama to Chicago in the 1960s, reflecting back on her experiences felt

that “the blacks in this city was worse off than any plantation down south. You know, down south you lived on the plantation, you worked it, and you had your food, clothing, and shelter. Up here they lived on a plantation with Boss Daley as slave master. Their jobs, their clothes, their shelter, food, all that depended on Boss Daley.”<sup>69</sup> Though Tillman prefers rural poverty, her comparison underscores the uncanny resemblance between the forms of exploitation practiced with the tools of wages, property, contract, and debt in both the North and the South. In both geographical areas, debt is pervasive, resulting in the immobilization of labor in the South and extremely limited mobility for African Americans in terms of jobs and housing in the North. The practice of wage garnishment further immobilizes people hobbled with debt who cannot pay bills and may lose their job or not be able to find gainful employment because creditors hound employers directly for payment.<sup>70</sup> Debt creates the socioeconomic conditions of disenfranchisement from which it is difficult, maybe even impossible, to escape into anything resembling economic autonomy.<sup>71</sup>

## Urban Debt in the Blues

Socioeconomic conditions in the North repeated with variation the use of debt to ensnare transplanted southerners in exploitative relations that resembled those on the plantation. As blues music moved north, it also changed to fit the new urban setting, while retaining key formal, stylistic, and thematic features from the rural tradition. As I discussed in the introduction, the Delta blues evolved to compete with the noise of the urban environment by electrifying instruments, which, in turn, necessitated changes in the style of play. Whereas percussive playing on guitar in open tuning with a slide and raw vocals in the style of Charley Patton and Son House serve the acoustic environment of the juke, electric guitars and microphones squawk and feedback when played in a similar way. Typical of the adaptations, after moving to Chicago Muddy Waters, advised by other musicians, purchased a DeArmond pickup and small amplifier for his acoustic guitar, learned to play in standard tuning, and began using a thumb pick.<sup>72</sup> When he graduated to a Gretsch guitar with internal electronics, he continued adapting, creating a sparser, leaner style of play to accommodate the guitar’s heavy sound. Electric guitar with slide necessitated a second guitarist, Jimmy Rogers, to play rhythm to Waters’s lead, and a bass player, Willie Dixon, to provide a stronger architectural frame for the two guitars. Eventually, the standard Chicago

configuration would add harmonica (Little Walter in the early days), harking back to the days in the Delta with another treble lead voice, only now amplified. Drums helped to balance rhythm and lead in the ensemble by providing support to the bass line, while piano, another voice capable of playing both rhythm and lead, adding both bass and treble, rounded out the group. The six-person configuration updated the rural musical practices and traditions, offering a new variation on old themes.

Waters's persona evolved alongside the instrumental configuration in lyrics he penned, as well as those written for him by Dixon. Traditional themes, such as infidelity, mistreatment, mojo, and threats of violence, combined with urban confidence and swagger to create a larger-than-life, boastful, masculine identity. The self-conscious image, like that of earlier performers such as Peetie Wheatstraw, who had the nicknames "The High Sheriff from Hell" and "Devil's Son-in-Law," became even more ironic in its deliberate self-referentiality and subtly self-deprecating moves. Even in the 1977 recording of "Mannish Boy," ghosts of the musical past haunt the field holler-style opening, heavy unison riff, and invocations of Waters's own signature phrases: he's a "hoochie coochie man," a "rollin' stone," whose birth is foretold by the "gypsy woman." Boasting "I can make love to you woman in five minutes' time," the protagonist's ironic assertions feed the play of meanings set off by the song's oxymoronic title. Despite the changes, so much remains the same, especially evident in the assertion of masculine identity in the lyrics. "Mannish Boy" pushes back against the racist use of "boy" as a form of address, in an attempt to reclaim a charged word. Referencing a history of disrespect and disenfranchisement that reaches from the North back to the South, the lyrics and vocal delivery utilize humor to enact a playful form of agency. It is precisely this agency that is at stake in the forms of economic entrapment practiced both in the rural South and the urban North. The blues, adapting to the physical and socioeconomic environment, continue to be the site of articulation of and resistance to the mechanisms employed to limit modes of action.

As was the case in the rural blues, the urban blues most often represents debt in terms of male-female relations. Eddie Boyd's "Five Long Years" (1952) recounts a story of betrayal after significant emotional and financial investment. The opening verse and refrain establish the dialogic context of the song. The singer recounts to a seemingly sympathetic listener his betrayal by a woman for whom he worked "five long years": "If you ever been mistreated, well, you know just what I'm talking about / If you ever been mistreated, you know just what I'm talking about / I worked five long years for one woman,

then she had the nerve to put me out.” The musical setting is ominous from the outset: a descending line of piano trills is accompanied by a heavy bass drum, setting the tone for frustration and disappointment. The saxophone fills are soulful and crowd the vocal at the beginning of the A’ line, creating a feeling of being hemmed in. Half-step slides on a ninth chord in the guitar at the opening of many lines contribute to the overall sense of the inevitability of despair. As the story unfolds, the narrator establishes his loyalty to the woman expressed through his hard work and his having given her all his pay: “I got a job in a steel mill, trucking steel like a slave / Five long years every Friday, I went straight back home with all my pay.” The emphatic triplet fills of the saxophone that begin before the end of the B line in this verse underscore the financial betrayal that accompanies the emotional one. Working “like a slave” and paying steadily, the man assumed he was building toward a future, making an investment in a relationship on which he could depend.

According to Boyd’s own account of the song’s origins, the betrayal on investment in part reflects his soured relationship with Lester Melrose, a scout and producer for RCA Victor’s Bluebird label. In an extended interview that Boyd gave to Jim O’Neal and Amy van Singel for *Living Blues* magazine in July 1977, he recounts how Melrose cheated him out of royalties, paying him only “one-fourth of one cent.”<sup>73</sup> After he stopped recording for Victor, his treatment at the hands of Leonard Chess was no better. Boyd asserts that Chess Records released and supported Muddy Waters’s recordings and not his.<sup>74</sup> Growing “tired of all this kind of stuff,” he got a job at “Harris-Hub Bed & Spring,” a steel mill in Cicero, Illinois. Boyd claims, “About ‘Five Long Years’: I never wrote down one word of that tune, and the rhythm come from the sound of that power brake machine I was running.”<sup>75</sup> Boyd eventually recorded the song by financing the studio fee and musicians’ session pay out-of-pocket and having Joe Brown of J.O.B. Records release it, thereby attempting to maintain control over the rights to the song and royalties.<sup>76</sup> He invested his savings from more than four years working at the steel mill in such a way that he could not be denied the fruits of his artistic work.

Interpreted in the light of recording contracts, the lyrics denounce the unscrupulous business practices of the producers who cheated artists out of the rights to songs and royalties. Artists often received minimal session pay and were at the mercy of their producers for future returns on the investment of their labor. Read through this lens, the woman in the song stands for people like Lester Melrose and Leonard Chess, along with countless others, who took advantage of artists’ naivete for their own profit.<sup>77</sup> Their power and influence reached beyond the confines of the record companies. As Boyd

explains in the interview, the Chess brothers also owned clubs and a radio station and would even pay deejays not to play cuts from competing companies. Their vertical near monopoly in the Chicago music scene, and their influence across the country, ensured that artists were at their mercy. “Mistreatment” can only be understood as a gross understatement of unconscionable abuse in this commercial context. The artist puts in “five long years” working for a record company without anything to show for it.

While Boyd’s song was born of the abuse of the producers who drove him to work in a steel mill in order to be semi-independent, the parallels to the house contract sale are also unmistakable: steady payments, made on time, for a period of years, only to be “put out,” evicted without any equity or capital. It is the specific reference to being “put out” in “Five Long Years” that resonates more fully with the housing situation than with the exploitation of the recording contract. While the narrator imagines a better outcome someday in the future—“The next woman that I marry, she gotta work and bring me the dough”—the song nonetheless ends with a variation on the refrain: “I been mistreated, you know what I’m talking about / I worked five long years for one woman, then she had the nerve to put me out.” The emphasis on mistreatment and the “nerve” to put someone out reinforces the communal experience of the African American homebuyers in Chicago, 85 percent of whom bought on contract. Very few managed to attain ownership of their homes. Even those who did found themselves surrounded by slums on the South and West Sides. The buildings in these neighborhoods were sold and resold on contract by speculators who turned them over through eviction. Eventually, they were gutted of all furnishings and left to rot. The hard-won investment of the few families who managed to own property depreciated with the surrounding area’s urban decay.<sup>78</sup>

The refrain’s insistent address to the listener, “you know just what I’m talking about,” projects the pain of having been duped and exploited onto each individual in the audience; in so doing, it creates the possibility of a bond among those who have been victims. Indeed, the force of the “if” that introduces the conditional line “if you’ve ever been mistreated,” diminishes with every repetition, making it feel as though everyone who hears the line can relate. It’s not a matter of “if” you’ve been mistreated in this community, because we have all been mistreated. The repetition of the refrain underscores the experience’s commonality, again pushing the meaning beyond the mistreatment Boyd suffered at the hands of unscrupulous record producers, and toward a more general form of mistreatment that lures victims with contractual arrangements that only enable fuller exploitation. The implied

self-recognition of members of the audience in the tale being recounted enlists their sympathy but also enables the constitution of a community of sorts: one comprising victims who believed themselves to be isolated and without allies in their suffering, now recognizing their plight in both that of the singer and that of their fellow listeners.

Boyd's "Five Long Years" establishes the emotional pain of betrayal through its representation of a love relationship with strong parallels to the financial betrayal of installment land sales. By way of conclusion, I turn to Muddy Waters's 1964 recording "You Can't Lose What You Ain't Never Had" to summarize the lure of property ownership and the mechanisms of betrayal and deceit, as practiced in the hyper-segregated Chicago housing market. For the majority of those able to save up a down payment, the bait of home ownership led to inescapable "voluntary" debt and disenfranchisement.

Muddy Waters himself managed to purchase a two-flat in 1954 at 4339 South Lake Park Avenue on the South Side of Chicago in the North Kenwood neighborhood.<sup>79</sup> At the time, the neighborhood—north of Hyde Park and east of South Cottage Grove Avenue—would have been in the final stages of "transition." According to census data from 1940, the area was less than 5 percent African American prior to World War II, whereas by 1950 it was 40 percent African American.<sup>80</sup> Waters biographer Robert Gordon maintains that Leonard Chess's attorney, Nate Notkin, assisted the blues musician with the house purchase.<sup>81</sup> The likelihood is that Waters benefited from connections with the white community to escape a contract purchase and stay in the house for twenty years before he moved to suburban Westmont. But given the ubiquity of contract sales and evictions on the South and West Sides, he was no doubt familiar with the plight of many African American families attempting to own property in the city. The theme of the song ably summarizes in its multivalent, polysemic refrain the truth of contract sales: "Well, you know, you can't spend what you ain't got, you can't lose what you ain't never had."

Consistent with the pattern I have identified in these songs, after the artist's signature instrumental introduction, the narrator, with some pathos in his voice, but an equal measure of characteristic Waters bravado and swagger, evokes for his listeners a lost relationship. The instrumental accompaniment employs prominent piano fills set against a heavy shuffle rhythm punctuated by triplets. The musical tone is playful and almost upbeat, rather than despondent, accentuated by Otis Spann on piano and reinforced by the staccato stand-up bass of Willie Dixon and the snare work of Francis Clay. The lyrics assert and then undermine the seriousness of the content by using clichéd



language addressed to an audience presumed to be familiar with such stories: “Oh, you know, I once had a pretty, little girl, I lose my baby, ain’t that sad.” The “ain’t that sad” tag undercuts the particularity of the suffering and presents a common phrase to sum up what can only be imagined to have been a painful situation. Presented in this way, with the combination of mock seriousness and bravado, and accompanied by playful musical moves, the story is at once serious and not so serious, a winking nod to the audience that they have heard such stories before.

The second verse moves from the lost love relationship to lost money: “I had money in the bank, I got busted, boys, ain’t that sad.” The reason for the loss remains indeterminate because of the passive-voice phrase “I got busted.” Although the narrator’s financial ruin might be the result of something that happened to him—loss of job, health problem, or other event that required him to run through his savings—it’s equally possible that the bank itself failed, causing him to lose all his money. As Mehrsa Baradaran documents, Black banks competed in a segregated financial market, which stacked the odds against them. In particular, Black banks were undercapitalized, leading to high rates of failure. Moreover, because of redlining, as Baradaran explains, “the portfolios of black banks were dominated by home loans, which were inherently risky, but the key problem for black banks was not the proportion of these loans they held but their nature. The problem was that the collateral for these assets—properties owned by blacks in locations where blacks could buy—diminished in value as soon as the loan was made.”<sup>82</sup> Segregation thus disabled appreciation and lending profitably for banks, creating even more risk for those attempting to safeguard savings and advance economically. In the song, the financial loss of vague origin is described with the same phrase as romantic loss: “ain’t that sad.” The audience of listeners (“boys,” “you know”) is called on and is able to identify with the loss precisely because of the lack of determinacy. Presumably the listeners have directly experienced or know someone who has suffered a similar kind of loss, perhaps due to bank failure. The same playful, almost exuberant triplet fills and chromatic slides by Spann and echoed in the guitar that punctuated the first verse, are repeated here to reinforce a lighthearted resignation to circumstances. The A’ line shifts from “ain’t that sad” to “ain’t that bad,” a clichéd judgment, evoking both a plea for sympathy and a condemnation of conditions beyond the narrator’s control that caused such a loss. The replacement of “sad” with “bad” only slightly shifts the emotional call of the narrator to the audience, from sympathetic feeling toward some kind of pronouncement about losing



money saved. The clichéd nature of “ain’t that bad” simultaneously calls for the audience to condemn the forces that caused the loss and arrests strong feeling because of the repetitive use of the phrase. “Ain’t that sad” and “ain’t that bad” form a literal refrain that seems to erode any depth of meaning and block emotional investment on the part of listeners beyond the superficial.

The slide solo between the second and third verses is sparse and playful, with moves echoed at times by the piano and snare, but backed with a steady, heavy shuffle in the bass and drums. The overall effect is one of restraint enabled by the ensemble configuration that reinforces the emotional restraint of the vocal delivery. Like a second voice, the slide guitar controls emotion despite difficult circumstances. The solo prepares for the final verse, which explicitly introduces the theme of real estate property to the list of losses: “I had a sweet, little home, it got burnt down, boys, ain’t that sad.” Waters’s reference to the home burning down evokes the practice of many unscrupulous speculators who, when faced with a property that had been bought and resold numerous times and had deteriorated to the point of being no more than a hulking shell without wiring, plumbing, fixtures, or windows, often resorted to arson to collect insurance money on otherwise worthless properties.<sup>83</sup> Arson struck often, sometimes killing tenants in buildings without proper fire escapes, leaving a smoldering mess in the slums, but allowing landlords to further capitalize on their investments.

The A’ line of the final verse shifts from the loss of the home to the narrator’s self-reflection: “Well, you know, it was my own fault, people, ain’t that sad.” This move is consistent with the overall tone of the song: matter-of-fact acceptance and resignation about loss. Here, the narrator blames himself for the circumstances and seemingly for the loss of the property to fire. However, this line encapsulates and expresses a significant aspect of the conflicted response to victimization: the victims blame themselves for the situation. African American homebuyers—exploited by the conditions of a dual, segregated market and redlining practices—nonetheless often blamed themselves, rather than speculators and financial institutions, for their losses. The Contract Buyers League that attempted to organize a group of homebuyer-victims for two class action suits filed in the 1960s met with resistance on the part of homebuyers reluctant to admit they had purchased on contract.<sup>84</sup> The shame and recrimination to which victims of predatory schemes subject themselves often block collective action because victims feel responsible for and ashamed of their predicament. They won’t talk about what happened to them to anyone else, thereby denying the conditions for the possibility of

collective engagement. Read in the context of contract house sales, the line articulates a common form of self-victimization that only compounds the situation.

Waters's deft use of the same formulaic insertions of the two prior verses, "you know" and "ain't that sad," pushes back against this isolation of victims and reaches out to a victimized collectivity. At the same time, the line's recitation of familiar phrases downplays the seriousness of its assertion. We recognize a victim blaming himself but also paradoxically reaching out to other victims. We also perceive someone attempting to take the loss in stride by reiterating familiar phrases. The final pronouncement of the refrain "Well, you know, you can't spend what you ain't got, you can't lose what you ain't never had," now feels pregnant with meaning in its concise summary of the situation.<sup>85</sup> The ironic articulation of "you can't lose what you ain't never had," a tautology on its surface, contains a message about contract sales: payments never purchased anything. Equity was never accumulated, so there can be no loss. Read in this light, the song's ironic and painful meaning resonates through the bravado and playfulness and seems to encourage the audience to accept things as they are. Regardless of whether the song can make anyone feel better, it courageously confronts reality with resignation, acceptance and joyful, musical play. The signature final instrumental tag of the song punctuates it with an almost mocking "I told you so" moral. If you can't laugh at this reality, what other choice do you have?

Debts incurred through sharecropping, tenancy, contract house sales, installment plan purchases, and shady record deals are, in some sense, voluntary. Muddy Waters's articulation of self-blame underscores the "voluntary" aspect of the indebtedness in a self-accusatory gesture. But his articulation of self-blame also ironically suggests its negation. Implicitly, he points the finger at a system that creates the conditions for unconscionable contracts that exploit a segregated market using institutional forms of racism for financial gain. Parallel to the monopolistic practices of local merchants and landowners operating commissaries on plantations (who charged outrageous interest rates for credit and did not provide accounts) and unscrupulous plantation owners (who cooked the books at settlement time to ensure "debt"), the speculators in Chicago manipulated similar unfair advantages. In both the Jim Crow South and the segregated North, property ownership is not only stymied but used as a lure to impose debt. Under these conditions, the "voluntary" nature of debt grows increasingly difficult to maintain, given the lack of agency and power of those caught in the system. Formal features of the

blues, especially repetition, enable an aesthetic representation of the complexity of being “voluntarily” forced into repeating familiar patterns. Despite the cyclical nature of the blues progression, artists are nonetheless able to achieve a degree of agency expressed through playful artistry. From Broonzy’s plow hand to Waters’s house contract sale victim, pushing back against socio-economic pressures is modeled from within the confines of the blues’ formal constraints.

## CHAPTER 2

# Coercion, Debt Peonage, and Convict Labor

I don't want no bondsman there to go my bail  
I don't want to spend no ninety-nine years in jail  
So judge, judge, good kind judge  
Send me to the 'lectric chair  
—Bessie Smith, “Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair”

If debt may be weaponized using sharecropping, tenancy, and house contract sales to dominate and exploit a population with extremely limited means to challenge or escape the system, it may also be imposed by force—either physical or through recourse to the penal system, or some combination of the two. Perhaps the most common depiction of this type of imposed debt occurs in songs about convictions resulting in sentences to hard labor. Peg Leg Howell’s “Ball and Chain Blues” (1929) provides a good example, recounting in seven verses how the narrator wound up in his present predicament, “in jail, back turned toward the wall.” The opening verse blames a Georgia woman as the “cause of it all,” but the lyrics focus on his arrest, conviction, sentencing, and punishment. Spoken commentary by Jim Hill alternately commiserates with and chides the narrator as the story unfolds, bringing the scenes to life. In the third verse, Hill even plays the part of the judge chiming in behind Howell: “I asked the judge what might be my fine [Spoken: ‘Rake or pick?].”

Ultimately, the narrator receives a heavy sentence of labor in the mine. The final verse concludes, “They put stripes on my back, chain found ’round my leg / Stripes on my back, chain found ’round my leg / This ball and chain ’bout to kill me dead.”

While it is not immediately evident in Howell’s song how sentences of hard labor represent examples of imposed debt, “Big Boy” Teddy Edwards’s song “Louise” (1934) makes the connection clearer. In this song, the narrator is arrested, presumably without cause, and taken to the county jail. The judge sentences him to labor “out on the county road.” In the second verse, Edwards provides a fairly accurate—although anodyne in its omission of threats of violence—description of the surveillance this type of work entails: “On a horse, there’s a man he rode / He count me in the morning, count me through the day / Count me every hour, see if I’d run away.” The refrain of the song calls to Louise to “Hurry home, hitch up that white mule and ride, ride to me.”<sup>1</sup> While seemingly an emotional plea in response to the circumstances, the final verse reveals that Louise comes with the means to bail him out:

It was early in the evening, sun was going down  
Seeing a lady coming all dressed in brown  
Looked in her face, looked down in her hand  
Was Louise coming, coming to get her man.

The lyrics imply that Louise holds money in her hand to free him. Labor was often imposed using the pretense of owing fines and fees associated with minor or fabricated crimes. In this tale with a happy ending, the narrator escapes because of financial aid from a woman. Debt is imposed by deploying judicial processes to extract labor. A knowing audience would understand these underlying mechanisms in Howell’s, Edwards’s, and others’ depictions of convict labor.

These two songs deploy what had become a trope in the blues at the time of their recordings in 1929 and 1934, born of decades of injustice. They also reflect an ongoing reality of the uses and abuses of the legal and judicial systems to keep African Americans in bondage. Debt peonage, convict labor, and convict lease all use the coercive power of state authority to impress and hold people in labor. To comprehend fully the use of the state and the justice system to impose debt, it is important to trace the history of forms of coerced labor in the United States back to the colonial period. The history of indentured servitude reveals strong parallels between multiple forms of semi-liberty<sup>2</sup> in the colonial period (contemporaneous with the establishment of racialized

chattel slavery) and the later use of coerced racialized forms of bondage in the post-emancipation period, particularly in the Jim Crow South.

## Indentured Servitude, Coerced Labor, and Slavery

“Nearly half of the total white immigration to the Thirteen Colonies” and an estimated three-quarters of the immigrants to the American colonies south of New York came as indentured servants.<sup>3</sup> Unable to pay their passage and often enticed by extravagant promises and exaggerated depictions of the prospects of a new life across the Atlantic, individuals bound themselves for one to seven years of labor.<sup>4</sup> Agents delivered these servants to ship captains who then sold them upon arrival in America. Husbands were sometimes separated from wives and children were often separated from parents, as the exigencies of the labor market—particularly the high value placed on children due to their relatively longer period of indenture—dictated the practices of placement, sale, and exchange.<sup>5</sup> And, like chattel slaves, indentured servants could be bought, sold, and traded to acquit debts among employers.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside “voluntary” indentured servitude, convict servants were also sent to the colonies from Great Britain.<sup>7</sup> Once in America, convicts served out periods of indenture calibrated to their criminal convictions, often seven or fourteen years.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the colonies used indentured and forced labor in lieu of prison for both debtors and those convicted of lesser crimes in the New World.<sup>9</sup> As Richard B. Morris observes, this use of forced labor represents the “real beginning of the chain gang.”<sup>10</sup> Some have argued that these practices of indenture served as models for the development of laws concerning racialized chattel slavery in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Rather than trace parallels and divergences between indentured servitude and slavery, my focus is on the post-Reconstruction period and the striking resurgence of these forms of coerced labor after slavery. Labor and capital shortages and, above all, the desire to immobilize labor to boost staple crop production motivated the resurrection of forms of indenture formerly practiced only on whites but now imposed on African Americans.<sup>12</sup> These forms of bondage, untethered from their contexts of colonial immigration or the justice system of the post-Revolutionary period, were imposed on a Black, largely formerly enslaved labor force. Whatever minimal legal rights and protections existed for indentured whites all but disappeared for bound African Americans.

Forms of indenture in the pre- and post-Revolutionary eras rely on an underlying conception of debt to establish a contractual relation to bind

labor. The foundational principle of the contract maintains that the bondsman or -woman owes a debt that must be repaid through labor, creating the possibility for unconscionable contracts that immobilize and exploit workers. The debt—either economic or social—must be discharged before the person regains normal liberties related to mobility and self-determination.<sup>13</sup> Bound labor in the form of debt peonage and convict lease in the post-Reconstruction South repurposes the concept of indentured labor to serve different ends in the period of Jim Crow segregation.

## Legal Coercion and Restrictions on Mobility

As we saw in the previous chapter, the crop lien could be used to bind laborers to the land. Debt imposed through the commissary or local merchant could be leveraged to keep laborers toiling at the same plantation for years.<sup>14</sup> Coercion functioned in the system to severely limit freedom to contract and, therewith, mobility, but other forces exerted pressure via recourse to the legal and judicial system. Immediately following emancipation, almost all southern states enacted vagrancy laws, in which vagrancy was broadly defined. Anyone who could not show proof of employment or otherwise exhibited exterior signs of “idleness” could be impressed to sign a contract against his or her will or be arrested and subject to imprisonment or forced labor.<sup>15</sup> While initially enacted in the postbellum period, vagrancy statutes persisted, indeed gained momentum, in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Ramblin’ Thomas’s recording “No Job Blues” (1928) portrays with perfect irony the predicament of the unemployed worker subject to arrest and punishment with forced labor for seeking employment. In the second verse, the lyrics specifically mention being picked up for vagrancy while looking at the want ads in the paper: “I am picking up the newspaper and I looking in the ads / And the policeman came along and arrested me for vag.” The remainder of the song describes the narrator’s trial, conviction, and sentence to forced labor in the mines, a common outlet for convict lease, as we saw in the Peg Leg Howell song above. Thomas’s ironic portrayal focuses a sharp critique on the absurdity of being forced to work by the state for the “crime” of seeking work. The guitar accompaniment, with abundant triplet figures, contrasts with the drawn-out vocal style, which emphasizes words such as *I*, *ads*, and *along* in the second verse. The instrumental line seems to respond to the depressed emotion of the vocal with, at times, sharp retorts—ascending and descending triplet patterns, single-note triplet patterns, and single bent notes. The

overall emotion of the song is sardonic and resigned rather than depressed, due in large part to the contrast between the vocal and guitar parts. The reference to having lost and seeking a new “meal-ticket woman” to avoid work furthers the feeling of attempting to cope with the absurdity of being caught up in the double bind of the system rather than wallowing in self-pity. The spoken line following the solo break also undercuts the seriousness of the situation by evoking mock modesty at being seen in a prison uniform, characterized as if it were formal attire: “And for y’all to see me in my black and white suit, it won’t do.” The narrator recounts his tale, putting the self on display in such a way as to elicit sympathy, all the while trying to preserve dignity by making light of being caught in an absurd situation. Critiquing the status quo, the song provides a coping strategy for a knowing audience of listeners.

Vagrancy statutes played a significant role catching up individuals in a system aimed at controlling and maximally exploiting Black labor. Using law enforcement to round up people, the state acquired unpaid work through coercion, as Thomas’s song illustrates. Indeed, vagrancy statutes played a key role in blurring the distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of labor. US Assistant Attorney General Charles W. Russell drew attention to the difficulty of distinguishing peonage from ordinary labor in his investigation of conditions in the South in the first decade of the twentieth century:

I have no doubt, from my investigations and experiences, that the chief support of peonage is the peculiar system of State laws prevailing in the South, intended evidently to compel service on the part of the workman. From the usual condition of the great mass of laboring men where these laws are in force to peonage is but a step at most. In fact, it is difficult to draw a distinction between the condition of a man who remains in service against his will, because the State has passed a certain law under which he can be arrested and returned to work, and the condition of a man on a near-by farm who is actually made to stay at work by arrest and actual threats of force under the same law. The actual spoken threat of an individual employer who makes his laborer stay at work against his will by fear of the chain gang and the threat of the State to send him to the chain gang whenever his employer chooses to have him arrested are the same in result and do not seem to me very different in any other way.<sup>16</sup>

Russell references not only vagrancy statutes that forced laborers to sign contracts but also the threat of enforcement by the state using forced labor



in chain gangs. The report underscores the difficulty of identifying clear-cut cases of peonage given all the coercive measures used to immobilize laborers. The central point remains that the state provided a legal framework and enforcement officers to coerce people into either “contract” situations or forced labor as part of a criminal sentence.

In addition to vagrancy statutes aimed at Blacks, other legal provisions curtailed acts by whites that might remobilize labor or otherwise enhance opportunities for laborers to bargain for more advantageous contracts. Anti-enticement legislation prohibited planters from employing laborers already under contract to someone else and emigrant-agent restrictions limited the activities of potential labor recruiters. In effect, “legislation aided the enforcement of a labor-market cartel.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most far-reaching of the legislation aimed at immobilizing and disenfranchising laborers were the acts that criminalized breaches of contract.

In the early 1900s, the southern states redefined breach of contract, which had been a civil offense, as fraud, a criminal offense. Prior to these legislative acts, sharecroppers and renters who signed contracts and then left their employers for other work were subject to “an action for damages for breach of that contract.”<sup>18</sup> But, as Gavin Wright points out, workers without assets cannot pay damages, making this form of enforcement meaningless.<sup>19</sup> In response, legislatures enacted “false pretenses” laws, “making breach and failure to repay advances presumptive evidence of fraud.”<sup>20</sup> If sharecroppers or renters received a furnish, an advance, or supplies on credit and left their job, they could be subject to criminal prosecution for “intent to defraud.”<sup>21</sup> With the establishment of vagrancy, anti-enticement, emigrant-agent, and false-pretense legislation, the legal framework was in place to immobilize and coerce Black labor. These laws created the conditions for the reappearance of forms of bondage that had been common for white immigrants in the early history of the nation, albeit with significant differences.<sup>22</sup> In the earlier versions of indentured servitude, immigrants voluntarily signed written contracts with specific temporal term limits and had a right to appropriate food, clothing, and living conditions enforceable through the legal process, including the right to testify in court.<sup>23</sup> In the new version of bondage in the Jim Crow South, recourse to the legal system was for all intents and purposes nonexistent, thus nullifying any enforcement of standards of decency for living and working conditions. Contracts were seldom if ever written and, even if they were, most African American laborers were illiterate. African Americans were further barred from legal channels to challenge breaches by employers by both the systematic denial of civil rights and fear of reprisal instilled through campaigns of terror.<sup>24</sup>

In 1910, the US Supreme Court agreed to hear a case challenging Alabama's false-pretenses statute. The case involved a laborer, Alonzo Bailey, who signed a one-year contract and received an advance of fifteen dollars. The contract stipulated a salary of twelve dollars per month for work as a "farm hand," to be reduced to \$10.75 per month in order to pay back the advance. Bailey worked for a little over a month and left.<sup>25</sup> Under the false-pretenses statute, he was charged with intent to injure or defraud. At trial, "the jury found the accused guilty, fixed the damages . . . at fifteen dollars, and assessed a fine of thirty dollars. . . . Bailey was sentenced . . . to pay the fine of thirty dollars and the costs, and in default thereof to hard labor 'for twenty days in lieu of said fine, and one hundred and sixteen days on account of said costs.'"<sup>26</sup> The ruling was appealed to the Supreme Court of the State of Alabama on a challenge to the jury instructions. Consistent with the statute, the jury was instructed to interpret Bailey's breach of contract as *prima facie* evidence of his intent to defraud. Indeed, because intentions are so difficult to prove, the statute aimed to eliminate the need for testamentary or other evidence of intent to defraud, thereby criminalizing all breaches of contract. The Supreme Court of Alabama upheld the lower-court ruling. Had Bailey been given the opportunity to explain his actions, he might have echoed a sentiment voiced in two verses of Jazz Gillum's "I'll Get Along Somehow" (1938):

I'm going to leave here, walking, too  
Just on account of the way you do  
I give you my money; you wouldn't play fair  
You taken my money and gave me the air.

The US Supreme Court issued an important ruling in 1911 that took aim at Alabama's false-pretenses statute as an instance of peonage.<sup>27</sup> The ruling is notable for a number of reasons. First, the court dismissed the issue of race from consideration, making the question of constitutionality rest on an interpretation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the court decided *Bailey v. Alabama* on the basis of the question of peonage, which it defined as "the voluntary or involuntary service or labor of any persons as peons, in liquidation of any debt or obligation."<sup>29</sup> Because the jury was not allowed to hear testimony from Bailey concerning his intentions, the court found that his breach of contract created the conditions for "involuntary servitude," expressly prohibited by the Thirteenth Amendment. The court found that "the words involuntary servitude have a 'larger meaning than slavery.'"<sup>30</sup> Focusing specifically on the issue of compulsion, the court reasoned, "We

cannot escape the conclusion that, although the statute in terms is to punish fraud, still its natural and inevitable effect is to expose to conviction for crime those who simply fail or refuse to perform contracts for personal service in liquidation of a debt.”<sup>31</sup> Avoiding an explicit mention of race, the court recognized the statute’s function as “an instrument of compulsion peculiarly effective as against the poor and the ignorant, its most likely victims.”<sup>32</sup>

The focus on compulsion in the ruling supports the explicit central focus of the Court: “There is no more important concern than to *safeguard the freedom of labor* upon which alone can enduring prosperity be based.”<sup>33</sup> But how to safeguard the freedom of labor, particularly under the conditions of racialized segregation and hegemony in the South? To cite again from the ruling, how is it possible “to abolish slavery of whatever name and form and all its badges and incidents; to render impossible any state of bondage; to make labor free”?<sup>34</sup>

## Mobility in the Blues

The *Bailey* case’s defense of the freedom of labor shines a light on the significance of mobility for the issue of compulsion. If a worker is not free to break a contract and walk away, albeit with a financial debt to repay as a form of restitution, the contract ceases to be a legal agreement defining the rights and privileges of both parties and becomes instead an instrument of coercion enforceable by recourse to the legal system.<sup>35</sup> When all the power lies on the side of the employer—not only to impose debt and coerce labor but also to set wages, hours, and working conditions—then moving is the worker’s only option. Indeed, mobility represents the most important form of resistance. It is no wonder that mobility is one of the most significant themes in the blues. Muddy Waters’s opening line in “I Can’t Be Satisfied” (1948) voices the desire of many: “Well, I’m goin’ away to leave, won’t be back no more.”

Dating back to slavery and emancipation, mobility was already an overdetermined site of cultural contestation. As many have argued, defying plantation codes and simply moving at will, whether to visit a loved one on another plantation or to flee slavery altogether, represented a significant act of resistance and defiance.<sup>36</sup> After emancipation, mobility acquired additional layers of meaning, particularly with respect to self-determination and an ability to resist various forms of constraint. As Saidiya Hartman asserts, “By refusing to stay in their place, the emancipated insisted that freedom was a departure, literally and figuratively, from their former condition.”<sup>37</sup> Even seventy-five years

after emancipation, Raper and Reid document the ongoing significance of African American mobility: “One out of every ten Negro renters and one out of every five Negro croppers, as reported by Schuler in a recent study, planned to move at the end of the year because they felt the landlord was unfair to them. This distrustful attitude recurs so frequently that it suggests the status of the Negro tenant, his relation to his landlord, his desire to shift about, and possibly his readiness, given industrial opportunity, to abandon the Southern farm for the city.”<sup>38</sup> While sharecropping and tenancy place serious restrictions on the mobility of labor, freedom to move was further curtailed by a network of legal constraints created in the postbellum period.<sup>39</sup> The sociopolitical, legal fact of efforts to restrict movement, as well as resistance to those forces, signal that mobility is the site of deep cultural investments on both sides. As a form of social commentary and site of articulation of contestation, the blues reflects on efforts to restrict mobility. Indeed, the prominence of the theme in the blues speaks to the ubiquity of the experience of immobility imposed using a variety of means.

The symbolic investment in mobility as reflected in the early blues coincides historically with the final phase of legislative efforts to curtail African American movement. William Cohen notes the simultaneity of legal efforts to curtail mobility with segregation legislation: “The turn of the century brought a fourth wave [of legislation] of such ferocious intensity that it dwarfed the three that preceded it. In the first decade of the twentieth century almost all the southern states passed laws dealing with enticement, breach of contracts, labor agents, and vagrancy.”<sup>40</sup> Attempts to immobilize labor coupled with segregation legislation create an atmosphere of intense pressure, surveillance, and restriction for African Americans. Movements are hindered, blocked, controlled, corralled, enforced, and coerced through both threats and acts of violence, including lynching.<sup>41</sup> Virtually all individuals are touched either directly or indirectly by these constraints on movement, whether it be through social or legal enforcement of written or unwritten codes, or by threat of or actual infliction of physical suffering, up to and including torture and death. And while ceding the sidewalk to an approaching white person or waiting until after all whites have been served in a store may not amount to the same type of constraint on mobility and freedom as that asserted by false-pretenses statutes and vagrancy laws, the ubiquity of efforts to control and constrain movement of all kinds creates an atmosphere of surveillance, constraint, and restriction. As transplanted Mississippian Willie Harrell expresses, until he moved north to Memphis, he did not realize just how circumscribed his life was: “When I was down there [in Mississippi sharecropping], it was just

like the penitentiary or something. [I] couldn't go nowhere. Certain time to go somewhere. Certain time to come in. [I] didn't have the freedom as I got now."<sup>42</sup> Under these conditions, migration represents a contestatory act of resistance.

Given the context of legislative attempts to immobilize Black labor, one might imagine that the representation of mobility in the blues would be wholly positive. However, a close examination of mobility as a theme reveals profound ambivalence in the blues around travel and movement.<sup>43</sup> While there are many blues songs that look forward to travel, more often than not they suggest running away from someone or something. To take one important example, Big Bill Broonzy's "Key to the Highway"<sup>44</sup> (1941) captures in two of its verses the conflicted sense of both running away from something and running toward work:

I got the key to the highway and I'm billed out and bound to go  
I'm goin' to leave here runnin' because walkin' is most too slow  
Now, when the moon peeps over the mountain, I'll be on my way  
Now, I'm going to walk this old highway until the break of day

Although recorded in Chicago in 1941, the song gives voice to a restless energy that reflects decades of conflict over mobility. Whether from the perspective of the rural agricultural South of the early twentieth century or the urban North at midcentury or later, where debt was deployed to restrict opportunities for agency, mobility continues to be a site of struggle.

The lyrics simultaneously express contradictory sentiments both about travel and the reasons for it. On the one hand, the narrator seems driven away from a love relationship ("woman you don't do nothin' but drive a good man away from home") and toward the promise of better work ("I'm billed out and bound to go"). On the other hand, he seems to regret having to leave the woman ("Come here, sweet mama, now and help me with this heavy load / I am due in West Texas and I've got to get on the road"). He also experiences the mobility as a kind of punishment for past sins: "I'm goin' to West Texas; I'm goin' down behind the sun / I'm gonna ask the good Lord what evil have I done." The contradictory sentiments underscore the difficulty of interpreting mobility as a purely positive theme in the blues. As "Key to the Highway" suggests, the movement is only partly voluntary, often a response to unsatisfactory conditions. The musical performance reinforces this irresoluteness in the lyrics. The casual, unhurried vocal delivery, which often falls behind the beat, coupled with the medium tempo contrast with the lyrically expressed

urgency to leave. The desultory feel juxtaposed with the articulation of the need to move quickly contribute to the song's ambivalent feel.

The metonymy of the title underscores the multivalent symbolic weight of mobility: possessing a key could signify property ownership in a car, signaling freedom of movement, but the key of the title is *to* the highway, troubling an easy interpretation of its meaning. What does a key to the highway unlock? Perhaps access to mobility and, by extension, mobility itself. Yet the possession of a key *to the highway* ironically underscores lack of ownership paralleled by the problematic representation of agency in the song. The key to a house or a car or even one's freedom (perhaps as a means of exit from imprisonment) all denote more ordinary expressions that could metaphorically signal proprietorship or agency. The metonymy confounds an easy interpretation and dovetails with the problematic subject position in the song. The depiction of being driven away or of running away competes with the feeling of expressing freedom through movement. Likewise, being "billed out and bound to go" suggests engagements and obligations dictating movement rather than the escape that the fantasy of mobility often proffers. While it may signal transportation to gainful employment secured by a contract, it is ambiguous enough to create a sense of obligation and bondage not willfully undertaken.

"Key to the Highway" is characteristic of the strategies employed in the blues to represent movement. Muddy Waters's "I Can't Be Satisfied" (1948), mentioned above, evokes the mixture of emotions associated with travel. While the opening line of the song anticipates movement away from a place, perhaps in search of more favorable circumstance—"Well, I'm goin' away to leave, won't be back no more"—the second line hints at failure in the North—"goin back down South, child, don't you want to go." From the vantage point of Chicago in the late 1940s, Waters testifies to ongoing ambivalence around mobility. Set in a playful musical setting of slide guitar against an occasionally syncopated staccato upright bass, the lyrics set up an alternation between a seemingly hopeful anticipation of escape and an ominous feeling of being driven away, summarized in the refrain: "Woman I'm troubled, I be all worried in mind / Well, babe, I just can't be satisfied / and I just can't keep from cryin'." The recurring references to threats of violence deepen the sense of travel as means of escape from frustration, anger, defeat, despair, and depression, linking present conditions in the Promised Land of Chicago to the past in the South.

In addition to the ambivalence toward mobility that both "Key to the Highway" and "I Can't Be Satisfied" express, they also share a form of narrative positioning with respect to travel that is ubiquitous in the blues: both narrators

speak from a position of anticipating travel. They project the act of leaving into a point in the near future and speak at the threshold of departure. Significantly for an understanding of mobility, its narration in the blues relies on anticipation, thereby setting up an opposition between narrators' stasis and their projected movement. In other words, the blues paradoxically stages the representation of mobility most often from the perspective of immobility and the imagining of movement in the future. As I argued in *Time in the Blues*, this position is significant for its foregrounding of the present moment.<sup>45</sup> But the immobility of the present moment also highlights and reinforces the fundamental ambivalences surrounding travel.<sup>46</sup> Travel may be desirable because it is restricted and barred, but people are also driven to move in ways that seem problematic with respect to agency. It is precisely in the moments of anticipation of travel that the full weight of the ambivalence bears down. Blues songs adeptly set into motion the contradictory emotions, motives, and attitudes evoked by the charged atmosphere created by limited economic opportunities, statutes, and legislation that circumscribe African American movement. Is leaving freely chosen? Is it the lesser of two evils? Or is it compelled? Is leaving running away or going to? Going where? Is the destination chosen, determined, or left to the vagaries of chance? References in the blues to riding the blinds, hitching rides, and flagging or catching the first train that comes along underscore the danger and lack of agency entailed in modes of transportation available to African Americans.<sup>47</sup> Never a wholly positive or negative experience, travel is anticipated from stasis with all the anxieties attending the dialectic of freedom and compulsion that surround it.

While most songs reference travel from the threshold of its undertaking, there are songs that narrate from the position of movement. Rarest are the songs that unambiguously celebrate travel, such as Sonny Boy Williamson II's "Bring It on Home" (1966), perhaps in part owing to its relatively late recording date in the civil rights era. More common are the songs that narrate from the perspective of rambling, moving, and roaming, either freely or while being pursued. Most dramatic in this respect is Robert Johnson's "Hell Hound on My Trail" (1937), in which the narrator seems to speak while moving: "I've got to keep movin', I got to keep movin', blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail." Although the narrator could be imagined to be trying to persuade himself to continue fleeing from a position of temporary rest, the narrative effect of *I've got to keep movin'* contrasts with the anticipation of travel in most songs. Here, the singer seems to sing while he flees. The pursuit by hellhounds eliminates any sense that the movement is voluntary or an expression of agency; rather, it is necessitated by outside factors that



impel flight. Mobility, although necessary and certainly preferable to capture by real or imagined demons, does not represent an expression of free choice.

Less dramatic than “Hell Hound on My Trail” are the numerous songs that reference “rambling.”<sup>48</sup> Like the songs anticipating travel, these songs also evoke ambivalence and a position of relative immobility from which to contemplate movement. While the narrators often proclaim their identification with rambling as a “lifestyle”—such as Bessie Smith’s “J. C. Holmes Blues” (1925), Lonnie Johnson’s “Roaming Rambler Blues” (1927), or Son Simms Four’s “Ramblin’ Kid Blues” (1942) featuring a young Muddy Waters recorded by Alan Lomax at Stovall Plantation—the representations are not without a characteristic feeling of compulsion. Rambling does not appear to signal an act of free will, even in its sexual extension. Serial lovers and constant movement bespeak a kind of freedom from constraint but also a force beyond the narrator’s control.

The ambivalence surrounding mobility in the blues may be best reflected in the symbolism of the crossroads. As Houston A. Baker Jr. has emphasized, the crossroads, and especially the railroad junction, is a central trope for understanding the blues. Baker argues that “the singer and his production are always at this intersection, this crossing, codifying force, providing resonance for experience’s multiplicities.”<sup>49</sup> The blues singers indeed stand apart from the community of listeners they address. Relatively freer to move about, travel, and have a wider range of experiences, blues singers represent the possibility of mobility for the audience they address.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, in many cases, the desire to pursue a career as a blues singer is motivated by a desire to escape a life of backbreaking labor and poverty restricted to a small geographical area.<sup>51</sup> Performing provides the means of escape by necessitating travel and, therefore, stands as an assertion of freedom of a kind. But the musicians are also subject to the constraints of vagrancy statutes, at times arrested and forced into labor like any other African American in the Jim Crow South. Their songs represent a fraught relationship to movement for, although they “escaped” like others who managed to migrate, they speak to an audience that understands what it means to be “immobilized.”

In the context of a consideration of mobility, the crossroads represent not only part of the means of escape—the intersection of roads and railroads that lead to other places—but also the point at which decisions are made. As George Lipsitz argues in his unpacking of the commercialization of the crossroads myth in relation to Robert Johnson, the romanticization of the story “hides the hard facts of life and labor in the segregated South in Johnson’s day.”<sup>52</sup> He adds that the “crossroads can be sites of both danger and



opportunity. Collision and confusion occur when paths come together, but the crossroads is also a place where decisions need to be made and choices matter.”<sup>53</sup> Lipsitz’s language here is fraught: while agency is clearly present in “choices” and “decisions,” “danger,” “collision,” and “confusion” problematize the understanding of the crossroads as a site of an uncontested or free expression of agency.

Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” (1937) articulates the lack of agency and conflicted nature of the symbolism of the crossroads. While the myth of Robert Johnson underscores the willful meeting of the devil at the crossroads and the pact to deliver his soul in exchange for talent, the lyrics bear no relation to this story. In fact, they depict a more desperate situation of indecision, powerlessness, and seeming lack of control.<sup>54</sup> This lack of agency is depicted in three realms: (1) his surrendering of himself to God: “I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees / Asked the Lord above ‘Have mercy now, save poor Bob, if you please’”; (2) his lack of relation to a human community that could provide help: “Yeeooo, standin’ at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride / Ooooh, eee, I tried to flag a ride / Didn’t nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by”; and (3) his failure to find female companionship: “I went to the crossroad, babe, I looked east and west / Lord, I didn’t have no sweet woman, ooh-well babe, in my distress.” Rather than a site of freedom, decision, and agency, the crossroads in “Cross Road Blues” underscores all the negative correlates to travel and mobility, most especially isolation and fear of abandonment.<sup>55</sup> In the context of the African American community of the early twentieth century, such isolation can only be perceived as ominous and profoundly threatening. While escape from oppressive conditions may be desirable, the symbolism of the crossroads—a site that requires decision and agency of a kind—combines a representation of freedom with the constraints that attend that freedom. In Johnson’s vision of the crossroads, the individual stands (or kneels) isolated from community ties and support, free, but subject to all the hazards of life on the road. This isolated and temporarily immobilized individual stares into the possibility of movement in the future and feels paralyzed.

## Peonage and Criminal-Surety: The *Reynolds* Case

Both the ubiquity of the theme of mobility and its ambivalent representation in the blues stand as testimony to the contested nature of Black movement in the New South. Efforts to control the movement of labor met with resistance

from laborers desirous of finding safer and better conditions in which to work and live. As we have already seen with the vagrancy, emigrant-agent, anti-enticement, and false-pretenses statutes, the white dominant culture's investment in attempting to render African American labor immobile was significant. Three years after the *Bailey* case, the Supreme Court had the occasion to rule again on the question of peonage, this time in a case involving criminal surety.

Mobility always posed the risk to the traveler of becoming ensnared in the legal system and falling victim to criminal-surety tactics. Being arrested for trespassing, for hitching a ride on a freight train, or for not having proof of employment under the vagrancy statutes could lead to arrest, conviction, a fine, and fees.<sup>56</sup> Local planters and others who required labor often paid fines and costs in exchange for a labor contract with the convicted—a practice called criminal surety. In the *Reynolds* case, “Ed Rivers, having been convicted in a court of Alabama of the offense of petit larceny, was fined \$15, and costs, \$43.75.”<sup>57</sup> Reynolds, the defendant in the case, paid the fine and costs for Rivers, who then “entered into a written contract with Reynolds to work for him as a farmhand . . . to pay the amount of fine and costs.”<sup>58</sup> Roughly a month into his contract, Rivers “refused to labor,” whereupon Reynolds had Rivers arrested for “the charge of violating the contract of service. He was convicted and fined the sum of one cent for violating this contract, and additional costs in the amount of \$87.05.”<sup>59</sup> After this conviction, Rivers entered into another surety contract “with [G. W.] Broughton to work for him as a farm hand at the same rate, for a term of fourteen months and fifteen days.”<sup>60</sup> In the *Reynolds* case, the typical features of criminal surety are evident: escalating fees and costs and serial contracts, here with different parties.

Citing the *Bailey* case, the Supreme Court struck down the practice of criminal surety as unconstitutional in strong language for the primary reason that such arrangements rely on compulsion for enforcement: “This labor is performed under the constant coercion and threat of another possible arrest and prosecution in case he violates the labor contract which he has made with the surety, and this form of coercion is as potent as it would have been had the law provided for the seizure and compulsory service of the convict.”<sup>61</sup> The labeling of criminal-surety contracts as instances of compulsory labor defines them as illegal instances of peonage: “Peonage is sometimes classified as voluntary or involuntary, but this implies simply a difference in the mode of origin, but none in the character of the servitude. . . . But peonage, however created, is compulsory service, involuntary servitude.”<sup>62</sup> Most famously and damningly, the court used powerful language to describe the situation of

the person ensnared in multiple, serial criminal-surety contracts: “The convict is thus kept chained to an ever-turning wheel of servitude to discharge the obligation which he has incurred to his surety.”<sup>63</sup>

The *Reynolds* case struck down criminal surety as a form of peonage: compulsory labor in the service of a debt to an individual. The fact that the debt is owed to the surety and not the state is significant in light of the provision of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that allows for “involuntary servitude” as “punishment for a crime,” paving the way for chain gangs, prison farms, and convict lease.<sup>64</sup> However, in criminal-surety cases, a debt to the state is not being repaid through compulsory labor; rather, the surety pays the state and is then owed the debt. The involuntary imposition of debt thus occurs in two or more stages: first, in the amount owed for the initial fine and costs paid by the surety, and then again through subsequent arrests and surety arrangements for ever-increasing amounts of debt, leading to the “wheel of servitude.”<sup>65</sup>

## Bondsmen in the Blues

Countless blues songs evoke courtroom scenes, with lyrics such as “The judge he found me guilty, the clerk he wrote it down”<sup>66</sup> and references to needing someone “to go my bail.”<sup>67</sup> Given the criminal-surety system, Bessie Smith’s bold declaration in “Send Me to the ’Lectric Chair” (1927) is understandable: “I don’t want no bondsman there to go my bail.” Bond conditions more often than not led to perpetual servitude. The narrator prefers death to hard labor in prison or slavery under another guise. However, most songs do not proclaim a preference for the death penalty. Indeed, most seem to lament the lack of someone to serve as a bondsman. Read in light of criminal-surety arrangements used to create conditions of peonage, “no one to go my bail” might be a good thing. Blind Boy Fuller’s “Big House Bound” (1938) features variations of the line “ain’t got no one to come and go my bail.” The early verses cast these people as friends who have abandoned him (“I got friends ’as got money, please tell ’em come go my bail”), presumably trustworthy people to whom he would owe a debt (like the titular Louise in “Big Boy” Teddy Edwards’s song). Fuller’s song progresses toward the narrator’s abandonment and the eventual necessity of serving time. While it may be unlucky not to have friends to bail you out, time in the “big house” might be preferable to a lifetime of peonage.

Although it is difficult to determine how widespread the practice of peonage was, there are hints in the historical record to suggest that it was

ubiquitous. Any African American person listening to lyrics about “someone to go my bail” undoubtedly made the connection between the phrase and the threat of peonage. Benno C. Schmidt describes the web of interconnecting forms of coercion and compulsion that continued despite the Supreme Court rulings: “Vagrancy and other open-ended laws that permitted prosecution on discretion, the system of criminal and civil law administered by whites alone, and the informal web of customs that made ‘the petty officers of the Law—deputy sheriffs, constables, justices of the peace, and the like—an outer cordon of guards to hold the peons in slavery’ were left largely untouched by *Bailey* and *Reynolds*. Out of reach entirely were the lawless supports for peonage: the violence and intimidation that infected race relations in the South.”<sup>68</sup> More chilling with regard to the ubiquity of peonage were the findings of agents of the Bureau of Investigation (forerunner to the FBI) pursuing the infamous *Williams* case in Georgia in 1921, involving the murder of eleven men held in bondage on a latter-day slave plantation. Asked “to estimate the extent of peonage,” the agents, George W. Brown and A. J. Wismer, “found the task difficult because it was relegated to distant rural communities and not well documented in any way. They had no doubt, however, that it was practiced extensively. They came across research from 1907 that estimated that a third of all farmers in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi used forced labor, and peonage was reported in every county in Alabama between 1903 and 1905.”<sup>69</sup> Testifying at trial, Wismer reported that the defendant, Huland Williams, did not know what peonage was and expressed the belief that “I and most all of the farmers in this county [Jasper County, Georgia] must be guilty of peonage.”<sup>70</sup> Given the widespread existence of peonage of all varieties across the South, the blues’ numerous references to a lack of bondsmen must be read in the same ambivalent light as references to mobility: sometimes jail or prison time is preferable to a life of indentured servitude.

## From Peonage to the Chain Gang and Convict Lease

Peonage, created by criminal-surety arrangements and fostered by vagrancy and other statutes that enabled easy criminal convictions, bears a striking resemblance to the indentured servitude in early America discussed above. Although indentured servitude in the colonies and early United States “gradually disappeared” for European Americans,<sup>71</sup> the resurgence of these forms of bondage in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras signals not only the return of forms of compulsory labor enabled and enforced through legal

and extra-legal means, but also the use of debt as a lever for compulsion. Debt underlies all these forms of compulsory labor, whether it is repayment of the cost of passage for immigrants or the repayment of fines and costs advanced by the surety. Moreover, these forms of bondage also share the crossing of the boundary between civil restitution and criminal debt. In early America, as in Alabama under the false-pretenses statute, failure to perform labor in repayment of an advance of money constitutes a criminal act, punishable by law. The employer may have recourse to criminal courts to compel labor conceived not only as restitution but also as discipline and punishment for failure to work.<sup>72</sup>

Compulsory labor as a means of punishment, as noted in the passage cited from Morris above, opened the door to the chain gang and convict lease. In early America, as in the South of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, short-term labor sentences were often imposed in cases where those who committed “criminal” acts had no financial means to make restitution.<sup>73</sup> Acts of theft or abandonment of duties could be punished with increased periods of indenture. Likewise, conviction under false-pretenses statutes or for failure to work off a surety arrangement led to increased sentences of compulsory labor. The punishment in the form of additional compulsory service is understood as repayment of a debt owed to society rather than a specific individual. In this respect, *Bailey* makes an important legal distinction based on the Thirteenth Amendment: “The state may impose involuntary servitude as a punishment for crime, but it may not compel one man to labor for another in payment of a debt, by punishing him as a criminal if he does not perform the service or pay the debt.”<sup>74</sup> But the *Reynolds* case muddies the waters. The distinction between labor extracted as punishment and labor in lieu of a fine becomes less and less clear: “There can be no doubt that the state has authority to impose involuntary servitude as a punishment for crime. This fact is recognized in the Thirteenth Amendment, and such punishment expressly excepted from its terms. *Of course, the state may impose fines and penalties which must be worked out for the benefit of the state, and in such manner as the state may legitimately prescribe.*”<sup>75</sup> When one bears in mind the fact that “worked out for the benefit of the state” means that fines will be paid by individuals functioning as sureties and repaid through compulsory labor to them, the distinction all but vanishes.

The use of compulsory labor as both restitution and punishment for crimes against property, other civil offenses, and criminal offenses obfuscates fundamental differences in the ways debt is conceived. In the case of civil offenses, like breach of contract, compulsory labor stands in for restitution as well as

supplemental penalty. The same is true in the criminal-surety cases. The convicted person is, in essence, “advanced” the money for the fine and fees (not unlike a sharecropping furnish). If the person refuses to serve out the contract, the fine and fees are increased as punishment, and the term of bondage may be lengthened. But the case of other crimes is murkier. A person may be found guilty of vagrancy, for example, and compelled to work for the state. Here, the labor does not repay money owed, but rather the convicted person presumably repays a debt to society. Enshrined in the Thirteenth Amendment cited above in the *Reynolds* case, the state has the authority to use involuntary servitude as a form of punishment. These two forms of debt, one civil and the other criminal, may seem separate and distinct—forced labor as restitution versus forced labor as punishment—but the distinction becomes blurred in the application. Already in the false-pretenses cases, one of the slippages is present: surplus labor was imposed for a “criminal” act (fraud), but repaid to the employer and not to the state (enabling the Supreme Court to strike down the statute as unconstitutional). However, would owing the additional labor to the state have made it constitutional under the Thirteenth Amendment? In early America, the state compelled labor from certain criminals (those of the servant class) as an extension of the concept of restitution. Here, the public is repaid for criminal acts through labor performed for the community—like community service sentences today—but does that make it legal compulsory labor?<sup>76</sup>

One final interpretation of the basis of the right of the state to coerce labor from those convicted of a crime is revealed in a Redemption-era ruling by the Virginia Supreme Court, *Ruffin v. Commonwealth*. As Michelle Alexander points out, the ruling rests on interpreting the clause of the Thirteenth Amendment regarding punishment for a crime as granting an exception to the abolition of slavery. The court reasoned that the convicted “during his service in the penitentiary . . . is in a state of penal servitude to the State. . . . He is for the time being a slave of the State.”<sup>77</sup> As Jenny Pope sings in “Tennessee Workhouse Blues” (1930), this could mean for life: “This is that new workhouse way out in Merlin, Tennessee [2×] / That’s where they take the prisoners and never set them free.” As is evident in the *Ruffin* ruling, attention to the issue of race reveals another set of concerns driving penal practices in the New South. If compulsory labor could be justified as repaying a debt to society or as part of rehabilitation, the case is harder to make for the racially discriminatory practices of the Jim Crow South, or what Edward L. Ayers refers to as “monoracial law enforcement.”<sup>78</sup> Pressing only African Americans into servitude responds to economic interests but more importantly serves to promote regimes of segregation and white supremacy.<sup>79</sup>

In the aftermath of the Civil War, with few prison buildings, no history of legal incarceration of African Americans (who as slaves had been previously subjected to “law” as practiced on private plantations),<sup>80</sup> and limited state resources, southern states sought ways to make prisoners “pay for themselves.” Resurrecting earlier practices, prisoners labored to offset the costs associated with their incarceration or, in most cases, to actually turn a profit for the state.<sup>81</sup> As Matthew Mancini asserts with respect to convict lease, but which applies equally to other forms of convict labor, “Thus it was in Alabama as in Georgia, Florida, Mississippi—indeed in every state where leasing’s roots took a tenacious hold—that the policy endured because it served a complex combination of interwoven political, economic, and social interests.”<sup>82</sup>

At all levels, forced labor was implemented. Counties instituted chain gangs whereby convicts repaid their debt through public works. At the state level, convicts worked in a variety of contexts, including state-owned prison farms such as Parchman, the Mississippi State Penitentiary.<sup>83</sup> Extending the logic of both the convict being a “slave of the state” and owing a debt to society, states and counties not only impressed convicts into labor but also sold their labor to the highest bidder. Both practices were justified according to the same logic, a fact most evident in the alternation between the two forms of involuntary servitude. Motivated by profits, counties either leased convicts or set them to work on chain gangs.<sup>84</sup> The alternation signals the lack of distinction between labor in the service of public projects and labor for a private individual or corporation as a stand-in for the state. The fundamental proposition is that the labor benefit the state financially.

## Prison Labor and Chain Gang Songs

In some respects, the distinction between the chain gang and convict lease is meaningless, particularly from the perspective of the one doing the labor. As the numerous prison and chain gang songs attest, being forced to work on a chain gang, a road gang, a levee, a prison farm, for a railroad, or in a mine amounts to roughly the same kind of experience.<sup>85</sup> Clearly some punishments were worse than others—evidenced by living conditions and especially mortality rates—but, all in all, coerced hard labor is coerced hard labor and most convicts served under unspeakably inhumane and horrendous conditions.<sup>86</sup> Peg Leg Howell’s “Ball and Chain Blues” makes clear in Hill’s spoken commentary “Rake or pick?” in response to “I asked the judge what might be my fine,” that “fine” was code for interchangeable forms of hard labor. Julius



Daniels's "Ninety-Nine Year Blues" (1927) uses the device of a long sentence to underscore the unlikelihood of survival. In a Piedmont style with intricate and inventive picking and effective use of a drone, Daniels opens with a verse that expresses his desire to seek revenge on those responsible for his fate: "Bring me my pistol, three rounds of ball / I want to kill everybody whopped the poor boy along." The next verses provide a context for his murderous fantasy, describing his arrest, hasty trial, conviction, and sentencing.<sup>87</sup> Like "Ball and Chain Blues," Daniels's song also references convict lease: "Says, I asked the judge what would be my fine / Says, 'A pick and a shovel way down Joe Brown's coal mine.'" The straightforward mention of the mine owner's name reveals the pretense involved in sending convicts to jail to have their labor sold through contracts to mining and other corporations. Here, closer to criminal-surety practices, the judge sends the narrator directly to a specific mine. In other words, the "judicial" system serves the economic interests of powerful individuals.

An audience of listeners all too familiar with forms of coerced labor undoubtedly found the subtlety of distinctions between the chain gang, the prison farm, and the lease essentially meaningless. What difference does it make if you swing a pick for the county on a road or for a company in a mine? Moreover, since the "legal system" aiding and abetting the coercion of labor is largely a web of informal arrangements anyway, the determination of where one ends up seems left to chance, determined by the contingencies of the local sociopolitical and economic circumstances. In other words, if a local farmer needs additional labor or the county or state has a road project or a good lease prospect, these factors—rather than the nature of the crime—will likely determine where you are sent and for how long.

Daniels's final verses stress the length of the sentence: "Be light on me, judge, ain't been here before" / "Give you ninety-nine years, don't come back here no more" / No more, no more, no more, my Lord, no more." The repetition of "no more" underscores the fact that ninety-nine years represents a life sentence.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, references to long or life sentences in many blues reinforced the perception that a new form of a lifetime of slavery was being imposed.<sup>89</sup> A life in shackles—something most slaves were spared except in transit—most often led to an early death.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the delicacy and intricacy of the picking pattern juxtaposed to the lyrics in the song underscores the fragility of existence. The listener is forced to confront the idea that an individual capable of such subtle artistry will die performing forced hard labor in excruciating conditions. The convict labor blues songs, in this respect, offer a powerful aesthetic challenge to the systematic waste of human life.



## The Lien in Another Guise

Even if those caught in the “legal system” of the New South could not likely distinguish labor performed for the county on a chain gang from work for the state on a prison farm or labor performed for a third party making payment to the state, nonetheless the distinction seems important. Accepting even the Redeemer interpretation of the law based on *Ruffin*, by what rationale can the state lease out convicts in lieu of forcing them to labor (or, as Daniels depicts, send them to specific mines at sentencing)? Even if convicts are “slaves of the state” while they serve their time, does this mean they are property of the state to be sold? Or that, like slaves and indentured servants, property in their labor may be sold to a third party?

There is an important conceptual difference between extracting involuntary labor from “slaves of the state” on a county road or prison farm as a form of punishment, correction, or rehabilitation, and maintaining a property interest in (the labor of) such persons. Indeed, selling the labor of convicts seems to blur the person-property distinction. I would argue that the use of debt as a concept enables the crossing of this important line. Debtors can be held to work off their debts, but how can convicted criminals be made to work off their debt to society? How does one calculate the “debt” for a criminal offense? Just as in the criminal-surety arrangements, in which fines and fees are converted to days, weeks, months, and even years of labor, sentences for civil and criminal offenses are being converted into dollars and cents, collected by the state selling labor. Debt serves as an umbrella category to mask underlying, fictitious forms of equivalence that enable what is owed to society to be converted into a sentence (time deprived of liberties), which is then converted into time performing coerced labor worth a specific sum of money. However, even that calculation is a fiction, dependent on economics and finances, not punishment and rehabilitation.<sup>91</sup>

Consistent with the interpretation in *Ruffin*, the state’s “property” in an amount of labor owed does indeed seem to imply something close to a condition of slavery, particularly in light of the fact that the labor is monetized in a way that enables bodies to be exchanged and transferred, though not exactly bought and sold. The state asserts a right to exact labor in exchange for a debt owed, more in line with the concept of a “lien.” Given this arrangement, there is a tendency for slippage to occur between the monetary value of convict labor and the monetary value of the convict. In other words, as the body who performs the labor, the convict is only worth so much. The steep mortality rates among leased convicts in the early twentieth century bears witness

to this slippage between a lien on labor and a lien on the person. Reflected in Mancini's title, *One Dies, Get Another*, the life of a convict was worth very little, certainly much less than a slave in the antebellum South.<sup>92</sup> Calculations could be and were easily made to determine what a life was worth, shifting the property or lien concept onto the person rather than the labor.<sup>93</sup> Robert Johnson's and others' use of lyrics referencing a "mortgage on my body and a lien on my soul" unmask a haunting truth underlying penal practices in the New South.<sup>94</sup> The state had a lien on bodies and souls as it found endless ways to entrap and ensnare African Americans in a new form of slavery. The concept of debt repaid through bound labor enabled slippages that set a price on human life.<sup>95</sup>

Convict leasing was gradually outlawed across the South by legislatures, beginning in Mississippi in 1894 and ending in North Carolina in 1935 (although as a practice it continued well beyond those dates). Yet, as Mildred C. Fierce points out, "the brutal treatment of convicts that had characterized leasing was virtually uninterrupted, but was now state-managed." The chain gang, prison farms, and other "contract arrangements" persisted, as did the majority-Black makeup of the prisoner population.<sup>96</sup> With the elimination of the convict lease, the most obvious way in which the prison system sets a price on human life disappears, but the extraction of coerced labor from a disproportionately African American prison population continues even today.

First, there are the instances in which labor is performed for the county or state. Chain gangs were temporarily resurrected in Alabama in 1995–96 and have been in use in Maricopa County, Arizona, since 1995.<sup>97</sup> More commonly, prisoners continue to make license plates in numerous states. Less dramatic is the sentencing of parolees and those on probation to pick up trash along roadways in orange jumpsuits. In these instances, labor is dictated as part of sentencing or parole and is performed in the public interest. Second are "contract arrangements" for labor in modern prisons with companies ranging from Walmart to Whole Foods.<sup>98</sup> In the most egregious cases, prisoners perform dangerous work at below-market wages as part of work-release programs, not too dissimilar from the convict lease of the past.<sup>99</sup> While prisoners in theory voluntarily agree to these contracts, material, social, and economic factors exert pressure on convicts to work for ridiculously low wages, calling into question how agency can be exercised absent certain freedoms in the prison environment.<sup>100</sup>

Related to these labor practices, other ways of imposing debt on those accused of crimes also persist in a revival of a kind of criminal-surety arrangement related to fines, fees, and bail. On 16 June 2017, the Southern Poverty

Law Center aided several plaintiffs in filing a class action suit against four New Orleans businesses, including two bail bond companies, accusing them of kidnapping, extortion, and false imprisonment. As SPLC deputy legal director Sam Brooke explains, “These companies used the criminal justice system to squeeze as much money as possible from families desperate to get their loved ones out of jail but too poor to pay the excessive bond on their own.”<sup>101</sup> In these cases, those accused of crimes are victimized by bail bond companies with the aid of the criminal justice system. More routinely and less sensationally, those who are unable to pay fines and fees are often sentenced to jail terms, depriving them of work hours, often with serious consequences. Those without financial means who are convicted are doubly punished: first, in the form of the fine and fees imposed and, second, when their inability to pay causes the amount of money they owe to be increased. Finally, a warrant may be served for their arrest, leading to lost wages and other damages while serving time.<sup>102</sup> All that is missing in this scenario is a surety to pay the fines and fees to whom the convicted would then owe labor. But even absent the surety, the state’s use of the imposition of debt enables gross inequities in the “justice” system. That this population is disproportionately African American hardly requires stating.<sup>103</sup> Debt continues to be imposed by the judicial system at all levels to perpetuate what Alexander has labeled the new Jim Crow, creating a racial undercaste with curtailed civil and political rights.<sup>104</sup>

The use of the criminal justice system to enforce, punish, and extract labor introduces coercion—in the form of a physical threat of curtailment of liberties or even a sentence of hard labor—as a feature of a particular kind of debt. In light of these conditions of involuntary servitude, the blues represent an important locus of articulation of the sentiments of those (potentially) ensnared in the system. Around key issues, such as mobility, bondsmen, and serving time, the blues reflect the complexity of responses to the new institutionalized forms of racialized slavery imposed through debt.

## CHAPTER 3

# The Blues, Commodification, and Capitalism

Like Sam Cooke, Chuck [Berry] kept telling me how record companies are like banks. They're loaning you money to make a record. You pay back that money with sales. But once the loan's repaid, Chuck would say, make sure you get your royalties.

—Etta James and David Ritz, *Rage to Survive: The Etta James Story*

The manipulation and imposition of debt function to restrict mobility, options, and agency and ultimately to create conditions of bondage. Lien laws, crooked settlements, redlining, criminal surety, and convict lease, to name a few of the mechanisms deployed, constricted the possibilities for action down to the bare minimum—and sometimes to none at all—isolating individuals in oppressive and even unconscionable relations of power achieved through economic means. In the blues, I located ambivalent sentiments and complex relationships to mobility, property ownership, and bondsmen that reflect the difficulty of attempting to assert agency under racialized regimes of domination. Bearing this fraught history in mind, I now look at the blues as not only a site of articulation but also a product shaped by racialized economic relations. Taking a step back, I examine the commodification of the blues as a genre within the broader context of African American vernacular music in the United States. My analysis of the commodification of the blues interrogates how it contributes to an understanding of the use of racialized capitalism to

dominate. The discussion weaves together several strands of argument, but most crucially, a history of racialized economic regimes (and their attendant conceptions of labor) and the history of the commodification of sound and music. An examination of racialized debt through this lens attends to the ways the broader mechanisms of capitalism shaped and continue to shape the commodification of “Black music.” If sharecroppers, tenants, convicts, and others are bound in new forms of economic slavery—their labor and bodies constantly paying back a fabricated debt to keep them in thrall—then how do we understand a music born of these circumstances, especially in relation to its commodification? Are record companies just another version of banks, as Sam Cooke and Chuck Berry taught Etta James, practicing their own style of predatory lending? Is the musical “product” a commodity with exchange-value like any other, or do the circumstances of racialized labor that helped shape the blues leave their traces in the music? What happens when the blues enters a market shaped by the forces of capitalism? Are the same forms of racialized exploitation repeated? Finally, does anything about the aesthetic form resist commodification or otherwise bear witness to an awareness of the exploitative manipulation of debt?

Capitalism is neither monolithic nor stable over time. Rather than a succession of clearly demarcated regimes, economic history presents what Raymond Williams describes as dominant, residual, and emergent cultural forms at different historical moments.<sup>2</sup> In the rural post-Reconstruction South, while market capitalism is the dominant mode, there are residual traces of the slave and barter systems, as well as indicators of emerging industrial and finance capitalism. But even this description is not nuanced enough to capture the complexities of the economic and financial structures underpinning monocrop agriculture under white supremacy tied to broader networks of market and finance capitalism. As we have seen in the discussions of forms of labor compelled by economic, state, and physical force, the system generates credit and debt in a mix of bound and unbound labor schemes. Most significantly, those in positions of power mitigate their risk by positioning sharecroppers, tenants, convicts, and others as “economic shock absorbers.”<sup>3</sup> These patterns are replicated later in the twentieth century, including outside the South, for example, as we saw with homebuyers forced into house contract sales who serve a parallel function, mitigating risk and creating opportunities for capital gains for real estate speculators in a hyper-segregated Chicago market.

The blues as a genre gives voice to the struggle for justice from the perspective of those victimized by the economic system. Analyzing the development

of economic relations under racialized forms of capitalism provides an interpretive context for the blues. But the blues is also a commodified form of aesthetic expression produced by those ensnared in the system. Producing music as a commodity requires interacting with capitalism. Intangible as sound, the blues enters a market and is sold through live performances, sheet music, and recordings. To a great extent, the economic systems that commodify the blues are controlled by the dominant white culture. Nonetheless, as I will argue, the blues bears the traces of resistance to commodification under capitalism. I begin my exploration of racialized economic history before both emancipation and the appearance of the blues. Under slavery, the complex functioning of debt and credit relations provides a foundation for what will become the conditions of labor and production in the New South and beyond. Likewise, as an antecedent of the blues, “Negro music” performs a similar function, serving as an aesthetic mode of expression for those laboring under the earlier form of bondage.

### Slavery, Capital, and Commodities

Plantation slavery poses serious interpretive difficulties for Marxist and revisionist Marxist economic frameworks, owing to the fact that, as Walter Johnson explains, “in both Smithian and Marxian economics, slavery serves as an un-theorized historical backdrop to the history of capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> More recent scholarship has shifted the focus away from the plantation as a financial unit and onto the economic system underpinning slavery as a mode of production, highlighting its dependence on finance capitalism. Agriculture as a business, and especially monocrop agriculture, is always risky, requiring credit to produce crops. As we have seen, after emancipation, the goal for the planter and for those from whom he borrows is to minimize risk by spreading it throughout a financial network, ultimately pushing it onto laborers. Under slavery, plantation agriculture also required the generation of credit as a mechanism to spread risk.<sup>5</sup> However, risk in the antebellum world extended beyond the planter and local merchants to even larger and more complicated financial networks. The triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the New World drew in merchants, captains, insurers, slave traders, planters, agents, factors, and others to form a web of actors operating on credit around the globe to traffic a human commodity. In other words, planters were one node in a vast network of speculative capitalism that invested borrowed money in the hopes of future returns. Viewed in this way, planters and everyone else

involved directly or indirectly in the transatlantic slave trade participated in a strategic deployment of capital to create more capital.<sup>6</sup>

Underwriting the credit system of the slave trade were the enslaved themselves, who crucially functioned not only as commodities but also as currency and collateral on the loans secured for their purchase. Ian Baucom describes the central functioning of the slaves in this financial system “as commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system.” Baucom asserts, “This is at once obscene and vital to understanding the full capital logic of the slave trade, to coming to terms with what it meant for this trade to have found a way to treat human beings not only as if they were a type of commodity but as a flexible, negotiable, transactable form of money.”<sup>7</sup> In this respect, these laborers also function as “economic shock absorbers,” who may even be sacrificed as “socially and commercially dispensable” bodies in order to mitigate risk for those investing capital.<sup>8</sup>

A useful analogy for understanding how slaves function in this system is a house purchased with a mortgage loan and insured for its total value. The slave trade functioned similarly: loans for purchases were secured by the value of the enslaved themselves. Within the system, even losses could be recouped, as in the unconscionable massacre of 132 enslaved persons aboard the *Zong*. On the slave ship, the captain behaved like the speculators who burned down houses for insurance money that we saw in chapter 1: he destroyed the slaves not only as commodities but also as collateral on the loans that secured their purchase. He believed that their murders would enable the Liverpool merchants, who had purchased them on credit, to collect the total value of their “loss” from the insurer.<sup>9</sup> In effect, the captain believed that in throwing enslaved persons overboard “he was not destroying his employer’s commodities but hastening their transformation into money.”<sup>10</sup>

The function of slaves as monetary instruments bearing credit is important for understanding the complexity of the economic system that both revolved around them and in which they were ensnared. More than simple commodities, they represent a form of investment that generated credit (and debt) predicated on a future return on investment. Purchased on credit, they were then resold on credit throughout the network. In addition, like a house with a mortgage that usually appreciates in value and may be insured, the enslaved were not only commodity-producing commodities but also bearers of interest because of their appreciating value and the possibility of their reconversion into more flexible forms of capital.<sup>11</sup> In effect, the entire transatlantic slave-trade system was a house of cards built on fictional money.

Credit was advanced predicated on future repayment with interest, secured by collateral.

After the 1808 prohibition of US involvement in the international slave trade, an illegal trade continued alongside a domestic one.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the expansion of the cotton economy after 1812 fueled a surge in the domestic trade, creating a “second, internal Middle Passage.”<sup>13</sup> Planters in the Upper South, primarily Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky, supplied the Lower South with slaves, using them to speculate in order to expand holdings, particularly of land.<sup>14</sup> Slave traders also engaged in speculation by purchasing slaves and reselling them for profit, and buyers continued to pay with credit. Enslaved people could be purchased on credit because they served not only as collateral on the debt incurred but also as collateral on other loans. The widespread practice of mortgaging slaves, both for their purchase price and for equity loans, underwrote a network of private borrowing using human beings as collateral.<sup>15</sup>

The focus on the generation of credit for expanding capitalist growth and wealth accumulation tends to obscure the debt incurred. Flipping the proposition over and focusing on debt brings into sharper relief the risks of economic speculation. Returning to the home mortgage analogy, defaulting on a mortgage and losing a house means the forfeiture of not only accrued equity and a place to live but also other ancillary financial costs. There is also the psychological toll on the homeowners as well as their families and relations. Losing in a speculative gamble on the purchase of property on credit, even with minimal risk, such as a home mortgage loan, can have serious consequences for those making an initial investment of capital.

Defaulting on a home mortgage causes the loss of the initial capital invested and the “collateral” put up for the loan: the down payment, loan and interest payments, and the house. However, for loans secured with slaves as collateral, either for the slaves’ purchase price or other equity loan, default negatively affected both enslavers and enslaved. Indeed, it seems clear that while the enslaver lost property in an enslaved person used as collateral, the slave suffered far more acutely from the default. In many cases, slaves were sold in order to meet financial obligations. Fictional scenes, such as Mr. Shelby’s sale of Tom and Harry in the 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as well as mentions in slave narratives of purchases by speculators at auctions after an enslaver’s death, suggest the frequency with which slaves were sold in order to acquit debts.<sup>16</sup> Historian Calvin Schermerhorn makes the striking connection between violence and debt in a market driven by credit relations and risk management using human collateral: “The violence of



slavery corresponded in large measure to debt service. Slaveholders in Maryland liquidating human assets to meet debt obligations tore families apart. Merchants under pressure to meet their margins sold transport. Planters in Louisiana intensified violence to increase productivity. There was a perverse irony to the relationship between violence and debt. The humiliation, misery, trauma, and terror experienced by the enslaved as they passed through a supply chain mirrored the optimism of agents in the cotton economy.<sup>17</sup> Slaveholders facing debt had options. With the reshuffling of paper, both debtor and creditor could continue to generate capital and make a profit in order to evade loss. However, as human collateral in almost every default scenario, the enslaved had no options. Default usually meant being forced to relocate to another plantation, cutting social and familial ties, often not for the first time. The negative consequences of risk-taking fall primarily on the collateral: the slave being uprooted and subjected to abuse.

The ability to push loss onto slaves derives from their status in the transaction as collateral. Property in the slave consists not only in the equity accrued from the purchase price and other payments but also in the slave's interest-bearing potential as an appreciating commodity. However, unlike other commodities with appreciating values, like a house, the presumed appreciation of the slave's market value is predicated on labor. In this sense, the slave is more than a commodity: the slave is also an embodiment of labor power. For Marx, "a commodity is a use-value or object of utility, and a 'value'" in a market.<sup>18</sup> Exchange-value, as opposed to use-value, derives from the labor power required to produce the commodity. Quantifying that labor enables exchange in the market. However, considering slaves as commodities complicates the very notion of commodity: they are not commodities produced by labor in the normal sense. Their use-value is their potential for labor, which produces more commodities, such as cotton.<sup>19</sup> In other words, their use- and exchange-values both relate to their ability to labor as active bodies. Moreover, their labor generates commodities, which in turn increases the slaves' value as surplus-value. Use-, exchange-, and surplus-value all coalesce into an active body with appreciating value, in which an enslaver may invest to turn greater profits.

Slaves' problematic status as commodities is perhaps nowhere more evident than in cases in which they owned property or earned wages. In some instances, slaves were allowed to engage in "petty production and provisioning," enabling them to barter, trade, and sell garden crops, eggs, and chickens, thus illustrating their complicated status by engaging in reciprocal exchanges with whites, including their "owners."<sup>20</sup> In a related phenomenon, slaves with

skills worked for wages (from which their enslavers took a cut) or even “succeeded as entrepreneurial middlemen who created complex labor networks in which hired slaves hired other slaves, who, in turn, additionally hired slaves.”<sup>21</sup> It is precisely the peculiar status as both property and property-holding person that enables the slave to be at once commodity and generator of surplus-value. It is also this dual and contradictory status—both property and person, but also neither property nor person—that enables the slaveholder to project loss onto the collateral-slave. This both/and, neither/nor status is reflected in the tenuous forms of agency available to the slave functioning as both collateral and generator of value.<sup>22</sup> As Walter Johnson persuasively argues, slaves were taught from an early age “to experience their bodies twice at once, to move through the world as both child and slave, person and property.” He asserts that slaves had a “double consciousness,” echoing Du Bois’s famous assertion, making them capable of exercising some agency by “turn[ing] their own commodification against their enslavement.”<sup>23</sup> Whatever power they may have exercised derived from their ability as commodities to generate exchange- and surplus-value from their labor power, which was used in the attachment to loans embedded in broader economic and social networks.

## Slave Music

If slaves as commodities generated surplus-value and sometimes held property, they also made sounds. Ethnomusicologist Ronald Radano considers music under slavery “as a peculiar and disruptive labor form whose very peculiarity was indicative of wider conflicts in the epistemological orders of the US South.”<sup>24</sup> The disruptive power of slave music derives from its status as “property-form and economic value existing within and against antebellum market exchange,” a kind of property of property, that puts into question both understandings of property and labor.<sup>25</sup> Radano documents the emergence of the category of “Negro music,” whose “ownership by slaves, if not inherently a form of resistance, could be nothing but illicit, identifying a claim upon a property legally owned by whites. What slaves had claimed illegally was a part of themselves, a quality of their own flesh, externalized as animated sound.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the very act of making sounds while laboring resists commodification, for though the Black body is owned by another, the sound property is not. Making music contains an element of what Radano calls “audible labor,” which resists commodification insofar as the music signals

something that cannot be recovered by capitalism. Its intangible, immaterial quality exceeds possession.

To be clear, Radano's argument seeks to undermine facile binary oppositions—such as white-Black, free-unfree, material-immaterial—that might, for example, identify slave music as a paradoxical free expression of an unfree body or site of resistance precisely because of its “free” articulation from within the bonds of slavery. In such a conception, slave music would represent an “authentic” or unmediated aesthetic expression of a subordinate group. This imagined “music of the slave cabin” represents an example of what James C. Scott dubs a “hidden transcript,” a “critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.”<sup>27</sup> While such performances no doubt existed, they cannot be recovered. Moreover, even if they could be, their form was still shaped by the context of slavery. Our very desire to posit them as an endpoint on the spectrum of authentic cultural expression should make us wary both about their “purity” and about our desire for “unmediated authenticity.” Instead, Radano views “Negro music” as a mediated cultural form, both subject and also resistant to the forces and categories of capitalism, race, and slavery.

Indeed, as Radano asserts, Negro musicians were part of the exchange processes of slavery shaped by capitalism. Enslaved people learned to perform European musical forms on European instruments, and do so on command, increasing their value. In this respect, the immaterial commodity they produced was partially reabsorbed by capitalism. Yet, as Radano argues, even these mechanisms of mediation and appropriation met with resistance: “If the slave was a propertyless, propertied thing, it had nonetheless, through some peculiar racial-economic magic, come to possess a lively, animated property of its own . . . thought to have existed outside and prior to dominance.”<sup>28</sup> Rationalized under slavery, “Negro music” was distinguished from the music of the masters by a racial logic of white supremacy that paradoxically necessitated a belief in an intangible differentiating quality that could never be recuperated. This characteristic of the music was posited as something retained from the time prior to slavery—some quality of “otherness”—without which “Negro music” would be indistinguishable from white music.

Efforts to (re)appropriate slave music as a commodity ultimately foreground the paradoxes and contradictions underlying the ideology of racialized capitalism and slavery. The resistant character of sounds contained within the category of “Negro music” is nowhere more apparent than in the music's appropriation, mediation, and commodification by white culture, most notably in Blackface minstrelsy. As Radano argues, “The mark of theft that would come to define the character of Blackface minstrelsy might better be comprehended

in this early period not only as an act of expropriation but also of reclamation, whereby whites sought to reclaim what they saw as an illicit property lost in the sounding bodies of African Americans.”<sup>29</sup> Blackface minstrelsy commodifies “Negro music,” mediating and domesticating this problematic form of property for racialized exchange. However, the act of appropriation, the attempt to re-present under the minstrel mask a form of expression that has been essentialized, must necessarily always fall short.<sup>30</sup> According to the logic of white supremacy, the performance of whites in Blackface must always assert difference by gesturing to a fundamental quality of race that escapes commodification. Without the fundamental otherness that cannot be performed—an essential Blackness of sound—there is no racial distinction, a proposition that would undermine the ideology of racial supremacy.

In the end, commodification is a representational act aimed at facilitating exchange and circulation.<sup>31</sup> Exchange depends on the setting of the value of goods using representational systems of equivalence (like money) that enable the comparison of unlike things.<sup>32</sup> “Negro music” as a product of slave labor in effect requires two representational acts to achieve commodification: the first of the enslaved, and the second of the music as a product of slave labor. The incomplete commodification of “Negro music” serves as a reminder of the residue of personhood that always resists commodification under slavery. In this respect, the category of “Negro music,” although it enables the partial reabsorption of this strange “property of property” by capitalism, also reinscribes one of the fundamental paradoxes of the racial divide: the music’s very doubleness reflects the double existence as property and person of those who produce it. In this way, the commodification of “Negro music” points to the white investment in the recovery of all products of slave labor for capitalism. The resistance of aesthetic expression to complete commodification underscores the peculiar subject position and forms of agency available to those who labor in bondage.

Finally, it is important to consider spirituals within the general category of “Negro music” as a particularly thorny site of resistance to commodification. As Radano writes, “Left with few resources beyond subsistence, slaves held onto and crafted into group artistry productions of value that masters could not so easily claim: the ineffable, ungraspable force of Black utterance.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of spirituals, communal production coupled with religious messages of redemption interrupt easy modes of commodification. Partial commercialization of spirituals after slavery included professionalized performances by the Fisk Jubilee Singers that benefited Fisk University. After the original group disbanded, “many charlatans out to make a buck by implying

that they were somehow connected with the now-famous Fisk” tarnished the reputation not only of jubilee singers but of spirituals by extension.<sup>34</sup> In his defense of spirituals, while W. E. B. Du Bois acknowledges their ersatz avatar in popular music and on the minstrel stage, he nonetheless highlights their force.<sup>35</sup> Du Bois argues that something about the “sorrow songs” interrupts processes of mediation, because they contain a historical message of humanity that “the slave spoke to the world.”<sup>36</sup> Subsequent performances in other historical contexts always point back to this site of origination. On his reading, the power of the songs derives not from “authenticity”—because their evolution over time does not detract from their force—but rather from the complexity of the message they contain: “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.”<sup>37</sup> It is the contradictory nature of the songs that defies their easy mediation. In this respect, Du Bois’s assessment is consistent with Stuart Hall’s definition of “Black popular culture . . . [as] a contradictory space”: “It is a sight of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high and low, resistance versus incorporation, authentic versus inauthentic, experiential versus formal, opposition versus homogenization.”<sup>38</sup> In particular, what Du Bois identifies as the articulation of faith in justice in this vernacular cultural form achieves something not easily reducible to a mediated commodity relation. The object monetized through ticket and sheet music sales and recordings by jubilee singers still stands in contrast to the power of the message that exceeds the commodified forms. In this respect, spirituals simultaneously participate in and resist their reabsorption into the racialized economics of capitalism.

## Debt and Limited Agency in the Postbellum World

The abolition of slavery only intensified the need for circuits of credit because of the ubiquity of debt. As I discussed in detail, under the regime of sharecropping and tenancy, debt weighed heavily on planters dispossessed of their slave property and attempting to survive economically producing a staple crop that

required large amounts of capital upfront. The tenancy system found different ways to hold labor captive and delay wages or deny them altogether. Legal systems buttressed efforts to immobilize labor in false-pretenses, anti-enticement, emigrant-agent, and vagrancy statutes. Criminal surety and convict lease crowned a system that used debt to bind laborers and hold them captive, potentially in perpetuity. Rather than manipulate creditor-debtor relations on paper through the use of human beings as collateral, in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction economies another type of attachment was used: the lien. Whether working “the wheel of servitude” under a criminal-surety arrangement, or working a life sentence on Parchman Farm, or working year in and year out on the same farm, these configurations use debt as a covering fiction to enable a kind of attachment of labor and, by extension, of persons. In other words, the fiction of debt creates the conditions under which labor and persons can be bound.

The shifting of debt onto laborers limits agency relative to mobility and self-determination in working and living conditions. But sharecroppers and tenants, like slaves before them, could exercise indirect forms of agency even while performing labor. For example, a cash renter could assert some autonomy by avoiding credit, as this African American interviewed by the Federal Writers’ Project explains: “Somethin’ else I did. I took that twenty-seven dollars and paid out’n it for my share of the fertilizer, and I didn’t run no account at the store. It sure opened my eyes when I seen how much cheaper you could buy things for cash.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, there was widespread understanding of the usurious interest rates charged, as well as the double-price system: one price for cash, a higher price for credit. But agency was continually hampered. Ned Cobb’s account of his rise from sharecropper to tenant to renter demonstrates that even if all loans are paid off, Black laborers cannot purchase on credit from local merchants from their own account: even if fully solvent they require the intervention of a white intermediary. After Cobb pays off a five-year note owed to his landlord, he attempts to purchase fertilizer without a guarantee from a white man. Without the ability to purchase fertilizer on credit, he cannot maximize his crop yield and generate surplus-value. But to take out a loan, he needs the signature of a white man; thus, he becomes reensnared in the racialized capitalist system.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the playing field of capitalism can always be manipulated to keep a racialized workforce at subsistence level or below. Agency is impeded by the constant manipulation of credit and debt, creating conditions for maximal exploitation.

## Commodifying Black Popular Music

As we have already seen, blues songs often express skepticism about the possibility of exercising agency in relation to labor and, by extension, escape to a better life. Whether it's the mule commands that haunt the sleep of the narrator declaring his intention to leave a life of tenancy in Big Bill Broonzy's "Plow Hand Blues," or the fantasy of demanding to be paid voiced in Tom Dickson's "Labor Blues," or the cruel irony of being sent to prison to perform forced labor as punishment for attempting to find work in Ramblin' Thomas's "No Job Blues," blues lyrics often call out exploitation and abuse in a system of racialized economic domination. While musicians give voice to the sentiments and frustrations of the community they address, their lives as itinerant performers represent, to some degree, an escape from the constraints imposed by the system. Performers like Charley Patton, Son House, and Robert Johnson, along with countless others, resisted the life of sharecropping and yearlong contracts, while they tried to evade vagrancy enforcement, to practice an art that, to a large extent, thrived in a community on the margins of a capitalist economy.<sup>41</sup> Their efforts to avoid the modes of economic relation structured by the imposition of debt in rural agriculture finds its echo in their role in the perpetuation of an art form that is not easily commodified or contained by exchange relations. Outside of the semi-captive labor system but addressing their "songs" to those caught up in it, the early blues performers practiced an art that also partially evaded the logic of capitalism. In a world of economic transition, where bound and forced labor coexist with wage labor and financial speculation, the blues as a genre both partakes of and resists the market relations shaped by commodity capitalism.

As we saw in the case of slave music, sound is not easy to commodify. Setting aside the paradoxes posed by "property owned by property," music's ephemeral, immaterial nature makes it particularly difficult both to hold as property and to commodify for exchange relations. Commodities, as defined by classical economic theory, are famously material objects, produced by labor that determines their value.<sup>42</sup> Marx's tendency to fixate on the production of material goods as merchandise for sale even in the case of music—pianos, scores—fails to capture both immaterial objects and the labor expended to produce them.<sup>43</sup> Music's commodification depends on modes of capturing its value, including the labor invested in creating it, producing what Timothy Taylor calls "regimes of commodification." From the perspective of European and Euro-American high and popular forms, Taylor differentiates these regimes chronologically: "music as published score, music as live sound at a public



concert, and music as recorded sound in the form of player piano rolls or audio recordings in many other formats, analog or digital.”<sup>44</sup> But the chronology of regimes of commodification for African American music is different, due in part to a racialized economy controlling access to the means of producing and marketing it. In the case of “Black music,” challenges to commodification arise not only from the difficulty of determining value for exchange but also from its mediation by the white dominant culture. Adapting Taylor for the blues, one early regime might be understood as live performance in a variety of venues—jukes, honky-tonks, front porches, picnics, street corners—for payment in cash, food, and/or liquor. Although at first glance this mode of commodification may seem to exist independently of racialized economic relations of domination, its performers and audience are nonetheless embedded in the system. Jukes are often located on or near plantations, while sawmills, levee camps, and other sites of labor provide other venues. Even leisure, such as picnics, is structured by racialized forces of domination. In addition, payday cycles determine musicians’ travel itineraries. Nonetheless, on the spectrum of racially mediated forms of commodification, African American musicians performing live for African American audiences comes the closest to evading commodification through the dominant culture.

A more explicitly commercialized form of “blues” performance emerged in the early twentieth century in southern African American vaudeville. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff argue that “the blues was incubated in Black southern vaudeville theaters” as part of a “mosaic repertoire” that included ragtime and folk materials.<sup>45</sup> Within this realm of semiautonomous African American culture, they “tentatively proffer 1909 as the year ‘blues’ came up for public recognition as a musical term and, by extension, the year blues music achieved a distinct, recognizable identity.”<sup>46</sup> In Black vaudeville, African American performers adapted the tropes of minstrelsy, folk music, ragtime, and other genres to perform “blues” within variety shows aimed at Black audiences. Many of these “blues” songs were published as sheet music, displaying relative degrees of similarity to folk blues compositions.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, southern Black vaudeville enables commodification in two regimes: printed sheet music and theatricalized performance.

At roughly the same time as Black vaudeville, the Blackface minstrel show, which appropriated and commodified “Negro music” throughout most of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, evolved into a new form that included the blues. Abbott and Seroff write, “Just before the turn of the century a new breed of African American minstrel show rose up in the South. . . . Living out of Pullman railroad cars and blanketing the Southland



with 'canvas theaters,' shows like Allen's New Orleans Minstrels, the Rabbit's Foot Company, the Florida Blossom Minstrels, and *Silas Green from New Orleans* staked out a new frontier of African American entertainment."<sup>48</sup> By the 1910s, these shows began featuring blues singers who performed "W. C. Handy's early blues compositions, particularly "St. Louis Blues," "Hesitation Blues," and the vocal version of "The Memphis Blues." Abbott and Seroff elaborate: "By the end of the decade all African American minstrel companies were expected to carry at least one 'real blues singer.' . . . African American minstrel performers of the early twentieth century, often working in Blackface, became successful purveyors of authentic, up-to-date Black vernacular music and dance."<sup>49</sup> Performing a mixed repertoire, singers, like Ma Rainey who appeared in the Rabbit's Foot Minstrels and vaudeville, sang songs by Handy as well as tunes with "folk" origins, including her own compositions.<sup>50</sup>

"Blues" debuts as a material commodity in 1912 with the publication of the rag-like "Baby Seals Blues" by H. Franklin "Baby" Seals, just prior to W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues."<sup>51</sup> Unlike Seals, a Black vaudevillian, Handy was a relative outsider to the genre undergoing commodification. As he recounts in his autobiography, Handy perceived early in his career that the blues had the potential to make him money. While conducting his orchestra in Cleveland, Mississippi, someone in the audience requests "our native music." Handy's band cannot honor the request, so a local band does, and Handy witnesses the moneymaking potential of music with "a disturbing monotony . . . associated with cane rows and levee camps." Most important for Handy, "folks would pay money for it."<sup>52</sup> Handy's account makes clear that he intends to mine the raw material of this "primitive music" for profit. Thinking like an entrepreneur in a market economy, Handy turns these "blue diamonds in the rough" into silver, regularizing and standardizing a "folk" form to conform to the expectations of professional, sheet music—a saleable commodity.<sup>53</sup>

As a partial reabsorption of the blues by capitalism, Handy's publication of standardized blues in sheet music beginning in 1912 intensified the dialectical relation that already existed between the tradition of rural live performance and the genre's commodification in commercialized forms. The creation of a commodified material object necessarily influenced the practice of rural blues performance and vice versa. Musicians acquainted with Handy's and others' compositions could either work versions of them into their repertoires or, more likely, make subtle adjustments to their own "compositions" over time, as they heard his music. But Handy's and other's "blues" did not eclipse or replace the tradition that inspired it. The live performance tradition of jukes, house parties, picnics, and other venues persisted. As performers borrowed

lyrics and riffs and even performed popular tunes, they reappropriated the commodified forms, demonstrating the genre's resilience. Indeed, capitalism is a two-way street: acts of appropriation by the dominant culture are met with acts of reappropriation by "folk" culture. Most crucially, the racialized forces of capitalism exert pressures on both traditions.

Members of traveling shows encountered rural forms of music, enabling singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith to incorporate elements of "folk" blues into their acts while giving performers like Charley Patton, Son House, and others exposure to new material. Evidence of borrowings back and forth between the "folk" and "popular" traditions are manifested in lyrical phrases and themes that appear in both subgenres.<sup>54</sup> Similar to the opposition between an imagined authentic music in the slave cabin and what appeared on the minstrel stage, here as well, one significant difference between the forms lies in the degree of deliberate engagement with commodification. If the early blues of minstrelsy and vaudeville negotiates to a far greater degree with the mechanisms of capitalism, the music of the rural areas, although not commodified through direct mediation by white culture, nonetheless bears the traces of racialized capitalism. Moreover, the perception of it as the noncommercialized, nonprofessional and, therefore, authentic expression of a subordinate group does not acknowledge the degree of interpenetration of the two worlds. As we will see in the discussion of the blues' commodification through recording, separating authentic from inauthentic, unmediated from mediated, is not so simple.

## Recording the Blues: Shaping the Archive

Like Handy's commodification of the blues through standardization and dissemination via sheet music, the recording history of the blues introduces new technological and racialized economic forces that shaped the genre. Recording technology emerged in the late nineteenth century and began to be used for preserving music and creating "a new musical culture."<sup>55</sup> In the early days of recording, as Tim Brooks documents, "while white record companies were willing to record Blacks, they wanted those who would appeal to white customers. Curiously, the prevailing thinking was that Blacks themselves were not a market worth pursuing, so certain types of music, presumed not to interest the white majority, were ignored."<sup>56</sup> Perception of the market delayed the recording of blues until Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" in 1920.<sup>57</sup> Sales of Smith's record significantly exceeded expectations, and "within seven months,

hundreds of thousands of copies of 'Crazy Blues' had been sold nationally, perhaps even a million."<sup>58</sup> In the wake of its success, recording companies turned to the women's "classic" blues of tented shows and Black vaudeville as a product to commodify.

The recording of the women's "classic" blues responded to market forces largely extraneous to the social fabric of rural southern life—what Clyde Woods refers to as the "blues epistemology"<sup>59</sup>—despite the fact that much of its target audience resided there. Artists such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, and many others who toured in theater and tented shows were recorded to capitalize on a newly discovered market. The drive to record "original" tunes motivated by a desire to maximize company profits dovetailed with the interests of the nascent music industry, including "professional" Tin Pan Alley composers.<sup>60</sup> These economic forces helped shape artistic output, further contributing to the later critical reception of women's "classic" blues as "commercialized" and, therefore, "inauthentic" in comparison with the "folk" tradition not yet cut onto disc. Shaped by capitalism, this version of the blues represents another mediation by the dominant culture. And yet, as in the case of the commodification of spirituals and the blues of vaudeville, the recordings contain many recognizable "folk" blues features. Moreover, as sales figures demonstrate, the African American "audience for the recordings accepted and endorsed them as blues."<sup>61</sup> Southern audiences, in particular, purchased them in significant quantities. Jeff Todd Titon estimates that Blacks in the South bought ten million records a year in the 1920s.<sup>62</sup> Pullman porters carried records and record catalogs with them from North to South and local record store owners played new releases, disseminating the commodified form of blues from urban to rural areas.<sup>63</sup> In this way, another commodified form was purchased and enjoyed by members of the rural southern community associated with the genre's roots.

The recording of the male, rural, self-accompanied blues singers followed this initial phase, beginning with Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926.<sup>64</sup> Several factors delayed the commodification of these singers in recorded form. First, they were performing in venues throughout the rural South, unattached, as the women were, to professional performance circuits like Black vaudeville and the Theater Owners' Booking Association (TOBA). Their relative lack of access to mediation by the white-dominated culture, including the fledgling recording industry, left them in relative obscurity, requiring the intervention of talent scouts to make connections.<sup>65</sup> Record companies relied on talent scouts to identify performers and either traveled to locations in the South to record or invited performers to travel North to their studios. The rural style

lent itself less well to the constraints of early recording technology than that of the “professional” women. The frequency range of the guitar was not easily captured by acoustic recording devices, nor were the vocal ranges, timbre, and diction of the major practitioners of “folk” blues.<sup>66</sup> The invention of electrical recording technology helped make the commodification of the rural tradition possible.<sup>67</sup>

Talent scouts and A&R men and some few women played a significant role in determining the artists, styles, and, especially, songs that were recorded.<sup>68</sup> Like the debates surrounding the “authenticity” of Handy’s compositions and women’s “classic” blues, scholars question how representative the archive of recorded materials is in comparison to live performance practice. Citing industry conceits concerning “originality” shaped by the constraints imposed by copyright law, numerous critics argue that scouts and A&R people pressured artists to change their repertoires. H. C. Speir, the Jackson, Mississippi, storeowner who served as a talent scout, sought artists who had “at least four different original songs. By *original* it was meant that none of the singer’s four songs could show the influence of anything recorded or published previously.”<sup>69</sup> But the category that we currently designate as “roots music”—music rooted in a historical tradition including the blues—operates according to an alternative sense of composition and originality. Ralph Peer, who worked as an A&R man for Columbia, OKeh, and Victor, developed an expansive view of “original *versions* of songs culled from the public domain as distinctive and copyrightable works.”<sup>70</sup> This interpretation attempted to reconcile folk practice with the profit motive to enable companies, and sometimes artists, to profit from recording.

In addition to the profit motive, racial stereotyping also shaped the archive, as companies discouraged Black artists from performing songs perceived as “white” “popular” music.<sup>71</sup> Record companies also “segregated sounds,” to use Karl Hagstrom Miller’s phrase, enforcing a perceived distinction between the “race” and “old-time” or “hillbilly” categories through marketing and song selection.<sup>72</sup> Self-censorship likely also played a role in preventing songs voicing racial protest as well as overly sexually explicit ones from being recorded.<sup>73</sup>

The archive of recorded blues (and Black music more broadly) reflects a complex dynamic between almost exclusively white record company executives and a live performance tradition.<sup>74</sup> As we have seen, the live performance tradition is largely bifurcated, but with contact and cross-influence between “professional,” “commercial” musicians and a rural tradition of “folk” artists. When artists recorded, the music was subjected to new economic, social, technological, and aesthetic pressures.<sup>75</sup> Acoustic recording initially privileged the

women artists, delaying the recording of male singers with guitars until 1926. Once in the studio, artists grappled with the material constraints of recording: horns and eventually microphones, no possibility for editing, and a time constraint of three minutes per side. What might have been a ten-minute or longer number live had to be shortened in order to be recorded. In all these respects, the early recorded blues as a commodity represents a partial absorption and adaptation of the form by capitalism.

## The Economics of Early Recording

As I have already suggested, copyright law influenced the commodification of the blues in sound recording. By defining what a protected work is, and, therefore, who can profit from its sale and by what means, copyright law drives financial incentive. This incentive, in turn, shapes recording practices, as companies seek to maximize profits. To some degree, it also changes the character of music in the process by exerting pressure to shape what listeners hear. In the case of African American music, as we have already seen, racialized mechanisms in the economy and also in the law render the process of commodification one of alteration. Commodification poses substantial obstacles to artists' control over and ability to benefit financially from their work. The "inherently exploitative dynamics of the American roots recording industry," as Brian Ward and Patrick Huber argue, took advantage of Black and white artists alike, largely because most musicians did not "appreciate the value of songs as commercial and legal properties." As they also note, despite the "equal opportunity" nature of exploitation, more "hillbilly" artists received royalties than did blues artists.<sup>76</sup>

Parallel to classical economic theory's conception of the commodity, legal reasoning about music initially fixated on physical products. Composers' works—both published and unpublished—were granted copyright protection for a period of twenty-eight years in a congressional amendment to copyright law in 1831.<sup>77</sup> The written score, one of Taylor's regimes of commodification, represents a material object that is easily recognizable as property and, therefore, protected by copyright. The Copyright Act of 1909 broadened the scope of protected work to include sound recordings, for which record companies were obligated "to pay 2¢ per side to the copyright holder"—in other words, a fee to the "recognized composer" (i.e., the one listed in the US Copyright Office), not necessarily the person who actually wrote the piece.<sup>78</sup> In addition, "mechanical royalties" required payment for songs that had already been

recorded by other artists.<sup>79</sup> This change in the law “defined the practice of ‘covering,’ by which other labels marketed their own versions of a new recording” legally by paying the copyright holder of the original material to rerecord it.<sup>80</sup>

The legal concept of the musical work protected by copyright contains embedded assumptions about what constitutes property and how it may be lawfully sold. African American vernacular music, and the blues in particular, brings into focus the racialized elements of these assumptions. As we already saw in the case of “Negro music,” some musical practices challenge the logic of capitalism. Those that are not written down, for example, are not eligible for copyright protection under the original act of 1831, thereby excluding most folk and vernacular music. Although the provision for “mechanical licensing royalties” in 1909 seems to move toward protecting musical works as sounds, this is not the case, as David Suisman argues: “Although the law now identified piano rolls and phonograph records as ‘copies’ of copyrighted music within the meaning of the law, it did not make the sounds themselves the object of copyright. Piano rolls and phonograph records were copies, according to the law, to the extent that they were analogous to a written score, like a kind of sheet music that only machines could read. The music of piano rolls and phonograph records was inscribed into law not as sound but as ‘text,’ albeit text beyond legibility for humans.”<sup>81</sup> This continued emphasis on text fails to recognize the “audible labor” of making music, to use Radano’s phrase, requiring sounds’ transformation into material, legible form in order to commodify and financially benefit from it. More significantly, in a racialized economy, the means of commodifying—writing down and recording—are controlled by the white dominant culture, creating opportunities to exploit Black labor.

In the early period of recorded blues prior to the Depression, the Copyright Act of 1909 defined the avenues for making money through music. The emphasis on the text enabled copyright holders, like W. C. Handy, to earn money by registering the written words and music with the US Copyright Office. In order to facilitate greater profits, record companies often linked themselves to music publishing companies, which “ensured that the company made money at least twice and often three or more times on each record sold—once upon sale of the records and again by earning royalties from other record companies that subsequently recorded copyrighted music.”<sup>82</sup> Some professional songwriters, like Perry Bradford, who wrote music for the blues queens of the 1920s, could protect their royalty income with their own publishing companies, but other songwriters, especially the performers themselves, were not usually protected.<sup>83</sup> As William Howland Kenney explains, the financial benefits of copyrighting created an incentive for coercion:

Fearful of losing sales of their own original race recordings when other companies “covered” them to get in on the profits, record producers for the small race labels pressured their performers and songwriters to sign over their copyrights. Even if another company’s version eventually sold better than the original record, the company that had first recorded the number and secured itself legal control of copyright would be sure at least to get royalty payments from the second label. In those cases where a given recorded selection sold well for a relatively long period of time, copyright could produce significant long-term revenues. Moreover, the rights to reproduce strong-selling recorded selections on cheaper dime store labels could earn the record company even more.<sup>84</sup>

Coercing the signing over of copyrights to record companies cheats artists of both composition and mechanical licensing royalties. Kenney estimates that “[Bessie] Smith was given less than half of what her copyrights would have earned, had she not signed them away.”<sup>85</sup>

J. Mayo Williams, the first African American executive at a white company (Paramount), manipulated the copyright system in multiple ways to steal money from artists. In exchange for serving as a middleman between white executives and Black talent, “Paramount made Williams manager of Chicago Music [their linked music publishing company], in which capacity he used various stratagems to wrest copyright or mechanical rights from the performer/composers, and arranged to have songs scored for publication and lead sheets registered for copyright with the Library of Congress. He earned one-half of the 2¢ royalty per recording that went from the record company to whoever owned copyright on the material recorded.”<sup>86</sup> Williams manipulated both composition and recording copyright royalties to his advantage. Recouping production costs for 78 rpm records required selling “5,000 copies per disc”; royalties were only paid after expenses had been covered.<sup>87</sup> Williams’s “creative bookkeeping assured that the vast majority of all artists saw no sales royalties at all, realizing only however much might be left of their flat recording payment after Williams’s ‘fee’ had been subtracted.”<sup>88</sup> The story should sound familiar: the production costs function as the record company’s equivalent to “the furnish” to the sharecropper or the fees paid in criminal surety. The sum can be manipulated as a “credit advance” to ensure that artists are never or only minimally paid for their work. Although some would argue that the risk of the speculative investment involved in recording justifies the rewards reaped by record companies at the expense of artists, it remains true that companies exploited performers’ financial straits and



ignorance of how the capitalist recording industry works, in order to maximize profits.<sup>89</sup>

Some artists with established reputations—mostly the professionalized women—had contractual arrangements with record companies, earning less money than they should have in the kinds of crooked arrangements deployed by Williams. Unlike their female counterparts, most male artists in the rural tradition were paid a flat fee for recording sides.<sup>90</sup> And while this practice also amounts to economic exploitation, it is important to think about the proposition from the performer's perspective. Beyond coercion, there are other reasons a performer might opt to accept a cash payment rather than enter into a contractual relation with a record company.<sup>91</sup> Contracts are understandably viewed with suspicion by African Americans from rural agricultural areas: they represent a way for employers to avoid paying employees or, worse, they can create conditions of bondage. Accepting a cash payment frees the artist from having to trust anyone, particularly a white man (or even a Black one, like Mayo Williams) offering a contract on behalf of a white-owned company. Why would anyone who grew up under a regime that included sharecropping and criminal surety trust a record company to keep fair accounts, not tack on additional fees, and then actually track the artist down and pay them?<sup>92</sup> Cash in hand was at least payment for work and, most likely, more money than most had seen for a year's labor. Son House's reaction to payment for his 1930 sessions at Paramount is likely typical: "I got paid forty dollars for making those records. At that time, I just had the big eyes. Forty dollars! Making it that easy and that quick! It'd take me near about a whole year to make forty dollars in the cotton patch."<sup>93</sup> For Paramount, the forty-dollar fee represents a minimal investment, a small fraction of the production costs, easily recouped in record sales and royalties that will not have to be shared.

Flat fee per recording follows the model established for early minstrel recordings, such as the wildly popular "The Laughing Song" and "The Whistling Coon" by George W. Johnson. The recording process on wax cylinders lent itself to a piecework approach, because they "could only be made one at a time—there was no way to duplicate them." In recording sessions, Johnson would repeat the same tune "all afternoon. At twenty cents a 'round,' . . . by the end of the afternoon he would be \$4.00 or \$5.00 richer."<sup>94</sup> The New Jersey Phonograph Co. sold Johnson's cylinders "to exhibitors for \$1.00 to \$1.50 each" and, eventually, "stocked their own musical coin-slot machines in public places. . . . A single popular cylinder might bring in \$20.00, \$30.00, or even \$50.00 in nickels before it wore out."<sup>95</sup> As cylinders deteriorated, Johnson would return to rerecord.<sup>96</sup> Because Johnson was not under contract, the



successful songs were eventually recorded for numerous companies on both cylinders and flat discs, using the same financial model.

The fee represents a task or piece-based wage: the artist receives money based on the items produced rather than for hours worked. Property in the material commodity—the cylinders and discs—is held by the company that may then benefit from sales in a variety of ways without having to pay a share of royalties to the artist who produced it. In the case of artists with established reputations, companies have an incentive to guard against competition. A flat fee cannot prevent “stars” from functioning as free agents and recording with competing companies. Early on, companies attempted, often unsuccessfully, to protect exclusivity by offering contracts. Well-known minstrel stars, like Bert Williams and George Walker or the reorganized Fisk Jubilee Singers under John W. Work, signed contracts requiring exclusivity.<sup>97</sup> Through contracts, recording companies attempt to bind labor in order to disable the mobility of valued workers, mirroring the anti-enticement acts and emigrant-agent statutes.

Recording contracts existed for “stars” in the early history of blues as well. Many of the blues queens of the 1920s had contracts, like Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters.<sup>98</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, Paramount’s biggest-selling artist, had an exclusive contract that did not prevent him from recording sides with competitor Okeh.<sup>99</sup> Lonnie Johnson received a seven-year contract with Okeh as a prize for winning a blues contest at the TOBA-affiliated Booker T. Washington Theater in St. Louis.<sup>100</sup> Prior experience with Black vaudeville, as well as with Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, and Bessie Smith on the TOBA, likely helped him secure the recording work.<sup>101</sup> As both a solo artist and versatile staff musician, Johnson was valuable to Okeh and its parent company, Columbia, producing at least 290 sides in field locations and at Okeh’s New York headquarters. Despite his “exclusive” contract, he, like many other artists, worked the system by recording for other companies under various pseudonyms.<sup>102</sup> For Okeh, Johnson’s ability to play blues, jazz, vaudeville, and popular songs generated value worth protecting with “exclusivity.” While under contract, Johnson continued playing side gigs in various venues, as well as traveling with theatrical touring companies, in order to earn a decent wage. Johnson’s experience illustrates how record companies benefit from financial, economic, legal, and social advantages. It also calls into question how advantageous contracts were to artists. The choice to offer a flat fee or a contract, and very occasionally a percentage of royalties, signals that record companies held the upper hand, while artists like Johnson, with limited agency, scrambled to make a living.

## Recording the Blues, Post-Depression and Beyond

The Depression drove most race record labels out of business: “Industry sales toppled from \$104 million in ’27 to \$6 million in ’32. Paramount shuttered its doors in 1931. The same year Columbia discontinued its 14000 ‘Race’ series, and Brunswick its 7000 series. Vocalion discontinued its 1000 series in ’32 and Okeh withdrew its 8000 ‘Race’ series in ’34.”<sup>103</sup> The geographical center for blues recording moved from New York to Chicago, where buyouts and reorganizations created new labels, like Bluebird (RCA Victor’s blues and jazz subdivision), Decca (the American branch of Decca UK), and ARC (with its various subsidiaries).<sup>104</sup> Consolidation also meant that ownership of masters was transferred, because “before the passage of the Sound Recording Act of 1971 (which took effect in 1972), copyright protection extended only to the author (or owner) of the composition, and the control of recorded music was effected only through ownership and management of physical master tapes.”<sup>105</sup> Post-Depression, the forms of financial arrangements with artists from the earlier period continued. While some commercially successful blues artists, like Tampa Red and Leroy Carr, had contracts that could be bought and sold with mergers, other artists recorded with several different labels. As in the earlier period, those who wrote music were usually coerced into signing away composition royalties. Lester Melrose, music publisher and freelance talent scout for Bluebird and Columbia from the mid-1930s until after World War II, declared, “I wouldn’t record anybody unless he signed all his rights in those tunes over to me.”<sup>106</sup> He practically extorted earnings from Big Bill Broonzy: “When Bill signed music publishing contracts with Melrose, first in April 1930 and again in March 1934, he had to give up half of the 50 percent share to which he would normally have been entitled. As a result, Bill had to agree that Melrose as the publisher would receive 75 percent of the publishing royalties, and he would receive only 25 percent as the composer. Bill had little choice but to accept this arrangement if he wanted to continue to work with Melrose.”<sup>107</sup> Beyond coercion, Melrose also used royalties in the same way that landowners used the plantation commissary to advance credit as a means to lure Broonzy and others into debt: “The only surviving statement he [Broonzy] received from Lester Melrose before the end of the war was for royalties earned through December 1944, and it showed that, instead of getting a check, Bill owed money to Melrose. According to Melrose’s calculations, although Bill was due over \$200 in royalties, Melrose had given Bill a series of advances that left Bill with a debt of over \$140.”<sup>108</sup> Leonard and Phil Chess

used similar machinations, purchasing Cadillacs at a discount and deducting list price payments from royalties. The Chess brothers even purchased homes and held the notes (although sometimes to the artists' benefit), like speculators in house contract sales, subtracting payments from artists' royalties and preventing artists from seeing the books.<sup>109</sup>

Other independent labels in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Modern Records and its subsidiaries—RPM, Flair, and Kent in Los Angeles, and Meteor Records in Memphis—all owned by the Bihari Brothers, engaged in the practice of adding their pseudonyms—Jules Taub (Jules Bihari), Joe Josea (Joe Bihari), and Sam Ling (Saul Bihari)—to composition copyrights to earn royalties from major blues and R&B artists like B. B. King and John Lee Hooker.<sup>110</sup> Syd Nathan of King Records in Cincinnati often claimed co-songwriting credit under the pseudonym Lois Mann, also the name of his music publishing company.<sup>111</sup>

But beyond copyright manipulations and attempts to limit artists' agency through exclusivity, contracts also often included terms of "assignment," allowing artists to be transferred through the sale of their contract to another company.<sup>112</sup> As Matt Stahl points out, "Assignability . . . a standard feature of the recording contract . . . is another means by which a recording artist alienates the right to choose for whom or what company he records."<sup>113</sup> Sam Phillips, who famously sold Elvis Presley's contract to RCA for \$35,000 (more than \$375,000 in today's dollars), was the source of contract ownership disputes between the Chess and Bihari Brothers over Howlin' Wolf, Rosco Gordon, and others.<sup>114</sup> The selling of artists' contracts bears some resemblance to criminal-surety arrangements and convict-lease agreements insofar as the transfer of labor is accomplished through contract sale: contracts with an assigned value are bought and sold (individually and as part of the assets of companies). As in the labor arrangements involving convicts, the selling of contracts raises the question of what is being sold: the recordings, the labor (to produce future recordings), or the person? The ambiguity surrounding the commodity controlled by the contract bears an eerie resemblance to the questions raised by contract purchases of "labor." In Howlin' Wolf's account, he insists that the Bihari-Chess dispute was over control of the masters recorded at Memphis Recording Service (later Sun Records).<sup>115</sup> But the eventual resolution gave the Bihari brothers Rosco Gordon's contract and the Chess brothers Howlin' Wolf's—a disposition that resembles a distribution of people and not recordings.<sup>116</sup> In cases where record companies are bought out, often when facing debt, the commodity purchased includes both the "vault" (master recordings) and the contracts with artists. In these scenarios, the fate of artists resonates with that of slaves sold and transferred as collateral to acquit debt.

Inequities in the recording industry began to be addressed in the 1980s by royalty reform efforts, as aging R&B artists pursued actions against major labels. As Stahl argues, a confluence of factors led to Ruth Brown's successful intervention in the "racialized political economy" of the recording industry that revealed Atlantic's decades-long history of fraudulent accounting practices.<sup>117</sup> Unsurprisingly, as Stahl explains, "in the contracts of the 1940s and 50s, the usual practice was to charge three kinds of costs back to artist royalty accounts: payments made to the artist for the session, payments made to side musicians for the session, and the costs of musical arrangements. The funds advanced by the company to cover these costs functioned as loans that were to be repaid out of artists' anticipated royalties, before they could receive any payments themselves."<sup>118</sup> Most artists ran a continuous negative balance in royalties, including Muddy Waters, who received no royalties because, according to company records, his "1986 royalty account balance was nearly \$60,000 in the red even though he had earned nearly \$25,000 in royalties in that year alone."<sup>119</sup> As Waters himself stated, "I got ripped off."<sup>120</sup> Indeed, companies stopped calculating royalties and sending statements, based on the assumption that the debts could never be repaid.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, according to copyright law, the catalog of master recordings belonged to the record companies and not the artists, robbing them of substantial royalties on reissues of their earlier work.<sup>122</sup> Brown and others succeeded in pushing Atlantic to rewrite more lucrative royalty contracts. Other large companies that bought out independents, such as MCA (which bought out Chess), also made partial amends by writing new royalty contracts.<sup>123</sup>

Contracts are supposed to protect individuals' freedom and guard against coercion and peonage. Although some would argue that artists are free to sign or walk away, that bad faith argument ignores the economic and legal pressures exerted by the recording companies that benefit from an unequal playing field.<sup>124</sup> Artists without access to capital, and often ignorant of the legal and financial ramifications, sign contracts, thereby binding themselves to terms of exclusivity, duration, assignability, and unfair royalty agreements that some have likened to indentured servitude, peonage, and even slavery.<sup>125</sup> But is the absence of a contract any better? Muddy Waters famously did not have a contract in the early days with Chess, a situation Charles Keil describes as an arrangement that "smacks of the old plantation and paternalism."<sup>126</sup> Instead, he was paid a flat fee per recording.<sup>127</sup> Although he was able to purchase a house with a conventional mortgage with help from the Chess brothers, what would have happened had he requested to review the books?

Today, technological and other changes have significantly reshaped the market for the blues and, therefore, the practices of the recording industry. Major artists like Bonnie Raitt and Joe Bonamassa have their own labels, but most artists sign with a small number of specialty record companies.<sup>128</sup> Bruce Iglauer, founder and head of Alligator Records, the largest independent blues label, provides a new financial model for recording. His label pays for recording and production (within a budget) or pays a negotiated price for masters (finished recordings), uses distributors to get physical products into the world market, and negotiates with digital vendors and streaming services. Importantly, Alligator works to publicize and promote live performances with a team of publicists. The label requires exclusivity in the sense that artists “not put another [competing] record on the market for a period of time.”<sup>129</sup> Duration is negotiated according to number of albums (as little as one) and assignment is not part of the deal. Gone are the practices of co-authorship on copyright: artists receive a fair percentage of royalties. The “bank,” as Etta James put it, still exists, but in a far more limited way and with clearly delineated terms. Most blues artists, aided by small independent labels, function on the margins of the recording industry.

## Resistance and Interruption

By and large, for major record labels today, investment in blues music and musicians is not a risk worth taking. The market is limited and so, too, the possibilities for big profits. This is a double-edged sword: very few artists will ever achieve substantial financial success, but on the other hand, they will not be (overly) exploited. Existing in what Jason Toyne terms a “proto-market,” the blues “bring[s] together performer and audience in arenas which are not fully commodified. . . . Commodity exchange does go on. . . . Records are bought and sold, audiences pay to enter clubs and pub back rooms. But the defining characteristic of the proto-market is that the level of activity cannot be explained by economic factors alone. People are engaged in music-making sometimes for the love of it, sometimes for the esteem and sometimes because they expect in the future to enter the music industry proper.”<sup>130</sup> The niche proto-market signals the blues’ peculiar status along with some other forms of “Black” and “roots” music: partially absorbed by commodification, but also resistant to it. In this respect, the blues as a genre continues to interrupt the processes of capitalism, demonstrating how an art form can push back.

Beyond the small market today, the resistance derives from several features of blues music that call into question assumptions necessary for easy commodification. First, there are formal attributes of the genre that resist notions of authorship and ownership central to copyright law. Repetition, borrowing, and recycling that evolved from practices in spirituals and work songs render the concept of ownership problematic in the blues. Using riffs, lyrics, and melodies to create new material out of elements of a commonly held tradition undermines conceptions of individual ownership based on originality. “Creativity” depends as much on knowledge and ability to cull from a common tradition (a form of repetition), as it does on improvisation in the moment. Second, blues songs, like earlier forms of African American vernacular music, often have an unstable structure, highly dependent on the live performance context. Like spirituals and work songs generated in the moment, blues songs retain elements of these improvisational practices, generating an unstable, ephemeral conception of a song.<sup>131</sup> In this respect, the blues retains features of folk art that tend to privilege process over product. As Suisman explains, this is inconvenient for the law: “Defining music as product, not process, the law put economic before social considerations. It favored a kind of creative work that could be fixed and captured, the antithesis of cultural production based on musical improvisation—or what some jazz musicians would later call spontaneous composition—which was predicated on dynamic interaction.”<sup>132</sup> Instability also challenges standard practices in recording. While in most other genres two “takes” of a particular song might be virtually identical, enabling A&R people to make choices based on technical and mechanical criteria, this is not the case for most blues. Melrose described the particular challenges posed by recording blues musicians in the 1930s: “Some of the artists who could not read or write made it very difficult to record them. Every time they would record a number they could never repeat the same verses. The result would be to record the number about four times and select the one with the best verses. I have rehearsed some of them at least six times on four selections and when we reached the studios, they would sing two or three different verses for each song.”<sup>133</sup> The fluidity of the “product” hampers efforts to fix it through recording.

In addition to calling into question a stable conception of the “product,” the emphasis on process also alters to some degree our sense of who produces it. The “dynamic interaction” described by Suisman exists “both among performers and between performers and audiences.”<sup>134</sup> The audience’s participation in the process of creation further disturbs assumptions necessary for

commodification. In the early days of minstrel shows, vaudeville stages, jukes, house parties, and picnics, and in the bars, clubs, and festivals of today, audience members shout back, dance, and participate, creating immediate impetus for changes to “songs.”<sup>135</sup> Ultimately, the instability of blues music makes the recorded archive in some sense less valuable, especially when compared to other genres of music. Producing a valuable commodity requires creating a stable product. The definitive studio version of a pop song is accorded value in large part due to its singular status. By contrast, a recorded blues performance represents one instantiation among many of a “song.” As a result, the absence of definitive iconic versions of blues songs with high recognition value decreases possibilities for profitable sales to television, movies, and advertising, reinforcing the genre’s position at the margins of commercial music production.

The importance accorded live performance raises questions about what is being “sold” in this mode of commodification. Whereas sheet music and records are tangible products exchanged for money and carried away, live performance is intangible and ephemeral, which introduces more questions about its nature as a commodity.<sup>136</sup> Early blues in tented and vaudeville shows paid performers wages for the time they were on tour according to a theatrical production model. For owners and producers, ticket sales generated profits after costs were covered, including performers’ wages.<sup>137</sup> Theater owners also signed contracts with performers, paying them according to the length of the engagement.<sup>138</sup> But other venues for blues raise more complicated questions. Musicians are paid to entertain at picnics, jukes, private gatherings, bars, and clubs in cash, food, and alcohol. Is this payment in money and barter based on the number of hours spent performing? What about the time spent traveling to the venue or learning new songs? Or the years learning and practicing? Or the investments in instruments and clothes? Does the number of people in attendance affect the pay? If so, does this mean that musicians are being paid as part of a marketing strategy, for example, as in a bar or restaurant?<sup>139</sup> Perhaps the most perplexing questions are posed by the musician busking on the street, like B. B. King in his early days in Indianola, Mississippi. Clearly, the people giving him money are not paying for his “time” on the corner. Are they paying for a specific song, as King asserts?<sup>140</sup> Or are they expressing appreciation and gratitude? The same questions could be asked about tips: are they “payment” or are they “gifts”?

As I outlined above, in the ante- and postbellum worlds that shaped the creation of the blues, sophisticated credit instruments coexist with barter, trade, and forced labor. For the African American population on whom debt



is imposed through the mechanisms of capitalism, creating music represents an act that resists complete reabsorption by the economic system. In some respects, it is not surprising that the economic theory of the dominant culture cannot fully capture something produced by the subordinate group victimized by the system. But viewing music as part of a gift economy offers a fresh perspective on African American vernacular music's ability to interrupt commodification under capitalism.

Rather than being based on the exchange of commodities, gift economies are total social systems predicated on cycles of giving and receiving. Instead of accumulation, the system values honor and morality, generating displays of "generosity, freedom, and autonomous action."<sup>141</sup> More importantly, in gift economies ownership is temporary, for it carries the moral obligation to pay the gift forward.<sup>142</sup> The concept of temporary ownership provides an alternative understanding of how ownership functions in the blues and why copyright is problematic. According to the gift logic, blues musicians "own" their songs in the sense that they borrow parts of an ongoing tradition to create them. The "works" belong to the musicians consistent with a temporary sense of possession: the "songs" represent part of a communal culture that circulates through individual performances. The musician "gives" songs both to those present for live performance but also to the community as a whole. The process of performing preserves and "restocks" the tradition. Consistent with a folk conception, the recycling and reworking of commonly held material creates temporary possession and "ownership" that ultimately returns back to a communal form.<sup>143</sup> The audience, in turn, "gives" tribute to the musicians in the form of food, drink, money, and praise. Seen from this angle, money is no longer remuneration for a commodity but part of a gift exchange among members of a community.

Elusive properties of the blues defy complete containment in ownership relations structured by capitalism. Having been victim to a regime organized around property ownership, it is no wonder that the artistic form of expression that best represents the perspective of the exploited eludes being fully contained within relations shaped by capitalism. Performances may be commodified in a variety of ways, but aspects of musical performance defy the logic of commodity culture, particularly around notions of originality and creativity. Print and recording technology can render the blues tangible, available for copyright, sale, and dissemination, but these forms represent only a partial reabsorption of the blues by capitalism. As Suisman argues, the simultaneous iterations of music in multiple forms "as sound, as object, as performance, as composition . . . are intricately interrelated, but each also has its own dynamics,



its own economy.”<sup>144</sup> In the case of the blues, these different economies interact to resist the logic of complete commodification. Creative artistry generates a dialectical movement, continually drawing commodified elements back into a logic and practice of musical performance resistant to commodity culture.

Despite new modes of commodification today, when blues music is most often experienced as CDs, MP3s, and on YouTube, Spotify, SiriusXM, and the like, the force of live performance continues to drive what is mediated by these forms.<sup>145</sup> Even recorded music made in a studio often captures the spontaneity characteristic of live performance, exhibiting features shaped by both economic and aesthetic considerations. Acoustic and electric recording on 78s prior to the Depression featured musicians from live traditions, both rural and “professional,” with little studio experience. Lack of investment in multiple takes or in rehearsal time on the part of record companies led to products that retain a sense of immediacy and spontaneity. Constraints posed by technology and the performers’ lack of familiarity with it, as well as a desire to keep costs low on the part of the labels, resulted in releases with audible mistakes. In the end, live performance traditions mediated by a racialized economy driven by a profit motive resulted in a fixed product that nonetheless manages to seem unfinished. The early race records reflect this confluence of aesthetic and economic factors that yielded an unusual commercial product capturing aspects of its production process.

The post-World War II recordings from Chicago also reflect to a great degree the dynamics of creative performance practice, in part due to a continuity of circumstance. Despite improved recording technology and some experimentation with recording techniques, musicians continue to perform in the studio much as they would live, without a lot of rehearsal. Of course, not all recordings capture the energy and vitality of live performance. There are plenty of uninspired, lifeless incarnations of the blues recorded in the studio, but there are also recordings that seem to capture the raw energy and unpredictability of a living tradition. A good example from the late Chicago period is Sonny Boy Williamson II’s “Nine Below Zero” (1962) for its preservation of the feeling of being almost out of control that characterizes live blues.<sup>146</sup> The recording may have benefited from Leonard Chess’s experimentation with “idiosyncratic recording techniques.” As Robert Palmer documents, Chess used “the studio’s tile bathroom as a resonating chamber for guitar amps, mixing directly miked amplifier and room ambience with artificial reverb, and recording both guitar and lead vocal ‘hot’—so close to the upper end of the VU meter that the very loudest notes pushed the needle just a shade into the red. The records created in this way jumped out at you.”<sup>147</sup> These

techniques enhanced the “live” sounds of Chess recordings. In the case of “Nine Below Zero,” the combination of the half-spoken, half-sung vocal that creates a sense of intimacy and direct address to the audience, and the subtle, unpredictable interweaving of the lines of the guitars and harmonica makes the cut feel unstable and the performance unrepeatably. Rather than being staid or restrained for the purposes of recording, the performance sounds like it was captured for posterity, only repeatable on a turntable. Against the steady, insistent, heavy rhythm provided by the bass and drums, the vocal lags behind the beat, in no particular hurry to recount the story of betrayal at the hands of a cruel woman. Liberal use of bent notes in the harmonica’s and guitars’ responses to the vocal reinforces the feeling of insistent individuality and creativity within the track. The idiosyncratic, specific lyrics—that a woman would wait until it got to be nine degrees below zero to abandon one lover for another—contribute to the intimacy by forging a connection to the audience. In the context of a harsh Chicago winter, being “put down for another man,” after having handed over “all of [his] money,” resonates with the familiar predicament of eviction.

The energy of the track derives in large part from the relationship between the harmonica, guitars, and at times piano playing against one another in unsynchronized yet complementary lines. While it is obviously a finished product recorded on a Checker single, it retains a feeling of process, of instruments and vocal working out a relationship in tension and contradiction. The tale of betrayal and abandonment in the dead of a Chicago winter feels tense and ongoing, rather than over and done, enabling the audience to relive with the narrator the pain of the event. While the single was produced as part of a market culture, the “finished” product feels unfinished and still in process, paradoxically creating a pocket of resistance to commodified culture. No matter the medium, the recorded sounds manage to evoke the dynamism and process of live blues, somehow pushing back against the fixity of confinement in a commodified form.

With advances in digital technology, recording the blues continues to present challenges to mainstream practices of commodification. Isolating tracks, overdubbing, using auto-tune to correct pitch, editing to move beats or replace single notes or even passages from other takes, as well as all the infinite possibilities offered by digital mixing and mastering, work to efface the traces of process in the finished recorded product. The music industry’s drive for perfection in the studio—conceived not only as error-free performance but also as recordings captured without “bleed” from one microphone to another (e.g., the sound of the guitar being recorded along with the vocal

on the vocal mike) and created in the confines of an acoustically dead space—runs counter to the desirability of a feeling of process and dynamism in the blues. Overdubbing of vocals or solos removes the possibility for spontaneous response from the other performers. Laying down the rhythm tracks separately eliminates the opportunities for filling and playing in response to the rest of the group. Ensuring that there is no microphone bleed creates an artificial sense of acoustic space that separates and refines what should be an almost competing interaction among sounds. These studio techniques that produce “clean” sound detract from and can even destroy the dynamic tension of the blues.<sup>148</sup> Capturing the free-flowing yet structured conversation aspect of the blues requires resisting the impulse toward “perfection” so prevalent in other genres. Against the pressures of the mainstream recording industry, many blues artists in a niche market attempt to create recorded sounds that retain a feeling of process as well as living breathing space.

Of course, live performance still represents the most significant source of revenue to artists, meaning that commodification in fixed form exists alongside something that incorporates elements of a gift economy. Bars, clubs, theaters, festivals, and other venues enable interaction between performers and audience, staging a process that partakes of aspects of folk music. Some artists choose to record these performances. But even when they turn to the studio, many capture sounds that retain a feeling of the live setting’s spontaneity, immediacy, and responsiveness. Appealing to an audience far removed from the Jim Crow regime, blues music today lies outside mainstream trends in the commodification of music, perhaps tapping a history of resistance to economic domination. In particular, the blues draws our attention to the ways a commodity culture, by overemphasizing the product, loses sight of the process. Whether it is creating music or producing a crop, focus on the finished product tends to enable the obscuring and submerging of exploitation and injustice beneath the calculation of profits.

## CHAPTER 4

# From Debt to Redemption

Re, re, re, re, re, re, re, respect

—Aretha Franklin, “Respect”

The blues reflects the history of racialized economic domination. Under cover of the representation of romantic relations, the blues directly and indirectly calls out the use of debt to dominate and exploit in bound labor regimes of sharecropping and tenancy, house contract sales, installment purchases, convict lease, and criminal-surety arrangements. The commodification of the blues mirrors this manipulation of debt, as an African American aesthetic process is mediated by the dominant white culture to create a product for sale in ways that also enable exploitation. In all these scenarios, debt functions to hold people in check, binding them to obligations to payback that foreclose possibilities for agency in the present and future. The discourse of balance-sheet accounting establishes the conditions for creating, maintaining, and perpetuating gross inequities, not only of wealth but of social and political capital as well. On my reading, the blues gives voice to an African American perspective that exposes racialized debt but, more fundamentally, flips the script to expose what the supposed debtors are owed. In other words, tracing the history of the weaponization of debt as it is recorded in the blues—in its content, form, and modes of commodification—reveals a call for a reckoning.

If an accounting were to occur, if overdue debts could be paid, what would redemption look like? As Tim Armstrong argues from the perspective of slavery, the “notion of ‘debt’ necessarily imposes a plot in which redemption

and justice are deferred.”<sup>1</sup> Debt projects repayment into the future, positing a moment when the equilibrium between debits and credits on the balance sheet will be restored. Redemption is a particularly apt word for this reckoning because of its economic and spiritual resonances. Redemption denotes paying something in full and thereby (re)claiming ownership, such as redeeming an item from the pawnbroker or paying off a mortgage before the end of the term. For enslaved people who purchased themselves, redemption meant paying a sum of money to attain freedom, conflating economic, social, and moral meanings of the word. But redemption also refers to spiritual salvation, whereby acts of atonement lead to deliverance from sin. From the perspective of the blues, the possibility for redemption requires first laying bare the truth, exposing the injustices of the present situation. Reckoning can only be imagined after the truth is told.

## Truth-Telling

As we have seen, a great many blues lyrics call out wrongs committed, often coding financial and economic injustice as romantic treachery and betrayal. The songs frequently stage a moment of discovery that marks a turning point between a past marked by abuse and a future in which, at the very least, the narrator will no longer be naive. But, as we have seen, agency is problematic for those ensnared within systems of economic, legal, political, and social relations that foreclose possibilities for action. In many blues, the discovery of betrayal does not lead to direct action. Although there are songs that depict violent revenge fantasies, such as Robert Johnson’s “32-20 Blues” (1937),<sup>2</sup> and Memphis Slim and Big Bill Broonzy maintain that the blues amounts to a sublimated form of revenge on the boss man,<sup>3</sup> most songs model resignation as a self-protective response to the discovery of abuse. The frequent blues image “Had to fold my arms and slowly walk away,” communicates self-control rather than direct action in the face of difficult situations.<sup>4</sup> As a strategy, resignation and self-restraint are not only self-protective but also signs of moral integrity in the refusal to reciprocate abuse with abuse, violence with violence.<sup>5</sup> Folding one’s arms and walking away or, more broadly, passive resignation and moving on with a belief that things will improve, disrupts the cycle of violence and uncouples justice from revenge.

Big Bill Broonzy’s “Baby, I Done Got Wise” (1939) exemplifies the tendency in the blues to emphasize the narrator’s coming-to-awareness and passivity in response to the discovery of mistreatment.<sup>6</sup> The refrain “I done got wise,

oh, to the way these women do / Yeah, you've been tryin' to trick me, baby, now the trick's done turned on you" (and its variants), strategically employs a passive voice verb, *done turned*, to signal payback. Resonating with "turning tricks"—suggesting possible betrayal through prostitution—the narrator's use of *done turned* creates uncertainty around the cause of the twist of fate. While clearly not the Black eschatology found in spirituals, in "Baby, I Done Got Wise," as in many blues, a belief in a movement toward justice of some kind is expressed.<sup>7</sup>

Most exemplary of this kind of faith in eventual justice is Bobby "Blue" Bland's "Farther Up the Road" (1957).<sup>8</sup> Recorded three years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, during a period of national reckoning around segregation, including violent backlash from white supremacists, the song's message highlights the ongoing significance of belief in a better future achieved without taking direct action. Employing the blues version of the Pauline warning in Galatians in its second verse, the song makes worldly and concrete the reversal of fortune that awaits those who behave badly. Introduced by syncopated, staccato, seventh chords on piano, the opening saxophone riff establishes a sonic echo of the theme of reversal, repeating three times the musical embodiment of the song's sentiment. Performed in F, the descending line opens on the flatted fifth (C-flat / B) as a pickup and descends through the fourth and minor third to the tonic in a triplet, before pulling back up to the minor third (A-flat), enacting the beginning of a recovery after a fall. The music lightheartedly descends and then begins to ascend, holding the first note of the ascension, the minor third, for a full beat. The last iteration of the riff creates a *rallentando* after the triplet, with eighth notes on the minor third followed by a quarter note, this time on the tonic. Set in opposition to the preceding triplet feel, the even repetition of the minor third emphatically introduces the tonic's articulation. The strong statement of musical resolution produces a kind of immediate satisfaction before the entrance of the vocal and hints at the possibility of satisfactory resolution in general.

The lyrics metaphorize time into space, employing the image of the road to deliver a message about future payback: "Further on up the road, someone's gonna hurt you like you hurt me [2x] / Further on up the road, baby, you just wait and see." Articulated as both a threat and a warning, the phrases also function as self-reassurance for the injured party that "what goes around comes around," that those who cause suffering will suffer. The second verse explicitly invokes the Pauline formulation but replaces the future tense with the modal: "You *got* to reap just what you sow, that old saying is true [2x] / Like you mistreat someone, someone's gonna mistreat you." *Got* as opposed

to *gonna* in the A lines underscores the necessity of payback. *That old saying* may be true, but the force of “for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,” absent the introductory “Be not deceived; God is not mocked” (Galatians 6:7), lacks the force of religious certainty grounded in faith in an omnipotent deity: this is a secular pronouncement about terrestrial justice. Moreover, the couplet is ambiguously addressed to *you*: either the one who has hurt him or an audience of listeners. The ambiguity of the *you* weakens the third-person warning of biblical language, creating an ambivalent pronouncement either addressed to an audience or to the mistreating lover or even to the self. Together, the use of the modal and the ambiguous form of address allow some degree of doubt to creep into the righteousness and certitude of the biblical pronouncement. The necessity expressed in *got* insists that those who mistreat others must surely be mistreated in turn. This is neither revenge nor a call to action but rather the articulation of the idea that “I have to believe that there is justice in this world.”

The metaphor of the road enables a gesture toward the future without any specificity, simply “what lies ahead.” Indeed, although there is an implied causal connection between mistreating people and being mistreated in turn, that connection is weakened by the image of the road that enables a vague projection forward. There is a strong implication that actions have consequences, but there are no specifics about how or when this form of justice will play out. Instead, the spatialization of time enables the tenuous link between past, present, and future to be smoothed over in the metaphor of the road. In other words, any doubts about eventual payback for past actions occurring “on the road ahead” are quelled by the image of extension and continuity. We may imagine that the road offers hazards and obstacles, but we also see the inevitability of moving forward. As a metaphor for making one’s way through life, the road allows for imagining payback sometime, somewhere up ahead, but without recourse to metaphysics or transcendence.<sup>9</sup>

The lack of specificity or agency in the articulation of faith in payback reflects what theologian James H. Cone has characterized as a “view of the world” in which “God is irrelevant” in the blues. He asserts that “this is not atheism; rather it is believing that *transcendence* will only be meaningful when it is made real in and through the limits of historical experience.”<sup>10</sup> Although Cone perceives a social and communal message of collective justice in the blues, I think it is important to differentiate between what is explicitly articulated in the songs and what may be perceived by an audience in reception.<sup>11</sup> In Bland’s “Farther Up the Road,” the final verse imagines the ultimate quid pro quo for the narrator: his lover will feel as badly as he currently does: “Further

on up the road, when you're all alone and blue [2x] / You're gonna ask me to take you back, baby, but I'll have somebody new." The narrator projects a scenario in the future, beyond the narrator's control, in which the mistreating lover will suffer the way he currently does. As a revenge fantasy, it is specific to the individual: the narrator's current pain will be avenged. Addressed to an audience of listeners, the message likely resonates, creating the possibility of collective recognition.<sup>12</sup> In other words, although articulated as the revenge of an individual, the shared desire for justice has the potential in reception to transform the message into a collective one: a listening audience may be shaped into a community by tapping into shared feelings. Belief in an eventual justice to come potentially provides both reassurance and empowerment with respect to interpersonal relations as well as social, economic, and political ones.<sup>13</sup>

Bland's performance of "Farther Up the Road" sublimates control, mastery, and agency into artistry. A feeling of decisive action resides in the vocal delivery. Bland's acrobatics—with expert phrasing, melisma, vibrato, and what can only be described as embedded ornamentation in the execution of some passages—act in concert with the spoken warning at the end of the song, "you'll get yours," to communicate a sense of definitive justice. From the opening frame with the saxophone riff to the dramatic instrumental fills that punctuate the vocal performance (e.g., the emphatic series of triplets after the last verse) and the deliberately moderate tempo, the musical contextualization functions as a supportive and enabling structure for the powerful vocal performance.<sup>14</sup> All these elements communicate control against the lyrical message that eschews decisive action. Even the expertly executed guitar solo by Pat Hare serves as a foil to Bland's vocal responses. Bland's highly unusual use of vocal response to the guitar solo functions as testimony to his inventive performance style and agency. The entire musical setting, from the repeated saxophone figure resolving on the tonic before the entrance of the vocal through to Bland's trading of figures with the saxophone at the end, frames Bland's masterful vocal as a gem. This setting boosts the feeling of mastery and certainty, which reinforces the message of faith in worldly justice articulated in the lyrics.

Recorded in 1957, the song earned national recognition for Bland. Bland's biographer, Charles Farley, writes, "It became Bobby's first national hit, and a huge one at that, peaking at number 1 on the R&B chart, staying on the chart for fourteen weeks, and crossing over to number 43 on the pop chart."<sup>15</sup> More significant than the limited crossover appeal of "Farther Up the Road," Bland maintained popularity within a predominantly Black audience, even



throughout the 1960s when, in the context of the civil rights era, many African American listeners abandoned blues in favor of soul and R&B. His enduring popularity with Black audiences (as well as B. B. King's, Albert King's, Freddie King's, and Ray Charles's), for critic Charles Keil, is as much due to his stylistic proximity to soul and R&B as to the message his music communicates to an urban audience: "An urban bluesman senses a broader and deeper obligation to the community or, rather, to Negro communities across the country. . . . Individual catharsis is still a *sine qua non* to successful performance, but in an anomic, bewildering urban situation, characterized by shifting values and interpersonal conflicts, people expect something more than a personal lament from a singer. He must not only state common problems clearly and concisely but must in some sense take steps toward their analysis and solution."<sup>16</sup> Bland's performance of "Farther Up the Road" provides a clear articulation of a need for justice, as well as a strategy of self-restraint and sublimated agency for those subjected to mistreatment of various kinds. The reversal of fortune promised in the lyrics both consoles and supports those who have suffered—economically, socially, politically, and personally—in the belief that some form of justice lies ahead.

This response to a communal need for secular faith in a justice to come provides what Cone identifies in the blues as a nonreligious form of transcendence for the community:

Underneath the despair there is also a firm hope in the possibility of black people's survival despite their extreme situation of oppression. . . . The hope of the blues is grounded in the historical reality of the black experience. The blues express a belief that one day things will not be like what they are today. This is why buses, railways, and trains are important images in the blues. Each symbolizes motion and the possibility of leaving the harsh realities of an oppressive environment. . . . The blues emphasize movement, the possibility of changing the present reality of suffering.<sup>17</sup>

Cone's highlighting of the multiple references to mobility in the blues coincides with the road metaphor in "Farther Up the Road." While I argued in chapter 2 that mobility cannot be reduced to a wholly positive value in the context of the blues, nonetheless Cone's assertion of the significance of unidirectional movement forward as an expression of hope in the blues, against critics who would argue otherwise, is consistent with the possibility of a social and communal reception that finds solace in pronouncements about eventual justice.

If the blues constructs a worldview that gestures toward a justice to come but advises self-restraint and models the sublimation of frustration and anger into productive (artistic) work, how do we imagine that the wrongs will be righted? How will accounts be settled? The wrongs exist on multiple levels. Within the songs, as we have seen, most often they are figured in interpersonal relations of cheating, lying, and betrayal. The interpersonal (often sexual, but also financial) cheating and lying represent multiple forms of economic, social, and political betrayal. In other words, returning to my overarching metaphor for the book, and echoing Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous declaration, there are many debts that are long overdue.<sup>18</sup> The issues of accounting and settling loom large.

I turn to a song by Aron Burton to explore what justice might look like. Burton, a “singer, bass player, songwriter and arranger,” is part of a second generation of Chicago blues players originally from Mississippi who worked alongside many of the West Side greats.<sup>19</sup> “Garbage Man” (1987) features Champion Jack Dupree on piano, backed by a group of Danish musicians. The song functions as a kind of homage to the garbage man, characterized as a great equalizer who makes the truth appear. The themes of cheating and lying appear in the song, exposed by the truths that garbage and, therefore, the garbage man hold. In other words, “wrongs,” in the form of misrepresentations and even flat-out lies, are “righted” as the truth comes out in the trash. In this respect, the roles of the garbage man and blues singer converge: both speak a kind of truth based on individual experience that nonetheless resonates because of its universality.<sup>20</sup>

The second verse declares:

I don't care what you say you drink, champagne and all the best  
When you dump your empties, where do they go to rest?  
Garbage man, to the garbage man, everyone seem to underestimate  
that garbage man  
If you just want to know where a one stand, ask his garbage man

Lies about social standing, and especially pretensions about economic superiority represented by the champagne, are revealed by the “empties” collected in the garbage. Unmasking the lies of social inequality by bringing the truth to light—a goal that aligns with undercutting various forms of racialized inequality—represents one form of justice in the song. Along with the desire to unmask the “truth” by exposing false claims of superiority, the refrain also asserts the necessity of reversing social hierarchies. In elevating the status

of the garbage man, the lyrics praise the one who has access to the truth and, by extension, a kind of hidden power over everyone. “Underestimating” the garbage man becomes an error committed by many in overlooking, ignoring, or being blind to the power of those who have intimate knowledge of truths often kept private.

As an extension and transformation of a historical role, the garbage man inhabits a position similar to numerous subordinate positions occupied by African Americans over time: house slave, domestic servant, chauffeur, overseer, mammy, nanny, housekeeper, et cetera. In a racialized incarnation of what Erving Goffman calls a “service specialist” role, these individuals have access to information often kept hidden from others.<sup>21</sup> These positions are shaped by the contradictions and paradoxes necessary for maintaining a system of racialized domination based on an ideology of white supremacy. Promoting and encouraging closeness and intimacy while at the same time demanding distance and maintaining difference, these roles present significant moral challenges and require living with contradictions for those on both sides of the racialized hierarchical divide. Subordinates with intimate knowledge of those in power are torn between allegiance to them, and all it affords, and loyalty to those in less fortunate positions. In other words, for those in liminal positions, identifying with the powerful often bestows benefits that in turn require ignoring the predicament of others—family members and friends—who do not have similar access. In the case of women, the long history of sexual abuse and rape by white masters, landlords, and heads of household, further problematizes the kind of “privilege” proximity might enable, highlighting the vulnerability of those with access to the white, private, domestic sphere.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, a closer, more intimate relation to those in power is a double-edged sword: it can provide a kind of protection, but it also presents greater risks of being subjected to that power. From the perspective of the “truth” referenced in Burton’s song, those who occupy positions that bring them into closer orbit with those in power gain access to information (and proof of it) capable of exposing the lies and betrayals that enable social, economic, and interpersonal forms of domination. In this respect, the garbage man represents a historical avatar of the earlier fraught and vulnerable positions, now shielded and protected by a public service occupation. The garbage man gains access to the secrets of the household without losing the protection of the “distance” afforded by his sanitation job. Access to household secrets uncovers not only interpersonal lies but, by extension, the pretenses and lies that enable social, political, and economic hierarchy. The lowly garbage man may occupy a subordinate social and class position, but he gains

power through a form of knowledge that does not require risking his personal safety or economic livelihood.

In Burton's evocation of the garbage man, there is also a kind of settling of accounts. Although Burton may not be deploying the slang expression, Henry Townsend, the bluesman from St. Louis who worked for a store in the late 1950s, makes the resonance clear when he explains that he "started off . . . collecting debts—that's what you call a garbage man."<sup>23</sup> The garbage settles accounts on a number of levels. In the verse following the piano solo by Dupree, the lyrics compare information about social standing held by neighbors and tax collectors to what the garbage man knows: "No need to ask your neighbor or the tax collectors, too / If anything goin' down, he got the goods on you." In this verse, the garbage becomes a kind of evidence that can be used to hold people "accountable." The garbage man derives power from not only his knowledge of what's "goin' down" but also his collection of the evidence of such deeds. As a kind of threat, the garbage man's power can overturn false perceptions and unmask lies by setting the record straight.

The use of the second-person form of address in the song frames the discourse as a general indictment. As the *I* speaks from the perspective of the garbage man, the audience is positioned as the second person in the dialogue, guilty of misrepresenting social and class status. The *everyone* of the refrain explicitly enlarges the group to include all listeners, save garbage men, in its admonishment and reminder of the garbage man's "privileged" access to information.

The following verse introduces the theme of death as the great equalizer with the help of a slight variation in the lyrics. Drawing a direct parallel between the position of the garbage man and the undertaker, Burton sings, "Don't care what you say you drink, champagne and all the best / But when you dump your ashes, baby, where do they go to rest?" The shift from *empties* to *ashes* invites the comparison between the final resting place of garbage and of human bodies. The use of *ashes*, although commonly used for garbage, also invokes death and perhaps final judgment, and it serves as a reminder that we're all headed to the same place. Here, the second-person address enhanced by *baby* renders the line more accusatory than the previous second-person declarations. Seemingly addressed to one specific individual, the line warns against attempting to hide the truth. In the final accounting, here a very secular and worldly accounting, the truth about deeds, actions, and material consequences will enable a reckoning of sorts.<sup>24</sup> Lies and deceit, and especially actions aimed at bolstering racialized social and economic inequality, will be measured and accounted for. "Where a one stands" after death will be

a matter for the living to determine based on actions, deeds, and their consequences. As the great equalizer, the invocation of death in the song gestures toward a secular form of Last Judgment, in which those empowered through cheating and lying will ultimately be forced to face the “truth.” As a form of justice, truth will hold people accountable.

Like the projected reversal of fortune in “Farther Up the Road,” the outing of the truth in “Garbage Man” provides some satisfaction. Similar to the form of hope W. E. B. Du Bois located in spirituals, this secular affirmation places faith in the human capacity to recognize truth.<sup>25</sup> This may not be a form of justice that ultimately settles the long-overdue debts, but it is a crucial first step in recognizing racial inequality and its myriad abuses. Unmasking the truth begins the process of reckoning that could and should lead to redemption.<sup>26</sup> But even from Bland’s and Burton’s perspectives in the late 1950s and 1980s, respectively, repayment is projected in the future, when a kind of equilibrium on the balance sheet will ultimately be restored. This representation of justice depends on an underlying timeline, a sense of history that enables the projection of future reckoning. My use of the word *redemption* is intended to underscore not only the multiple levels on which this accounting ought to occur but also its attendant conception of history.

## Past, Present, Future

Redemption for racialized injustice implies a redress of history, not only for actions in the past but also for their ongoing effects. As the epigraph to this chapter from the Queen of Soul hints, the words that we use to invoke the process of righting historical wrongs all begin with the prefix *re*. The *OED* indicates that the prefix, derived from Latin and Romance languages, generally means “back” or “again,” two distinct yet overlapping meanings. Although the varieties of usage of the prefix *re* are “practically infinite,” nonetheless three general classes are discernable: (1) prefixes “to ordinary verbs of action (chiefly transitive) and to derivatives from these, sometimes denoting that the action itself is performed a second time, and sometimes that its result is to reverse a previous action or process, or to restore a previous state of things,” as in *redo* and *remake*; (2) prefixes “to verbs and nouns which denote ‘making (of a certain kind or quality),’ ‘turning or converting into,’” as in *recycle* and *revitalize*; and (3) prefixes “to verbs and nouns which denote fitting, equipping, supplying, or treating with something,” as in *restore* and *resource*.<sup>27</sup> In the context of race relations, with words like *redemption*, *reconstruction*, *reconciliation*,

or *reparations*, to name a few, the prefix *re* in and of itself is fascinating for the ambiguity of its meaning: “again” or “back.” Are we going back to repair what was broken? Are we going back to start anew? And/or are we doing something again with a view toward getting it right the second, third, or hundredth time? The ambiguity resembles the shifting meaning of the word *revolution*, which up until the French Revolution of 1789 generally meant to repeat, as in *revolve* around or *retrace* the same path, but which after that specific revolution signaled a radical break or rupture with the past.<sup>28</sup>

As in the case of the French Revolution, the form of the words that we use reflects a fundamental ambiguity concerning our view of history. Are we doomed to repeat the past even as we go back and try to correct it, or do we create breaks with the past in our efforts to repair? Moreover, do breaks always signal discontinuity? The musical meaning of the term break refers to sections of music that are stripped down to the rhythmic essentials, often laying bare the bass and drum parts as the treble voices cease playing. In the context of soul, R&B, jazz, funk, rap, and much less often blues, breaks lay bare the foundation by exposing the rhythmic structure of a song. They enable the sensation of stopping amid movement. They create the illusion of rupture while being founded on continuity.<sup>29</sup> Stripping the treble and midrange voices away makes the audience feel as though the music ceases, because melody essentially stops, but the rhythmic pulse or groove continues beating, as does the basic structure of the song in the bass tonalities. Hip-hop’s use of the break in the creation of flow out of rupture, to use Tricia Rose’s terms, enhances our perception of the fundamental paradox of simultaneous continuity and discontinuity.<sup>30</sup> In the musical device of the break, aesthetic form renders palpable the tensions and contradictions of our uses of the prefix *re*, especially in those situations in which *re* simultaneously evokes both going back over the same but also fundamentally changing—repeating the past and breaking with it. Could efforts like redemption or reparation, like “the break,” signal both continuity and rupture?

## Repetition and History in the Blues

Within the blues aesthetic, repetition is foundational. The twelve- (or other number) bar progression, the AA'B lyric pattern, the citation of traditional lyrical phrases and couplets, the borrowing of riffs and licks—all these formal elements of the blues rely on repetition. But repetition in the blues aesthetic is not verbatim; creative expression depends on variation.<sup>31</sup> Blues songs are

born through relationships of filiation with other songs from which they recycle and repeat elements, but not exactly. Like a giant family tree, blues songs constitute a web of generic/genetic resemblance through the deft deployment of repetition with variation.<sup>32</sup> Knowledgeable listeners recognize familiar patterns, structures, and articulations at the same time that they delight in new formulations and expressions. The dialectic between old and new, repetition and variation, is essential to the blues aesthetic both from the standpoint of the listeners' appreciation and the artists' creative activity.

Repetition in the context of aesthetic pleasure can be soothing and comforting, offering reassurance through familiar forms of perception.<sup>33</sup> A recognizable opening riff or lyric couplet, even with its own innovative twist, often evokes excited applause and cries of affirmation from the audience. Listeners appreciate the repetition of familiar patterns and respond in a positive way. But repetition can also be soul-crushing and mind-numbing. In the context of manual labor or other harsh working conditions, such as under convict lease, repetition is dispiriting and dehumanizing, in part because of the lack of variation in the gestures and movements. Chopping and picking cotton, clearing lumber, toting bales, sweeping a factory floor, and collecting garbage, involve tedious forms of repetition that are deeply dissatisfying, even toxic and obliterating, precisely because of their repetitiveness. Lack of appropriate remuneration also makes imagining escape from present circumstances nearly impossible. The repeated gestures of manual labor foreclose envisioning future upward socioeconomic mobility. Instead, repetition reinforces the feeling of being stuck through the reenactment of the same gestures. Ultimately, repetition traps the subject performing the labor in the present moment. As I argued in *Time in the Blues*, the cyclical and repetitive experience of time produced by these forms of labor—without the possibility of projecting either a near- or long-term future and without a meaningful connection to the past—contributed to the aesthetic form of the blues. In the repeated cycle of chord changes, verse repetitions, and recycling of couplets, melodies, and riffs, we can hear the echo of an experience of time shaped by labor conditions in the Jim Crow South that all too often resonated in the industrial North. The endless repetition of labor shaped an aesthetic form that is both founded on repetition and also deeply celebratory of the present moment.<sup>34</sup>

Repetition in the blues is Janus-faced: pleasurable and painful, a source of reassurance and delight, but also a reminder of suffering and pain, all channeled into a cathartic form.<sup>35</sup> The paradox of repetition in the blues—the same but different—structures an experience of time that is also fundamentally ambiguous and paradoxical. The blues celebrates the present moment



through an aesthetic that privileges immediacy and spontaneity, but by means of citation. In other words, dwelling resolutely in the present paradoxically requires repetition of the past, not only through borrowings from other songs but in the very musical form itself, which ceaselessly repeats the same articulations with minor changes. In this respect, the sense of time in the blues is both repetitive and forward moving, bringing together two opposed models. Time is often conceived as a cyclical phenomenon involving repetition—days, seasons, years—or as a stream that flows in one direction.<sup>36</sup> Within the form of the blues, the simultaneous existence of both the circle and the arrow of time harnesses the dialectical power of this opposition to full effect.<sup>37</sup>

The paradoxical conception of time in the blues implies a parallel perspective on history. If time is simultaneously cyclical and unidirectional, repetitive and forward moving, then history may also be understood in these paradoxical ways. Against the Western historical narrative of teleological progress dominant since the Enlightenment, time in the blues pushes back by demonstrating the fundamental interdependence of the arrow and the circle. Extrapolating from the temporal structure of the blues to construct a narrative of history, rather than a teleological one, the blues produces a narrative mode with dynamic conflict, a result of the simultaneity of competing notions of time. Rather than a two-dimensional arrow or circle, one must imagine a three-dimensional echo chamber, where the sounds of past and future times reverberate in the present moment. As Walter Johnson has argued with respect to the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in America, and as Jean and John L. Comaroff have highlighted in postcolonial situations, contexts of struggle and contention produce conflicting narrative modes of understanding and, therewith, conflicting senses of time.<sup>38</sup> Against the authority of the narrative of progress of the dominant (white) culture, subordinate groups call into question the linear trajectory, bringing to bear conceptions of temporality shaped by lived experiences of oppression, subjugation, and exploitation.<sup>39</sup> The blues, as an aesthetic form shaped by forces of domination, bears the marks of such a contestation over the perception of time and history, necessitating a new imagining of both. In particular, the importance of repetition in the blues asserts a message about continuity despite change over time, particularly with respect to forms of domination. As an archive created over decades, the blues delivers a remarkably consistent message about a fundamental lack of change in racialized economic relations of exploitation.

Although the blues creates a sense of musical development or progress by building up tension and releasing it—a forward movement—at the same time, the music creates a cyclical movement, by repeating with variation both



within its own present articulation (chord progression, lyric structure, etc.) and from the past (citations from the tradition). In response to a linear, teleological view of time and history that changes as it moves forward, the blues counters with a structure that enacts forward development using repetition and cycles, making the present and future dependent on the past. Above all, the blues aesthetic form remains determinately in the present, but with reverberations of the past and hints of the future. Incorporating elements of the circle and the arrow of time, the blues offers a strategy for dwelling in the present in a way that is both conscious of the past and open to the future, but without fixing the meaning of either. By extension, the confluence of the circle and the arrow in the blues produces a view of history that echoes the overlapping and conflicting meanings of *re*: back and again. Ultimately, there is a fundamental undecidability inscribed in the blues precisely around the sense of time and history. Unable to project a future and working with and through citation to both repeat and change the past, the blues enacts both meanings of *re*—retracing the same steps and changing course—from a perspective firmly grounded in the present.

## Reconstruction and Redemption

The view of history that I am deriving from the temporal perspective of the blues admits both cyclical and unidirectional conceptions of movement and also forecloses significant projection either backward to the past or forward to the future. The blues view of history opens up new possibilities for understanding the *re* in words associated with the redress of racialized forms of domination, exploitation, and subjugation. Parallel to the understanding of the break in music, interpreting *re* requires holding open the possibility for multiple meanings: back and again, continuity and rupture, stopping and moving, returning, redoing, and remaking. Consistent with my argument in the previous chapter, the blues as process rather than product encompasses conflicting temporal perspectives and represents struggles over a conception of history.

In order to understand the implications of the “blues view of history” for efforts at redressing racialized injustice, it is important to recall some of the uses of *re* words, and especially those used as historical markers. To begin with historical designations that predate the blues, both Reconstruction and Redemption signal post–Civil War efforts to come to terms with the past of slavery in starkly divergent ways. Reconstruction, as used by historians, denotes a period from roughly the Emancipation Proclamation (1 January

1863) until the withdrawal of federal troops from the South after the compromise election of Rutherford B. Hayes in March 1877.<sup>40</sup> At its most simplistic level, Reconstruction signaled bringing the states of the Confederacy back into the Union, implying politically reconstructing both the formerly rebellious states (i.e., drafting new constitutions) and the federal government. But this limited political meaning does not acknowledge the variety of struggles encompassed by the term. Beyond the political reformation of the states and the Union, what else was to be reconstructed? How was that reconstruction to be achieved? Rebuilding the formerly rebellious states required creating not only new political but also new social, economic, familial, gender, and, above all, racial relations.

As recent scholarship on Reconstruction in the wake of Eric Foner's pathbreaking *Reconstruction: American's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* has stressed, the era had far-reaching consequences for transforming and reforming the nation, an interpretation that leans toward the vectored as opposed to the cyclical vision of history.<sup>41</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage writes in the introduction to a volume of scholarship dedicated to the invocation of Reconstruction in subsequent periods of reform in American history, "The term suggested an intentional refashioning of the nation; it implied innovation, regeneration, rehabilitation, and reorganization. In a nation marked by a tradition of episodic, gradual, and piecemeal reform, Reconstruction stood out as a historical rupture when blacks experienced rapid and unprecedented empowerment, northerners exercised pervasive influence over southern institutions, southerners suffered a dramatic diminution of their power within the region and nation, and the southern economy experienced profound upheaval."<sup>42</sup> Brundage's description stresses break and rupture, particularly in the experience of the lives of the formerly enslaved, within a general framework of forward movement along a trajectory of progress. Clearly, the election of African Americans to government positions including the US Congress testifies to the unprecedented circumstances. But from the perspective of most African Americans in the rural South, life after the break represented by emancipation was nonetheless characterized by a high degree of continuity with the past. Within the rupture of the purported arrow, there were repetitive elements of the cycle. From stories of slaves not emancipated, to those who remained on plantations performing essentially the same work under the same conditions, to the enactment of Black Codes, to the reinstatement of forms of gang labor and eventually sharecropping, Reconstruction, for some, means *reform* in the sense of *form again* under a new guise rather than fundamentally change. W. E. B. Du Bois's chapter in *Black Reconstruction* titled "Looking Backward"

begins with this explanatory epigraph: “How the planters, having lost the war for slavery, sought to begin again where they left off in 1860, merely substituting for the individual ownership of slaves, a new state of serfdom of black folk.”<sup>43</sup> Intractable and entrenched patterns of white supremacy are difficult, even impossible, to eradicate through legislation. Moreover, the underfunded military occupation, including the Freedmen’s Bureau, could not bring about the kind of systemic change necessary for true reform in the sense of form anew in a fundamentally different way. Instead, Reconstruction seen from the bottom up more likely seemed like reconstructing—building again in a slightly divergent way—rather than razing and producing something profoundly different.

The designation *Redemption* for the backlash movement that brought white supremacist governments to power after Reconstruction reflects the perspective of those determined to “rescue” the South from northern interference and restore it to its former glory. As Nicholas Lemann writes, “The name implied a divine sanction for the retaking of the authority the whites had lost in the Civil War, and a heavenly quality to the reestablishment of white supremacy in the post-Reconstruction South. ‘Reconstruction,’ the North’s word, was sturdy, purposeful, and optimistic. ‘Redemption,’ the South’s, was empyrean.”<sup>44</sup> The diversity of the Redeemers’ makeup defies generalization; nonetheless, Foner asserts that “they shared . . . a commitment to dismantling the Reconstruction state, reducing the political power of blacks, and reshaping the South’s legal system in the interests of labor control and racial subordination.”<sup>45</sup> From the standpoint of history, Redemption signals a purposeful backward movement to restore, in the sense of “put back to the way it was before,” conditions in the South prior to the “disruptions” of the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction. As a perspective on history, it seems to desire to arrest movement toward one telos—full citizenship for the formerly enslaved—and reorient that movement. Informed by a backward glance, Redemption strives toward a “new” goal: restoring the labor conditions of slavery without reinstating slavery per se. As a historical (re)vision, it reorients the arrow in order to reaim the arc toward a revised telos. Not quite cyclical, it nonetheless imagines retracing steps in order to depart in a new/old direction.

The use of the word *redemption* also signals a quasi-religious meaning of cleansing the South of the sins of Reconstruction. Violence and vigilantism, including a dramatic increase in lynchings, accompanied Redemption in the form of the White Line, White Leagues, Ku Klux Klan, and other extralegal organizations that worked to suppress Black voting as well as forms of social

and economic mobility.<sup>46</sup> In a perverse adaptation of Christian imagery, the Southern states were cleansed in the blood of murdered African Americans in a violent purgative terror that helped usher in and accompanied Redemption.<sup>47</sup> In this religious connotation, Redemption invokes a view of history aimed at deliverance, but only for the select (read white Christian elite) few.

From the standpoint of economics, Redeemers worked to repudiate southern debt: “Enormous debts hung over most Southern states, debts that had accumulated since the antebellum years and that had been augmented by generous postwar deals handed out by state governments, Democrat and Republican, desperate to rebuild the South.”<sup>48</sup> The economic agenda of Redemption did not entail repaying debts but rather walking away from them in order to wipe clean past obligations with a view to building something “new” that largely remade the “old.” Unlike the socioeconomic and political agendas of Redemption that sought to restore, to the degree possible, conditions prior to the rupture represented by the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, repudiation of debt under Redemption created its own form of rupture by disavowing the past. Bringing together different views of history, Redeemers sought both to recreate the past, although in slightly altered form, and radically break with those parts of it that they found unacceptable, disagreeable, or inconvenient.

Most significantly for my interests, and consistent with the more repetitive patterns of history, the Redeemers restructured taxes so that “laborers, tenants, and small farmers paid taxes on virtually everything they owned—tools, mules, even furniture—while many planters had thousands of dollars in property excluded. . . . Thus, the tax system became increasingly regressive, as those with the least property bore the heaviest proportional burden.”<sup>49</sup> Imposing debt on the most vulnerable population post-slavery is a gesture that I have traced throughout the preceding chapters. Although the form of economic bondage is new for this particular population, the bondage itself is all too familiar. For those immobilized and essentially reenslaved by sharecropping, convict lease, and taxation, Redemption likely differed little from slavery, precisely because of the efforts to recreate the antebellum past in a new form.<sup>50</sup> In particular, the economic agenda of Redemption combines repudiation of debt with regressive taxation to free those currently encumbered by ongoing debt—planters and former enslavers—and create new conditions of bondage for the recently emancipated. Like Willie Brown’s narrator in “Future Blues” (1930), African Americans no doubt felt trapped in time: “Can’t tell my future, and I can’t tell my past / Lord, it seems like every minute, sure gonna be my last.”

Both Reconstruction and Redemption embody in concrete ways the paradoxical interconnection between the vectored and cyclical conceptions of time and history present in the blues. In their opposition to each other, both historical periods, and the socioeconomic and political efforts at reform they represent, underscore the complicated interpretations of time and history entailed by any efforts explicitly aimed at addressing the consequences of human actions in the past. These efforts at reforming, rebuilding, restructuring, and repair will always make the past palpable in the present, precisely because they return to the past in order to reorient the path leading to the future. As moments characterized by a self-awareness about efforts at intervention in history, they highlight the tension between *back* and *again* in the prefix *re*. Whether for progressive or regressive purposes, socioeconomic and political agendas aimed at correction or remediation must always engage both a cyclical and unidirectional conception of time and history, as their interventions cause multiple temporalities to resonate in the present moment.

## Redemption

The title of my study, *Debt and Redemption in the Blues*, does not intend to invoke explicitly or implicitly the historical period after Reconstruction. Instead, it aims at the complex meanings attached to this specific word in both the religious and economic contexts. Returning to the *OED*, the oldest definitions of *redemption* from Anglo-Norman and Middle French refer to “deliverance from sin and its consequences, salvation,” but also the “action of freeing a prisoner or captive by payment.” The financial meaning of redemption, which links a form of deliverance to payment, evolves over time to encompass the “action of discharging or paying off of a debt, obligation, or charge,” and even the “act of buying, purchase, purchase of a contract.”<sup>51</sup> The link between payment and freedom exists in both the religious and juridical-economic meanings: human beings are delivered from sin through a kind of spiritual payment, as prisoners, captives, and slaves are set free by monetary payment. Both types of redemption entail an acquittal of debt. The *re* in redemption suggests that the payment represents a restoration of sorts, something given as a means of or in exchange for a return to a prior state. Sinners are returned to a state of innocence prior to corruption, while prisoners, slaves, or captives have their original freedom restored. Some kind of payment—whether through acts, deeds, or money—restores the person to a prior state.

But does redemption in this sense mean return to the earlier sin-free, debt-free, or guilt-free state? Our moral understanding of corruption or guilt renders the idea of return to the prior state problematic. If time travel is impossible, so, too, is regaining innocence. Paying back spiritually, morally, socially, politically, or financially cannot be the same thing as actually restoring innocence or freedom. A difference will always inhere between the two states, made palpable by the “restoration.” The absolved sinner will always be more aware of the wages of sin than the innocent person, just as the former prisoner, captive, or slave will always be more fully appreciative of freedom than those who have never been bound. From this perspective, the vector of history ensures that the past (of sin, guilt, or bondage) cannot be undone. The past will always haunt the present, even as present actions seek to correct the past and (re)orient the future. Although redemption implies a return to the past in order to alter or change it, the action of redemption, in fact, privileges the arrow rather than the circle of history by highlighting the inability to actually return to previous states.

Beyond the meanings of redemption associated with deliverance from sin and payment in exchange for freedom, redemption can also mean compensation or recompense.<sup>52</sup> In this meaning of the word, the act of payment entails making amends. Consistent with the unidirectional view of history that redemption implies, the inclusion of the notion of compensation underscores the difference between the prior state and the “restored” one. In other words, the fact that additional payment is required in order to make up for the consequences of past actions reinforces the impossibility of return. Indeed, the recompense further differentiates the original state of innocence or freedom from the later state of redemption because one must pay more than what is owed. Like the laborers charged increasing fees for defaulting on contracts, including criminal-surety arrangements, debts continue to mount consistent with a logic of atonement that requires additional compensation in order to return to “equilibrium.”

The practice of pawning, a prevalent theme in the blues, perfectly illustrates the concept of paying more than what is owed. Pawnbrokers make loans and charge interest with the pawned item serving as collateral.<sup>53</sup> In order to “restore” the original property relations, the borrower must repay the money advanced, with interest, to regain possession of the pawned item. But redeeming the pawned item does not and cannot restore the prior state. Although the item that served as collateral on the loan is returned to the original owner, redeeming it requires repayment of the loan amount along with additional money as interest. Blind Boy Fuller’s “Three Ball Blues” (1940)

brings the point home: the loan transaction exploits financial disadvantage to impose debt. In Fuller's song, the desperate narrator pawns his shoes in the opening verse. Unable to repay the loan and on the verge of losing his home after having already lost his car, he makes a second trip to the pawnbroker, this time with his guitar. While a guitar might be the first thing someone else might pawn (rather than shoes), for the musician it represents his means of earning a living. The choice to pawn the guitar underscores the impossibility of a good outcome for those in desperate financial straits. Fuller's final verse provides a concise and pointed summation of the pawn transaction from the debtor's perspective: "Says, I asked that pawnshop man, 'what the three balls doing hanging on that wall?' / Says, 'it's two to one buddy, you don't get your things out of here at all.'" While the origin and meaning of the pawnshop symbol—three gold balls suspended on a bar—remains murky, attributed to links to the Medici family crest and the possible origins of pawnbroking in Lombardy or associations with Saint Nicholas,<sup>54</sup> the song imagines the three balls as symbolizing two to one odds. These odds are likely far better than the actual probability of reclaiming pawned property, nonetheless, the interpretation underscores the disadvantage of the debtor. The business of pawnbroking depends on uneven odds: financial inequality is leveraged to turn a profit. Even when the borrower succeeds in paying back the loan with interest and regains the pawned item, in the end, the lender benefits and the borrower loses in the transaction. As a financial transaction, the temporal frame of pawnshop loans underscores the degree to which redemption cannot return to or replicate prior states. The model of redemption rather posits movement forward into new configurations that resemble the old.

Redemption's meaning in the economic context of pawning highlights the ways in which economic interpretations of the word, like religious ones, always tilt in favor of a unidirectional conception of history. In the case of religious redemption, as part of Christian eschatology, cleansing humanity's sins in the blood of Christ is a crucial element of the teleological narrative of salvation. The arc of human history is viewed as moving toward the telos of salvation through messianic sacrifice. The narrative underlying economic transactions like pawning is, though not teleological, strongly oriented toward forward movement. Linked historically to the progress narrative of the Enlightenment discussed above, the implied movement underlying capitalism is also understood to be unidirectional. Karl Marx's formula, MCM' (money or liquid capital, invested in commodities, yields greater liquid money), presumes ever-accumulating amounts of capital. As we have just seen, the pawnbroker gains temporary possession of the commodity (C, the pawned item) by



exchanging liquid capital ( $M$ , the loan amount) for it. The investment of capital in the form of the loan secured by the pawned commodity yields more capital ( $M'$ ), either in the loan repaid with interest or in the acquisition of a pawned item that is worth more than the amount advanced in the loan. In either scenario, the pawnbroker is guaranteed a profit consistent with the expanding logic of capitalism. But the borrowers, even those who successfully redeem their pawned property, still come out behind. Viewed in this way, past ownership of the object may be “restored,” but not without loss created by debt. Time and circumstances may be moving forward, but “progress” understood as economic advancement remains elusive.

As we have seen, the blues sees the world from the perspective of those on whom debt has been and is imposed, challenging the logic of the unidirectional movement toward redemption in a number of ways. First, as I have highlighted, the blues rejects the religious, teleological narrative characteristic of spirituals in favor of an open-ended narrative that refuses to make pronouncements about ultimate ends. From an economic standpoint, as we saw in the previous chapter, the blues’ resistance to commodification challenges one of the underlying assumptions of capitalist logic. Reasserting the significance of process over product, artistic practice in the blues foregrounds struggles over ownership that enable exploitation, thereby putting into question the inevitability of accumulation and economic progress. From a temporal standpoint as well, the blues challenges the narrative of progress by continuously asserting the significance, indeed necessity, of repetition for forward movement. While religious and capitalist narratives privilege the arrow, the blues is highly dependent on the cycle, and yet still interweaves elements of the arrow. In the use of forms of repetition that enable progress, the blues underscores the significance of recycling, reusing, repeating, and returning. In this respect, the blues gives voice to the other side of the pawn transaction: the person pawning the item and being charged interest. Rather than simply celebrating the “progress” of capitalist accumulation from the point of view of the pawnbroker, the blues reminds us that someone has to make a sacrifice in order for there to be redemption. The “sacrifice,” understood throughout my study in economic terms, enables the rich to get richer and the powerful to become more powerful. But the act of sacrifice is repeated endlessly in new guises—the same again, but different, a new riff on an old tune. Such movement cannot simply be understood as “progress.” Instead, the blues as a form encourages us to interrogate the repetitions embedded and obscured in these narratives. The repetitions of debt enable the forward movement of some, precisely because they hinder and block the forward movement of others.



## Reparations

In the final chapter, I address the articulation of a call for reckoning in the blues. Without rehearsing that argument here, I think that it is important to address my choice of the word *redemption* rather than *reparations* in my title. The concept of debt posits the possibility of equity or parity when the loan is paid, but, as we have seen in numerous contexts, redemption is indefinitely deferred. Indeed, capitalism is not based on a teleological narrative leading to equity or parity. It is instead predicated on increasing expansion and accumulation, purportedly for all, but in reality only for those enabled by the system to leverage capital to yield more capital. The blues documents the racialized history of the manipulation of the system by those in positions of power and privilege to exploit inequality.<sup>55</sup> The expansion of accumulation through credit depends on the maintenance of debt imposed on the vulnerable in the system. Over and over again, the surface meanings of the blues that focus on mistreatment and betrayal in romantic and sexual relations point to a deeper meaning about mistreatment and betrayal on a social and economic level. This calling out implies a remedy of sorts. From the blues perspective, such a remedy is imagined along the lines of redemption rather than reparations, for a number of reasons.

The encoding of social and economic relations in romantic and sexual ones frames the conception of injustice in terms of the logic of the balance sheet: love, affection, and/or money have been withheld, misappropriated, stolen, et cetera, by a mistreating lover who also represents society as a whole, and white society in particular. The most common remedy is to end the relationship. Leaving ends the mistreatment, including whatever financial dependency and fraud has been in play. The lyrics never imagine restoring money obtained in deceitful ways, so the imbalance in the “account” is never reconciled. While in the context of a romantic relation leaving may end abuse, in the broader racialized socioeconomic context, walking away is most often a fantasy. Forms of compulsion enforced by the state—such as criminal surety and convict lease, or unconscionable labor contracts compelled by terror and threats of violence, such as sharecropping and tenancy, not to mention the threats of starvation and exposure posed by poverty—effectively foreclose the option to simply leave. Instead, the imbalance is perpetuated, with the debt serving to maintain exploitative relations.

In many songs, in addition to putting an end to the relationship, there is an implied eventual accounting in the form of a vague imagining of righting wrongs in the future. Countless lyrical invocations of “someday” point to an

indeterminate future moment when things will be better. Eddie Boyd's "Five Long Years" (1952) muses, "The next woman that I marry, she gotta work and bring me the dough," while Muddy Waters's more fanciful "Nine Below Zero" (1979) intones, "I'm going to retire in the Delta, laying out there in the pouring rain." The narrators imagine a future that represents an improvement over current circumstances as a compensation for mistreatment in the past. But these articulations sound like fantasies precisely because of their compensatory nature. Living off the income of a woman or retiring to the Delta are as unlikely as being able to walk away from socioeconomic forms of exploitation. The vision of the future is vague, at best, due in part to the fact that articulations like these always sound like the pipe dream of the traditional blues line "The sun's gonna shine in my backdoor someday."<sup>56</sup> Because the blues as a genre tends to signify on socioeconomic mistreatment using references to lying and cheating lovers, remedy usually lies in simply ending abusive relations.

Second, the economic understanding of injustice that is articulated in the blues is largely a product of the historical circumstances that gave rise to the genre. The rural South of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was shaped by economic relations and, in particular, bound forms of labor that reinstated slavery under new guises. The first two chapters highlighted the forms of bondage referenced in the blues. Indeed, calling attention to these forms of bondage is one of the primary aims of the blues. Spotting the abuses of sharecropping, criminal surety, convict lease, and other racialized forms of economic servitude calls, first and foremost, for putting a stop to them. Remedying these forms of injustice would require sociopolitical reforms—legislation and enforcement—to effect structural economic changes. Imagining and articulating these types of remedies is beyond the blues' ken. Instead, the accent is heavily on survival—coping, hoping, and believing in something better to come. In this respect, Muddy Waters's declaration in the introduction to "Mannish Boy" (1977), "Everything, everything, everything gon' be alright this morning," seems as much an attempt at self-reassurance as an articulation of belief. As in many blues, the narrator tries to imagine the near future as "alright." Because the blues dwells stubbornly in the present, with only a vague gesture toward the future, even this feels more like hope than belief. Reparations remain unimaginable.

Third, these forms of articulation, with their implicit indictments of the status quo, cannot posit a remedy as complex as reparations for a number of reasons. Reparations require the collective recognition of the commission of multiple wrongs that have led to the ongoing victimization of particular

groups. The emergence of the blues in the Jim Crow South and the blues' urban evolution prior to the civil rights era shape the worldview represented in the genre. In other words, the lyrical content of the blues is determined by socioeconomic and political conditions of discrimination, segregation, and entrenched white supremacy, and its attendant privileges. Before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the Voting Rights Act (1965), reparations were largely unimaginable. Moreover, even since these watershed judicial and legislative acts, the continuation of economic forms of discrimination and exploitation—not to mention efforts at voter suppression and the denial of civil rights—undermines faith in a narrative of progress.

The United States, as a collective entity with a group identity, failed to acknowledge even in part until at least 1954 the injustices suffered by African Americans because of slavery, its legacy, and its multiple avatars, including Jim Crow. Because of this failure, the imagining of a different future was difficult, at best. Those most victimized by racial oppression, domination, and violence were perhaps least likely to see the possibility for change, let alone what that change might look like. It was precisely this population that was responsible for the creation of the blues. It is no wonder, then, that the form, which was shaped during the nadir of race relations in America, and in the geographical region in which white supremacy was most oppressive, gestures only vaguely toward a different future. As a genre, the blues dwells in and reflects on present circumstances and conditions, precisely because of the horrors of the historical moment of its creation. While this indirect formal and lyrical reflection of current circumstances may resonate with the past and vaguely gesture toward the future, the emphasis is nonetheless on the present moment, providing a coping mechanism, rather than a recipe for change. Both the failure to acknowledge past wrongdoing by society as a whole and the ongoing struggle to survive under the status quo, together foreclose the possibility of imagining possible remedies. Particularly in the pre-World War II blues, a kind of change that moves beyond simply putting an end to mistreatment is rarely articulated. Without a collective acknowledgment of wrongdoing, it is difficult for the subordinated group to imagine a way forward other than walking away.

Finally, as Roy L. Brooks has argued, there are two possible legal conceptions of reparations: a tort model based on compensation and an atonement model that requires an apology.<sup>57</sup> Within the economic framework of debt that I have established in the blues, the compensatory model is possible, although rare. As I have suggested with examples from Waters and Boyd above (both post-World War II blues artists), compensation for past wrongs is at least

imaginable sometimes, if only as fantasy. But for the prewar blues, although some songs fantasize about a reversal of circumstances—“Someday you’re gonna want me and I won’t want you”—none imagine lovers realizing the error of their ways and acknowledging past wrongs.<sup>58</sup> Ending the mistreatment by leaving is the primary remedy, with some kind of quid pro quo as a fantasized bonus, not a requirement for moving forward. In any case, acknowledgment of wrongdoing would remain at the individual level.

The rarity of an articulation of a hope or desire for an acknowledgment of past wrongdoing in the blues likely corresponds to a history of frustrated expectations among the formerly enslaved and their descendants. Sherman’s Special Field Order no. 15, granting forty acres and a mule to freed slaves, and its ignominious denouement within the Freedmen’s Bureau, is illustrative of a variety of “promises” that were not kept. Land redistribution, back wages, and other forms of compensation for the horrors of slavery that would acknowledge, at the very least, the unremunerated investment of labor, never occurred.<sup>59</sup> Former enslavers could not be trusted to pay wages in the future—and often did not, as we have seen—let alone offer restitution for past work.<sup>60</sup>

If imagining individual accountability is difficult, a collective reckoning with collective compensation of any kind is truly unimaginable. Perhaps some individual former enslavers felt guilt and the need to make amends, but no collective sense of accountability is evident in the historical record. On the contrary, post-slavery, and especially post-Reconstruction under Redemption, such a collective acknowledgment is unthinkable. Particularly under the Jim Crow conditions that gave rise to the blues, much of the white Southern collectivity is focused on undoing and unmaking Reconstruction and redoing and remaking the Old South under a new guise, not on acknowledging the errors of the past. If even the tort model of reparations is unthinkable, then the atonement model is beyond imagination. Brooks considers an apology to be the *sine qua non* of reparations: the collectivity must admit guilt. But a collective social reckoning that admits guilt and offers an apology is truly a fantasy for those being reenslaved by new forms of economic bondage.

From the perspective of the blues, history repeats as it moves forward—old forms are reworked and repeated with a difference. But the blues aesthetic also (re)orients our interpretation of repetition. In particular, irony in the blues underscores double meanings, as lyrics deploy signifying at multiple levels to set in motion reverberant, simultaneous messages. Cheating lovers are cheating lovers, but they also signify cheating bosses and (white) society at large. In much the same way, familiar riffs, repeated lyrics within songs, lines and couplets from other songs, and the twelve-bar cycle are all repetitions

with slight variation. Recognizing multiple meanings in lyrics, as well as the play of resemblance and difference in musical articulations, requires allowing for freedom of movement. In other words, hearing and interpreting a familiar riff with a slight twist or hearing multiple meanings in “she lied to me” requires allowing complementary (resonant) and even contradictory (dissonant) elements to sound in the same moment.<sup>61</sup> Listeners hear that a woman lied or they hear a riff that they have heard before, but they also hear possible underlying meanings and echoes of various riffs from other songs and performances. Irony, both lyrically and musically, enables an undecidability to dwell in the blues. This ironic view also applies to history. As I have been arguing, it is not a matter of choosing between the arrow *or* the cycle but rather a matter of maintaining both the arrow *and* the cycle. The blues teaches musicians and listeners alike that you cannot repeat the past; instead, repetition enables an awareness of echoes of earlier times and faint foretastes of the future in the present moment. Dwelling in the moment enables the free play of all elements.

Within the blues as an aesthetic form, the awareness of the necessity of repetition that nonetheless cannot repeat exactly produces an ironic perspective tinged with humor. Although ostensibly about despair, the blues creates art and joy out of paradox. Despite profound cynicism and even pessimism at times, the blues nonetheless celebrates from within the present moment. Each repetition asserts the impossibility of exact repetition, just as every A' line repeats the A line with deviation, and so on. And each one of these iterations moves the creation forward. The inability to repeat exactly is celebrated rather than lamented. Indeed, the celebratory movement of aesthetic creation rooted in paradox enables a self-aware, ironic perspective to emerge. While blues songs recount tales of mistreatment and the need to put an end to it, they also acknowledge the likely repetition of mistreatment under new guises. Things will change, history will move forward, but forms will repeat and we will recognize them. And in this recognition, we will find a kind of pleasure and enjoyment.

If reparations are unimaginable from this perspective, redemption can at least be hinted at within the call for reckoning that follows truth-telling in the blues. Irony and humor, playfulness and creativity, provide positive responses to oppression and domination, offering possibilities for catharsis and calls for change. It is in this paradoxical sense that I believe the blues is redemptive: able to recognize the inevitable repetitions of history, while nonetheless believing in forward movement, all the while providing a space and a place in the present for enjoyment and pleasure.

# A History of Relief

Even if blues musicians and audiences cannot imagine reparations, the music comments on various historical attempts at “relief.” In light of my analysis of the contradictions underlying reformist attempts at intervention and correction, the tangle of inconsistencies, inefficiencies, conflicting ideologies and practices—not to mention the reintroduction of discrimination and exploitation by various attempts at relief—is not surprising. I open the exploration of relief with a return to sharecropping and tenancy as forms of economic dependency used to enforce social and political inequality that are central to the blues.

The Great Depression and New Deal worsened conditions for those who were already living at a bare subsistence level, but they also shone a bright light on southern rural poverty. As Paul E. Mertz writes, “Although poverty was not confined to any particular area in the South, privation was most widespread, and probably most intense, among several million tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and agricultural wage workers. Tenants and croppers were the largest single block of the nation’s rural poor.”<sup>1</sup> Studies such as *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* by Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and Will W. Alexander, published in 1935 as a summary of statistical studies in support of pending tenancy legislation,<sup>2</sup> *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation* by T. J. Woofter Jr., published by the Works Progress Administration in 1936, and *The Plight of the Share-Cropper* by Norman Thomas, published in 1934 with the aid of the Socialist Party, all revealed the entrenched poverty engendered by the plantation system that only worsened during the Depression. As Mertz asserts, relief efforts sparked by the Depression “direct[ed] attention to the rural labor surplus” but also “revealed the pervasive general poverty that had always existed.”<sup>3</sup> These conditions are perfectly evoked by the open D-minor

tuning, haunting falsetto, and lyrics of Skip James's "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" (1931): "Hard times is here an' everywhere you go, times are harder than th'ever been before."

In a poignant final chapter of Woofter's WPA study titled "Constructive Measures," the stark reality is laid bare along with a series of recommendations for various types of relief programs. After a quick condemnation of the disastrous results of the laissez-faire approach adopted through 1932, Woofter outlines what he terms "basic realities"—the current state of "The People," "Inter-regional and International Relationships," "Large vs. Small Scale Operations," and "Social Inertia."<sup>4</sup> His hopes for intervening in the situation are tempered by what he perceives as an intractable problem that has "surviv[ed] the Civil War and subsequent depression, ramifying in its influence into all phases of southern rural life." He notes that European parallels suggest that reform efforts might take "several generations to attain their goal."<sup>5</sup>

In terms of specific programs, Woofter outlines potential objectives and the means of achieving them through an interlocking set of federal and state efforts. His work in cooperation with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration highlighted the challenges associated with instituting lasting change (which I will discuss below). For now, suffice it to say that federal relief efforts collided head-on with entrenched labor practices, as well as social structures including systemic racism, that perpetuated debt peonage and immobility through the sharecropping and tenant system.

In the area of state legislation, Woofter recommends the repeal of state laws "which make it a misdemeanor to quit a contract while in debt."<sup>6</sup> While he notes that criminal prosecutions, like those discussed in chapter 2, have diminished, he nonetheless calls for the eradication of the laws supporting debt peonage. He also recommends the use of written contracts, enforceable by law, and "contracts providing the reimbursement of the tenant for permanent improvements of the land or buildings made with his labor,"<sup>7</sup> thereby attempting to appropriately remunerate all work. Some of Woofter's recommendations, such as calls for soil conservation and diversification and the retirement of submarginal lands, take aim at improving productivity and yield in the long term. In an effort to raise incomes, these measures presume that benefits will trickle down.<sup>8</sup> Other recommendations specifically target the wretched plight of sharecroppers and tenants and call for credit reform by recognizing that lending programs under federal auspices have only reached this vulnerable population indirectly.<sup>9</sup> Woofter specifically advocates for direct forms of relief, including work relief, rehabilitation, and the promotion of landownership to attempt "to improve conditions within, or

to modify slightly, the existing tenant system.”<sup>10</sup> From his position as coordinator of rural research for the WPA, Woofter cannot and does not imagine interventions aimed at disassembling or reconstructing southern agricultural systems wholesale. As David Eugene Conrad asserts, the New Deal represents a singular missed opportunity to dismantle and reorganize an exploitative and unsustainable form of agricultural labor: “It is a tragedy that the system [southern tenancy] was not disrupted at precisely this time, for the opportunity was golden. Never in its long and cruel history had tenancy been more vulnerable.”<sup>11</sup>

The picture painted of southern rural poverty by the writers of the Depression era enabled the “discovery” of its existence by the rest of the country. Their work depicts a world largely unchanged since Reconstruction, particularly the living and working conditions of an African American population in areas with a high concentration of large plantations and the accompanying tenants, sharecroppers, and wage laborers. In a sense, the Great Depression wrought virtually no changes, except increased precarity, to a group already immobilized and barely scraping by. As Texas bluesman Mance Lipscomb succinctly observed, “See, people talkin bout havin that Pression an hawd times—they didn’t have no hawd times, man. You all had it easy all yo life. They oughta come along when I was comin up.”<sup>12</sup> Blues songs from the popular and rural traditions bear out Lipscomb’s view, registering no significant difference between conditions before and after October 1929. Indeed, many have argued that the Depression made itself felt in some sectors of the economy, including southern agriculture, prior to the stock market crash.<sup>13</sup> Rather than a significant change, the songs rather bear witness to ongoing conditions of need, want, and fear that extend unbroken from the first recordings of the 1920s well into the World War II period.<sup>14</sup> As Lonnie Johnson ably captures in the opening lines of his 1937 recording “Hard Times Ain’t Gone No Where,” “People is raving, howling about hard times; tell me what it’s all about [2×] / Hard times don’t worry me; I was broke when it first started out.”

Typical of some pre-Depression era songs, Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Broke and Hungry” (1926) conjures a world of isolation and vulnerability with images of destitution and desperation interwoven with an amorous theme. While the narrator addresses an audience of women in the sixth verse to frame his song as a cautionary tale, attributing his current state to an unfaithful lover—“I want to show you women what careless love have done [2×] / Caused a man like me steal way away from home”—his existence on the road also references “going away to build me a railroad of my own.”<sup>15</sup> The disjointed lyrical associations revolving around a failed love relationship that has caused the



narrator to hit the road resonate with the ubiquitous conditions faced by itinerant laborers across the South seeking work and shelter. Whether running away from an unfaithful lover, fleeing a mean plantation boss, or simply trying to find work, the conditions on the road are the same.

The opening plea to a woman to take him in—“I am broke and hungry, ragged and dirty, too [2×] / Mama, if I clean up, can I go home with you?”—describes the situation of millions of African Americans moving in search of work from emancipation forward. Jefferson’s plaintive style of vocal delivery, with a distinctive octave leap at the caesura of the A’ line, sets the query in a mournful yet resigned tone. The song evokes the suffering and vulnerability of those seeking work, food, clothing, and shelter with nowhere to turn: “I am motherless, fatherless, sister and brotherless, too.” Despite the situation represented, Jefferson’s performance nonetheless evidences moments of creativity in the lyric constructions (“I feel like jumping through the keyhole in your door”), in the vocal delivery, and in the guitar accompaniment, asserting agency from a position of vulnerability. The ascending picked run in double-time tacked onto the end of the song exhibits a high-spirited burst of energy and control that the lyrics leave largely obscured behind dependency and desperation. While the singer is pleading for help from others, his rollicking guitar run at the end of the song provides a spark of optimism in trying circumstances.

Being “broke and hungry, ragged and dirty,” desperately in need of someone to alleviate immediate suffering, rings from the pre-Depression context of 1926 to resonate with the more widespread suffering of the Great Depression. The living conditions of millions of African American agricultural workers trapped in rural southern poverty were revealed because of economic developments and attempts to alleviate them that unearthed an enduring tragedy. The “acute agricultural emergency” that the New Deal attempted to address also made visible to the rest of the nation a “deep-seated agricultural problem”<sup>16</sup> rooted in the plantation system, one of slavery’s greatest legacies.

## Antebellum Roots and Postbellum Discrimination

My discussions of antebellum slavery and postbellum forms of bondage highlight the use of debt as a fulcrum to exert pressure on a captive group of agricultural workers, largely foreclosing possibilities for social advancement or escape. While the Civil War brought slavery to an end, Reconstruction introduced new forms of exploitative labor practices. Reconstruction officially

acknowledged the need for long-term social and economic interventions and transformations in the formerly rebellious states, in addition to the need for immediate forms of assistance. Post-Civil War relief was administered primarily through the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, an underfunded, overtasked, temporary federal attempt at providing a vast array of services.<sup>17</sup> As labor law historian James D. Schmidt argues, “The Freedmen’s Bureau is particularly important, for it represents the first broad effort in American history to build the apparatus of a modern, administrative state,”<sup>18</sup> to “essentially govern . . . the former Confederacy.”<sup>19</sup> The outcomes of the programs of the Freedmen’s Bureau were mixed. W. E. B. Du Bois notes that the Bureau was an economic success measured in monetary terms, putting former slaves back to work producing crops and generating surplus for export as well as taxable earnings.<sup>20</sup> Linda Faye Williams points out that the bureau also made some progress in establishing schools and hospitals.<sup>21</sup> But, as public policy, the efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau set a pattern that has been repeated countless times in American history, and particularly during the New Deal, pitting differing strategies, goals, interests, and ideologies against one another with, at best, mixed results. For example, despite widespread destitution, the familiar argument against direct relief—that it encourages dependency—was mobilized. As part of an ideological rationalization for forcing freedpeople back to work, the argument against providing food, clothing, shelter, and services fed into and reinforced racial stereotypes.<sup>22</sup>

Although ostensibly charged with providing legal authority to enforce “free labor,” as Saidiya V. Hartman has argued, the Freedmen’s Bureau paradoxically aided “compulsory labor schemes” engineered by landowners intent on recreating as nearly as possible labor conditions under slavery.<sup>23</sup> By attempting to force former slaves into signing contracts, the bureau inadvertently blurred the lines between free and unfree labor. From the former enslaved person’s perspective, selling one’s labor does not seem significantly different from selling oneself, prompting resistance to signing contracts.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, compelling someone to sign renders the act far from voluntary. Indeed, the indenture bonds used to formalize apprenticeships, which enabled planters to secure largely unpaid work from the children of freedpeople, illustrate the ways in which contracts may be deployed to create conditions of bondage.<sup>25</sup> So, although the bureau sought to ensure a free labor system, its policy efforts to enforce contracts often served the interests of those attempting to bind labor.

The act creating the bureau also tasked it with managing abandoned and confiscated lands, specifically empowering the federal agency to lease parcels

of up to forty acres for periods of three years.<sup>26</sup> The echo of Sherman's Special Field Order no. 15 in the forty-acre specification seemingly held open the promise of landownership to freedpeople. However, subsequent political and legal maneuvering ensured that lands would by and large not be rented, much less sold, to the formerly enslaved.<sup>27</sup> Failing to deliver on the promise of land, the property policy ultimately dovetailed with the policy to enforce the signing of labor contracts to reinstitute conditions of bound labor.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as Eric Foner argues, freedpeople often refused to sign contracts at the same time they were being evicted from government lands.<sup>29</sup>

The failures of the Freedmen's Bureau established a pattern not only of raised and frustrated expectations of social integration and equality, including land ownership, but also of conflicting strategies and ideologies behind relief that were repeated in subsequent social welfare and relief efforts. Underlying many of the policies are biased assumptions, buttressed by racism, that perpetuate discrimination and exploitation. One of the most consistent and often-repeated patterns is the use of local authorities to administer and implement the work of federal agencies, providing the means to white southerners to control access to goods, services, funds, and opportunities.<sup>30</sup> The reliance on local agents, particularly in the case of the New Deal, but during Reconstruction as well, had disastrous consequences for attempts to reconfigure social, racial, economic, and political relations. Equality, be it social, political, legal, or economic, is not a desideratum of whites in power. Debt, including in the form of denial of relief, will continue to be used as a means of limiting possibilities and extracting labor for the benefit of white property owners.

In addition to the Freedmen's Bureau, postbellum relief also took the form of veterans' pensions. Williams outlines a compelling case for identifying the Dependent Pension Act of 1890 as discriminatory.<sup>31</sup> From benefit payments scaled to rank, to the difficulty of proving one's birth date, identity, or marital status, Black veterans of the Union Army faced discrimination and an uphill battle in making successful claims for pensions.<sup>32</sup> While African American veterans and their families did receive benefits, as Williams asserts, "Poor Black tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and day laborers rarely had the money to track down witnesses, execute legal documents such as affidavits, and pay for expenses associated with their applications."<sup>33</sup> For this group, a veteran's pension would have made a significant impact. But hiring an attorney, writing letters, and filing necessary court documents lay beyond the reach of those struggling with day-to-day survival.

While the Freedmen's Bureau enacts conflicting policy goals and ways of implementing them often premised on racist assumptions, the Civil War

veterans' pension act creates a seemingly color-blind policy that, while not formally racist, nonetheless contains systemic racial bias.<sup>34</sup> The obstacles that applying for a pension present for the sharecropper or tenant pinpoint a failure to think through how policy will be implemented, as well as the different effects that implementation will have on different individuals and communities. This pattern, of embedding racial discrimination within color-blind language because of a failure to consider practical implications, will be repeated in relief efforts of the twentieth century.

## The Mississippi River Flood of 1927

The failures of the Freedmen's Bureau and Civil War veterans' benefits represent a distant past to the early blues musicians. These forms of discriminatory federal relief only resonate indirectly with the generation that pursued (and consumed) blues performance in an effort to escape sharecropping and tenancy. Although the lyrics of the blues do not directly reference these early relief efforts, they do comment on subsequent federal responses to southern poverty and disaster emergencies that repeat familiar racialized patterns.

In an area that was subject to periodic catastrophic flooding, the 1927 Mississippi River flood nonetheless brought unprecedented destruction and death to 170 counties in seven states.<sup>35</sup> Clyde Woods describes the flood as "biblical," explaining that in Mississippi, "it rained almost continuously in the Delta from the summer of 1926 to April 1927. On 21 April, a wall of water twenty feet high demolished the new levees built near Greenville. The rushing waters created a lake seventy-five miles long and one hundred miles wide. Then, during the first week of May, tornadoes and earthquakes pounded the region. Water completely covered the land until August. Several African Americans died immediately and more than 400,000 were placed in the 154 Red Cross camps established in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 18 of them in the Mississippi Delta."<sup>36</sup> Hundreds died during the immediate emergency and subsequent rescue and relief efforts. 16,570,627 acres of land, most with newly planted crops, were destroyed and with them, a year's worth of income for planters, tenants, sharecroppers, and wage laborers.<sup>37</sup> Blues songs such as Sippie Wallace's "The Flood Blues" (1927), Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rising High Water Blues" (1927), Lonnie Johnson's "Broken Levee Blues" (1928), and Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere—Parts 1 and 2" (1930), document the chaos, confusion, desperation, loss, and terror caused by the flood.<sup>38</sup> Largely narrated from a first-person perspective, these songs move between

eyewitness and general accounts of the devastation and displacement caused by the natural disaster.<sup>39</sup>

President Calvin Coolidge named Herbert Hoover, then secretary of commerce, to work with vice chair of the American National Red Cross, to coordinate disaster relief for refugees.<sup>40</sup> Private donations funded efforts to provide food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention to those displaced by flood waters.<sup>41</sup> But the emergency relief provided by the Red Cross was segregated, discriminatory, and abusive, with the most egregious treatment of African Americans occurring in a camp in Greenville, Mississippi.<sup>42</sup> Reports from refugees in and those who had escaped from the segregated camps described inadequate food, clothing, and shelter, in addition to rape and murder.<sup>43</sup> Writing for the *Chicago Defender* as a special correspondent from Vicksburg, J. Winston Harrington exposed not only the reality of segregated relief but the forced labor of the camps: “Men, women and children of our group, who were conscripted, forced to leave their homes to top levees and prevent, if possible, a flood in their respective cities, are now refugees in ‘Jim Crow’ relief camps. This vast army of destitute persons, nearly one hundred thousand, the majority of them farmers and laborers from 75 villages and towns of seven flood-torn states of the South, are experiencing worst [*sic*] treatment than our forefathers did before the signing of the emancipation proclamation.”<sup>44</sup> Harrington’s exposé series detailed the peonage conditions in the segregated camps. In an article published in the *Chicago Defender*, Ida B. Wells-Barnett reasonably posed some pointed questions: “‘Why are hundreds of thousands of our people herded in camps, instead of being provided for in houses, where they and their families can be helped as are the white refugees, and live together as families should do?’ ‘Why must Colored people only be forced to work on the levees for \$1 per day at the point of a gun before they can get rations?’”<sup>45</sup>

From the white Southern perspective, the answer to her questions was premised on racist ideas about the division of labor. Levee work was dangerous and difficult and had always been performed by Black wage labor (paid or not) or through convict lease. Those coercing labor to repair the levees reasoned that the refugee population would serve the same function as those exploited in the past. Added to the usual threat of violence—overseers holding guns on workers—now the coercion was enhanced by support from National Guard troops and supplemented by the threat of withholding rations.<sup>46</sup> The forced labor conditions of levee repair transformed a “relief” effort into another form of peonage. The irony here is profound: victims of a natural disaster

should be entitled to or even owed relief from the community, and are instead transformed into those who owe. What they owe can only be repaid through labor. The transfer of debt onto the Black community works in a most insidious and perverse way to refashion those who are owed relief into those who must perform labor in order to receive it.

It is no surprise that the person tasked with overseeing the African American refugee camp in Greenville, Mississippi, near one of the largest levee breaks, William Alexander Percy, was the son of a Delta planter.<sup>47</sup> Not only were Black refugees forced to repair levees, peonage was also used to bind labor to plantations once the waters receded. Whites forced Blacks to repay through coerced labor the “debt” owed for aid, in addition to the debt already owed for the furnish and other expenses associated with the now destroyed crop. In effect, the normal “debt” of the yearly furnish was tripled—a double furnish for the 1927 crop cycle, as well as the expenses associated with relief.<sup>48</sup> After a tour of the flood area, assistant secretary of the NAACP Walter White described “concentration camps” patrolled by National Guard members, reporting “Negroes escaping refugee camps and preferring to go without food, shelter and clothing, rather than be returned to the plantations from which the flood had driven them.”<sup>49</sup> The use of local agents, including a Delta planter’s son as head of a county chapter of the Red Cross, ensures the institutionalization of racist presumptions in the implementation of policy. “Relief” fortifies socioeconomic domination and subordination. What in theory is destined for all victims of the flood is not only unequally distributed but also weaponized to promote planters’ interests and reinforce economic dependence and immobility.

Blues songs about the 1927 flood most often portray a sense of helplessness amid efforts to flee the rising waters, and do not refer even indirectly to the discrimination and peonage that characterized relief after the flood. Charley Patton’s “High Water Everywhere—Parts 1 and 2” perhaps comes closest to suggesting discriminatory rescue efforts in mentions of being turned away in part 1 (“I would go to the hill country but they got me barred”) and not being able to get a boat in part 2 (“I couldn’t get no boats there, Marion City gone down”). These lyrics may signal discriminatory rescue efforts for a knowing audience, particularly the emphasis created by the articulation “*they got me barred.*” Indeed, some plantation owners attempted to prevent workers from fleeing, for fear they would not return to work after the waters receded.<sup>50</sup> Worse, David Evans recounts that “along the St. Francis River in Arkansas, two thousand Blacks and four hundred whites stood on a crumbling levee,

awaiting death. A rescuing steamer took on all the whites and only twenty-five Blacks.”<sup>51</sup> Consistent with this anecdote, more accusatory lines in Patton’s part 2 reference men, women, and children drowning:

Oh, the water risin’, our men sinkin’ down  
And the water was risin’ and airplanes was all around  
[Spoken: Water is all around]  
It was fifty men and children come to sink and drown  
Oh, Lordy, women and grown men drown  
Oh, women and children sinkin’ down  
[Spoken: Lord have mercy]  
I couldn’t see nobody home and wasn’t no one to be found<sup>52</sup>

The use of *our men* hints that African Americans were left to die so that whites could be rescued. Despite the pain and confusion produced by the traumatic experience, Patton’s characteristic suppressed rage seethes in his growling vocal “noise” to support an interpretation of the lines as an indictment.

Strikingly direct, Lonnie Johnson’s “Broken Levee Blues” (1928) voices a very specific protest of the flood conditions in its second verse: “They want me to work on the levee, I have to leave my home / They want to work on the levee, then I had to leave my home / I was so scared the levee might break, Lord, and I may drown.” Although Johnson had only indirect knowledge of these kinds of events, they were nonetheless widely reported in the African American press and doubtless disseminated through informal channels of communication in the Black community. Johnson’s final verse unleashes what for many listeners must have been a familiar fantasy of refusal to work: “The police say, ‘Work, fight, or go to jail.’ I say, ‘I ain’t totin’ no sack.’ / Police say, ‘Work, fight, or go to jail.’ I say, ‘I ain’t totin’ no sack. / And I ain’t buildin’ no levee; the planks is on the ground, and I ain’t drivin’ no nails.” Johnson’s use of the word *sack* merges two forms of labor in his defiant repudiation: agricultural and levee work. Although contextualized by the flood of 1927, the lyrics echo sentiments latent in numerous blues from both before and after the great flood.

The forced levee work of repairs under threat of violence for meager rations, as well as the debt peonage used to coerce agricultural labor on plantations, would have been familiar to African Americans in the Delta and beyond. The themes of levee work and the hardships of sharecropping are ubiquitous in blues lyrics, as we have seen. The fact that Lonnie Johnson’s “Broken Levee Blues” is the only significant blues representation of these



familiar forms of hardship in conjunction with the 1927 flood is not that surprising for several reasons. First, the labor themes in relation to exploitation are already abundantly, if indirectly, treated in blues. Second, the performers because of their constant travel were likely not themselves victims of the refugee camps. And third, although information about the specific horrors precipitated by the flood conditions was disseminated in the Black press, it was not widely known among whites—Hoover and directors of the American Red Cross made certain of that.<sup>53</sup> Controlling access to recording, and therefore mediating the production of representations of the flood experience and its aftermath, white-owned record companies likely discouraged overtly accusatory themes (as they did other topics) to be consistent with the more widely broadcast, whitewashed treatment of flood rescue and relief efforts.

## The Great Depression and the New Deal

Many of the patterns of discrimination dating back to Reconstruction and the 1927 Mississippi flood rescue and relief operations were repeated by the various agencies of the New Deal. Some Depression relief efforts followed the color-blind approach of Civil War veterans' pensions by not considering the realities of local administration or the differential impacts across populations and regions. Other efforts bore direct political allegiance to particular interest groups—for example, large-scale planters—implementing policy with detrimental effects on Black workers to whom federal agencies turned a blind eye. As James C. Cobb argues, the flood taught planters how to redirect federal assistance to their own advantage, including holding African Americans in peonage.<sup>54</sup> In addition, exclusions and omissions in federal policy concatenate multiple economic, political, and administrative agendas that, in the end, also discriminate against African Americans.<sup>55</sup> Overall, the New Deal presents a complex moment in US history with significant missed opportunities, particularly to disrupt the tenancy system, but also to level the playing field more generally.<sup>56</sup> But rather than begin with the alphabet soup of agencies created by the New Deal and the policies and views that inspired and undergirded them, I turn to the depiction of the New Deal in blues songs. Since the historical record largely takes a top-down perspective—examining the political, economic, social, and racial views and agendas of those who framed the policy—a first corrective adjustment entails looking from the bottom up.

Charley Patton's "34 Blues" (1934) offers a collage-like representation of what the year 1934 looked like from the perspective of a plantation worker.



His paradoxical opening assertion in the A lines of the first verse—that he won't tell what the new year has brought—is quickly negated by the B line of the same verse and followed by the mention of specific events in the following verse:

I ain't gon' to tell nobody [what] thirty-four have done for me [2×]  
Took my roller; I was broke as I could be  
They run me from Will Dockery's; Willie Brown I want your job [2×]  
[Spoken: Buddy, what's the matter?]  
Ah, one of them told papa Charley, "I don't want you hangin' around  
my job no more"

Although he declares that he is not going to tell anyone what has befallen him, he proceeds to do the exact opposite. He has been thrown off the plantation where he has been living—Will Dockery's—and now must fend for himself. As the song progresses, Patton takes a broader view in the third verse to describe events taking place around him: "Fella, down the country, it almost make you cry [2×] / [Spoken: My God, children] / Women and children flagging freight trains for rides." Taking a step back from the narrator's own difficult circumstances, the spoken commentary underscores the plight of children forced to hit the road, less able to scrape by than the singer is. His delivery of "it almost make you cry" in the A line, with its exaggerated descending melisma in three segments on *cry*, bears none of the traces of the usual suppressed anger of Patton's vocal style. Instead, he seems deeply saddened and moved to see women and children cast out to ride trains in search of better circumstances.<sup>57</sup>

The final verse serves as a kind of faint imprecation to alter present circumstances, framed with the general expectation that nothing will change. Patton sings, "It may bring sorrow, Lord, and it may bring tears [2×] / Oh Lord, oh Lord, let me see your brand-new year." Although he addresses himself to the Lord, his final line feels defiant and almost like a challenge to bring about some type of meaningful change. In five short verses, Charley Patton sketches the view of the Depression from below. Unpacking the meaning of the imagery requires examining the specific policies enacted that had a direct effect on southern rural poverty and touched the lives of those in Patton's audience.

The first two verses see the narrator thrown off the plantation and forced to hit the road to join, in the third verse, the women and children in the same predicament. While Patton was likely thrown off of Dockery Plantation for

any number of reasons, the song casts his lot among those evicted from plantations in the period.<sup>58</sup> The first phase of the New Deal under Franklin Delano Roosevelt created two programs that had a substantial impact on the South—the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). The AAA, approved in spring of 1933, attempted to create “price parity” for agricultural commodities by lowering production. In the case of cotton, there was already a substantial surplus from the previous year contributing to depressed prices.<sup>59</sup> The aim of the legislation was to provide a subsidy to farmers who agreed in the first year to destroy part of what had already been planted: “The AAA would pay farmers to plow under 10 million acres of cotton, a fourth of the crop, so that the market would be less glutted at the end of 1933.”<sup>60</sup> In subsequent years, the government would “rent” acres on which farmers would agree not to grow cotton or the other targeted staple crops.

With a 25 to 50 percent reduction in the crop on any given plantation, one can assume a resulting reduction in the amount of labor required to produce it. In theory, the government took into account both the landlord and those who worked the land: “The Adjustment Administration instructed landlords to divide payments received for the plow-up and for subsidies after 1933 among their tenants according to the interest each tenant held in the crop. Thus, a sharecropper was to receive one-half of the payments, the share-tenant two-thirds or three-fourths, and a cash-tenant all.”<sup>61</sup> Payments were made in two installments: a “parity payment” and a “rental payment.” Predictably, because the AAA was not interested in disrupting traditional landlord-tenant relations, landlords received the entire “parity payment” and found ways of avoiding paying their fair share of “rental payments” to sharecroppers and tenants. In the end, tenants received about one-ninth of the government funds paid through the program.<sup>62</sup>

Donald H. Grubbs enumerates the various ways in which landlords could cheat their tenants out of government money owed them:

If the illiterate and powerless tenant could be induced to make his mark at the bottom of a long form laden with small print written in legalese, only the landlord and the government knew that the tenant had waived his right to government money. Often landlords, signing their cotton contracts, simply forgot to mention having any tenants. And if by chance a check did arrive payable to both tenant and landlord, the AAA thoughtfully provided a form authorizing the planter to cash it—and, by implication, keep the money—without the worker’s endorsement.

Indirect methods could also be used. . . . Or, again, without evading the law, planters could now demand payment of previously forgotten debts, or simplest of all, raise the tenant's rent by the amount of his AAA check. Particularly prone to victimization were tenants who managed their own farms—"managing share tenants"—who were supposed to receive, in addition to their share of the small parity payment, half of the large rental payment as well. This composed a prize too large to be ignored, and the tenant's loss of it was common.<sup>63</sup>

The government chose not to deal with tenants and croppers directly, opting to distribute money indirectly (and, therefore, most often not at all) to laborers. As Conrad explains, in this respect the federal government followed the southern custom of not viewing tenants and sharecroppers as "lien holders," rendering them invisible as "persons who appear to have an interest in the crop."<sup>64</sup>

The government funds could be used to pay back real or fictitious outstanding balances. In *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, Johnson, Embree, and Alexander cite a sharecropper from the Mississippi Delta who said, "I plowed up six acres of my cotton last year, but I didn't get a cent from the government. Boss said it was credited to my account, but I don't know."<sup>65</sup> In other cases, landlords handed over AAA checks to merchants, enabling them to be "credited" to accounts. Quoting another tenant, Johnson, Embree, and Alexander write, "Mr. — and the others brought the checks out here to the store and that's where we signed up. The merchant taken them and give credit for them. Some of the folks got a little something out of theirs but I just signed mine and give it to him. I asked him for some of mine back and he said 'nothing doing.' I didn't want to act hard cause I know it wouldn't get me nowhere."<sup>66</sup> Despite widespread abuses by planters and merchants, the crediting of checks to outstanding balances—a practice dubbed "set-offs"—was deemed permissible by the AAA legal division.<sup>67</sup>

As the program continued beyond 1933, there was a built-in incentive for landlords to evict tenants and sharecroppers who were no longer needed to produce smaller crops.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, there was also a financial incentive to use wage laborers who were not entitled to any share of the payments, effectively pushing workers down the rungs of the agricultural employment ladder.<sup>69</sup> Mertz explains that in early 1934, coincident with the recording of Patton's song, administrators of the AAA began to perceive that "the AAA cotton program had been an 'unforeseen calamity' for sharecroppers and tenants, reducing and even destroying the minimal security afforded by the crop lien

system. Landowners now found it profitable to reduce the number of their tenants and demote those remaining to wage laborers. Those displaced were forced on relief, ‘with all that means in purposelessness, in futility, in the absence of self-governance, in the destruction of ambition and the devastation of a dream that “next year” would promise better conditions.’”<sup>70</sup>

Beginning with the 1934–35 contract, the AAA attempted to mitigate some of the negative effects on tenants of its crop-reduction policy by stipulating that landlords minimize the impact as much as possible, including maintaining the same number of tenants. However, the vagueness of the contract language in its repeated use of the phrase “insofar as possible,” as well as its exception for those tenants deemed to be “a nuisance or a menace to the welfare of the producer,” failed to protect those in danger of being evicted.<sup>71</sup> Although it is difficult to determine accurate numbers of the tenants and sharecroppers evicted from plantations in 1933, Grubbs cites official studies with a figure of at least 15 to 20 percent of families but also notes that “a well-informed attorney . . . estimated displacement at 40 per cent, most of it because of the reduction program.”<sup>72</sup>

Evictions meant the loss of not only employment but also food, clothing, and shelter. Conrad explains that “to the sharecropper, the most feared action by the planter outside of violence, was eviction. Once he was cast off the plantation and his credit stopped at the commissary, the cropper had no means of support except federal relief, or the STFU [Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union]. Very few sharecroppers could find a new landlord or any other sort of work.”<sup>73</sup> Patton’s opening verses conjure the pain and uncertainty caused by the increase in evictions in 1933 occasioned by the AAA, with families (women and children) forced to hit the road when their labor was no longer needed. The view of mobility is far less ambivalent than the usual push and pull of those taking to the road for reasons discussed in chapters 1 and 2. During the Great Depression, the number of evictions leading to insecurity increased dramatically. Moreover, the mobility produced by evictions was not an assertion of agency, however nebulous a concept that may be, but rather the consequence of government policy playing out in the everyday lives of tens of thousands of sharecroppers and tenants.

In addition to the AAA, the first phase of the New Deal also created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, designed to aid the unemployed, including by providing work. As I mentioned at the opening of this chapter, FERA faced a policy dilemma as it confronted entrenched rural poverty. Enacted to relieve the pressures of Depression unemployment, the federal agency faced the challenge of ameliorating conditions in “an impoverished

region, [with] acreage reduction and tenant displacement, and chronic labor surplus.” Mertz continues, “These concerns could put FERA into the business of providing some new means of self-support for the rural poor and raising their living standards to an acceptable level. Such a program would go far beyond the original objective of aiding the unemployed, yet such scope was necessary for success.”<sup>74</sup> How would FERA define “unemployment” in the cotton belt? Given the living and working conditions of millions of sharecroppers and tenants, how should “employment” and “unemployment” be understood? Do those displaced by the AAA constitute victims of the Depression? What about those barely surviving in precarious circumstances, “working” according to the seasonal rhythms of cotton production? Are they, strictly speaking, unemployed because of the Depression? In effect, tenancy was more responsible than the Depression for the conditions requiring relief.

In one attempt to make FERA policy consistent with the aims of the AAA, those receiving government loans were encouraged to pursue subsistence farming.<sup>75</sup> As a form of “rehabilitation,” the agency would serve *in loco dominus*:

After placing its rehabilitants on land, the [F]ERA could furnish them, on credit, essentials for farming, such as the implements and work-stock which nearly all of them lacked. The [F]ERA might also provide cows and pigs (perhaps acquired from AAA surplus), poultry, stock feed, and crop and garden seed. It could even advance groceries to the clients until they could produce their own food. Rehabilitants would be expected to pay for livestock, equipment and advances with a share of their garden produce, eggs, milk, and the like, which the [F]ERA could distribute to nonfarm relievers. This plan proposed, in effect, that the [F]ERA assume the traditional “furnishing” of the landless poor, as well as their supervision. Thus, in two important functions it would substitute for the landlord.<sup>76</sup>

This type of government furnishing arrangement is reflected in Sleepy John Estes’s “Government Money” (1935). With subtle sarcasm, Estes narrates the basics of the government loan program:

Now, on the farm, they all have joined the government loan [2×]  
Now, the government give you three years chance, then you could have  
something of your own  
Now, the government furnish a milk cow, a rooster, and some portion  
of hen [2×]

You know long through the spring, then you could have some money  
to spend

His opening verse articulates a proposition that resonates with so many other opportunities for socioeconomic advancement through property ownership. The skepticism about anyone managing to turn things around enough in three years not only to pay back the loan but also to amass sufficient funds to purchase land, rings through his easy, unhurried delivery. His emphatic use of *they* to designate those who have enrolled in the program, asserts his distance from the group, enabling a certain amount of irony to develop. The B line's use of the word *chance* underscores the riskiness of the proposition. In the following verse, the word *furnish* links the government agency's program to plantation practices. The absurdity of furnishing *some portion of hen* emphasizes Estes's critical perspective on this attempt at relief. The mention of *long through the spring* of the B line, subtly implies to the knowing listener that during the winter and spring, before crops are ready for harvest, the farmers will be in the same condition of dependency and need as under a sharecropping contract: forced to borrow and barely getting by. What sounds on the face of it to be a reasonable program aimed at relief and eventual self-sufficiency, in Estes's sly and mocking treatment, becomes another opportunity doomed to failure.

Estes is correct: FERA's policies were problematic for a number of reasons. First, the dubiousness of subsistence farming as a viable option economically was recognized by many at the time.<sup>77</sup> The move toward large-scale production and mechanization was already underway in the South. Small subsistence farmers could hardly compete with larger operators profiting from economies of scale. Second, as a government loan program, FERA discriminated against African American farmers. As the initiative continued, it began to make loans according to selection criteria that assessed risk by looking at assets and experience, effectively barring sharecroppers and tenants.<sup>78</sup> Black farmers were discouraged from applying or their applications were denied in favor of those who owned tools and work stock or who could demonstrate managerial experience. Finally, and dovetailing with the discrimination in the criteria for extending credit, like most government programs its implementation relied on local county agents who were most often loyal to, or even members of, the planter group.<sup>79</sup>

The AAA was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1936 and FERA's responsibilities were redistributed to the Resettlement Administration and to the newly created Works Progress Administration in 1935.<sup>80</sup> In

the blues, references to the WPA begin to appear, as do references to direct relief under other guises.<sup>81</sup> Like the songs indirectly critical of relief during the 1927 flood, some songs suggest a link between government project work and compelled labor. Peetie Wheatstraw's "Working on the Project" (1937) operates this kind of conflation using humor in the lyrics, vocal delivery, and his piano work, as well as the accompanying guitar work by Kokomo Arnold. Wheatstraw sings in the opening verses:

I was working on the project, begging the relief for shoes [2×]  
Because the rock and concrete, hooo well, well, they's giving my feet  
the blues  
Working on the project with holes all in my clothes [2×]  
Trying to make me a dime, hooo well, well, to keep the rent man from  
putting me outdoors

The imagery calls to mind county chain gangs—barely clothed and shod—while the playful vocal dips and slides and syncopated fills create a contrasting lighthearted feel. As the song progresses, the emphasis shifts to having to wait to be paid. The B line of the third verse asserts, "But the payday is so long, oh well, well, until the grocery man won't let me eat." The emphasis on waiting for payment, and the resultant doing without food, makes government project work resemble other familiar labor arrangements.

The penultimate verse introduces the theme of the unfaithful lover, "spending all my dough," and the narrator assures his listeners that he's wise to her ways and "won't be that weak no more." The appearance of the betraying lover, specifically one who spends his money, seems to serve the typical function in the blues of indirect indictment—here, of federal programs. While he toils, presumably doing road work, he receives no money; he asserts, albeit indirectly, that the labor is stolen from him.<sup>82</sup> As the subject matter shifts, the more joyful singing style and playful fills of the opening verses give way to a more serious tone in the fourth and fifth verses.

The final verse declares, "Working on the project with payday three or four weeks away [2×] / Now, how can you make ends meet, hooo well, well, well, when you can't get no pay?" The vocal delivery becomes increasingly mournful with more descending melismata in the final verses. Although in the preceding verse he asserts that he will no longer be taken advantage of, he is stuck. Without work to be found, the government project is the only game in town. The deliberate cadence of the ending in the piano and guitar announces the finality of the situation soberly and without humor. Getting

wise and somehow escaping is only a fantasy, given the conditions of the Depression.

In a more ironic vein, framed in an urban setting of razing buildings for slum clearance, Casey Bill's "WPA Blues" (1936) condemns government relief by describing a catch-22 it creates. The narrator needs to work in order to pay his rent, but the only work available is through the WPA on wrecking crews tearing down houses. His opening verse narrates:

Everybody's working in this town, and it's worrying me night and day  
[2x]  
If that mean working too, have to work for the WPA  
Well, well, the landlord come this morning, he knocked on my door  
He asked me if I was going to pay my rent no more  
He said you have to move, if you can't pay  
And then he turned, and he walked slowly away  
So I have to try find me some other place to stay  
That house-wrecking crew's coming from the WPA

As the verses develop, the building he is living in is condemned, he cannot move because no one will rent to someone on relief, and, finally, his house comes tumbling down around him. In the final verse he sings:

Early next morning, while I was laying in my bed  
I heard a mighty rumbling, and the bricks come tumbling down on my  
head  
So I had to start ducking and dodging, and be on my way  
They was tearing my house down on me, oo-hoo, that crew from that  
WPA

The musical execution remains controlled, consistent with the matter-of-fact tone of the vocal, as it recounts an absurd situation.<sup>83</sup> The destructive image of the WPA wrecking ball threatening the narrator's safety and destroying his house indicts a system that not only does more harm than good but uses force and coercion to destroy shelter for the marginalized.<sup>84</sup> As in Wheatstraw's "Working on the Project," resignation seems to be the only option available in the face of such "relief."

In addition to the WPA, blues songs also reference direct relief in the form of distribution of goods. Painfully resonant with the relief efforts during the 1927 flood, the negative depiction of Red Cross stores in songs from



the 1930s suggests disrespectful treatment of those in need of assistance. As Mary Poole argues in reference to Social Security, New Deal administrators attempted to distinguish between unemployment, mostly collected by white industrial workers, and relief, more often distributed to Blacks and poorer whites. Employing a specific strategy to distinguish between the two forms of aid, she asserts that “policymakers . . . consciously set out to make the receipt of relief a negative, humiliating experience.”<sup>85</sup> Consistent with a pattern that dates back to the Freedmen’s Bureau, the resentful attitude about direct relief aligns with what Chad Alan Goldberg identifies as the denial of the rights of citizenship to those in a position of dependence. As Goldberg argues, the history of relief, viewed as protectionism and paternalism in the United States, correlates with a denial of the civil and political rights of those characterized as “paupers.” In other words, economic dependence is perceived as disabling civil and political autonomy.<sup>86</sup> From the receiving end, blues lyrics attest to the stigma and humiliation associated with the second-class status conferred by receiving aid. Walter Roland’s “Red Cross Blues” (1933) presents a disagreement between the narrator and his woman over having recourse to the Red Cross store. While she asks him to pick up some flour, he refuses, saying “Say, you know them Red Cross folks there, they sure do treat you mean / Don’t want to give you nothin’ but, two, three cans of beans.” The hint at discrimination is reinforced in the following verse, in which he claims in an ironic mode that the governor will take over relief and will be more equitable: “But, you know, the governor done take it in charge now, said he gon’ treat, everybody right / He gon’ give ’em two cans of beans now, and one little can of tripe.” Sonny Scott’s “Red Cross Blues” (1933) and Huddie Leadbelly’s “The Red Cross Store Blues” (1941) present narrators refusing to go to the Red Cross store in similar circumstances.<sup>87</sup> These songs resonate with the discriminatory and exploitative practices of the Red Cross as a relief organization dating back to the 1927 flood and bear witness to the ongoing negative associations with direct relief.

Sonny Boy Williamson I’s “Welfare Store Blues” (1940) goes a step further to rework the theme of a disagreement over getting groceries from a relief organization to include a specific reference to race and to FDR.<sup>88</sup> Characteristic of Williamson, the lyrics and vocal delivery exhibit a little more aggression in his treatment of the subject. His refrain emphatically asserts his refusal to obtain assistance in this way: “But I told her, no, baby, and I sure don’t want to go / I say, I’ll do anything in the world for you; I don’t want to go down to that welfare store.” In the second verse, he proposes a different solution to their predicament: “Now, you need to go get you some real white man, you

know, to sign you a little note / Then, get you a pair of them keen-toed shoes and one of them old pea-back soldier coats.”<sup>89</sup> Rather than accept direct relief from the welfare store, he encourages his woman to get a white man to loan her money for clothes. Suggesting a loan to a woman, and specifically from a “real white man,” carries with it the implication of prostitution. Williamson hints that a loan (perhaps in exchange for sexual favors) is preferable to direct “relief.” Moreover, the modifier *real* before *white man* conjures at least three possible meanings that are not incompatible with one another. Perhaps he is suggesting that race discrimination is more pointed in this era and that she will have to be certain that the individual granting the loan is not of mixed race. Or perhaps he is insinuating that the welfare store (and by extension the organization behind it) is not really white in the sense that it does not really exercise power. Or perhaps, and related to the second interpretation, those who work in the welfare store and mistreat Black customers are lower-class whites without power, intent on keeping African Americans “in their place.” The lyrical emphasis on race calls attention to the racial bias and discrimination that forms of direct relief perpetuate. In the end, the songs of Estes, Wheatstraw, Weldon, and Williamson all proclaim that government relief merely replicates forms of untenable racialized economic exploitation familiar from the past and, in Williamson’s case, are even worse than the indebtedness and dependency of personal loans.

Later relief and economic security efforts of the New Deal, such as the Farm Security Administration, Federal Housing Administration, and Social Security Administration, repeated the patterns of systemic racial discrimination of earlier efforts, and with the same underlying causes: color-blind policy, local agents, alliance with particular political and economic interests, inattention to implementation, et cetera. For example, the FSA failed to make loans to African American tenants and sharecroppers at a rate consistent with their representation in the overall farming population. Mertz concludes that aside from lack of publicity about the program leading to low application rates, “a much more fundamental problem was that the selectivity of farm purchase lending was weighted against landless Blacks. Since they were concentrated in the ranks of sharecroppers and wage laborers they usually did not have the equipment or down payment money preferred for such credit. Finally, the county selection committees established under the Bankhead-Jones Act [legislation aimed to address tenancy] were often unresponsive to national nondiscrimination policies.”<sup>90</sup> Consistent with redlining and resultant house contract sales, Sitkoff maintains that “The Federal Housing Administration . . . encouraged residential segregation. Established by the National Housing

Act of 1934 as a shot in the arm for the sickly construction industry, the FHA wrote into its *Underwriting Manual* the warning that property values deteriorate when Negroes move into predominantly white neighborhoods. The FHA also refused to guarantee mortgages on homes purchased by Blacks in white communities, augmenting the trend toward racial segregation.”<sup>91</sup> Most problematically, old-age insurance and unemployment insurance available under the Social Security Administration explicitly excluded domestic and farm workers. Following a pattern established when these same categories of laborers were funneled to FERA—relief instead of unemployment—Social Security also did not cover these workers; in other words, “the vast majority of the southern African American workforce.”<sup>92</sup> Blues songs understandably do not reference these specific forms of discrimination. As we saw in the class action lawsuits over house contract sales in Chicago in the late 1960s and early 1970s, people are not always aware of discrimination when it assumes the form of exclusion. It takes time to learn that others are receiving benefits (salaries, jobs, higher quality goods and services, etc.) that you are not.<sup>93</sup> Far more obvious are the all too familiar ways federal agencies treat a vulnerable population: substandard wages, debt peonage, coercion including violence, and double binds. It is not surprising that blues songs continue to give voice to these types of injustices, and often under the guise of abusive or exploitative romantic relations.

### Come On in My Kitchen

Relief, from the perspective of the blues, looks more like the same old mistreatment than it does help or assistance. Robert Johnson’s “Come On in My Kitchen” (unissued) provides a rich and complicated evocation of the Depression context. The song, recorded in two takes on Johnson’s first day of recording in San Antonio, Texas, with American Record Company in 1936, contains the haunting refrain “You’d better come on in my kitchen, babe, it’s going to be rainin’ outdoors.”<sup>94</sup> The beginning of the slower, unissued version features an abbreviated statement of the melody, with its distinctive descending line at the end, which introduces an entirely hummed first verse. The deliberate tempo coupled with the humming establish a somber mood and create the conditions to highlight the refrain with accompanying unison guitar line. Without any context other than the musical one, the words conjure a scene of a person beckoning from a doorway to someone to come in before getting caught in the rain. The words seem displaced in the mouth of

Johnson, especially *my kitchen*, suggesting that they have been uttered to him by a woman. Seductive yet oddly decontextualized, the song opens with the offer of succor from the elements.

As the song develops, the verses provide only disjointed fragments of information that are difficult to resolve into a narrative structure. To some extent, the second verse reinforces the interpretation that the words uttered in the refrain are the repetition of something said to him by a woman. He sings, “Ah, the woman I love, took from my best friend / Some joker got lucky, stole her back again,” hinting that perhaps it was his friend’s girlfriend or wife who beckoned to him to come inside. If this is the case, “come on in my kitchen” may represent the offer of more than shelter from the rain: it may signal food, warmth, and sex, presumably with his friend’s woman. But the casual relating of events—that he stole the woman from his friend and she was in turn stolen from him—suggest a world of competition and need, men stealing from one another as they pass women around.

The third verse continues the development of a world in which human relations are tenuous and needs dominate: “Ah, ah, she’s gone; I know she won’t come back / I’ve taken the last nickel out of her ’nation sack.” Although the relation between the woman’s departure and his having taken her money is not clear, in the context of the Depression, the fact of his having stolen from her reinforces the sense of a dog-eat-dog world.<sup>95</sup> The slow tempo, relatively clear diction, and the sparse guitar part all contribute to the stark feel that reinforces the images of seeking shelter and struggling against natural and human forces. Without elaborate guitar work to provide a kind of musical refuge, the words and images retain a haunting character. The spoken lines that follow the third verse invoke something more ominous and threatening than the rain of the refrain: “Babe, can’t you hear that wind howl / Can’t you hear that wind howl.” It seems as though the narrator is imagining talking to the woman he loves from the safety and security of being indoors, only listening to the wind outside. But we know that this can only be a memory, since “she’s gone” and he knows “she won’t come back,” rendering the lyrics even more poignant.

The seductiveness of the vocal delivery and guitar work, and the themes of abandonment and isolation add layers of complexity to the song’s meaning, and especially the refrain. While the refrain seems to be words spoken by a woman to the narrator to lure him into an illicit but pleasurable and comforting relationship, now he utters the same words, beckoning “come on in my kitchen.” The reversal of gender roles in the seduction changes the meaning slightly, as he appropriates a woman’s line to use with females in

the audience. Clearly, he does not have a kitchen to draw women in, but he sings “come on in my kitchen” to elicit a favorable response. Perhaps in search of compassion, the singer evokes a tale of vulnerability involving a need for shelter and comfort in the past, hoping to spark a listener to project herself into the woman’s role in the present. Manipulating the past scene of seduction by recycling the line enables him to occupy the position of the seducer rather than the seduced, aiming to convince at least one woman in the audience to offer to bring him home.<sup>96</sup> The appropriation of the line reveals the complex power relations involved when the seducer portrays himself as the seduced in order to entice others to seduce him. The seducer and seduced become almost indistinguishable, as the line is appropriated, redeployed, and recontextualized in the song. Ultimately, the shifting dynamics highlight the difficulty of determining where power resides in a world of precarity, dependence, and need. Motivations are obscured and the exercise of agency tenuous all around.

Johnson’s seductive lament in “Come On in My Kitchen” opens a window onto the hurt and desperation of the Depression. It suggests that all relief measures are temporary: relationships end and people move on. But the song itself stands not only as testimony to the ethos of the period but as a form of relief in and of itself. Its gorgeous vocal line, compelling riff, stark setting, and haunting lyrics provide a kind of refuge for a weary listener in need of comfort. This song and, indeed, all songs provide a form of relief that cannot feed, clothe, or house but can temporarily distract from life’s hardships and provide a sense of community. There is no segregation, discrimination, or coercion here; only the possibility of entering a world and communing with the singer and his audience and, thereby, experiencing passing relief from troubles.

Before and during the Depression, we know that African Americans spent some of the precious few dollars they had on Victrolas and 78 rpm records.<sup>97</sup> Accounts from the Depression-era writers who studied the conditions among sharecroppers, describe the insides of homes with record players.<sup>98</sup> The presence of these objects in tenant shacks and even in refugee camps, after having been saved from flood waters, stands as testimony to their value for the people who owned them. One Black former sharecropper interviewed by the Federal Writers’ Project listed “Victrola music at night” as part of the “recreation and good times [that] we have to make . . . for ourselves.”<sup>99</sup> The Victrolas and records bear witness to music’s significance to this population as a kind of relief.<sup>100</sup> Against the backdrop of official forms of “relief”—which, at the very least, always had strings attached, when they didn’t involve humiliation

or engender further debt—the ethereal music emanating from the Victrola must have seemed like a lifeline: comfort in dark times and a way of coping when everything else fails.

## Updating Relief: Welfare

Frustration and anger over the humiliation associated with receiving relief during the Depression and into the early 1940s became an explicit articulation of distrust of government aid voiced in later blues. Social welfare of various kinds was officially introduced as part of the New Deal and, as we have seen, most often perpetuated and aggravated racialized discrimination and social, political, and economic inequality. In the second half of the twentieth century, newer forms of aid are referenced in the blues with the same skeptical, distrusting, even disdainful, attitude toward government “help.” For example, John Lee Hooker’s “Welfare Blues,” originally recorded in 1950 and released in 1971, mentions reluctantly seeking welfare as a result of an ongoing strike. More characteristically, a pair of songs that bookend the 1970s give voice to the mistrust created by relations of dependency between the welfare state and its clients. Beyond the helplessness and desperation of poverty, Jimmy Dawkins’s “Welfare Blues” (*All for Business*, 1971) and Albert Collins’s “When the Welfare Turns Its Back on You” (*Ice Pickin’*, 1978), both express the fear that the government will suddenly and without warning cease providing aid. In an era marked by a retreat from Lyndon B. Johnson’s war on poverty and a new conservative rhetoric of welfare “reform,” these cautionary tales serve as a counter-discourse to the right-wing representations of the abuses that the welfare system engenders. In the blues, the folks trapped in the system are not the abusers but rather the abused.<sup>101</sup>

In the context of the smooth, West Side Chicago sound of the early 1970s, with trebly guitar settings and prominent organ backing and horns, Dawkins nearly screams his lyrics about the predicament of those dependent on the government: “People ballin’ and cryin’; everybody got the welfare blues [2×] / Look, children screamin’ and cryin’ for bread; mom and dad ain’t got no shoes.” This opening verse establishes the conditions of living below the poverty line with a description so elemental as to be applicable across both urban and rural America: lack of food and clothing is the common denominator of poverty. Under such conditions, people can only emote in despair. His second verse indicts the government directly for victimizing the dependents, pulling the rug out from under them without warning: “Old folks out on the

street, oh Lord, they got no place to go [2×] / Oh, the governor took their welfare check, said, ‘we can’t feed y’all no more.’” His mention of the governor accurately reflects the responsibility of state governments for administering federal funds through various forms of assistance, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Supplemental Security Income.<sup>102</sup> People dependent on government aid are suddenly left in the lurch when the state ceases to issue checks. The shift in pronoun from the governor took *their* welfare check to the direct discourse of *we can’t feed y’all no more*, subtly and implicitly moves the narrator, and by extension the listener, into identifying with those being deprived of aid.<sup>103</sup> Dawkins’s vocal tone only adds to this identification with its proximity to *screamin’*, *ballin’*, and *cryin’*. Furthermore, the direct discourse of the harsh phrase that fails to explain adequately the denial of benefits—*we can’t feed y’all no more*—blocks any sympathy with the government’s position. Depicting the poor, first from the outside and then from the inside, the movement of the lyrics creates empathy for those with no options left.

After the soulful guitar solo, Dawkins elaborates on the sudden loss of support, including his own interaction with the civil service worker tasked with delivering the bad news: “The mailman told me this morning, as he was passing my door / Well, the man told me this morning, the girl [?] had been passing my door / I don’t carry no more wel’ check for the poor; there ain’t no food, no food for the poor.” The exasperation builds to an indictment through the last verse and outro, as Dawkins passes judgment and assigns blame: “Governor of Illinois, he done mess up everything; he done cut out the poor welfare check, I’m about to lose everything.” Identifying with the public for whom he sings, Dawkins vents the anger and frustration of those dependent on the government who have been summarily cut off.

Albert Collins’s “When the Welfare Turns Its Back on You” raises the same theme explicitly from the outset, stating the inevitability of the government failing to fulfill its obligations. He poses and answers the inescapable question to those in a position of dependence: “Now what you gonna do, when the welfare turn its back on you? [2×] / Now, you be standin’ there stranded; there ain’t a thing that you can do.” Whereas Dawkins’s treatment focuses on the immediate circumstances of those who find themselves without the money on which they had been depending, Collins’s lyrics provide insight into the kinds of dynamics that exist between the welfare state and its clients. While he, like Dawkins, highlights destitution—“Now you look all through your house, yeah, you can’t find a piece of bread [2×] / Sometime you begin to wonder, if you be better off, better off, dead”—Collins also details the game of cat and mouse to which those in the system are subjected. His more



aggressive singing style communicates an indictment of the system emphasized by stop time:<sup>104</sup>

You go down to the welfare  
Give 'em one, two report  
Something they sellin' you  
Will surely get your goat  
If you tell 'em you sick  
You better have a bad cough  
'Cause if you don't  
They be ready to throw you off

The insider's description of dealing with bureaucratic agencies underscores not only the lack of compassion and humanity in the relations between the state and its clients but also the need for strategic action and self-control on the part of welfare recipients. Having to fill out forms, swallow one's pride (*Something they sellin' you will surely get your goat*), and foresee any and all possible avenues of denial of benefits, puts the person on welfare on the defensive in multiple ways: anticipating bureaucratic moves, challenges, and even losing everything. Like the situation of the sharecropper at settlement time, the welfare recipient is at the mercy of the state for survival. Planning is most often futile because, according to Collins, it's not a matter of *if* you lose welfare, it's a matter of *when*. Like Dawkins, Collins cynically warns his audience not to rely on government aid. Such assistance will stop without warning, leaving you in desperate straits.

Robert Cray's 1980 cover of Collins's song, "The Welfare (Turns Its Back on You)," and Kirk Fletcher's 2004 cover of Dawkins's "Welfare Blues," underscore the enduring resonance of the message of the songs: even in the twenty-first century, everyone should be wary of depending on government support. The songs about welfare underscore the inhumanity enabled by an institutionalized system of relief. The cruel treatment of victims in the segregated flood camps of 1927 and the blind indifference to racialized southern poverty of the New Deal haunt the depiction of welfare. Local and state authorities again administer federal funds, enabling long-standing patterns of bias, discrimination, and prejudice to determine their distribution. Similar to the supposedly color-blind policies of the Civil War veterans' benefits, bureaucratic authorities implement policies, enabling a lack of empathy and an avoidance of the facts of differential treatment. No wonder the representation of relief in the blues is always accompanied by suspicion, and often



disdain and fear: the government gives with one hand and not only threatens to arbitrarily and suddenly take away with the other but also to extract some kind of payment. The message about relief in the blues communicates what contradictory ideologies and strategies for relief and reform look like on the receiving end. While blues music does not attempt to offer alternative social, political, or economic policy, it does provide a clear articulation of the difficulty of intervening, reforming, correcting, or ameliorating situations that have a deeply entrenched history. From the point of view of those most desperately in need of help, relief more often resembles a trap to ensnare and immobilize than a leg up toward a different future.

# The Call for Justice in the Blues

If even relief efforts can be used to coerce labor from, exploit, humiliate, and impede the progress of those most in need of aid, how can there possibly be hope for a justice to come? Clearly, blues music provides comfort and solace to a community of listeners. The blues may even assist in raising awareness about common forms of victimization, such as predatory lending or the types of victimization under the New Deal. But what about justice? Beyond calling out past mistreatment, how might the blues imagine reckoning and redemption?

Many songs recount experiences of victimization, betrayal, and inequity. Countless direct and indirect references signal the wrongs committed. I would argue that an exhaustive cataloguing of the wrongs is less important than their (re)statement to a group of listeners for whom they represent the status quo. Songs, like Aron Burton's "Garbage Man," that reveal the "truth" of socioeconomic conditions perform a key function: they give voice to facts that are often repressed or ignored, in a language and music with which a particular community can identify. Recalling and reciting the injustices, reminding the audience of the daily mistreatments, major and minor, keeps them present in thought. Without such awareness, no collective action can be taken to address or remedy wrongs.

Freddie King's "I Love the Woman" (1961) serves as an excellent example of the truth-telling a blues song can perform. It relays in succinct, almost telegraphic form, a tale of mistreatment replete with oblique references to history. Even the record's label—where songwriting credit and, therefore, royalties go to Billy Myles and Nathaniel Nathan (son of King Records founder

and owner Syd Nathan)—documents the mechanisms of economic exploitation practiced on African Americans in the recording industry.<sup>1</sup> The lyrics open with a clear declaration of the predicament: “I love the woman and learned a lesson that I can’t forget.” Firmly anchored in the present, the use of *I love* as opposed to *loved* establishes the fact that the relationship is ongoing. Yet, the narrator signals through tone, vibrato, and emphasis (particularly the extended nasal at the end of *woman*) that the lesson learned ought to have ended the relationship. King’s signature addition to the A’ line of an emphatic *yes* with melisma in a triplet pattern communicates the idea that the lesson has gone unheeded. The melismatic *yes* also serves as an invitation to the audience to connect and identify with the singer.<sup>2</sup> The B line confirms these inferences, stating unequivocally “Yes, she’s mean and she’s evil, and now my life is in a solid mess.” The instrumental fills from the piano and guitar reinforce the message of suffering in the present moment, echoing the almost pained singing of *yes* in the A’ and B lines.

The song exploits a strategically placed guitar solo to allow tension to build after the declarations in the opening verse. The guitar work develops King’s characteristic patterns that disable a feeling of forward motion.<sup>3</sup> Telling a story on the guitar parallel to the lyrical one to this point, King makes statements that often employ an ascending pattern culminating with a bent note. While the ascending pattern seems to lead in a specific direction, the bent note upon arrival frustrates the feeling of attaining even an intermediate goal. Heavy guitar emphasis on the downbeat of the measures in the opening bars followed by rest reinforces the sense of lack of movement. Half-voiced notes are nearly drowned out by the triplets of the backing ensemble of piano, bass, and drums in measure 4, suggesting inability to escape from the present turmoil. King’s voiced *yeah* in response to his descending slide down the fretboard in measure 7, although seemingly affirmative, does nothing to change the perception of impeded, constrained motion on the guitar that mirrors the narrator’s situation. The move to the dominant chord (V in the I-IV-V progression), which should signal the high point of the solo, lacks a sense of triumph or clarity but instead feels tentative and hemmed in, reinforcing the impression left by the preceding eight bars. The voice of the guitar is absent from the final notes of the descending sequence of the turnaround, which are instead voiced by the bass. The guitar remains silent at this significant point of the progression, contributing to the impression that it has been subsumed by the other voices in the ensemble, robbing it of agency. The guitar solo thus serves as a restatement of the kind of predicament articulated by the narrator in the first verse: he is stuck and unable to extricate himself.

The unusual placement of the guitar solo after the first verse allows for the feeling of the present circumstance to sink in before introducing a second verse in stop time that will detail the wrongs committed against the narrator. The instrumental runs up to the lyrical articulations in the second verse fail to stop before the a cappella vocal enters, adding a feeling of pressure on the vocalist that mirrors the power relation represented in the lyrics. The instruments seemingly prod him to proclaim:

She wakes me in the morning  
Before the break of day  
Telling me to get up and go out  
And earn myself some pay  
She scolds me like an orphan  
And treats me like a clown  
And when I need some lovin'  
That woman can't be found

The treatment described, while it could plausibly characterize an abusive romantic relationship, also parallels the historical treatment of African Americans. Agricultural workers, bound and unbound, were woken before dawn and forced to work. The *scold[ing] like an orphan* echoes the accounts in a variety of labor contexts of treatment at the hands of overseers and bosses, who added threats of physical violence to verbal abuse. The *treat[ing] like a clown* rings with the history of minstrelsy and, even more darkly, the long-standing practice of finding the debasement and suffering of African Americans amusing.<sup>4</sup> As a list of complaints against the woman, it telegraphs an encapsulated history of racialized economic and social injustices that persist in 1961, the time of recording. The culminating line of the second verse is sung against a constant triplet backdrop that crescendos throughout the line, causing King to increase his vocal volume and intensity as he finishes. The effect is one of exasperation, frustration, and strain consistent with both the romantic interpretation of the song—that she does not fulfill his emotional and sexual needs—and the broader socioeconomic reading—that white society abandons those in greatest distress. King's vocal transition from the second verse to the final one (a repetition of the lyrics of the first verse), a kind of abbreviated pronunciation of *and* that slides into the *I* of *I love the woman*, causes him to extend his pronunciation of the diphthong vowel. The elongated sound increases the feeling of pain in the delivery, refocusing attention back on the narrator's suffering. Despite mistreatment, he proclaims his love again and

concludes the song with a stop-time rendition of the second half of the final line: “And now my life is in a solid mess.” The “resolution” provided by the guitar response that follows provides no real feeling of escape from the predicament. The bent, ascending pitch notes are followed by a rapid descent toward the tonic that does not ultimately resolve. King continues the descent beyond the tonic in a partially voiced, trailing line that refuses the listener any sense of closure. Although the descent does reach the tonic, the failure to stop there—and indeed, the push further down the scale, but not as far as the octave below—reinforces the feeling of being stuck. This lack of musical resolution renders more emphatic the present tense of the final pronouncement: *and now my life is in a solid mess*.

Freddie King voices a blunt truth about the presentness of suffering: it is ongoing despite an awareness of the source of the pain. In this respect, his truth-telling is more poignant and personal than Burton’s in “Garbage Man.” “I Love the Woman” recognizes the emotional dilemma of someone who is being victimized, who is aware of the victimization, and yet cannot see his way clear to escape. The fact that he has *learned a lesson that [he] can’t forget* suggests eventual action; but for now, he has a mess to contend with.

As I argued in my interpretation of Muddy Waters’s “You Can’t Lose What You Ain’t Never Had,” songs that state the facts of victimization, even if they do not offer a way out, nonetheless aid in the formation of collective identity. They provide a vehicle for common recognition of a problem that is most often unspoken. Parallel to the argument Ronald Radano makes with respect to slave song, that “Negro music continually revealed a potential for reaffirming social relationships,” the blues also serves a performative function with respect to group solidarity.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, blunt statements about being trapped in present circumstances, such as King’s and Waters’s, may be more helpful in the constitution of a communal bond than those that emphatically assert escape from abuse. Sonny Boy Williamson II’s “Fattening Frogs for Snakes” (1957), which declares, “It took me a long time to find out my mistakes [2x] / [Spoken: It sho’ did man] / But I bet you my bottom dollar, I’m not fattenin’ no more frogs for snakes,” while satisfying at some level, may be less meaningful than those songs that refrain from making pronouncements about a definitive break.<sup>6</sup> Both in spite and because of Williamson’s resolute declaration never to allow himself to be exploited again, the audience likely suspects otherwise. As we saw in Big Bill Broonzy’s “Plow Hand Blues,” bold proclamations about escaping exploitation are thwarted by subconscious resistance as well as by material obstacles. Williamson’s “Fattening Frogs for Snakes,” and songs like it that assert an end to domination and abuse, enable identification with a

wish fulfillment fantasy and, therewith, cathartic, positive feelings. However, lyrics that acknowledge the complexity of escaping abuse may ultimately be more helpful in the formation of a collective identity. Those songs that do not imagine a way out or, like Broonzy's, that acknowledge the difficulty of escape, gesture toward the larger problem of social justice that persists. As Bobby Rush humorously describes the predicament in "Porcupine Meat" (2016):

I'm in love with a woman, she don't mean me no good  
I would leave that woman, if I could  
I tried to leave her many times before  
And every time I leave, I walk back for more  
I know it ain't right  
Oh, it just ain't fair  
I want to leave, but I can't go nowhere  
It's like porcupine meat  
Too fat to eat, too lean to throw away  
Porcupine meat, it's too fat to eat  
It's too lean to throw away<sup>7</sup>

Avoiding easy answers, this type of truth-telling fosters a group listening experience that can aid the formation of collective identity.

Songs that articulate painful truths encourage individual listeners to identify with the situation presented by the singer. In the blues context, individual listeners feel themselves becoming part of a group that identifies with the story being told. The identification is reinforced by audience members who respond affirmatively to the singer in live performance. Even while listening to recordings, the same dynamic of group formation is set in motion. The tale of mistreatment resonates with individual listeners, as recognition of common experience enables a collective bond to form. I would argue that collective recognition prompted by truth-telling represents a *sine qua non* of any articulation of a call for social justice. In other words, stating the facts and, thereby, constituting a community for whom those facts represent a problem to address, represent the necessary first steps in any demand for reckoning.<sup>8</sup>

## Coping with Victimization

As we have seen, the literal and metaphorical meanings conveyed in the blues document mistreatment. The cheating and betrayal that occur within romantic

contexts mirror and evoke broader racialized social dynamics, revealing truths about both the self and others. Most often, songs recount the discovery of the narrator's victimization at the hands of someone else. That process involves both self-discovery—recognizing previous ignorance of and even complicity in exploitation—and discovery about others—the unmasking of hostile, agonistic social dynamics. While the younger self may have been ignorant or self-deceived, awareness transforms the narrator into a wiser version of him- or herself with a different outlook on society. An enlightened persona emerges, no longer naïve to the ways of the world. Listeners, seeing themselves in the formerly self-deceived, ignorant victim, may find comfort in knowing others have also been victimized and may seek to share the narrator's new enlightened perspective.

The revelation of past victimization and the expectation of its likely repetition in the future would seem to recommend a reorientation toward skepticism and even suspiciousness when dealing with others. Many songs recount and model behavior aimed at preventing or curtailing future victimization. As I argued, while some songs explicitly model self-restraint, others elaborate revenge fantasies. Most often, the revenge songs function as cautionary tales that ultimately communicate the self-protective value of inaction as a means of preventing the escalation of violence. The all-too-familiar experience of violent repression in response to even minor forms of challenge to the racial hierarchy in the Jim Crow South and the urban North taught a pragmatic lesson for survival. Sublimating frustration and anger into creative expression both prevents further victimization and provides a feeling of displaced agency in performance. Importantly, restraint and resignation in this respect do not necessarily mean the same thing as acceptance of the status quo.<sup>9</sup>

Inherent in the blues are strategies for dealing with frustration, anger, and resentment. Irony and humor, in particular, provide an outlet for creative energy that requires agency on the part of both performer and audience. This sublimated form of action aids at least partial catharsis but also serves a pedagogical function by modeling means other than physical violence to gain the upper hand. Signifying in the blues is part of a broader tradition of African American verbal dexterity used to assert mastery and control and, at least temporarily, subvert power relations.<sup>10</sup> For both performer and audience, signifying both lyrically and musically requires creative engagement with forms of expression that hold the potential for reshaping power dynamics in the future. In this way, signifying both enables an immediate release through humor and provides a mode for engaging with and challenging oppressive forms of authority.

In addition to signifying, other formal aspects of the blues shape perceptions of the world. Specifically, the blues' formal structure sets up the expectation that certain actions provoke responses. At a primary level, the antiphonal structure emphasizes the inevitability of response. The repetition of the A line in the A' line, the response in the B line, and instrumental responses to vocal calls, all serve to inculcate an understanding that actions (calls) prompt responses. In addition, vocal performances and especially instrumental solos train listeners to anticipate that the building-up of tension will lead to its release. Dynamic crescendos and decrescendos reinforce this feeling, as does the arc of instrumental solos. Likewise, the turnaround (usually in bars 11 and 12) provides partial release of the steadily mounting tension but also sets up the next chord progression cycle. The dynamic movement of tension and release—in all the forms that it assumes within the blues—teaches that actions imply consequent reactions. In other words, performing and listening to blues ingrains patterns of expectation through formal structures.

In the context of an aesthetic form that reveals injustices and betrayals, this formal structure is significant: it enables the investment in a belief that actions have consequences. As expressed in lyrics from Lonnie Johnson's "How Could You Be So Mean" (1947), there is an implied assertion that "what goes up, it must come down." If individuals cheat, lie, exploit, and abuse, then, according to the expectations established by the formal structure of the blues, they will eventually receive their just deserts. Scores will be settled, accounts will be reckoned, the universe will provide a karmic response—just as the A' line follows the A line, the B line follows after that, and so on. As a kind of artistic sublimation, formal structures of the blues encourage a belief in eventual justice for those who have been wronged.

But the lesson of secular karma embedded in the structure of the blues lacks a prescription for any particular type of action. Truths are revealed and aspects of the form teach the lesson that wrongs will be righted; however, there is no indication of how this will occur. At the lyrical level, narrators respond to the revelation of injustice in different ways: with violent revenge, restraint, resignation, resolve to leave, or embrace of the present moment. As senders of messages to listeners in the audience, performers model examples of possible responses. T-Bone Walker's "T-Bone Shuffle" (1948) contains a *carpe diem* message: "Have fun while you can, fate's an awful thing [2×] / Never know what might happen, that's why I love to sing." Other songs endorse a defiant rejection of things as they are, such as Big Bill Broonzy's "Plow Hand Blues" and Sonny Boy Williamson II's "Fattening Frogs for Snakes." Still others seem



to state the facts flatly, without any particular form of advice, such as Muddy Waters's "You Can't Lose What You Ain't Never Had" or Freddie King's "I Love the Woman." While these responses represent a broad spectrum of possible reactions, they nonetheless share one particularly significant trait: as part of the genre, by example, they advocate for sublimating victimization into creative activity. Even when the narrators seemingly do nothing, when they "fold their arms and slowly walk away"<sup>11</sup> or state with authority but without elaboration that "you gotta reap just what you sow,"<sup>12</sup> the musical performance demonstrates agency in the channeling of anger and frustration into the creation of a work of art. The exercise of agency in aesthetic creativity not only serves as a release valve for pent-up frustration; it also promotes positive action in a number of ways.

Fundamentally, creative sublimation models a way of maintaining or reclaiming self-respect. While the victim of both personal and socioeconomic betrayal may feel powerless, disenfranchised, and prevented from responding in the context of the immediate situation, sublimation holds out the possibility for future constructive action. Freddie King provides an outstanding example of this type of transformation—from passive victim to self-respecting believer in a justice to come—in his "Someday, After Awhile (You'll Be Sorry)" (1963). In contrast to "I Love the Woman," "Someday, After Awhile" narrates the psychological movement from depression, to remembrance of past joy, and, finally, to definitive separation from the one who mistreated him. Significantly, in the bridge to the song, King sings:

Troubles, trouble on my mind  
Troubles, trouble way down the line  
I don't need no sympathy  
So, baby, don't you pity me

The refusal of sympathy and pity, underscored by the more jazzlike musical move to the II and the triplets on the V and sharped V, signals both a rejection of further emotional ties and, more significantly, the recapturing of self-respect. In the final verse of the song, the narrator proclaims his acceptance of his present misery but also, more significantly, his belief that his lover will suffer in the future (as he suffers now): "I may be blue, but I don't mind / Yes, 'cause I know way down the line / I said someday, someday, someday, someday, baby, after a while, you'll be sorry." The insistent repetition of *someday* conveys the narrator's certainty about the eventuality of the emotional quid pro quo. Significantly, belief in eventual justice emerges on the heels of

regained self-respect. The narrator may not know when or how change will occur, but he is certain that it will.<sup>13</sup> For an audience of listeners, the self-respect modeled in the performance of “Someday, After Awhile” demonstrates the process of aesthetic sublimation. Painful emotions are channeled into a song that provides a kind of roadmap for reclaiming a feeling of agency. In this way, the song illustrates that pain can be productive. Listeners will learn to pick themselves up, move away from those who would abuse, and be wary when abusers seemingly offer comfort or solace. Finally, and most importantly, members of an audience will learn to invest in a belief in eventual reckoning.

Beyond the modeling of self-respect, which may serve to empower those who feel victimized, aesthetic sublimation also provides a means for creating a collective awareness of victimization. Individual listeners, recognizing their own plight in the stories and emotions communicated by the music, understand that others share these experiences. Coupled with the lesson concerning self-respect, collective consciousness of victimization provides a first step toward group action.<sup>14</sup> While not the faith-based encouragement to action contained in freedom songs like “We Shall Overcome,”<sup>15</sup> the blues, in its own time and space, can function to unite members of a community in the awareness that things are not right.

## Responses to Betrayal

The message of the blues often boils down to a narrative of broken trust. Betrayal has been discovered, prompting reevaluation and, with it, the possibility for change in the future. The narrative arc of many blues songs consequently depends on the representation of the present moment as a turning point. In light of revelations, narrators reinterpret the past, causing the present to be perceived as a moment of readjustment or even rupture.<sup>16</sup> Some songs project a future that will be free of victimization, although always in ways that lack specificity. At the very least, narrators who have been betrayed, like the one in Freddie King’s “Someday, After Awhile,” are fundamentally changed by the truth that has been revealed. Junior Parker succinctly summarizes the results of such transformations in “Next Time You See Me” (1957): “Next time you see me, things won’t be the same.” Or, as Big Bill Broonzy voiced in an interview with Studs Terkel, “[blues singers] sing because they figure there’s going to be a change in something; that it’s not always going to be the same.”<sup>17</sup> While there are no specifics provided about the form the change will take, nonetheless, the fact of change is significant. Belief in change as a result of

new awareness renders the present moment distinctly different: rather than a continuation of the past, it represents a door to the future.

While projections into a different future do not always occur in the blues, some songs try to imagine something different and better. Revenge fantasies, as we saw in chapter 4, offer at least emotional satisfaction, all the while cautioning against actually engaging in violent reprisal. Other invocations hint at happiness in the future: “The sun’s gonna shine in my backdoor someday” or its modern equivalent, “The next woman that I marry, she’s gotta work and bring me the dough.”<sup>18</sup> The vagueness about the form that happiness will take does not undermine belief in a better future. Rather, the revelation of mistreatment and injustice is accompanied by a gesture toward belief in eventual escape and even redress.

Seemingly running counter to the songs that give voice to faith in eventual accountability for past wrongs are blues songs that appear to deny the possibility for justice, invoking a view of history as repeating itself. Some songs refer to the past in ways that indicate a lack of progress in addressing and eradicating racialized forms of injustice that might warrant a loss of hope. Through their lyrics, these songs project the idea that change is not coming or, if it is, it’s in a mighty slow way that strains human capacities for faith. One example, Washboard Sam and His Washboard Band’s “I’ve Been Treated Wrong” (1942), alludes to slavery in its opening couplet, invoking a sense of a lack of change: “I don’t know my real name; I don’t know when I was born [2×] / These troubles I been having, seems like I was raised in an orphan home.”<sup>19</sup> The A and A’ lines establish a link to slavery through the persistence of problems of identity linked to knowledge of name and birthdate. The ongoing legacy of slavery is particularly striking in a song recorded in the 1940s. The second verse conjures the isolation of victimization, here figured in the orphaned child suffering alone: “My mother died and left me when I was only two years old [2×] / And the troubles I’ve been having, the good Lord only knows.” The grim outlook of the orphan frames feelings of isolation and neglect. The song’s third verse anticipates a life of misery without justice. Similar to King’s lines in “I Love the Woman,” here Washboard Sam mentions slavery in a simile, in case the oblique references in the first verse were not clear enough: “I been treated like an orphan and [I’ve] been workin’ like a slave [2×] / And if I never get my revenge, even this will carry me to my grave.” Mistreatment in the form of abandonment, exploitation, and abuse prepares for the question of the appropriate response, to which the B line offers revenge. While the opening *if* clause (*If I never get my revenge*) implies that the narrator will seek revenge as long as he is able, perhaps

without success, the culmination of the line suggests that this desire will motivate him until he dies. The invocations of slavery in “I’ve Been Treated Wrong” paint a bleak portrait of the possibility of socioeconomic progress. Unlike King’s use of similar lines, Washboard Sam’s song does not use allusions to slavery to characterize a romantic relation. Instead, the indictment is general: society has failed the mistreated narrator in this account. And while personal revenge may not succeed, it nonetheless motivates him to act with determination until his death.

The musical setting of “I’ve Been Treated Wrong” employs an almost anachronistic musical setting in 1942 that is consistent with the lyrical message of lack of progress in history. The style, employed by Chicago recording artists of the 1930s like Big Bill Broonzy, uses piano, guitar, and washboard to back a relaxed vocal delivery.<sup>20</sup> The unhurried tempo and almost loping rhythm with slight syncopation in the piano responses combine with light-hearted interplay of guitar and piano to function as a juxtaposition to the tale of victimization recounted in the lyrics. The lack of the kind of urgency and force that would become the hallmark of the later Chicago blues sound nonetheless aids in the communication of a message of determination in the face of overwhelming odds. Whereas the message might appear at first glance to be bleak and pessimistic, particularly where the possibility for happiness or change is concerned, the lyrics articulate a determined desire to seek revenge for social injustices. Even if the final line of the song describes a familiar predicament of being trapped in the present moment—“I’m too old for the orphan and too young for the old folk’s home”—Washboard Sam’s spoken encouragement to the other instrumentalists—“play it, play it,” “yes, yes”—prods them to a rollicking conclusion. As we have seen many times, present enjoyment holds out the possibility for a better outcome in the future. As a sublimated form of action, it is productive in the sense that it provides temporary relief in joyous musical expression that may be read as sustaining the quest for eventual justice.

## Forms of Justice and Redemption

Even in songs with the bleakest outlook about the possibility for progress or change, the call for action in the service of equality and justice may be heard in the criticisms of things as they are. Truth-telling generates the expectation of a response to the truths revealed, implicitly calling for interventions to correct conditions that enable betrayal, domination, and abuse. I have

focused on various direct responses and forms of sublimation that the blues deploy as part of the call for reckoning. I now turn to one particular form of imagined redemption referenced consistently in the blues to explore what justice might look like.

Far short of the positive articulations of change in anthems associated with the civil rights movement, blues songs nonetheless offer a glimpse of what the future might eventually hold. “Having the blues” functions as a baseline to construct its vague polar opposite. “Not having the blues” suggests not only being freed from feelings of depression, anger, frustration, and helplessness but also, and by extension, being empowered to act, having been liberated from the conditions that cause the blues. Since having the blues is most often the result of having been treated unfairly, not having the blues implies being treated fairly and equitably—by specific others (lovers, bosses, etc.) and others in general (white society). The opposite of the blues does not have any specific name, although love, joy, sex, financial stability, affection, kindness, and care appear in numerous songs as enabling it. Moreover, complete banishment of the blues is not conceived as possible. The insistence on repetition in the genre bars belief in definitive escape. Distinctly different from gospel and soul in this respect, faith in eventual overcoming never finds full voice in the blues. Instead, self-protective cynicism recognizes the inevitable failure of achieving lasting fulfillment because of the repetition of historical patterns of racialized domination and exploitation.

Along the spectrum of feeling, somewhere between the two extremes of “the blues” and “complete escape from the blues,” lies the oppositional pair satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Satisfaction and its opposite appear in a significant number of songs to describe related but less serious emotional states. B. B. King’s “Walking Dr. Bill” (1960) provides a good example: “I didn’t exactly have the blues, I just wasn’t satisfied.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than the depression and despair of the blues, dissatisfaction connotes, with sexual overtones, frustration in personal and social relations. Citing dissatisfaction rather than the blues to characterize an emotional state makes it easier to envision improvement in present circumstances. Put another way, fantasizing about being satisfied, particularly because of its sexual associations, seems safer and more attainable than achieving lasting happiness or fulfillment. The underlying logic seems to be, if I can imagine sexual satisfaction—however fleeting and ephemeral that may be—I can allow myself to imagine satisfaction in other situations. In this respect, satisfaction represents an attenuated, limited form of redemption for those repeatedly subjected to not only the frustrations, humiliations,

and abuses of daily life but also the long-term disappointments associated with a history of broken promises.

In Muddy Waters's corpus, *satisfied* and its variants are employed to denote a state characterized by temporary reprieve from the pressures of everyday struggles, tensions, and stresses, often articulated as "worries" and "troubles."<sup>22</sup> Not quite joy or happiness, satisfaction represents an achievable goal, in part because of its implied lack of duration. To explore the theme of satisfaction, I turn to Muddy Waters's 1960 cover of "Southbound Train." More than Broonzy's 1952 original, Waters's version uses an aggressive, accusatory tone to give voice to the sentiments of a younger generation frustrated by the lack of progress in so many areas of social, political, and economic life. That the theme of satisfaction continues to resonate in 1960 stands as testimony to the enduring power of sexual signifying to convey forceful messages concerning the unacceptability of ongoing injustices.<sup>23</sup>

"Southbound Train" presents a fascinating case study in part because it posits "satisfaction" as located in the South. The geographical orientation toward the South in the title and opening lines reverses the usual depiction of a kind of Promised Land outside the South. It implies that the North, from which the narrator presumably speaks, has not fulfilled promises of a better life. The opening couplet evokes frustration and anger encapsulated in a laconic statement about train schedules paired with words of admonishment addressed to a woman in a condescending manner: "I wonder why that old southbound train don't run [2x] / Well, you know, you don't need no tellin', little girl, you know just what you done." Indirectly, the narrator communicates the idea that he is attempting to leave the North via train because of something his lover has done. As is typical in the blues, the accusation of wrongdoing remains vague, enabling multiple layers of meaning to accrue. The next verse introduces the notion that he has been subjected to mistreatment in the North, beyond whatever the woman has done. With his characteristic gruff tone, Waters sings, "I am a hardworking man; catch the devil everywhere I go / Well, you know, I work so hard and I catch the devil everywhere I go / Well, you know, when I get back down in the lowlands, well, yes, I won't have to work no more." Despite his hard work, not only has he not been rewarded, he has met with various forms of mistreatment. Leaving on a southbound train represents escaping abuse both at the hands of a woman and in labor situations. The B line imagines returning to the Delta to a life of leisure. But the projection of this vision of life in the South immediately reveals its status as fantasy. If most Mississippians migrated to Chicago for better working conditions, including higher wages, none imagined that

returning South would enable a life without work. As if to correct his own fantasy, Waters introduces the solo break with the spoken line, “Lay it on me like rocks on 61, baby,” comparing the work of the musicians in the band to roadwork (possibly as part of a gang) on the main highway through the Delta. This reminder of harsh labor conditions in the South further marks the B line of the second verse as fantasy, hemming in the possibilities of escape from economic and social injustice.

The forms of address in the opening verses employ second-person constructions to represent a dialogic situation. While the opening verse is explicitly addressed to the *little girl*, the second verse expands the use of *you know* in the A' and B lines to interpolate an audience of listeners. By implication, the audience is familiar with the situation the singer describes. They are well acquainted with the experience of working hard only to *catch the devil*, and of thinking about moving away in order to escape these forms of mistreatment, particularly with respect to labor. The spoken interjection before the solo expands the gesture of inclusion to the work of the musicians, constituting and affirming the creation of a community of listeners familiar with feelings of frustration and anger in response to abuse. They, like the singer, know what it means to want to get away but also know that the South is unlikely to provide shelter from overwork or random acts of aggression.

After the guitar solo break, the narrator returns to the scene in the train station, this time stressing his possession of a ticket. The melismatic *yeah* in the beginning of the A' line, along with the shift in emphasis produced by syntactic changes, underscore his possession of the means of getting away: “I’ve got my ticket right here in my hand / Yeah, I’ve got my ticket; I’m holding the ticket right here in my hand.” Waters’s characteristic liaison between *right* and *here* creates significant emphasis on the here and now. The deictic *right here* forces the audience to focus on the imagined ticket that he holds, which functions to transport them to the platform. The words conjure a scene of someone actually possessing the means of escape. The B line of the verse returns to the sexual situation and provides slightly more information about the *little girl* of the opening verse: “Well, yes, I got a good woman, boys, but the little girl just don’t understand.” It would seem that the narrator has two women: a *good woman* perhaps *down in the lowlands* and a *little girl* in Chicago who has wronged him. The desirability of returning to the South is embellished with the prospect of romantic and sexual fulfillment with a *good woman* as opposed to the *little girl* up north. The cherished ticket clutched in his hand would seem to guarantee escape to something better.



The final verse of the song continues with the ticket theme but adds a new twist. Although the narrator has a ticket, he is still required to ask permission to board the train: "I'm on my way to the lowlands, conductor, can I ride? / Well, I'm on my way to the lowlands, please conductor, let the poor boy ride." Through direct discourse, the first statement in the A line emphasizes his destination, as he asks permission to travel via rail. The forceful articulation of *conductor* underscores another's authority—presumably a white man's—to determine his fate. Despite possessing a ticket, the narrator must ask permission to exercise his presumed right to travel. The performance of the A' line adds emphasis with a melismatic *well* and *I* along with an extended pronunciation of *please*. The force behind the vocalizations expresses barely suppressed rage and significant frustration through tense phonation creating growl-like vibrations in the vocal tract, paradoxically coexisting alongside the deferential *please*.<sup>24</sup> His self-characterization as a *poor boy* diminishes his power and authority consistent with racialized codes of conduct. Despite holding a ticket and having paid for it, he still has to beg and plead to board the train. As a metaphor for social situations in general, it encapsulates the conflicting emotions of African Americans in the North in the early 1960s, still subject to social norms enforcing racialized subordination. While Broonzy says *Mr. Conductor* in a fairly even, almost matter-of-fact tone in his 1952 performance of these lines, here, Waters evokes far greater frustration, bordering on aggression and rage. His expert use of vocal timbre, emphasis, and melisma to create bravado within the confines of a line that still includes *please* masterfully expresses the contradictions of racialized domination.

The final line of the song refocuses on the self and makes a bold proclamation: "I'm gonna keep on travelin', 'til I make myself satisfied." Seemingly setting aside the train and its gatekeeper conductor, and their associations with racialized domination, the narrator states his determination to escape from current frustrations. The declaration that he intends to *keep on travelin'* calls forth the theme of mobility in the blues. As I discussed, travel is not always unambiguously positive. Here, the intention to keep moving is directed toward the goal of satisfaction, implying dissatisfaction in the here and now. The traveling will end when "he makes himself satisfied." The reflexive articulation of the verb is extremely significant.<sup>25</sup> First and foremost, satisfaction is something he will do for himself. It will not depend on others—*the little girl*, *conductor*, the *good woman*, or the people for whom he works hard—he will make *himself* satisfied. Like Freddie King's significant move toward self-respect in the bridge and final verse of "Someday, After Awhile," here Waters



insists on self-reliance. Equally important is the use of the word *satisfied* to denote the end goal.

Beyond pleasure and enjoyment, etymologically and historically, satisfaction also refers to doing enough to repay a debt, fulfill an obligation, or even atone for an offense or sin.<sup>26</sup> An obsolete meaning of the reflexive use of the verb in the context of duels means to be avenged: *to give oneself satisfaction*. While I do not contend that Muddy Waters invokes an obsolete meaning of the expression (although it's not inconceivable), nonetheless, *'til I make myself satisfied* resonates with multiple meanings related to notions of debt and its repayment. Fundamentally, the narrator views his life according to the logic of a balance sheet: Romantic and economic mistreatment, the burden of labor, and the pressures of racialized aggression (even in the North) represent negative entries that need to be offset by romantic and sexual fulfillment and a life of leisure. In effect, he is owed, according to social norms of fairness and equity. References to a generalized understanding of how things are supposed to be abound in the song. The *little girl know[s] just what [she's] done* because relationships are defined and understood according to expectations around duties and obligations. The accusatory lines addressed to the *little girl* signal that she has failed to perform according to her prescribed role within the relationship. Likewise, the boss, who forces the narrator to work hard and nonetheless pursues him with random acts of devilment, breaks an implied contract. Even the conductor, as a representative of the white dominant social order, breaks a social contract, because he requires only some passengers who possess tickets to ask permission to ride. The multiple references to an implied understanding of the way social, economic, and interpersonal relationships are supposed to function creates a layering effect. The accumulation of sources of frustration and anger, and their conflation, add accretions of meaning to satisfaction. Personal, romantic, sexual, economic, and social satisfaction were held out as implicit promises in a contract that has been broken at multiple levels.

The inclusion of the audience through interpellation by the singer (*you know*) reinforces the layering of broken contracts. The boss and conductor stand in for socially institutionalized forms of racism to which the narrator, as an individual, is subjected. Addressing the listeners in an inclusive manner broadens the scope of the accusations to include the systematic targeting of racialized groups. The act of calling out these unacceptable behaviors, voicing the desire for a better life, and insisting on satisfying the self becomes more than an individual plea. Indeed, for listeners who identify with the narrator's tale, it amounts to a call for social reckoning. To satisfy the self (and

especially in the South) would mean, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, to "pay a long-overdue debt."<sup>27</sup> The broken contracts would finally be repaid in a way that would attempt to render whole again a community systematically abused and exploited.

The call for justice encourages action to achieve satisfaction. In Waters's performance of "Southbound Train," companionship, love, sex, and leisure represent components of a better life. But, as I already highlighted, those requisites, and particularly liberation from work, bespeak fantasy, particularly given Waters's reference to rocks on Highway 61. If there is a model for satisfaction articulated in the blues, it resides not in the lyrics but rather in the musical performance. Waters's band performs a version of satisfaction that locates redemption in musical interactions. In this respect, the performance models ideal social relations.<sup>28</sup> From the beginning of the track, perfectly synchronized pickup notes on drums, bass, piano, and guitar set up for the vocal, demonstrating that the musicians are working together, interdependently, to create a perfect context for Waters's vocal performance. The timing is impeccable. In an era before click tracks, digital recording techniques, and overdubs, the musicians are in perfect sync. Underneath the vocal, the instruments, including the harmonica, execute interdependent, but also highly individualized, parts. The interlocking nature of the parts necessitates restraint, timing, and careful execution. No one plays on top of or louder than anyone else. They reinforce one another and also play against one another. The solo break highlights the guitar in a way that is heavily dependent on the context provided, especially the work of the piano, harmonica, and second guitar, as offsetting treble voices to foreground the first guitar's voice. The piano and harmonica are especially restrained in measures 9 and 10, as the guitar solo reaches the summit of its arc before the turnaround. Fundamentally, the efforts of each individual are subordinated to a greater good.

Creating this kind of sound requires working together, which in turn requires interdependence predicated on trust. If any one member of the ensemble fails to play his part correctly, it lessens the effect of the song as a whole. If the harmonica, piano, or second guitar were to overshadow the guitar in the solo or the bass and drums were to work against the deliberate rhythmic phrasing of the vocal, it would weaken the net effect. Performing the parts requires a great deal of mutual respect and trust to create a texture that still allows for room to breathe. These musical relations of trust and respect serve as a powerful model for what social interactions could and should be. If everyone did their part, when they were supposed to, and how they were

supposed to, all would benefit. Musical performance models responsibility and accountability aimed at satisfaction.

The effect of musical cooperation achieved through interdependence and trust is not unlike sexual satisfaction achieved when partners respect one another's needs and desires while fulfilling their own. Like sexual signifying in the lyrics, the erotic power of musical performance for both musicians and audience should not be neglected as part of the modeling of idealized social relations. Respect plays a significant role in enabling everyone's needs to be satisfied. The teasing of antiphonal structure, the dynamics of tension and release, and the triplet-based rhythms contribute to the music's sexual power. Along with the pleasurable erotic component, there are also elements of humor and competition enacted in the musical relations. Giving voice to pain and hurt, through shared forms of expression that include humor, tension, and pleasure, is a powerful antidote to the kinds of mistreatment laid bare in the lyrics. In a form of musical expression not unlike a conversation between lovers and peers, the ensemble expands the dialogic model in a way that allows for all voices to be heard and valorized. Concerted action based on trust and accountability enables both individual and group satisfaction.

The musical modeling of satisfaction occurs throughout blues performance. Whether it's in the dialogic interaction of vocal and instrumental parts, the synchronization of a medium or large ensemble, or the interplay between performer and audience, the musical-social contract enables the subordination of individual needs in ways that benefit the collective. This does not preclude the possibility for individual improvisational responses in real time—crescendos, decrescendos, accelerations, decelerations, embellishments, variations, et cetera—but they also depend fundamentally on knowing, trusting, and relying on the other musicians. Individual acts of creativity are embedded in and dependent on group support for optimal aesthetic effect. Ultimately, the co-creation of works of art serves the community by enabling the collective recognition of both the reality of present circumstances and the possibility for change for the better through coordinated action.

Musical performances provide satisfaction for musicians and audience, in part, because musicians count on one another to do the right thing musically. By extension, performance enables the belief in relying on others to do the right thing socially, politically, and morally. As a form of resistance to the exploitation and abuse recounted in the lyrics, the creative act provides a model of accountability expressed through a musical aesthetic.<sup>29</sup> Underlying blues performance is a profound valorization of mutual respect audible

as a model of redemption that the blues offers the performer and the attentive listener.

## Humanistic Redemption

While the painful truths are being laid bare, and listeners in the audience are recognizing their own experiences and feelings in the narrative and musical representations, a call for justice rings out. The need for reckoning sounds in the detailing of injustices in the lyrics. Within the lament about how things *are*, there is an implied articulation of how they *ought to be*.<sup>30</sup> The call for justice also emerges in the disjuncture between what is described in the lyrics and the idealized social relations embodied in musical performance. The negative portrayal of reality in the lyrics juxtaposed with the positive model of accountability and responsibility in the musical performance reveals a moral truth: things need to change. And, perhaps implicitly, we need to do something. But rather than demand specific forms of change or imagine reparations for past wrongs, the blues instead call for a humanistic form of responsibility and accountability. Redemption is not spiritual or religious but rather secular and terrestrial, dependent on individual and collective action.

Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" (1928) presents one of the finest and clearest articulations of a moral call in the blues.<sup>31</sup> The song uses the theme of death as a great equalizer to ask future generations to comport themselves with decency and respect for those who have gone before. It entreats us to treat others with dignity by performing a simple task after they have departed. This kind of accountability demands that a debt be repaid, but in the future, when those to whom it is owed are no longer with us. As a quintessential form of obligation, it tests the limits of human decency and responsibility precisely because no enforcing mechanism serves as a check on behavior. No one will be punished for failing to keep up their end of the bargain.<sup>32</sup> As an indirect admonishment, it condemns those who fail to fulfill their promises. The poignancy and vulnerability of the narrator's situation—facing death and burial, as we all will eventually—highlights the interdependence of human life. We are all dependent on others and, therefore, all responsible to others. Fulfilling the narrator's request requires a decency lacking in the behavior documented in most blues songs. Making the request expresses a profound faith in humanity's capacities for moral responsibility despite a lifetime of bitter disappointment.

The song evokes earlier forms of the blues with an AAA'B lyric structure, creating an aesthetic link to the past that echoes in the connections that the song asserts between past and future generations. Like the lyric form, the older narrator calls to a younger listener. Neither the guitar part nor the tone of the vocal delivery prepare for the dark subject matter of the lyrics. Indeed, they establish a strong contrast between the contemplation of death, on the one hand, and the lighthearted, picked and strummed guitar part, on the other. The opening verse is addressed to an anonymous interlocutor:

Well, it's one kind favor I ask of you  
Well, it's one kind favor I ask of you  
Lord, it's one kind favor I'll ask of you  
See that my grave is kept clean

The characterization of the favor as *kind* lessens the impact of the initial perception of the nature of the request. A *kind favor* sounds more like giving someone directions or helping a blind man across the street than agreeing to a moral obligation.

The next verse develops the metaphor of the *lane* without *end* to symbolize a youthful perspective on life but gently reminds the listener that the narrator's own life will soon terminate with the mention of the *bad wind*. The third verse conjures a funeral procession with *two white horses in a line*. Both of these verses elaborate on the theme of human mortality with as light a touch as possible: the extended metaphor of the journey of life ends with an elegant burial. But this treatment of death as the explicit subject matter does not adequately prepare the listener for the fourth verse, in which Jefferson makes a startling shift to narrate from the position of the already dead. This unexpected move refocuses attention on the seriousness of the request in the opening verse:

My heart stopped beating and my hands got cold  
My heart stopped beating and my hands got cold  
Well, my heart stopped beating, Lord, my hands got cold  
It wasn't long 'fore service by the cypress grove

The strange use of the past tense and the physical specificity of the description—stopped heart and cold hands—abruptly end the metaphorical musings about death. The reality of physical mortality is presented from the perspective of someone awaiting burial. This renders the opening request more forceful

and immediate, as the narrator is now understood to be already deceased. The addressee in the lyrics and, by extension, all listeners are being asked to keep clean the grave of someone about to be buried.

The final verses of the song remind listeners of the material reality of caring for the dead: the sound of the coffin, the digging of the grave, and the tolling of the church bells. The clear evocations of death and the burial process culminate in the final verse with Jefferson's imitation of the church bells on his guitar using held low tones. The sound of the bell tolling within the song allows the listener no escape from the scene's immediacy. We are transported to the burial ground by the onomatopoetic guitar sounds intensified by the silence around them. The closing line of the song, "Then you know that the poor boy is dead and gone," presents the truth of our obligation: with the narrator's passing and the end of formal ceremonies, we are now being asked to keep his grave clean.

The request made in the song through the second-person form of address allows for ambiguity to develop around the kind of response it requires. Is the *you* being addressed singular or plural? Are we being asked as individuals to keep the grave clean, or are we being asked collectively and metaphorically to care for one another? The second-person pronoun allows for the imagining of both individual and collective forms of responsibility. Just as the music may be experienced individually (either listening alone or feeling alone as part of a group) or collectively (feeling part of a group audience), the moral interpellation may also be experienced in both ways. Indeed, the ambiguity produces an important movement between the two forms of responsibility. Those who feel individually responsible motivate those who are less inclined to accept the burden of accountability, while the collective shouldering of the burden lessens its weight for those who feel overwhelmed. The dialectic of individual and collective consciousness and accountability feeds a dynamic that promotes action.

Unlike spirituals, gospel, and soul music that aim to incite a particular type of collaborative responsibility—often coordinated political action—the blues calls for both individual and collective moral accountability. This difference results from a number of factors. First, the blues' origins in solo performance sets it apart from both earlier and later genres based on collective musical practice. Initially, the blues was largely a solo performance art consistent with the worldview of those individuals who gave birth to the genre two generations after slavery. This individual perspective, which was foundational for the blues, became a characteristic that carried over into later ensemble forms. Vocalists and instrumentalists take turns articulating calls and responses,

which perpetuates the focalization on an individual. Second, the individual sends a message to a singular recipient. Due to the predominance of the theme of betrayal in love relations and the nature of sexual signifying, the lyrics address one of two possible individuals: either the betrayer or someone sympathetic to the betrayed. Audience members are most often positioned by the lyrics to occupy one of these two roles. As we have seen, this initial level of reception and interpretation gives way to other meanings that enlarge the possible scope of listener positions. As the meanings of songs are understood to encompass broader categories of betrayal, the possibility of group identification appears. Audience members become aware of parallels between, for example, abusive love relations and exploitative labor situations, and their mode of identification shifts accordingly to foster new bonds between both singer and listeners and among listeners.

Because the situations being presented offer no clear guidelines for action, the call for an accounting is moral rather than political. By this I mean that no clear goal is expressed, in contrast to, for example, freedom in spirituals and gospel songs. Not only is no clear end point articulated, but how to achieve the goal of *something better* is uncertain. Satisfaction seems like the one temporary form of reprieve imagined. But how that may be achieved and what that would mean remain elusive. Closer to an open-ended moral imperative (a Kantian imperfect duty) than a political one, the blues calls for both individual and collective action to do enough (*satis-facere*).<sup>33</sup> But what is enough? Even Jefferson's simple request to *see that my grave is kept clean* lacks a clear statement of what exactly is entailed. Unlike perfect duties that define the parameters of expected behavior and action, such as the biblical proscription *thou shalt not kill*, imperfect duties, such as to care for one's children or parents, trigger a litany of seemingly endless tasks. In the case of the duty invoked by Jefferson, questions arise. Satisfying the seemingly simple request to keep his grave clean requires interpreting the scope of action and taking responsibility.

The metaphorical extension of the imperfect duty to see that someone's grave is kept clean implies caring for others who cannot care for themselves. The limitless potential of this type of request is obvious. Not only the young, elderly, and infirm, but within the specific audience of African American blues listeners, this could mean any number of people victimized by situations beyond their control. The call for corrective action is indeed limitless. It is in part because of the limitless and abstract nature of the call for action that it remains moral rather than political. Whereas political demands usually prescribe action in view of a specific goal—for example, protecting voting or civil

rights—moral demands lack definition and specificity. To respect and assist others requires vigilant self-examination, critical reflection, and action.

The call for reckoning in the blues implies open-ended obligations because of the genre's secular nature. The lack of faith in God or some other greater force inhibits the articulation of faith in a specific ultimate outcome.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the blues stubbornly and persistently calls out bad behavior and requests, like Jefferson, that individual and collective others respond with appropriate, morally accountable acts. The call implies that *things should be otherwise* and asks people to respond but provides no formula for what to do, nor how to act, nor any assurances that the goal can and will be achieved. Instead, the call for redemption rings out and waits for an appropriate response.





# Conclusion

The imperfect moral duty implied by the call for reckoning in the blues bears a strong resemblance to one conception of the obligation to make reparations for slavery, the Jim Crow regime, segregation, discrimination, and the long-term effects of racialized subordination. Roy L. Brooks makes a forceful moral argument for reparations, which for him must include atonement “for past atrocities.”<sup>1</sup> Rejecting models from tort law that aim at restitution or compensation, Brooks argues for the centrality of a restorative form of justice that would necessarily entail an apology from society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> This moral component of reparations separates the moral question of *ought* from the pragmatic question of *how*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the need for a reckoning must be acknowledged, even if the means of achieving it are less clear. More importantly, Brooks’s conception of the moral character of the demand for reparations places the emphasis on the fact that the victims against whom the wrongs were committed constitute a group.<sup>4</sup> For Brooks, efforts at rehabilitation must be directed to a community in order “to nurture the group’s self-empowerment or the community’s cultural transformation, or at least to improve the conditions under which the victims live.”<sup>5</sup>

While the blues may foster the formation of group identity among listeners and, as I have argued, communicate a call for moral action, still, the audience addressed is not society as a whole. The genre created a form of address, including signifying, that assumes an informed community of listeners. Historically, the genre was addressed to a specific group largely through segregated live performance venues and race recordings. Moreover, as I argued in chapter 4, the blues cannot imagine reparations as an outcome for a variety of historical reasons. Nonetheless, the moral outlook in most blues shares with Brooks’s conception of reparations the idea of an open-ended duty to atone.

Significantly, the lack of specific aim enables flexibility in the face of changing social, political, and economic dynamics. For Brooks, if the goal is truly one of rehabilitation, rather than compensation or restitution, the actions undertaken must remain subject to change. Under this conception, the collective duty of society to redress past wrongs requires constant reevaluation in order to address the persistent and changing ramifications of actions in the past (and present) with ongoing effects. In other words, reparations represent a collective, imperfect moral duty toward African Americans. The call for justice in the blues rings out as an open-ended demand for reckoning and waits for an appropriate response.

Repetition and cyclical structure in the blues suggest that the long overdue debt will never be fully paid. Patterns repeat and, yet, we continue to move forward. The request for reckoning in the blues, although an articulation of faith, is accompanied by a healthy dose of skepticism about ever realizing racial justice. Irony and humor expressed in signifying prevent overinvestment in the belief in human decency. Unlike spirituals, gospel, and soul, the blues calls for an accounting in a double voice, at once believing and also not believing that anything like fairness, equality, or justice may be achieved.

Formal structure and modes of articulation in the blues, as we have seen, limit the scope of imagined action. Uncovering and pointing out the truth of mistreatment may lead to change of some kind, but it is most often achieved by walking away. Songs that stage a confrontation are usually framed as fantasies constrained by the reality of historical circumstances. Rare are the songs that call for some type of collective action. Lonnie Johnson's recordings of "Crowing Rooster" (1941) and "Working Man's Blues" (1948), two variants of the same song, represent curious exceptions to the reticence in the blues to state a need for group action to address injustice. Using the pimp as a figure for anyone taking money from the working man, Johnson depicts economic exploitation in broad strokes: "What makes a rooster crow every morning 'fore day [2x] / To let the pimps [and rambles]<sup>6</sup> know that the working man is on his way." The use of the rooster enables Johnson to overlay urban and rural contexts, generalizing the abuse of labor. While Johnson's 1928 recording of "Crowing Rooster Blues," an earlier version of the song, moved to blaming women who want expensive gifts, recasting the exploitation in terms of amorous relations, the 1941 and 1948 versions contain a three-line verse in the middle of the song that makes more pointed declarations. In this verse, which stands out for breaking the AA'B form, Johnson calls for some kind of collective action: "Men, we got to get together, yes, something's got to be done / We make the money, while the pimp has the fun / You know where there's only

grocery and no money, there ain't no fun."<sup>7</sup> After this rallying cry, the song returns to the AA'B form and reverts to the theme of unfaithful women. The seriousness of the accusations being leveled is softened not only by humor and a jaunty guitar and piano setting but also by the swerve toward more familiar and less threatening subject matter. Moreover, the overall vagueness of the call to action, while unusual for its directness, is consistent with the lack of ability to imagine what action might look like or what it might yield. What could be *done* and by whom to fight back against economic predation remains open. Nonetheless, the direct call for action is significant for its clear articulation of an awareness of collective economic victimization.<sup>8</sup> Imagining the means of bringing about a reckoning and demanding a settling of accounts seems to lie beyond the scope of the blues, in part because of the overlaying of meaning in representations of mistreatment.

In Lonnie Johnson's formulation, clearly the blues announce that "something's got to be done," but what? Although the blues cannot imagine reparations, the music does teach the sobering lesson that the work of social justice is never done. Sadly, there will always be more injustice to discover, announce, and address, as history repeats itself in a pattern of theme and variation. If we imagine that the work is over, we only set ourselves up for the next go-round. Despite the healthy pessimism born of bitter experience, the blues offers a model of productive, coordinated action. The idealized social relations modeled in musical performance call for ongoing individual and collective action in view of achieving a justice to come.



# Notes

## A NOTE ON SOURCES

In the notes, short titles have generally been used. The full entries can be found in the bibliography, except in cases where the short citation is followed by “discog.” in parentheses, directing the reader to the recording’s details in the discography.

## INTRODUCTION

1. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 68–69.

2. Talley collected folk songs and rhymes that may have dated back to the antebellum period. The entry for “Fattening Frogs for Snakes” reads, “You needn’ sen’ my gal hoss apples / You needn’ sen’ her ’lasses candy; / She would keer fer de lak o’ you, / Ef you’d sen’ her apple brandy. / W’y don’t you git some common sense? / Jes git a liddle! Oh fer land sakes! / Quit yo’ foolin’; she hain’t studyin’ you! / Youse jes fattenin’ frogs fer snakes!” (*Negro Folks Rhymes*, 97). Songs with the expression include Virginia Liston, “I’m Sick of Fattening Frogs for Snakes”; Carrie Edwards, “Fattening Frogs for Snakes”; Clara Smith, “I’m Tired of Fattening Frogs for Snakes”; Sonny Boy Williamson II, “Fattening Frogs for Snakes”; and Big Bill Broonzy, “When I Get to Thinking” (also recorded by Muddy Waters). For a discussion of the use of the expression as a metaphor for the sharecropping relationship in the blues, see my *Time in the Blues*, chapter 2.

3. Waters’s “chest voice” conveys more power to listeners than Broonzy’s “head voice,” characterized by its more nasal resonance. On listeners’ impressions of vocal timbre, see Heidemann, “System for Describing Vocal Timbre.”

4. Woods, *Development Arrested*, 20.

5. Rose, *Black Noise*, 21–61.

6. Many “established” rappers

declined offers to record, understanding the music as fundamentally live performance art.

On the circumstances of recording “Rapper’s Delight,” see Rose, *Black Noise*, 56; and Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 129–30. Shusterman argues that rap evolved as dance music, not music for listening (“Fine Art of Rap,” 616). For a discussion of an anti-commercial attitude in rap, see Lena, “Social Context.”

7. For an introduction to the musical characteristics of the blues, see Evans, *NPR Curious Listeners’ Guide*, 83–97. “Pitch area” is Evans’s term to describe blue notes (84).

8. For a discussion of a number of musical forms under slavery, see Barlow, “*Looking Up at Down*,” 8–20.

9. Compare Toynbee’s argument concerning “‘listening backwards’ in the direction of Origin. The key point is that Origin will, in almost every case, be a collectivity, a historical moment or geographical place rather than an individual subject” (*Making Popular*, 63).

10. Abbott and Seroff “tentatively proffer 1909 as the year ‘blues’ came up for public recognition as a musical term and, by extension, the year blues music achieved a distinct, recognizable identity” (*Original Blues*, 4) based on articles in the *Indianapolis Freeman* and the publication of Odum’s collection of “Negro folk songs.”

11. Early documentation of the blues includes descriptions by Peabody “Notes on Negro Music”; Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry”; and Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 74.

12. More recent scholarship on the blues has questioned assumptions made by early scholars working in a folklorist tradition who privileged the rural male tradition as “authentic,” excluding women and musicians from urban areas, as well as perpetuating a racial segregation of sound practiced by record companies. McGinley persuasively argues that “authenticity” and antitheatricalism in traditional (folkloric) blues criticism produces gender bias (*Staging the Blues*, 7–9). Miller traces the cross-pollination of commercial and folkloric recording (*Segregating Sound*, 9, 240). See also Hamilton on the folk versus popular divide and the “inauthenticity” of recorded blues (*In Search of the Blues*, 16–17). Finally, Ottenheimer has argued for the significance of “middle- to large-sized river towns” in the Midwest in the very early development of the blues (“Blues in the Heartland,” 32).

13. The scholarship of Oliver, Char- ters, Lomax, and Evans is most influential in this regard.

14. Evans forcefully articulates this argument in *Big Road Blues*.

15. Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*. One counternarrative is advanced by Ottenheimer, who relies on accounts by relative “outsiders” John Jacob Niles, Howard Odum, and W. C. Handy to complicate the rural Delta origin narrative. However, she provides no formal characteristics for what she recognizes as blues other than a three-line verse form and melismatic vocal style (“Blues in the Heartland,” 32).

16. Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 67.

17. Woods, *Development Arrested*, 25.

18. Woods maintains that the world- view articulated in the blues represents an African American working-class “ontology, or worldview, embedded in these communi- ties [that] has provided a sense of collective self and a tectonic footing from which to oppose and dismantle the American intellec- tual, cultural, and socioeconomic traditions constructed from the raw material of Afri- can American exploitation and denigration” (*Development Arrested*, 29).

## CHAPTER I

1. See my discussion of the signif- icance of repetition in the blues in *Time in the Blues*, 185–86.

2. On aspects of vocal quality, see Malawey, *Blaze of Light*, 102–3, 106.

3. For a detailed discussion of the factorage system in the antebellum period, see Woodman, *King Cotton*, 6–7, 34, 39.

4. *Ibid.*, 34, 36.

5. *Ibid.*, 41.

6. Baldwin aptly describes share- croppers and tenants as “economic shock absorbers for landowners and planters” (*Poverty and Politics*, 25). Already in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois identified the potential for lien law to recreate slavery (*Souls of Black Folk*, 136–38, 141–42, 157–58). See my discussion of the use of slaves to underwrite and move debt in the antebellum world in chapter 3.

7. Woodman, *King Cotton*, 288.

8. Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 125.

9. For statistics on the distribu- tion of large plantations (five families or more) and smaller farms from 1860 through the Depression in the cotton South, see Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, xxviii–xix, 15–23.

10. Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, 156.

11. See my discussion of the financ- ing of slavery in chapter 3; and Baptist on the credit system that underwrote slavery (*Half Has Never Been Told*, 90–94).

12. For a discussion of the moti- vations of laborers and planters to prefer working for shares, see Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, 85; and Wright, *Political Economy of the Cotton South*, 172. Roback points out that sharecropping reduces the risk of default (“Exploitation in the Jim Crow South,” 41).

13. The perceived need for an inducement to work is based on racial prej- udice; see Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 588. Odum’s *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* may have contributed to the

perception of a lack of Black industriousness (cited in King, *Southern Renaissance*, 40). As Litwack argues, labor slowdowns on the part of formerly enslaved people were likely manifestations of freedom (*Been in the Storm*, 227).

14. In this respect, the difference between sharecroppers and tenants was simply "one of degree" (Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 45). See also Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 9–10.

15. Labor organizer Clinton Clark relates a fairly typical story of a sharecropper from Louisiana perpetually in debt (*Remember My Sacrifice*, 39). Daniel writes, "Using debt as a fulcrum, planters increasingly found ways to force sharecroppers to remain on the land," immobilizing labor through coercion (*Breaking the Land*, 6).

16. Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 22. On the widespread use of exorbitant credit rates, see also Mandle, *Roots of Black Poverty*, 48–49.

17. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 91–106. Woofter reports credit rates of 50 percent to landlords and over 70 percent to merchants (61–62).

18. For Marx, keeping subsistence at an absolute minimum enables the cheapest possible labor power, thus maximizing profits for the capitalist (*Capital*, 276–77).

19. Marx's famous dictum applies here: "In all cases, therefore, the worker advances the use-value of his labour-power to the capitalist. He lets the buyer consume it before he receives payment of the price. Everywhere the worker allows credit to the capitalist" (*ibid.*, 278). Planters are not strictly speaking capitalists in the traditional Marxian sense, but the economic principle is the same. See Wright's analysis of the labor market (*Old South New South*, 17–80) and Foner's characterization of the Southern economy as colonial (*Nothing but Freedom*, 71).

20. Lipscomb, *I Say Me for a Parable*, statement about earnings in only one year on 272, quote on 297.

21. *These Are Our Lives*, 21. Couto recounts a similar story (*Ain't Gonna Let Nobody*, 178). See also Marsh Taylor's narrative for a white landlord's perspective (*These Are Our Lives*, esp. 115–23).

22. Litwack lists "disputes over crop settlements" among the many "offenses" that could lead to lynching (*Trouble in Mind*, 306). The Henry Lowry lynching that occurred in Arkansas in 1921 corroborates this assessment (Packard, *American Nightmare*, 134–38). Likewise, Clark reports that sharecroppers in Louisiana were drowned over disagreements at settlement (*Remember My Sacrifice*, 39).

23. For an example of a "hidden bale" story, see Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*, 53. Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, acknowledging the ubiquity of such "hidden bale" settlement stories, assert, "The plight of the tenant at annual settlement time is so common that a whole folklore about it has grown up in the South" (*Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 9).

24. On immobilization, see Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 107–23. In their anthropological-sociological study of Natchez in 1934, Davis, Gardner, and Gardner conclude that "the economic control exercised by landlords over the tenants to whom they furnish credit is still well-nigh absolute" (*Deep South*, 353).

25. Davis, Gardner, and Gardner cite a particularly egregious case of a tenant who sells his subsistence crop to the landlord, only to buy it back at twice the price later in the year (*ibid.*, 344–45). See also Cobb's discussion of fabricated debts (*Most Southern Place on Earth*, 104–5).

26. Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 108.

27. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 131.

28. Johnson et al., *Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 28.

29. Edwards, *World Don't Owe Me Nothing*, 18–19. See a similar account from a 1968 interview with Bukka White in Lawson, *Jim Crow's Counterculture*, 46. Johnson discusses several examples of



“unjust settlement” (*Shadow of the Plantation*, 120–23).

30. Davis, Gardner, and Gardner assert that cheating by planters is “extremely common” (*Deep South*, 350).

31. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 11.

32. See my discussion of the turn-around in relation to time and sharecropping in *Time in the Blues*, 38.

33. Radcliffe’s biography of Mississippi John Hurt underscores his “resilient nature” and “calm acceptance” of disappointment in conjunction with his musical career and his overall gentle demeanor. Hurt was a sharecropper and tenant farmer up until the time of his “rediscovery” in 1963 (*Mississippi John Hurt*, 68).

34. Lawson underscores the persistence of country themes in Walter Davis’s blues, citing “Cotton Farm Blues” as an example (*Jim Crow’s Counterculture*, 107–8).

35. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, xxv. Powdermaker reports a form of blackmail in which landlords use the threat of seizure to prevent tenants from leaving (*After Freedom*, 87).

36. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 9. Cobb recounts an episode in which bankers attempt to exploit his illiteracy to get him to sign a lien on all his possessions attached to the loan on the remainder of what he owes. After his wife reads the papers to him, he refuses to sign (Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers*, 267).

37. Cobb provides an example of a chattel mortgage (Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers*, 32). On the practice, see also Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 67.

38. Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers*, 27–33, 53, 111–12, 258, 468, 472.

39. Consistent with the urban association, Victoria Spivey and Lonnie Johnson recorded a pair of songs with this theme as a pretext for sexual innuendo, “Furniture Man Blues—Parts 1 and 2.”

40. Clinton Clark, a tenant farm organizer in the 1930s, organized a “buying club” for workers in northwestern Louisiana to enable them to benefit from wholesale

prices by buying in bulk and avoiding the exorbitant interest rates of commissaries. Planters responded with threats of murder (Clark, *Remember My Sacrifice*, 60–61).

41. Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, liner notes, transcription corrected by author (discog.).

42. Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 6. Foner points out that the Black Codes, including vagrancy laws, enacted directly after the Civil War and eventually nullified by civil rights legislation are nonetheless important “because of their immediate political impact and what they reveal about the likely shape of southern economic relations if left to the undisputed control of the planters. As W. E. B. Du Bois observed, “the Codes represented ‘what the South proposed to do to the emancipated Negro, unless restrained by the nation’” (*Nothing but Freedom*, 52).

43. Cohen, “Negro Involuntary Servitude in the South,” 19, 29–30.

44. Lawson, *Jim Crow’s Counterculture*, 33. See Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi*, 186n12, for a list of blues musicians who grew up in farm families and multiple biographical sources.

45. Evans asserts that the first generation of bluesmen “avoided being tied to the land, either as an owner or through a long-term sharecropping arrangement, as this meant the loss of mobility and acceptance of the social status quo.” Evans speculates that, given Patton’s father’s holdings, he could have led a relatively decent life in the Delta but rejected the social status associated with farming in favor of music (“Goin’ Up the Country,” 36, 55–56).

46. Edwards recounts being picked up for vagrancy a number of times (*World Don’t Owe Me Nothing*, 47–50).

47. Lawson, *Jim Crow’s Counterculture*, 69. Although Lawson does not mention them, this would be true of women as well, like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Memphis Minnie, and Koko Taylor.

48. Songs that incorporate a version of the mortgage-lien phrase include Sleepy John Estes, “Poor John Blues” and “Drop

Down Mama"; Tommy McClennan, "Brown Skin Girl"; and Big Joe Williams, "Meet Me Around the Corner."

49. Caplovitz, *Poor Pay More*, 25, 100, quoted in Baradaran, *Color of Money*, 145. Ownby discusses the introduction of installment buying in Mississippi via the mail-order catalog (*American Dreams*, 86–87).

50. Using census tract data, Spear documents the creation of a segregated Black population from 1890 to 1920 (*Black Chicago*, esp. 11–27).

51. *Ibid.*, 26.

52. *Ibid.*, 91.

53. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 88. Best asserts that "by 1920, the African American population of Chicago had climbed to 109,594, an increase of 148 percent over 1910. Fifty thousand southern Blacks migrated to Chicago during 1917–18 alone, and by midcentury, the city's black population had swelled to 492,000," surpassing New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit (*Passionately Human*, 19).

54. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 201.

55. *Ibid.*, 202. The use of the word "ghetto," borrowed from shtetls for Jews in Eastern Europe, underscores the "involuntary nature of segregation" (Baradaran, *Color of Money*, 70).

56. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 29, my emphasis. See also Baradaran, *Color of Money*, 92.

57. The 1948 Supreme Court ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer* rendered restrictive covenants unenforceable; see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 16, 30; and Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 113, 184.

58. Satter, *Family Properties*, 41–42. Redlining began under the New Deal and the Home Owners Loan Corporation and continued under the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration, which Baradaran characterizes as "more consequential [government] loan programs" (*Color of Money*, 105–6).

59. According to Satter, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "exempted . . .

loan or mortgage insurance programs underwritten by the federal government. . . . The Federal Housing Administration's mortgage insurance programs did not need to comply with nondiscrimination laws" (*Family Properties*, 192). The FHA became part of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1968 under Lyndon Johnson, ending this type of discrimination in loan insurance. As Taylor documents, predatory lending reappeared in the form of a federal low-income homeownership program that mitigated risk for lenders and resulted in what she terms "predatory inclusion" (rather than exclusion), preying on African American homebuyers (*Race for Profit*, 5, 17–19).

60. Satter, *Family Properties*, 70–71, 111–13. The ruling by United States District Court Judge Hubert L. Will in the 1969 suit *Contract Buyers League v. F & F Investments*, cites the allegations of the plaintiffs concerning blockbusting.

61. MacNamara, "Contract Buyers League," 4. Satter cites an average markup of 76.8 percent in the *Contract Buyers League* case filing (*Family Properties*, 350).

62. MacNamara, "Contract Buyers League," 3.

63. Satter, *Family Properties*, 38, 58.

64. *Ibid.*, 57.

65. *Ibid.*, 5.

66. The failure to redistribute property at the end of the Civil War finds its echo in the difficulty of enforcing sections of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, the 1866 Civil Rights Act, and Section 1982 of Title 42 of the United States Code with respect to African American property ownership. The US Supreme Court case *Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer* interpreted the Thirteenth Amendment to prohibit "all racial discrimination, private as well as public, in the sale or rental of property." Plaintiffs in the *Contract Buyers League* cases used this ruling to attempt to expand the understanding of discrimination to include cases in which differential treatment of whites and Blacks was not easily demonstrated. See Satter, *Family Properties*, 276–77, 279, 321–22, 328; and "Discriminatory Housing Markets." Finally,

Baradaran draws the parallel between sharecropping, house contract sales, and installment credit and the subprime mortgage market that devastated African American buyers (*Color of Money*, 259–60).

67. Satter, *Family Properties*, 101.

68. *Ibid.*, 102. Satter cites an investigation by Inland Steel Company's "garnishment administrator" that revealed "merchants who demanded sums of \$550 when their customers owed only \$250 and creditors who collected wage garnishments for months without ever applying the money they were collecting to the debt they claimed to be owed."

69. Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 298. "Boss Daley" refers to long-time Chicago Democratic mayor Richard J. Daley.

70. Baradaran, *Color of Money*, 145.

71. Mark Satter estimated that 85 percent of African American properties were purchased on contract (*Family Properties*, 4).

72. Muddy Waters learned from Jimmy Rogers and Claude Smith (Blue Smitty) (Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 75–77).

73. O'Neal and van Singel, *Voice of the Blues*, 247. See my discussion of contracts and royalties in chapter 3.

74. *Ibid.*, 250.

75. *Ibid.*, 251.

76. *Ibid.* See Bobby Rush's discussion of the pros and cons of paying recording costs out-of-pocket versus taking a "loan" from a studio (*I Ain't Studdin' Ya*, 166, 255–57).

77. See also Keil's scathing account of contracts and practices at Chess Records (*Urban Blues*, 80–86).

78. Conley argues that unlike other forms of property, the value of housing is directly affected by the surrounding area (*Being Black*, 16).

79. The house is slated to be renovated to house a museum and community center (Shaffer, "Muddy Waters' Former Chicago Home").

80. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 6–7.

81. Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 125.

82. Baradaran, *Color of Money*, 90.

As Baradaran explains, capital attracted capital, making failures inevitable in a segregated banking market: "Instead of multiplying money, black banking effected a slow trickle-up of wealth into the white banking system. The profits were being skimmed off the top by the robust mainstream economy, leaving the ghetto economy with the scraps" (95).

83. Satter, *Family Properties*, 334–37, 344. Satter notes that one of the speculators named in the *Contract Buyers League* cases, Al Berland, was convicted of arson (361).

84. *Ibid.*, 251.

85. The tenuousness of ownership parallels the use of heirs' property as a tactic to dispossess African American families of land absent a will; see Presser, "Family Bought Land."

## CHAPTER 2

1. The song is in a popular form with verses and chorus. The instrumentation is unusual: tiple (a ten-stringed instrument played by Edwards), guitar, banjo, and piano.

2. Moulrier Boutang uses the term "semi-liberté" to break down the free-unfree dichotomy in understanding the development of the labor market in the American colonies (*De l'esclavage*, 263–64).

3. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 315; Smith corroborates this figure for the southern colonies ("Indentured Servants," 40); Morgan provides a figure of 33.7 percent of all white migrants to the thirteen colonies in the first six decades of the eighteenth century as being indentured servants (*Slavery and Servitude*, 44).

4. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 320, 390.

5. *Ibid.*, 321–22.

6. Steinfeld, *Invention of Free Labor*, 46.

7. Morris cites estimates of upwards of "fifty thousand convicts . . . shipped to America—to at least nine of the continental

colonies" (*Government and Labor*, 326); Morgan corroborates these numbers (*Slavery and Servitude*, 45–46).

8. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 346; Morgan, *Slavery and Servitude*, 52.

9. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 348–49. See also Robinson's discussion of the ideological underpinnings of the workhouse (*Black Marxism*, 31).

10. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 349.

11. Parent, *Foul Means*, 146–47; Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, 55–57.

12. Compare Morgan's assertion that the pressure to "maintain production levels of staple crops" motivated the transition from bound labor to slavery in the southern colonies (*Slavery and Servitude*, 26).

13. As Moulter Boutang underscores, the ability to break the contract is unilateral on the employer's side (*De l'esclavage*, 444).

14. Novak, *Wheel of Servitude*, 19; Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor*, 11–12, 62.

15. Cohen, "Negro Involuntary Servitude," 29. Davis documents the Freedmen's Bureau's use of vagrancy laws to attempt to force freed individuals to sign contracts for wage labor (*Good and Faithful Labor*, 75), as does Foner (*Reconstruction*, 157). Vagrancy laws disappeared during Radical Reconstruction but reappeared under "Redeemer" governments (*ibid.*, 594–95). Compare Schmidt's discussion of Jacksonian-era vagrancy laws, workhouses, poor laws, and compulsory work in the North (*Free to Work*, 62–72). Russell provides a sample vagrancy statute from Florida (*Report on Peonage*, 30).

16. Russell, *Report on Peonage*, 7–8. Cobb notes that "the Mississippi Delta accounted for an inordinate number of peonage complaints" (*Most Southern Place on Earth*, 103).

17. Roback, "Exploitation in the Jim Crow South," 38–39. See also Cohen, "Negro Involuntary Servitude," 24. Anti-entitlement legislation was also enacted by Redeemer governments (Foner, *Reconstruction*, 593).

18. Novak, *Wheel of Servitude*, 50, citing Justice Brewer's opinion in the Supreme Court case *Clyatt v. United States*.

19. Wright, "Economics and Politics of Slavery," 104.

20. Schmidt, "Principle and Prejudice," 451; see also Cohen, "Negro Involuntary Servitude," 43.

21. Breach of contract was interpreted as "prima facie evidence of intent to defraud" (Schmidt, "Principle and Prejudice," 451). On patterns of enforcement in Mississippi, see McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 143.

22. Patterson's description of three phases of institutionalized slavery is helpful for understanding degrees of liberty in this context, particularly his middle phase, "institutionalized liminality" (*Slavery and Social Death*, 340).

23. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 311–12; Morgan, *Slavery and Servitude*, 20.

24. Davis, Gardner, and Gardner succinctly summarize the situation in their study of Natchez in the 1930s: "The subordination of the lower caste by the operation of the courts, however, renders such written contracts worthless, since no colored tenant would dare sue a white landlord for any failure to abide by the rental contract" (*Deep South*, 291). Litwack lists "testifying or bringing suit against a white person" as "grounds" for lynching (*Trouble in Mind*, 307).

25. *Bailey v. Alabama*, 219 US at 229–30.

26. *Ibid.*, 231, embedded citation from lower-court ruling. Schmidt describes these long-term agricultural contracts as "an incomplete mutation of traditional customs as indentured servitude slowly transformed into the wage relation" (*Free to Work*, 20–21, 33, 39, 43–44).

27. As Schmidt points out, "It was not an accident that the state of Alabama gave the Supreme Court its historic opportunity to strike at peonage. Alabama was . . . the state which contrived the most ingenious web of statutes supporting peonage and provided the legislative example for other Southern states, and [was] the last state to abolish the

brutal practice of convict-leasing" ("Principle and Prejudice," 452).

28. *Bailey v. Alabama*, 219 US at 231.

29. The Court cited the congressional "Act of March 2, 1867, c. 187, 14 Stat. 546, the provisions of which are now found in §§ 1990 and 5526 of the Revised Statutes" (*ibid.*, 240).

30. *Ibid.*, 241.

31. *Ibid.*, 238.

32. *Ibid.*, 245.

33. *Ibid.*, 219, my emphasis. See also Schmidt, "Principle and Prejudice," 460.

34. *Bailey v. Alabama*, 219 US at 241, referencing the *Slaughter-House Cases*. Further complicating the protection of the freedom of labor is the failure of states other than Alabama to comply with the *Bailey* ruling. Cohen documents the persistence of false-pretenses statutes in several states (*At Freedom's Edge*, 230).

35. Moulrier Boutang, *De l'esclavage*, 168–69.

36. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 80–84.

See also Hartman's discussion of the significance of the slavery-era expression "stealing away" (*Scenes of Subjection*, 68–69). The phrase takes on a religious meaning in the spiritual "Steal Away"; see Graham's discussion of its use as a signature song of the Fisk Jubilee Singers (*Spirituals*, 59–61). Many spirituals, including "Bound to Go," "Good-Bye, Brother," and "Lay This Body Down," deal with travel and loss. Finally, see also Levine's extended discussion of mobility (*Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 262–68).

37. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 128.

38. Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 67, relying on a WPA study. Litwack underscores the magnitude of African American mobility, citing migration statistics from the early twentieth century (*Trouble in Mind*, 482).

39. Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge*, 4.

40. *Ibid.*, 245–46.

41. Work points out that the highest number of lynchings occurred during the "period that Negro crime reached its highest

point," clearly two facets of strategies to control African Americans ("Negro Criminality in the South," 75). See also Cohen's discussion of the correlation between rate of lynching and coerced labor in *At Freedom's Edge*, 210–13, 293–94.

42. Chafe, Gavins, and Korstad, *Remembering Jim Crow*, 42.

43. Giggie locates the ambivalence in an "always ambiguous and in flux" attitude toward railroads in African Americans in the Delta (*After Redemption*, 53–57).

44. The song was first recorded by Charles Segar in 1940 but standardized by the recording by Broonzy, Jazz Gillum, and Washboard Sam. The song has since been recorded countless times, including versions by Little Walter and His Jukes, Derek and the Dominos, Freddie King, the Rolling Stones, and Eric Clapton and B. B. King.

45. Simon, *Time in the Blues*, 21.

46. Narration from this threshold position is related to Baker's assertion that the blues are always "atopic" (*Blues, Ideology*, 5).

47. Examples include Ma Rainey, "Moonshine Blues"; Tommy Johnson, "Cool Drink of Water Blues"; Memphis Minnie, "Chickasaw Train Blues" and "In My Girl-ish Days"; and Robert Johnson, "Walking Blues." See also, Devi, *Language of the Blues*, 186–87.

48. Devi defines rambling as "to move from place to place, never settling down" (*Language of the Blues*, 180).

49. Baker, *Blues, Ideology*, 7. See Radano's discussion of Baker (*Lying Up a Nation*, 231) and Giggie's fascinating chapter on the material and symbolic significance of the railroad in the crucial period from 1875 to 1915 in the Mississippi Delta (*After Redemption*, 23–58).

50. Carby and Davis highlight the fact that it was men who most often traveled and women who were most often left at home, signaling gender-specific responses to mobility. However, they both point out that the women of the blues rambled like the men, albeit as part of traveling shows; see Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way," 474–77;

and Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 18–19, 68–69. McGinley suggests that the mobility of the tent shows served as material for acts (*Staging the Blues*, 39–44). Miller reads railroad songs as reflecting the itineraries of working musicians (*Segregating Sound*, 52–53).

51. To cite just a couple of examples, Paul and Beth Garon speculate that Memphis Minnie ran away from home to escape farm work (*Woman and Guitar*, 14–15). Eddie Boyd recounts understanding the economics of the cotton plantation by the time he was eleven years old and feeling like he “had to leave” (O’Neal and van Singel, *Voice of the Blues*, 233).

52. Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*, 119–20. See also Schroeder, *Robert Johnson*, 41.

53. Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*, 120. Lipsitz references West African belief systems, as does Devi’s discussion of Yoruba and other myths of the crossroads (*Language of the Blues*, 82–83). Gussow summarizes the “African retentions” debates in studies of African American culture (*Beyond the Crossroads*, 10–12). Kubik remains skeptical about associations between West African cultural traditions and the blues (*Africa and the Blues*, 21–25). Consistent with Radano’s position on the emergence of “Black music” in the context of interracial contact and the consequent limits of African retentions, I would argue that the question of retentions is ultimately undecidable but cultural parallels are quite compelling (*Lying Up a Nation*, 10, 60–62).

54. See Schroeder’s discussion of the myth of Johnson at the crossroads in relation to blues scholarship and “Cross Road Blues” (*Robert Johnson*, 37–39). For a discussion of the “facts” of Johnson’s life in relation to the myth surrounding him, see Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 105–25; and Gussow, who painstakingly traces details of Johnson’s life as well as the history of “the crossroads,” where Highways 49 and 61 currently intersect outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi (*Beyond the Crossroad*, 255–78). Graves finds no evidence of a pact with the devil in the song (*Crossroads*, 56),

nor do Pearson and McCulloch, who critique scholars who would see “Cross Road Blues” as a protest song, such as Charters (*Robert Johnson*, 76–77). Charters specifically views the song as “a reflection of the social restrictions which encircle the singer,” a characterization with which I agree (*Poetry of the Blues*, 171).

55. Cone underscores the centrality of community in antebellum faith among the slaves, arguing that loss of faith is synonymous with loss of community in the spirituals (*Spirituals and the Blues*, 58). The focus on the individual in the blues, characteristic of post-emancipation existence, deemphasizes community.

56. David “Honeyboy” Edwards recounts being arrested and sent to a farm in the local county (*World Don’t Owe Me Nothing*, 36–37). Palmer relates a story of Robert “Junior” Lockwood and Sonny Boy Williamson II being jailed for vagrancy (*Deep Blues*, 182–83).

57. *United States v. Reynolds*, 235 US at 139.

58. *Ibid.*, 139–40.

59. *Ibid.*, 140.

60. The court documented the significant difference between the number of days of hard labor Rivers would have owed the state versus what he owed Reynolds and Broughton, calling it a “more onerous sentence” (*ibid.*, 147).

61. *Ibid.*, 146.

62. *Ibid.*, 144.

63. *Ibid.*, 146–47. In the concurring opinion, Justice Holmes indicts the practice of preying on “impulsive people with little intelligence or foresight” in a series of contracts “each for a longer term than the last.” (150). The labor contract reproduced in the opinion documents Rivers’s illiteracy (145).

64. Schmidt, “Principle and Prejudice,” 477.

65. Alexander documents a contemporary case of debt peonage created by fees and fines trapping Ora Lee Hurley, “a prisoner held at the Gateway Diversion Center in Atlanta,” in perpetual servitude; working “a full-time job while in custody,



most of her income went to repay the diversion program, not the underlying fine that put her in custody in the first place" (*New Jim Crow*, 156).

66. This line occurs in Ma Rainey, "Chain Gang Blues"; Cannon's Jug Stompers, "Viola Lee Blues"; Robert Wilkins, "Police Sergeant Blues"; Matthew McClure, "Prisoner's Blues"; Kokomo Arnold, "Chain Gang Blues"; Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, "Joliet Bound"; Blind Boy Fuller, "Big House Bound"; and Sleepy John Estes, "Jailhouse Blues."

67. The phrase appears in Bessie Smith, "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair"; Mississippi Sheiks, "Bootlegger's Blues"; Blind Boy Fuller, "Big House Bound"; and Big Maceo, "County Jail Blues."

68. Schmidt, "Principle and Prejudice," 494–95, citing Bonaparte, *Report of the Attorney General*, 1:211–12. Documenting the persistence of the practice into the early 1920s, Woodruff cites correspondence addressed to the NAACP that requests help for numerous instances of peonage and other forms of coercion (*American Congo*, 122–25).

69. Freeman, *Lay This Body Down*, 31.

70. Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, 110, citing from testimony of A. J. Wismer in the trial transcript. See also Freeman, *Lay This Body Down*, 37.

71. Steinfeld writes that "by the mid-1820s no European indentured servants remained in the United States" (*Invention of Free Labor*, 11).

72. Lengths of time of indenture and lengths of contracts were increased in subsequent convictions for failure to perform bonded labor in early America, as they were in *Bailey and Reynolds*; see Morris, *Government and Labor*, 346; and Steinfeld, *Invention of Free Labor*, 11.

73. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 349; *United States v. Reynolds*, 235 US at 47; Wright, "Economics and Politics of Slavery," 104.

74. *Bailey v. Alabama*, 219 US at 244.

75. *United States v. Reynolds*, 235 US at 149, my emphasis.

76. Morris, *Government and Labor*, 348–54. See also Schmidt's discussion of nineteenth-century legal theory concerning the "voluntary" nature of work performed by paupers and vagrants due to their dependence on society (*Free to Work*, 117–20). Also subtending this practice is the logic of "rehabilitation": "virtue" may be inculcated in those convicted of crimes (among the working poor), as well as debtors and vagrants through work; see Hansan, "Poor Relief in Early America."

77. *Ruffin v. Commonwealth*, cited in Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 31.

78. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 174. See also Work, "Negro Criminality in the South," 77.

79. The exponential growth in majority-Black prison populations across the South speaks to the demands for cheap labor driving the system; see Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 31; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 170, 180; and Kirby's discussion of the racialized use of chain gangs across the South in *Rural Worlds Lost*, 216–17.

80. On law and discipline of slaves on plantations, see Elkins, *Slavery*, 56; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 25–49; and Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery," 6. Oshinsky cites a Natchez slaveholder who pronounced, "Each plantation was a law unto itself."

81. Work identifies the profit motive and its relation to abuse: "The introduction of the convict lease system into the prisons of the South, thereby enabling convicts to become a source of revenue, caused each state to have a financial interest in increasing the number of convicts. It was inevitable, therefore, that many abuses should arise" ("Negro Criminality in the South," 77). Many Redeemer governments increased penalties for petty crimes and instituted convict lease (Foner, *Reconstruction*, 593–94).

82. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 112.

83. In Mississippi, lack of a need for other forms of labor motivated the purchase of state farms, including Parchman (ibid., 141; Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 109–33).

84. For an example of the alternating practice in Monroe County, Mississippi in 1883, see Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge*, 227.

85. Examples of songs include Kokomo Arnold, "Chain Gang Blues"; "Texas" Alexander, "Section Gang Blues"; Fred McMullen, "De Kalb Chain Gang"; Ma Rainey, "Chain Gang Blues" and "Cell Bound Blues"; and Alice Moore, "Prison Blues." Prison work songs are a different genre, featuring extremely rhythmic antiphony to help coordinate dangerous work and to allow the time to pass more quickly. These songs make no mention of actual conditions. For some excellent examples, see Jackson et al., *Afro-American Work Songs in a Texas Prison*; and Jackson, *Wake Up Dead Man*.

86. For a discussion of the conditions under which convicts did hard labor, see my *Time and the Blues*, 79–84; Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 59, 76, 137; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 193; and Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 44–45. On mortality rates, see Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 46; and Curtin, *Black Prisoners*, 85, 154–59.

87. Baradaran points out that, "Once arrested, these men would have a speedy trial, and within an average of seventy-two hours after arrest, be sold to a southern industrial mill or work in deplorable conditions for twelve hours a day mining coal or iron" (*Color of Money*, 21).

88. Oshinsky reports that in Mississippi "not a single leased convict ever lived long enough to serve a sentence of ten years or more" (*Worse Than Slavery*, 46). Curtin details the high number of deaths in the Alabama coal mines as a result of the lease, estimating the death rate between 20 and 40 percent (*Black Prisoners*, 85, 154–59).

89. Examples of songs with references to long or life sentences include Cannon's Jug Stompers, "Viola Lee Blues"; Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie,

"Joliet Bound"; Jesse James, "Lonesome Day Blues"; and Bukka White, "Parchman Farm Blues." On the relative frequency of life sentences at Parchman, see Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 141.

90. Cohen highlights the similarities between slaves and convicts in terms of labor, noting that "under slavery, chains and shackles were used only by slave traders and for discipline" (*At Freedom's Edge*, 226).

91. Unlike surety arrangements, the monetization depends on the market for labor and corresponds in no real way to any calculation of the severity of the crime. Companies bid on convict labor and imposed "sentences" that often did not respect the temporal boundaries established by the legal system. Curtin describes the strategy of withholding information about sentences in an attempt to break convicts psychologically in the Alabama mines (*Black Prisoners*, 82, 85, 94).

92. Mancini takes his title from a quote in a 1919 report on prison conditions in the South in the *Proceedings of the National Prison Association*, in which a lessee ironically sums up the difference between slaves, who were owned and therefore worth keeping, and convicts, who were only leased and thus worthless (*One Dies, Get Another*, 2–3).

93. Genovese points out that slaves represent a "heavy capitalization of labor." Slavery as a system therefore "requires all hands to be occupied at all times" in order to be profitable (*Political Economy of Slavery*, 49). Mancini argues that convict labor shares this feature of slave labor (*One Dies, Get Another*, 147–48).

94. Robert Johnson, "Travelin' Riverside Blues." Other songs that reference liens and mortgages on people in the context of love relations include Sleepy John Estes, "Poor John Blues" and "Drop Down Mama"; Tommy McClennan, "Brown Skin Girl"; and Big Joe Williams, "Meet Me Around the Corner."

95. Jackson asserts bluntly, "In the Old South the slave's body was owned by



the farmer and in the Texas Department of Corrections the convict's body was owned by the state of Texas" (*Wake Up Dead Man*, viii).

96. Fierce, *Slavery Revisited*, 194.

Mancini asserts that convict lease continued in Mississippi, for example, until 1906 (*One Dies, Get Another*, 17–18).

97. "Alabama to Make Prisoners Break Rocks." Sheriff Joe Arpaio infamously opened a tent city for inmates and utilized chain gangs to bury the indigent in the Arizona heat; see "'That Circus Ends.'"

98. Abdulrauf, "50 Companies Supporting Modern American Slavery." Chuck D summarizes the prison labor situation and the ironic assistance of hip-hop culture perfectly: "Our youth looking at jail life as being glamorous is taking us right back to slavery" (*Fight the Power*, 47).

99. Southern Poverty Law Center documents the participation of Alabama prisoners in work-release programs in poultry processing. In one case, a prisoner died cleaning a processing machine, while many others have sustained serious injuries (Tucker, "Kill Line"). Closer to my home, prisoners "voluntarily" fight wildfires in the state of California (Lowe, "What Does California Owe").

100. Workers are eager to take company jobs that pay better than in-prison jobs ("Incarcerated Workforce").

101. "SPLC Lawsuit."

102. In the wake of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the US Justice Department's 2015 "Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department" chided the municipality for not offering community service as an alternative to those who cannot pay fines. Ferguson required a minimum payment of one hundred dollars per month while other local municipalities allowed payments of fifty. The report documents that those who failed to pay fines in a timely manner were assessed additional fines and charges and warrants were even issued for their arrest. While serving jail time, someone could lose housing or

custody of children taken by Child Protective Services.

103. The NAACP estimates that "in 2014, African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional population" and that "African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites" ("Criminal Justice Fact Sheet"). As of August 2020, the Federal Bureau of Prisons indicates that 38.3 percent of federal inmates are Black ("Inmate Race"). In addition to those incarcerated, Alexander highlights the significant number of people under "community correctional supervision"—i.e., on probation or parole," adding significantly to the group with curtailed rights (*New Jim Crow*, 94).

104. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 2. Alexander uses the phrase "civil death" (142) to describe the plight of convicted felons, echoing Patterson's use of "social death" to describe slavery, a kind of "institutionalized marginality" (*Slavery and Social Death*, 38, 44, 46).

### CHAPTER 3

1. James, *Rage to Survive*, 95.

2. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 121–27. Some scholars label the South's economy "colonial" because of the lack of industry and role in supplying unfinished materials to the North and England; see, for example, Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 105. Wright identifies the isolated, regional labor market as a factor that hindered industrial development (*Old South, New South*, 11).

3. Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 25.

4. Johnson, "Pedestal and the Veil," 300. Johnson provides an overview and compelling critique of Marx's and Marxist historians' analysis of slavery.

5. Kilbourne argues that credit evolved as a risk-spreading mechanism (*Slave Agriculture*, 1).

6. Mbembe provides a metaphor for understanding traffic in a human commodity: "If under slavery Africa is the privileged site of extraction of this ore, then the plantation

in the New World is the site of its casting, and Europe is the site of its fiduciary conversion. This passage from *man-ore* to *man-metal* and from *man-metal* to *man-currency* is a structuring dimension of early capitalism" (*Critique de la raison nègre*, 67–68, my translation). Similarly, Gilroy characterizes "plantation slavery" as "capitalism with its clothes off" (*Black Atlantic*, 15).

7. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 61–62.

8. Armstrong, *Logic of Slavery*, 34.

9. Baucom analyzes the *Zong* trial records that document the dispute between the marine insurers and the Liverpool merchants over payment of the insurance claim on the value of the lost cargo, including the murdered 132 enslaved people. Baucom views the calculation of the slaves' loss value as sign of their complete conversion into "little more than promissory notes, bills-of-exchange, or some other markers of a 'specie value.'" Their value is no longer tied to "their continued, embodied, material existence but to their speculative, recuperable loss value," signaling "the colonization of human subjectivity by finance capital" (*Specters of the Atlantic*, 139). See also Armstrong's discussion of the *Zong* massacre in terms of distribution of risk and the language of "sacrifice" in marine insurance (*Logic of Slavery*, 19–20, 25).

10. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 62. See also Ryder's discussion of slave life insurance in the South ("To Realize Money Facilities").

11. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 60–61, 150.

12. The international trade continued illegally both to the United States and other destinations for several decades. For an analysis of the global financial structure of the illegal trade, see Harris, "Circuits of Wealth."

13. Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South*, 31. On the expansion of the cotton economy in relation to slavery, see Schermerhorn, "Commodity Chains and Chained Commodities," esp. 11, 13, 22.

The relatively close historical proximity of the invention of the cotton gin, the Louisiana Purchase, and the dispossession of Indigenous people provided powerful incentives to spur speculation and the expansion of slavery; see Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 5; and Baptist, *Half Has Never Been Told*, 6–37.

14. For statistics on the internal slave trade, see Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 5–6; and Baptist, *Half Has Never Been Told*, 3. Baptist documents the use of slaves as a means of expanding land holdings prior to the end of international trade (21).

15. Martin's survey and analysis of over eight thousand mortgages in public records in Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries uncovers networks of private loans that used more than twenty-seven thousand human beings as collateral ("Slavery's Invisible Engine," 818, 819, 862). See also Baptist's discussion of the use of slaves as collateral for bank loans (*Half Has Never Been Told*, 274–76).

16. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 39–40. Many slave narratives mention estate sales after the death of the slaveholder, presumably to acquit debts. Tines Kendricks specifically mentions debts in his narrative, while several other former slaves reference speculators (Yetman, *When I Was a Slave*, 15, 21, 44, 46, 67, 86, 90, 146). See also Johnson's discussion in *Soul by Soul*, 22, 25–26, 127.

17. Schermerhorn, "Commodity Chains and Chained Commodities," 23–24.

18. Marx, *Capital*, 152.

19. Marx's MCM' formula posits the following: "Money capital (M) means liquidity, flexibility, freedom of choice. Commodity capital (C) means capital invested in a particular input-output combination in view of a profit. Hence, it means concreteness, rigidity, and a narrowing down or closing of options. M' means *expanded* liquidity, flexibility, and freedom of choice" (Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, 5). Slaves, a commodity, are also a form of liquidity.

20. Hahn discusses slaves' production of crops and eggs for sale, sometimes

even making them creditors to their enslavers (*Nation Under Our Feet*, 27–30).

21. Radano, "Black Music Labor," 200. See also Andrews, *Slavery and Class*, 82.

22. For a discussion of debates in slavery studies on agency and autonomy, see Kaye, "Problem of Autonomy"; and Johnson, "Agency." Rodrigue provides a helpful definition of agency for the ante- and post-bellum contexts: "Agency, a concept that pervades scholarship on Black life during and after slavery, can be understood as the capacity to act on behalf of one's own interests and values. In essence, it involves the ability to remain independent, to some degree, of another's control and to exercise a measure of free will" ("Black Agency After Slavery," 41).

23. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 22, 163, 164. Johnson documents a history of "negotiations and subversions" from inside oppression, citing numerous instances from slave narratives, slave traders' journals, and slave owners' letters and diaries (179–81, 186, 187). Johnson's argument echoes W. E. B. Du Bois's famous notion of the double consciousness of African Americans (*Souls of Black Folk*, 9).

24. Radano, "Black Music Labor," 175–76.

25. *Ibid.*, 78.

26. *Ibid.*, 185.

27. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xii.

28. Radano, "Black Music Labor," 195.

29. *Ibid.*, 206.

30. Miller asserts that in the early period, "Minstrelsy did all this within the irreducible context of the blackface mask—a prop that performed racial distance under the auspice of racial passing" (*Segregating Sound*, 4–5).

31. Smallwood, "Commodified Freedom," 292, 293.

32. Horkheimer and Adorno associate instrumental rationality in the service of domination with the bourgeoisie's reliance on reductive forms of thinking that allow for

the comparison of unlike things for exchange (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4, 7).

33. Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 139–40.

34. Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 194. Various offshoots of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers continued touring in the 1880s and 1890s (Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 3–4).

35. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 164. Commercial interest motivated performances of race in Blackface minstrelsy and Black vaudeville that would be labeled "inauthentic" in relation to "authentic" folk blues by folklorists influenced by a romanticist tradition; see Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 142, 150, 276.

36. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 165, 167.

37. *Ibid.*, 169.

38. Hall, "What Is This 'Black,'" 88.

In a similar vein, Woods points out, "Levine also argued in support of the proposition that commerce does not automatically translate into inauthenticity and irrelevancy" (*Development Arrested*, 109).

39. *These Are Our Lives*, 49.

40. Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 155–56.

41. For a list of blues musicians who grew up in farm families and biographical sources, see Ownby, *American Dreams*, 186n12. Honeyboy Edwards proudly boasted, "I never made no crop," which according to Pearson "elicited both admiration and jealousy." Pearson extends the argument, asserting that "the blues musician represented a way of beating the system and was therefore an affront to the paternalistic white power structure" ("*Sounds So Good to Me*," 66).

42. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 33; Marx, *Capital*, 130.

43. Attali, *Bruits*, 107–10.

44. Taylor modifies Attali's regimes of dissemination (*Music and Capitalism*, 21).

45. Abbott and Seroff, *Original Blues*, 3.

46. *Ibid.*, 4. The date is based on articles in the *Indianapolis Freeman* and the publication of Odum's collection of "Negro

folk songs." For Abbott and Seroff, Black vaudeville represents a semiautonomous sphere of African American culture that enabled the emergence of the blues (*Original Blues*, 175).

47. Based on an archive of 456 songs published as sheet music with "blues" in the title, Muir offers helpful axes of classification for thinking about this mode of commodification using relative degrees of resemblance to Tin Pan Alley songs and folk blues (*Long Lost Blues*, 38–39).

48. Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right*, 210.

49. *Ibid.*, 211.

50. Work's account of Ma Rainey's introduction to the "blues" points to the unquestionable dialectical relation between audience and singer that fuels the genre and defies notions of property and ownership. Work reports the account Rainey gave him of her first encounter with a plaintive form of singing in Missouri in 1902, when "a girl from the town . . . came to the tent one morning and began to sing about the 'man' who had left her." Rainey claimed to have learned the song and incorporated it into her act (Work, *American Negro Songs*, 32; Southern, *Music of Black American*, 332). Abbott and Seroff cast doubt on the story's veracity, especially the 1902 date and Rainey's role as pioneer of the blues (*Original Blues*, 162).

51. Abbott and Seroff, *Original Blues*, 136–39. Composed by Black vaudevillian H. Franklin "Baby" Seals, it was arranged by ragtime pianist Artie Matthews for publication.

52. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 76–77.

53. The expression comes from the title to this section of Handy's autobiography, "Blue Diamonds in the Rough: Polished and Mounted" (*ibid.*, 137). Miller characterizes Handy as a middleman negotiating between "conscious art and Black folklore" (*Segregating Sound*, 149).

54. Ida Cox's recording of "Death Letter Blues" is a good example of lyrical and thematic material that crossed back

and forth between the two traditions. Son House's "My Black Mama—Part 2" shares thematic and lyric material with the Cox song. Beaumont discusses various songs with the "death letter" theme (*Preachin' the Blues*, 66–67). Ultimately, I agree with Muir, who argues that "folk" and "popular" are less helpful categories than thinking about the distinction as a continuum with axes for classification (*Long Lost Blues*, 38–39).

55. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 15.

56. Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 7. On the misjudgment of the market by recording executives, see Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 117; and Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 207.

57. On the famous story of how Perry Bradford convinced Fred Hagar of the OKeh label to record Mamie Smith, see Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 199–200; Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 210; and Mazor, *Ralph Peer*, 37–41.

58. Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 160. The *All Music Guide to the Blues* claims that "Crazy Blues" "sold a million copies in its first six months" (Erlewine et al., 404).

59. Woods, *Development Arrested*, 25.

60. Suisman and Kenney link the pressure exerted on blues performers to produce "new" material to copyright concerns (Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 132; Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 132).

61. Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 56.

62. Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 200; Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 129; Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 249. Of course, as Titon points out, there was no blues music programming on radio available in the 1920s, even if rural folks had had electricity.

63. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 118; Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 281.

64. Papa Charlie Jackson began recording in 1924 with Paramount, but his experience with minstrel and medicine shows means he is not credited as the first male recorded in the folk tradition.

65. On Blind Lemon Jefferson and the increasing importance of talent scouts for

recording, see Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 41–42.

66. Suisman discusses technical limitations and narrow frequency response in acoustic recording (*Selling Sounds*, 107–8, 272). See also Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 71. Positioning the horn for acoustic recording to capture both the vocal and the instrument also posed challenges (Mazor, *Ralph Peer*, 54).

67. Sterne, *Audible Past*, 276–78. Travel-size electric equipment was available by 1927 (Mazor, *Ralph Peer*, 90).

68. Tilton, *Downhome Blues*, 216; Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 131–32; Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 240; Charters, “Workin’ on the Building,” 24–25. Ward and Huber insightfully describe A&R men and women as both “cultural mediators and agents of change” (*A & R Pioneers*, 5).

69. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 72–73. See also Kenney on the emphasis on novelty among scouts to avoid copyright problems (*Recorded Music*, 132); and Arewa on the problem of creativity in the blues for copyright law (“Blues Lives,” esp. 598–99).

70. Mazor, *Ralph Peer*, 83. Ward and Huber describe Peer as “probably the single most influential A&R man in interwar roots recording and popular music publishing, and a towering figure in the history of the larger American popular music industry” (*A & R Pioneers*, 23).

71. Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 65. Ward and Huber assert that Peer required Black artists to “conform to a much narrower set of stylistic expectations than he demanded of the white roots artists he recorded for hillbilly records series” (*A & R Pioneers*, 170).

72. Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 240. The segregation and stylistic stereotyping even occurred at Black-owned Black Swan Records, where Ethel Waters reports she was limited to the blues by Fletcher Henderson (*A & R Pioneers*, 232).

73. Tilton, *Downhome Blues*, 216–17. Record companies may have censored some material they felt was too risqué, but there seems to have been “no consistent

standard” applied (Oliver, *Screening the Blues*, 216). There were clearly competing motivations—avoid federal prosecution and boost sales—as well as degrees of understanding of innuendo in lyrics. Ward and Huber point out that “racist stereotypes of hypersexual African Americans” led to criticism of recordings that portrayed “the race” in a “demeaning or offensive” manner, including from the NAACP (*A & R Pioneers*, 215).

74. Black Swan Records, founded by Handy’s music publishing partner Harry Pace, was a short-lived (1921–23) African American-owned “race” label (Abbott and Seroff, *Original Blues*, 260–63).

75. Rothenbuhler provides a compelling analysis of Robert Johnson’s recordings as responsive to the “culture of recorded music” (“For-the-Record Aesthetics,” 65).

76. Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 108, 117.

77. Best explains that “in the act of February 3, 1831, Congress extended the Constitution’s copyright protections to an author’s ‘Writings and Discoveries’ . . . to include written musical scores” (*Fugitive’s Properties*, 42).

78. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 118.

79. Act to Amend and Consolidate the Acts Respecting Copyright, sec. 1(e). Income from mechanical rights could be substantial. Peer proposed to Victor that he be paid half of mechanicals and not a salary, foreseeing the profitability (Mazor, *Ralph Peer*, 74–77).

80. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 118.

81. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 167–68.

82. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 128.

83. David Jansen, “Perry Bradford: Pioneer of the Blues,” liner notes, in Bradford, *Perry Bradford Story* (discog.).

84. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 118–19. See also the whistleblowing account by record producer John Hammond (under the pseudonym Henry Johnson) of the exploitation of African American and hillbilly artists by A&R men as well as some fellow musicians, like Benny Goodman, who purchased

songs for twenty-five dollars or less, claimed co-authorship, copyrighted the songs, and then, when possible, pressured musicians to record them with multiple labels to maximize profits ("Music Sold for Less Than a Song.")

85. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 128.

The *Catalog of Copyright Entries* for 1932 lists Bessie Smith as copyright holder of words and music for songs that remained unpublished. Registering a copyright provides legal protection for potential royalties in the event that works are recorded or published as sheet music.

86. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 127.

As an example, songs composed and performed by Ma Rainey were copyrighted to Chicago Music Publishing Co. in 1926.

87. *Ibid.*, 121.

88. *Ibid.*, 128. Williams is credited with saying that "Screw the artist before he screws you . . . was virtually the maxim of the record industry" (*Paramount*, 49).

89. Ward and Huber make this argument, while also acknowledging race, class, and gender bias in the A&R folks' dealings with musicians (*A & R Pioneers*, 111–12, 115–16). See also Springer, "Folklore, Commercialism and Exploitation," 40. For a discussion of risk for contemporary independent labels including a consignment model for distribution and sales, see Iglauer and Roberts, *Bitten by the Blues*, 230.

90. A rare exception is Skip James, who opted for royalties instead of a flat fee from Paramount; however, because of the Depression, he would likely have earned more money from the flat fee (Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 92; Springer, "Folklore, Commercialism and Exploitation," 39).

91. See Titon's insightful discussion of lump-sum payments (*Early Downhome Blues*, 214–15).

92. Titon makes a similar argument about the difficulty of maintaining contact with performers for recording companies (*ibid.*, 215).

93. Lester, "I Can Make My Own Songs," 41. House also reported making fifteen dollars per side at the same sessions (Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 94).

94. Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 29.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Brooks cites an article from 1906 that claims that Johnson "once sang the same song 56 times in one day" (*Lost Sounds*, 35).

97. On Bert Williams, George Walker, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, see *ibid.*, 117, 125, 126, 195.

98. *Paramount*, 38, 49–50. On fees paid to Ethel Waters, Edith Wilson, and Bessie Smith, see Springer, "Folklore, Commercialism and Exploitation," 38–39.

99. *Paramount*, 89. A hot commodity, Jefferson recorded almost one hundred sides for Paramount between 1926 and 1929 (Abbott and Seroff, *Original Blues*, 121). Because Jefferson violated his exclusive contract by recording with a competitor, "Paramount sued O'Keh for damages and secured its promise not to release any more material from its surreptitious session" (Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 80).

100. On Johnson's professional career, see my *Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson*, 4–15.

101. Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues*, 107, 122, 140.

102. Johnson recorded for Gennett Records as Bud Wilson and for Columbia as Jimmie Jordan. On "talent rustling" by A&R people and the ubiquity of recording under aliases, see Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 77–78.

103. Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters*, 12.

104. "ARC had been cobbled together from close to a dozen small- to medium-sized label imprints, by 1934 including . . . the old Columbia Phonograph and O'Keh; in 1938, the whole conglomeration would be purchased by CBS, the previously unrelated Columbia Broadcast System, and reemerge as the more modern Columbia Records label" (Mazor, *Ralph Peer*, 180). See also Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 9. "After World War II . . . Columbia, Decca and RCA ruled as the giants of the record industry, along with a few new upstarts like Capitol Records (founded in 1942)" (Iglauer and Roberts, *Bitten by the Blues*, 61).



105. Stahl, *Unfree Masters*, 188–89. The “vaults” (recordings held by the labels) could be reissued without paying royalties to the original recording artists (Stahl, “Tactical Destabilization,” 352).

106. Lomax, *Mr. Jelly Roll*, 187.

107. Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, 80–81.

108. *Ibid.*, 108.

109. O’Neal and van Singel, *Voice of the Blues*, 263–64. Cohen draws the explicit parallel to sharecropping, “To singers and songwriters, the company was “Plantation Chess.” . . . Life at the label has been compared to sharecropping. Artists were often paid not in cash but in goods and services, credit in the company store. These goods were given as if they were gifts, and then later, to the shock of the recipients, subtracted from royalties” (*Machers and Rockers*, 150–51). Leonard Chess’s paternalism did save Etta James’s house: because he signed on her mortgage loan, she did not lose it to rapacious relatives or addiction. Chess left the house to her in his will (James, *Rage to Survive*, 189).

110. “B. B. King reported: ‘Some of the songs I wrote, they added a name when I copyrighted it . . . like ‘King and Ling’ or ‘King and Josea.’ There was no such thing as Ling, or Josea. No such thing. That way, the company could claim half of your song.’” Working with CPA Sidney A. Seidenberg, King was able “to wrest song credit back from bogus ‘collaborators’” (Robins, “B. B. King”).

111. Nathan also maximized profits with a virtual vertical monopoly on music production and was accused of outright theft for releasing other companies’ titles on his own labels; see Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 50, 109, 137–38. On the value of Nathan’s assets upon his death, including copyrights, see Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 147.

112. Stahl, *Unfree Masters*, 113–14. Assignment continues to appear in contracts with blues artists such as with MC Records (Mark Carpentieri, email to author, 22 September 2020). Sallie Bengtson reports that Nola Blue Records includes assignment

as part of standard contract language but reports that “some artists have chosen to negotiate the right to mutual consent as part of the assignment clause” (email to author, 17 October 2020). Interestingly, the largest contemporary label for blues, Alligator Records, does not include language allowing transfer of artists to other companies (Iglauer, email to author, 14 September 2020).

113. Stahl, *Unfree Masters*, 114.

114. Palmer, “Sam Phillips,” 122. The Chess and Bihari Brothers also fought over Jackie Brenston of “Rocket 88” fame (Kress, “Chess Brothers vs. Behari Brothers”); see also, Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 154–55.

115. Burnett and Strachwitz, “Howlin’ Wolf Interview.”

116. Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 155.

117. See Stahl’s analysis of Brown’s and attorney Howard Begle’s successful challenge to the “racialized political economy” of royalties (“Tactical Destabilization,” 344).

118. *Ibid.*, 350.

119. Harrington, “MCA to Pay Royalties to RB Greats”; Stahl, “Tactical Destabilization,” 351.

120. Chanda, Mitchener, and Todd, *Buddy Guy*. It is unclear whether Waters is referring to the actions of the Chess brothers, Willie Dixon’s having copyrighted songs that Waters claims were his compositions, or both.

121. Stahl cites a summary memo from an attorney working with Brown who uncovered evidence that “the company decided there was no way in hell these people were ever going to work their way out so let’s don’t even bother to go through the exercise of even posting what they earned” (“Tactical Destabilization,” 355). This fact enabled the threat of lawsuits under RICO, part of the pressure brought to bear to address inequities.

122. *Ibid.*, 352. A related issue concerns rock covers of blues songs by artists such as Canned Heat and Led Zeppelin,

who appropriated songwriting credit and did not pay royalties. Willie Dixon successfully sued Led Zeppelin for royalties over their hit "Whole Lotta Love," based on his composition "You Need Love" (Springer, "Folklore, Commercialism and Exploitation," 41–43).

123. Atlantic also contributed to the establishment of the Rhythm & Blues Foundation, viewed as a form of reparations. Etta James is cynical about MCA's motivation, attributing their writing of new contracts and paying of royalties for the Chess catalog to a desire to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy as they pursued royalties from companies that produced pirated editions of Chess songs (James and Ritz, *Rage to Survive*, 254).

124. See Stahl's discussion of what he calls "contractarian" arguments that assert the distinguishability between legitimate and illegitimate contracts according to clear lines between freedom and coercion, including the artists' right to "take it or leave it" (*Unfree Masters*, 157–60).

125. Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 142; Stahl *Unfree Masters*, 145. Prince famously wrote "slave" on his face and assumed an unpronounceable symbol as his stage name (leading to the moniker "The Artist Formerly Known as Prince") during contract disputes with his record company (Forde, "Record Breaker").

126. Keil, *Urban Blues*, 82. The royalty statement from 1986 would have been from MCA, which had bought out Chess. See also Bobby Rush's story of being rejected from Chess for reading a union contract aloud in their office (*I Ain't Studdin' Ya*, 156–57).

127. Through subsequent buyouts, Waters never received royalty payments, nor did Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Willie Dixon, and the Soul Stirrers, among others (Harrington, "MCA to Pay Royalties to RB Greats").

128. Bonnie Raitt created Redwing Records and Joe Bonamassa owns J&R Adventures LLC.

129. Iglauer, email to the author, 14 September 2020. Iglauer is proud of his reputation of always paying royalties to artists

and song publishers (Iglauer and Roberts, *Bitten by the Blues*, 67).

130. Toynbee, *Making Popular Music*, 27.

131. See Moore's discussion of the difficulties of commodifying both spirituals and blues arising from challenges to conceptions of originality and ownership ("Surveying the Field," 6). Turino's insights into the resistance to commodification of music that is "participatory" as opposed to "presentational" is also relevant here. Because the distinction indicates a spectrum, the blues, although not as participatory as some folk forms, nonetheless contains features that entail audience participation (*Music as Social Life*, 77). Small uses a neologism, *musicking*, intended to capture the emphasis on process over product in what he argues is an African retention in the approach to making Black music (*Music of the Common Tongue*, 13–14, 45–46, 50).

132. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 169.

The conception of process overlaps with Floyd's insistence on Black musical experience as event (*Power of Black Music*, 232). See also DeVaux's discussion of jazz improvisation's challenge to notions of composition and product (*Birth of Bebop*, 9, 11).

133. Melrose, "My Life in Recording," 61, quoted in Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers*, 206.

134. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 169.

135. Ferris's work documenting the give-and-take in house parties in the Delta underscores the importance of audience participation in blues performance (*Give My Poor Heart Ease*, 222–23).

136. Taylor even stresses the importance of the tactility of products like CDs and LPs in contrast to downloading and streaming for music (*Music and Capitalism*, 146–47).

137. Suisman discusses group productions and the challenges they pose to what he sees as the fetishization of "the composer and the composition" in the 1909 Copyright Act (*Selling Sounds*, 168).

138. Abbot and Seroff reproduce a contract between a TOBA venue and Ma



Rainey and her band for a one-week engagement (*Original Blues*, 291).

139. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) was created to collect fees from hotels, restaurants, and other organizations playing recorded music. Legal disputes over refusals to pay fees eventually went to the US Supreme Court, which ruled that music helped to produce profit and therefore the paying of performance rights (Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 171–73).

140. B. B. King mentions that he “never passed the hat, but the people knew that I’d appreciate a dime if I played a tune they requested” (Wheeler and Obrecht, “B. B. King,” 319).

141. Mauss, *Gift*, 23.

142. *Ibid.*, 23–24. Paying forward coincides with Toynbee’s assertion that a kind of altruism exists in popular music wherein “musicians claim to act on behalf of the community and for the collective good” (*Making Popular Music*, 37)

143. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization created the designation “masterpieces of the intangible heritage of humanity” in an effort to protect something like group intellectual property in folk knowledge and practices. As Taylor points out, this has led to an ironic outcome: “The concept and use of the idea of the masterpiece of the intangible heritage of humanity, might protect local and ancient cultural forms and practices from being appropriated, but, at the same time, it can have the effect of . . . creating a market for them or a touristic culture around them that significantly alters those forms and practices that were intended to be protected” (*Music and Capitalism*, 116).

144. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 280.

145. On royalties for artists and songwriters from iTunes, satellite radio, and streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music, see Iglauer and Roberts, *Bitten by the Blues*, 277–80.

146. An earlier version recorded by Williamson in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1951 does not have the same energy and life

as the later Chicago recording, in large part due to the rhythmic, more predictable harmonica fills and lack of prominent interplay between the harmonica and other instruments.

147. Palmer, “Church of the Sonic Guitar,” 21.

148. See Iglauer’s account of recording Albert Collins “live” in the studio without overdubs for *Ice Pickin’* (1978) and using the studio “as a tool to create a sense of live performance” (Iglauer and Roberts, *Bitten by the Blues*, 115, 197).

## CHAPTER 4

1. Armstrong, *Logic of Slavery*, 65.

2. “32-20 Blues” contains references to numerous weapons and ammunition (32-20, .38 Special, Gatling gun) to be used against a lover who stays out all night. Komara discusses the lyrical similarities with Skip James’s “22-20 Blues” (*Road to Robert Johnson*, 29–30). Some outlaw songs, like Will Bennett’s “Railroad Bill,” glorify violent revenge. But most blues focus on revenge fantasies aimed at an unfaithful lover; examples include Leroy Carr, “Blues Before Sunrise”; Lonnie Johnson, “She’s Making Whoopee in Hell Tonight”; Memphis Minnie, “Me and My Chauffeur”; and B. B. King, “You Done Lost Your Good Thing Now.” Hoodoo and conjuring may also be used for revenge (Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 126–27).

3. Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, liner notes (discog.).

4. Robert Johnson, “If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day.” The line also appears in Ishmon Bracey, “Left Alone Blues”; Son House, “Dry Spell Blues—Part 1”; and Hambone Willie Newbern, “Roll and Tumble Blues.” See McGeachy’s discussion of the “folded arms” formula (*Lonesome Words*, 45–47).

5. As an example of the view that “the antidote to revenge is not justice but forgiveness,” Atwood cites Nelson Mandela’s attitude upon his release from prison:

"He said to himself that he had to forgive all those who had wronged him by the time he reached the prison gates or he would never be free of them" (*Payback*, 159). Self-restraint as a coping mechanism resembles the later urban incarnation of masculinity characterized by the "cool pose" (Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, 5).

6. Even Muddy Waters's cover of the song, "I Done Got Wise," with his characteristic bravado, falls short of promising much in the way of revenge. See my discussion of the significance of "coming to awareness" narratives in relation to migration in *Time in the Blues*, 120–21.

7. See Cone's discussion of Black eschatology and the belief in future judgment tied directly to present experience (*Spirituals and the Blues*, 83, 90, 93–95); and Pratt's discussion of popular music as "utopian prefiguration," especially spirituals and gospel (*Rhythm and Resistance*, 36, 37–69).

8. The song was written by Joe Medwick. For a discussion of the production and success of the song, see Farley, *Soul of the Man*, 73–74.

9. In concluding his study of religion in the Mississippi Delta in the crucial and brutal period of post-Reconstruction, Giggie asserts a general belief in eventual liberation among Delta Blacks: "For them, religion was a space where they integrated the realities of second-class citizenship with dreams of overcoming it, where they fashioned ideas and institutions that helped them minimize the ills of segregation and sometimes even overturn them, and where they planned for a future of unchecked liberty even though they knew not when it would come, only that it would" (*After Redemption*, 200).

10. Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 113.

11. Murray and Harvey argue for a similarity in the communal function of the blues and church attendance (Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 38–42; Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 180). My argument, like Cone's in *Spirituals and the Blues*, goes a step further in locating a form of secular

faith related to justice in the blues. The competing message of secular versus otherworldly justice would confirm Harvey's reading of bluesmen competing for the same audience as preachers.

12. Pratt argues that style and sense of place in popular music help create a feeling of community (*Rhythm and Resistance*, 34).

13. The potential for this kind of experience supports Cone's assertions concerning the social function of blues as a process whereby "through the acceptance of the real as disclosed in concrete human affairs . . . a community can attain authentic existence" (*Spirituals and the Blues*, 242).

14. Farley describes the song in his biography of Bland as one that "allows Bobby to tell a story and show off his growing vocal prowess" (*Soul of the Man*, 73).

15. *Ibid.*, 74.

16. Keil, *Urban Blues*, 76.

17. Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 124. Cone makes these assertions in the context of an extended discussion of debates over characterizing the blues as hopeless and full of despair (122–24).

18. "The Negro is saying that the time has come for our nation to take that firm stride into freedom—not simply toward freedom—which will pay a long-overdue debt to its citizens of color" (King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 140).

19. John Anthony Brisbin, liner notes, Burton, *Past, Present, and Future* (discog.). Brisbin details Burton's association with Chess Records in the 1960s, where he played with Eddie Taylor, Hubert Sumlin, Carey Bell, and Willie Mabon, and his membership in the Alligator Records unofficial house band, where he played with Lonnie Brooks and Albert Collins.

20. Evans stresses truth as "the main aesthetic standard . . . for early folk blues," based in part on his interviews with bluesmen, including Rube Lacy (*Big Road Blues*, 58). Evans does not recognize a social function beyond the cathartic (165) in this truth-telling. Telling the truth also appears in an interview Oliver conducted with Henry

Townsend that links personal experience to authentic expression (*Conversation with the Blues*, 112, 176). Pearson makes the argument that the blues "artist as truth-teller expresses the audience's vision of reality through his personality and conviction, much as individuals in church corroborate the validity of a general belief in the Holy Spirit through testimonies of their own experience. Blues concerns are secular, but the bluesman provides testimony in agreement with the audience's beliefs" ("*Sounds So Good to Me*," 132).

21. Using a theatrical metaphor for everyday life, Goffman defines "discrepant roles" in social interactions as ones in which the person occupying such a position gains information via access to places normally off-limits to those who are not part of the social performance. He includes servants and slaves, whom he describes as "non-persons," and service specialists among discrepant roles (*Presentation of Self*, 145, 151–55).

22. For a critical discussion of the issue of rape under slavery, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 79–112. For a discussion of the complexities of the positions occupied by house servants under slavery, see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 327–65; and Andrews, *Slavery and Class*, 103–4, 152–62. The Williams plantation case in Georgia offers a particularly poignant and painful case of an African American overseer coerced into committing murder in an attempt to shield the owner of a modern-day slave farm from prosecution for peonage; see Freeman, *Lay This Body Down*, esp. 28, 42. The history of the legislation of segregation bears the traces of the paradoxes created by racialized power relations in public and private spaces—for example, in exemptions in railroad segregation legislation allowing Black employees to accompany white employers or white police officers escorting Black criminals to ride in white-only cars (Lofgren, *Plessy Case*, 22).

23. Townsend, *Blues Life*, 108.

24. The worldly nature of the accountant is consistent with what theologian

Cone identifies as "a stubborn refusal to go beyond the existential problem and substitute otherworldly answers" in the blues, arguing that the "blues ground black hope firmly in history" (*Spirituals and the Blues*, 99, 126). This is consistent with the distinction Spencer draws between a biblically derived form of theodicy in the blues and an otherworldly eschatological belief (*Blues and Evil*, 75–76).

25. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 241.

26. Brooks argues for the centrality of apology for any meaningful form of reparations for historical injustices against African Americans. He identifies four conditions for apology, beginning with admission of the truth: "When a government perpetrates an atrocity and apologizes for it, it does four things: confesses the deed; admits the deed was an injustice; repents; and asks for forgiveness. All four conditions are essential to taking personal responsibility" (*Atonement and Forgiveness*, 144).

27. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (2008), s.v. "re-, prefix."

28. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 29–38.

29. Rose, *Black Noise*, 73–74.

30. See Rose's discussion of the use of breakbeats in rap (*ibid.*, 53–54) and Chang's discussion of the discovery of the break by DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell) and its uses because of dancers' reactions (*Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 78–79).

31. In an interview with Wheeler in 1980, B. B. King responded to a question about influences on his guitar playing in a way that highlights the impossibility of exact copying: "There's only a few guys that if I could play just like them I would. T-Bone Walker was one, Lonnie Johnson was another. Blind Lemon, Charlie Christian, and Django Reinhardt: Those were the only guys. . . . And there are also things that they do today that if I *could do*, I probably would, but not the way that they did it. Instead of playing it A, B, C, D, I'd probably play it A, C, D, B—not the exact same thing, because I think that there are very few people that play the same ideas identically as you would feel

it yourself" (Wheeler and Obrecht, "B. B. King," 327).

32. See my discussion of a blues conception of tradition dependent on repetition in *Time in the Blues*, 177–206.

33. Levitin suggests that the recognition of repetitive structures is key to our finding pleasure in music (*This Is Your Brain*, 107).

34. Simon, *Time in the Blues*, 18–19, 22.

35. Rose, using McClary's description of Western art music, distinguishes between repetition in Black music and the teleological structure of the classical tradition (Rose, *Black Noise*, 69; McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 155). Repetition in "Black music" has also been characterized as an African retention—a problematic assertion for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the unknowability of a long history of cultural retention and adaptation. For a good summary of the debates in ethnomusicology about African retentions in the blues, see Waterman, "African Influence"; Oliver, "African Influence"; and Evans, "Africa and the Blues." Radano's persuasive argument concerning the emergence of the category of "Negro music" in the context of Black-white intercultural contact in the nineteenth century demonstrates the difficulty of identifying "African retentions" (*Lying Up a Nation*). Finally, Brackett provides a useful summary overview of theoretical attempts to define "African-American music as a musicological subject" (*Interpreting Popular Music*, 115–19).

36. See my full discussion of the circle and the arrow in *Time in the Blues*, 4, 7, 23n4, 23n6, 210.

37. On the opposition between the circle and the arrow in the Western classical music tradition, see Berger, *Bach's Cycle*; and my discussion of the interdependence of the two conceptions in *Time in the Blues*, 4, 7, 210.

38. Johnson, "Time and Revolution"; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, 4, 10, 12–15, 17, 48–49, 67–68.

39. Citing the case of South Africa, and particularly legal struggles over

reparations, the Comaroffs write, "The modernist telos of nationhood, and the kind of historiography it mandated, has been seriously undermined. Nowadays *both* the future and the past—even the oppressive colonial past, the struggles to which it gave rise, and the revolutionary possibilities toward which liberation pointed—radiate an aura of lost certainty, lost momentum" (*Theory from the South*, 150).

40. I am using Eric Foner's temporal parameters (*Reconstruction*).

41. For examples of this scholarship, see Brown, *Reconstructions*.

42. Brundage, "Introduction," 1–2.

43. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 128. Cobb cites WPA interviews of individuals who continued working for years after emancipation, not aware that they were free (*Most Southern Place on Earth*, 41–42). Juneteenth stands as testimony to belated emancipation.

44. Lemann, *Redemption*, 185.

45. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 588. Emberton characterizes the Redeemers as a "motley crew" (*Beyond Redemption*, 171).

46. Foner notes that the Ku Klux Klan was already active before Blacks obtained suffrage in some states, including enforcing labor discipline (*Reconstruction*, 428). Ayers links the Redeemers to intimidation tactics, such as the use of force by the KKK (*Promise of the New South*, 8). For a discussion of the paramilitary activity against African American social and political gains during Reconstruction, Redemption, and into the 1890s, including African American political resistance, see Hahn, *Nation Under Our Feet*, 265–313, 425–31. See also Emberton's account of violence leading up to the election of 1876 (*Beyond Redemption*, 171–205). Litwack cites from Federal Writers' Project narratives that describe the Klan enforcing socioeconomic conceptions of "place" by victimizing those who did well financially, enforcing white supremacist norms (*Trouble in Mind*, 150). Whitecapers specifically targeted sharecroppers and small landowners (Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 26–27). For an

excellent narrative historical account of the end of Reconstruction and the appearance of Redemption in Mississippi, including violent acts of rebellion and vigilantism, see Lemann, *Redemption*.

47. Emberton links the legitimization of the use of violence by whites to the multivalent political narrative of redemption (*Beyond Redemption*, 4).

48. Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 46. Woodman writes, "When the war ended Southerners owed Northern merchants an estimated one hundred and fifty million dollars, most of it to New Yorkers" (*King Cotton*, 203). O'Malley links the Redeemers' racial agenda to their economic one, arguing that their efforts to "restore . . . the . . . proper relation to specie" of the notes circulated by carpetbaggers parallels their attempts to reestablish strict racial hierarchy (*Face Value*, 121).

49. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 588–89.

50. Some forms of bound labor, such as under convict lease or criminal-surety arrangements, were arguably worse than slavery, because of the absence of ownership, which eliminated an inducement to better treatment; see Oshinsky's compelling argument in *Worse Than Slavery*."

51. According to the *OED*, the "deliverance from sin" meaning dates from the late tenth century, while the meanings related to payments for freedom or to purchase a contract date from the second half of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, respectively. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (2008), s.v. "redemption, *n*."

52. According to the *OED*, this meaning appears in 1325.

53. The extension of the meaning of redemption to pawned items appears in 1439, according to the *OED*.

54. Caskey finds the Medici coat of arms origin plausible, given the family's history of moneylending, but deems the St. Nicholas connection fanciful (*Fringe Banking*, 14–15).

55. Arrighi interprets Marx's MCM' as a recurrent historical pattern that constitutes a "systemic cycle," but one that theorizes

expansion (*Long Twentieth Century*, 6).

Interestingly, Smith invokes equity to argue in favor of raising all wages, consistent with his views about expanding economic production (*Wealth of Nations*, 90).

56. See Oliver's open-ended, speculative reading of the meaning of the traditional couplet "The sun's gonna shine in my backdoor someday / And the wind's gonna change, gonn' blow my blues away" (*Screening the Blues*, 19–20).

57. Brooks, *Atonement and Forgiveness*, 1.

58. Lyrics from Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, "Joliet Bound" (1932). Other songs with similar quid pro quo formulations include "Texas" Alexander, "Some Day Baby Your Troubles Is Gonna Be Like Mine"; Blind Blake, "Brownskin Mama Blues"; Big Bill Broonzy, "Skoodle Do Do,"; Walter Davis, "Sad and Lonesome Blues"; Blind Lemon Jefferson, "How Long How Long"; Charley Jordan, "Stack O' Dollars Blues"; Clarence Lofton, "Monkey Man Blues"; and Memphis Minnie, "I'm Talking About You" and "I'm Talking About You—No. 2."

59. For an analysis of the ongoing story of dispossession of African American farmers, see Newkirk, "Great Land Robbery."

60. For a deliciously parodic letter "dictated by a former servant" on the offer of work from a former enslaver, see Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, 333–35.

61. Lyrics from Muddy Waters, "Nine Below Zero."

## CHAPTER 5

1. Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 5. See also Baldwin's discussion of reasons for the failure to "define and identify" rural poverty and the dawning of both awareness and policy to address it (*Poverty and Politics*, 19–21, 37–46).

2. Describing the significance of this slim volume, published as part of efforts to pass the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, Mertz writes, "This concise summary of Johnson's field studies of 1934 and other

investigations of southern rural life was factual and moderate in tone but firmly indicted the AAA. In the fall of 1935 it was published by the University of North Carolina Press and is still recognized as the best brief survey of the tenancy crisis of the 1930s" (*New Deal Policy*, 112.)

3. *Ibid.*, 58.

4. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 179–84.

5. *Ibid.*, 184. The report from the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy also discussed programs to address tenancy in England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Germany, as well as Mexico (*Farm Tenancy*, 70–86).

6. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 185. The President's Committee made the same recommendation (*Farm Tenancy*, 19).

7. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 185; *Farm Tenancy*, 18.

8. Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 185–87.

9. *Ibid.*, 186.

10. *Ibid.*, 189.

11. Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 206.

12. Lipscomb, *I Say Me for a Parable*, 91.

13. Poole, *Segregated Origins*, 18. Raper discusses Depression conditions of bank foreclosures and displacement six years prior to the crash (*Preface to Peasantry*, 6). Baldwin dates the Depression to the early 1920s, after World War I (*Poverty and Politics*, 32).

14. Bessie Smith's "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out," recorded in New York in May 1929 and written in 1923 by Jimmy Cox, narrates the fall from material success and resultant abandonment by friends characteristic of roaring twenties and Depression-era narratives. Other songs with the same theme include Bobby Leecan, "Nobody Needs You When You're Down and Out"; and Georgia Tom, "Broke Man's Blues."

15. Tracy interprets this line as a desire to escape segregated modes of transportation ("Black Twice," 92). The mention of "careless love," a traditional

theme in blues and other roots music, is here removed from its normally gendered context of sex outside of marriage leading to unwanted pregnancy.

16. Conrad paraphrases and cites directly from a letter from Chester Davis, administrator of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, addressed to district agents in May 1934. The phrase "deep-seated social problem" is Davis's. Conrad explains that Davis, while recognizing the dilemma facing the agency, "did not intend to interfere in the normal relationship between landlord and tenant" (Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 69).

17. See Williams, *Constraint of Race*, 36–37. Foner explains that the bureau's "life span [was] limited to one year, but incredibly, no budget was appropriated—it would have to draw funds and staff from the War Department" (*Reconstruction*, 36).

18. Schmidt, *Free to Work*, 6.

19. Lemann, *Redemption*, x.

20. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 225; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 26–42.

21. Williams, *Constraint of Race*, 38–40; see also Peirce, *Freedmen's Bureau*, 75–94.

22. Williams, *Constraint of Race*, 38; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 153.

23. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 127. See also Foner's discussion of the contradictions in the bureau's free labor policy (*Reconstruction*, 142–44, 157).

24. Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, 74–84; Simon, *Time in the Blues*, 34, 36, 40–41; Williams, *Constraint of Race*, 44–46; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 673; Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 57–58, 60–61. Foner highlights the freed-people's rejection of attempts to control every detail of workers' lives, thereby eroding autonomy (*Reconstruction*, 105, 135, 161–68). Peirce provides a sample contract approved by Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner General Oliver O. Howard (*Freedmen's Bureau*, 138).

25. For examples of Freedmen's Bureau contracts, including for indenture, see <http://www.freedmensbureau.com/labor>

.htm. Schmidt discusses apprenticeship litigation during Reconstruction (*Free to Work*, 178–81).

26. An Act to Establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees, sec. 4.

27. Williams, *Constraint of Race*, 42–44; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 158–64.

28. See Williams, *Constraint of Race*. For a discussion of the military roots of the bureau's conception of compulsory labor, see also Miller's introduction to Cimbala and Miller, *Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction*, xxii–xxvi; and Foner, *Reconstruction*, 153–58.

29. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 163–64.

30. Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, 48. Schmidt details a spectrum of political and legal views among assistant commissioners of the Freedmen's Bureau from liberal to conservative but notes that among the conservatives, "labor regulations became little more than a powerful mechanism of planter domination. The actions of this final group presaged what would happen in the Redeemed South, when the state enforced draconian contract, vagrancy, enticement, and convict labor laws" (*Free to Work*, 163).

31. Williams, *Constraint of Race*, 58–64. The act is often read as an example of color-blind relief.

32. *Ibid.*, 63–64. See also Regosin's excellent study of problems related to identity and family for freedpeople based on Civil War pension cases (*Freedom's Promise*).

33. Williams, *Constraint of Race*, 62. Goldberg notes that African Americans made up only "9 or 10 percent of Union military forces," three-quarters of whom were freedpeople whose access to pensions presented significant challenges (*Citizens and Paupers*, 93).

34. Goldberg contrasts Civil War veterans' pensions with policies of the Freedman's Bureau to highlight the distinction between those, primarily African Americans, who received direct relief and were therefore viewed as paupers, subject to curtailment of their political and civil

rights, and those who received pensions, who were viewed as fully citizens because of a civic republican conception of citizenship linked to their service to the country. The distinction signals a racialized, dual system of welfare (*Citizens and Paupers*, 8, 61–62, 82–83, 84, 93).

35. Daniel, *Deep'n as It Come*, 128–29.

36. Woods, *Development Arrested*, 118.

37. Daniel, *Deep'n as It Come*, 10.

38. Bessie Smith's "Back Water Blues" and "Muddy Water" were recorded in February and March, respectively, before the first major levee crevasses occurred; however, advertising produced after the flood connected the songs to the recent events (Evans, "High Water Everywhere," 14). Lonnie Johnson recorded "Back Water Blues" a few days after the flood. White artists also recorded songs commemorating the flood; examples include Ernest Stoneman, "The Story of the Mighty Mississippi" and Vernon Dalhart, "The Mississippi Flood." For discussion of flood songs, see Evans, "High Water Everywhere."

39. See my discussions of spatial and temporal displacement in Patton's "High Water Everywhere," parts 1 and 2, *Time in the Blues*, 142–44 and of narrative technique in Johnson's flood and disaster songs, *Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson*, 110–18.

40. Daniel, *Deep'n as It Come*, 55; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 272–75.

41. Daniel documents private donations of almost \$17.5 million (nearly \$300 million today) in addition to a little over \$6 million (over \$100 million today) coming from "various governmental agencies, railroads, and state governments" (*Deep'n as It Come*, 87).

42. Barry, *Rising Tide*, 317, 334.

43. Harrington, "Flood Refugee Shot to Death"; Parrish, *Flood Year 1927*, 44–45; Evans, "High Water Everywhere," 8–10; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 313, 330.

44. Harrington, "Refugees Herded Like Cattle."



45. Wells-Barnett, "Flood Refugees Are Held." Her account was based on reports from a refugee who escaped from a camp in Louisiana.

46. Harrington, "Work or Go Hungry"; Evans, "High Water Everywhere," 51. The impressment of African Americans, including convicts from Parchman Farm, into labor repairing levees began before the large crevasses in the lower Mississippi (Barry, *Rising Tide*, 193, 195–96, 200–201).

47. See Barry's detailed discussion of Will Percy's complicated relationship with his powerful planter father and former senator, Leroy Percy (*Rising Tide*, 293–335). Barry argues that Will Percy was bullied behind the scenes to prevent the evacuation of African Americans and to institute harsh conditions at the Greenville camp. Evans characterizes Percy as a "white apologist" ("High Water Everywhere," 69n14).

48. See Evans's invocation of the language of incarceration ("Singing the Blues") and Barry's discussion of a tag system to create conditions of slave labor (*Rising Tide*, 314–17). Harrington explains that "tags" were used to return workers back to their original plantations to repay the cost of rations ("Use Troops").

49. White, "Walter White Reports." White was prevented from visiting the camp at Greenville (Barry, *Rising Tide*, 322).

50. Evans mentions an episode documented in the *Baltimore Afro-American* ("High Water Everywhere," 8).

51. Evans, "High Water Everywhere," 8; his source is an article titled "Death and Famine Grip Delta" that appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

52. Daniel discusses the use of sea-planes for reconnaissance to surveil the levees and locate those stranded and requiring rescue (*Deep'n as It Come*, 69–73). See also Barry, *Rising Tide*, 282.

53. Daniel mentions Hoover's political ambitions as a possible motivation for lying about the death toll and "ignoring a venereal disease epidemic for weeks and refusing to publicize conditions of peonage" (*Deep'n as It Come*, 87, 123, 138–41). Hoover even

pressured Robert R. Moton, the chair of Hoover's Colored Advisory Commission, to remove mentions of peonage and discrimination from the commission's final report; see Barry, *Rising Tide*, 330, 378–86, 389–91. The Red Cross likewise sought to suppress negative publicity in the hopes of continuing to raise funds for relief.

54. Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 185.

55. Poole's excellent study of the genesis and history of the Social Security Act carefully demonstrates how complicated motives for policy can be (*Segregated Origins*).

56. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 206; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 58.

57. Raper corroborates Patton's imagery: "When 'hard times' force the family to leave the home county, the father goes ahead to find work while the mother waits for word to come; then with bundles of belongings she gets her children on the train for a place where she hopes for an easier life but does not always find it" (*Preface to Peasantry*, 75).

58. Evans contends that the song mocks the overseer who threw him off Dockery's for womanizing ("Goin' Up the Country," 45), an interpretation with which Wald concurs ("Charley Patton").

59. Wolters cites prices of eighteen cents per pound in 1929 and less than six cents per pound in 1933, with a surplus of thirteen million bales (a year's worth of the commodity) (*Negroes and the Great Depression*, 9). See also Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 15, 17–18. Barbecue Bob's "We Sure Got Hard Times Now" (1930) references falling cotton prices in connection with the House midterm election during Hoover's term: "Cotton have started to selling, but it keeps going down and down / Just before election, you was talking about how you was going to vote / And after election was over, you head's down like a Billy goat."

60. Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 43.

61. *Ibid.*, 52.



62. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 19; Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 142; Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 24.

63. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 21–22.

64. Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 52.

65. Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 53. See also Cobb, for instances where AAA payments were “credited” toward outstanding “debts” (*Most Southern Place on Earth*, 186–87).

66. Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 54.

67. Mertz specifies that “set-offs” were legal as long as they were not prohibited by state law (*New Deal Policy*, 23). See also Wolters on the lack of auditing of accounts by the AAA (*Negroes and the Great Depression*), 27–28.

68. Hoffsommer, “AAA and the Cropper,” 499.

69. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 7, 34; Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 189.

70. Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 95, citing correspondence from Frank Tannenbaum to William Alexander.

71. See Conrad for paragraph 7 of the 1934–35 USDA cotton contract (*Forgotten Farmers*, 58). See Wolters on Alger Hiss’s objection to the insertion of “insofar as possible” at the time (*Negroes and the Great Depression*, 31).

72. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 25–26. On the unreliability of statistics on eviction caused by AAA, see Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 81; and Hoffsommer, “AAA and the Cropper,” 500–502. Sitkoff casts considerable doubt on statistics proffered by critics of the New Deal (*New Deal for Blacks*, 53). See also Raper’s statistics on the increase of wage laborers between 1927 and 1934 (*Preface to Peasantry*, 34).

73. Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 162. The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, a biracial collective in Arkansas, provided some direct relief.

74. Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 60–61. Poole cites a document prepared during the establishment of Social Security that

“claimed that agricultural workers were more represented in Emergency Relief than any other group in 1934” (*Segregated Origins*, 21).

75. Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 76–78.

76. *Ibid.*, 69–70. Raper reports the further abuse by landlords who charged interest on the government loan money granted to tenants (*Preface to Peasantry*, 229).

77. Browne, “Benign Public Policies,” 149.

78. Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 88–89; Woolfer, *Landlord and Tenant*, 174.

79. Hunt, *African American Life*, 4; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 49.

80. Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 44, 124–25, 157.

81. Songs include Jimmie Gordon, “Don’t Take Away My P.W.A.”; Carl Martin, “Let’s Have a New Deal”; and Josh White, “Welfare Blues.” For more songs, see Van Rijn, *Roosevelt’s Blues*, 66–95.

82. There were many struggles over differential wages for white and Black workers in the Works Progress Administration and the National Recovery Administration, despite regulations aimed at prohibiting discrimination. See Raper’s discussion of ways of circumventing NRA minimum-wage provisions (*Preface to Peasantry*, 239–40, 242–43).

83. Big Bill Broonzy also recorded a jauntier version of the song, “WPA Blues” and a jazz-rag with what Broonzy described as “an old levee camp holler” opening, “WPA Rag” (*Big Bill Blues*, 93). Broonzy claims to have worked for the WPA in Chicago, which may or may not be true given his propensity for stretching the truth. Riesman’s painstaking research on Broonzy argues that the issue of “truth” is a complicated one in Broonzy’s dictated autobiography. Riesman contends that if Broonzy’s stories are not strictly speaking true in the sense that they happened to him, they nonetheless accurately reflect African American experience (*I Feel So Good*). Casey Bill Weldon later recorded “Casey Bill’s New WPA Blues”

(1937) as a member of the Brown Bombers of Swing, which is not as critical.

84. Otto and Burns explain that “federally-funded slum clearance projects often outstripped the building of low-rent housing projects, creating overcrowding in Black neighborhoods. Moreover, many of the people ousted by slum clearance were not eligible for the new housing projects; or, they could not afford the rents” (“Welfare Store Blues,” 98). See also President Roosevelt’s “Statement Fixing Jurisdictions of PWA and WPA.”

85. Poole, *Segregated Origins*, 75.

86. Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, esp. 3, 4, 8, 9, 61–62. Goldberg identifies women and men of color as clients of programs under the New Deal as likely not to be recognized as “independent, rights-bearing citizens,” but rather as “dependent paupers,” and likens their status of “civil death” to Patterson’s definitional characterization of slavery as “social death” (*Citizens and Paupers*, 9, 95; see also Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, esp. 38–44).

87. Van Rijn discusses many of these “Red Cross Store” blues, including Lucille Bogan’s “Red Cross Man” recorded on the same day as Roland’s version (*Roosevelt’s Blues*, 43–65).

88. Otto and Burns point to the song’s entertainment value at the same time that they characterize it as a “crushing indictment of the local discrimination which hindered federal attempts to aid the poor” (“Welfare Store Blues,” 100).

89. Various sources transcribe the lyrics as “keen-toed” or “king-toed” and “peat-back,” “pleat-back,” and “pinch-backed.” It is difficult to determine exactly what he is saying and no option seems to fit any women’s fashion of the period, although pea coats and steel-toed shoes existed for men. See Taft, *Talkin’ to Myself*, 706; Otto and Burns, “Welfare Store Blues,” 100; and <https://genius.com/Sonny-boy-william-son-i-welfare-store-blues-lyrics>. Van Rijn interprets the line to mean that it is a male obtaining the loan, which is difficult to

reconcile with the second-person form of address in the refrain (*Roosevelt’s Blues*, 54).

90. Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 193. See Baldwin for statistics on the percentage of African American FSA borrowers by state (*Poverty and Politics*, 197). In Mississippi, for example, where African Americans made up 75 percent of the total number of tenants in the state, they received 26 percent of loans in 1938 and 35 percent in 1945.

91. Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 50.

92. Poole, *Segregated Origins*, 21, 29.

93. In *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company* in 2007, a 5–4 decision of the Supreme Court ruled that the plaintiff had not met the time requirement of bringing a discrimination cases under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Ledbetter alleged that she had been systematically discriminated against in low performance evaluations and lower wages than her male coworkers for nineteen years, but the court barred her claim because she did not meet the 180-day requirement for filing. The first bill signed into law by President Barack Obama, the Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, effectively eliminated the time constraint on filings, recognizing the difficulty of obtaining pertinent information.

94. Robert Johnson recorded “Come On in My Kitchen” on 23 November 1936, along with eight other songs (Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 131, 142–45). The unissued version has a slower tempo and contains slightly different lyrics than the one issued by Vocalion in 1937. Conforth and Wardlow write, “Apparently the slower version did not impress [Art] Satherly [recording director for ARC], who chose to release the second, faster take. But Robert’s first run-through is still acknowledged as the greater of the two” (*Up Jumped the Devil*, 169).

95. ‘Nation sack could be a shortening of *donation*, given the context of the Depression. Devi offers the interpretation that it signals that the woman is Native American—from “the Nation”—and wears a small bag dangling from her belt (*Language of the Blues*, 174–76; see also Evans,

“Ramblin’,” 13). Yvonne Chireau, a professor of religion who studies hoodoo, interprets the nation sack to be a mojo bag providing sexual power to the woman. Emptying the nation sack, for Chireau, means taking away the “woman’s sexual power over him” (Oakes, *ReMastered*). These interpretations are not inconsistent with the historical reference but add complexities of meaning to the power dynamic represented.

96. Johnson was reported to have often asked women at gigs if they could take him home (Pearson and McCulloch, *Robert Johnson*, 105–7).

97. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 65–66; Daniel, *Deep’n as It Come*, 97.

98. For example, see the description of a tenant shack with “an ancient Victrola rest[ing] precariously on an uncertain three-legged stool” (Terrill and Hirsch, *Such as Us*, 79). For “race record” sales figures, see Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 200–202.

99. Terrill and Hirsch, *Such as Us*, 275.

100. Ferris titled his important study *Give My Poor Heart Ease* citing lyrics from a song by James “Son Ford” Thomas, who refers to the power of the graphophone in his childhood (111).

101. Nixon’s campaign rhetoric in 1969 highlighted curtailing what he perceived as the abuses of Johnson’s Great Society (Barber, “Welfare Reform”; Berkowitz, “1970s as Policy Watershed”). The rhetoric of Nixon and Ford would culminate in Reagan’s infamous 1976 evocation of the “welfare queen” taking advantage of the system. See Baradaran’s discussion of this political strategy to sidestep addressing the historical legacy of economic disadvantage, and especially her pointed critique of the irony of making this argument from the standpoint of white privilege (*Color of Money*, 216). Bobo characterizes “putatively race-neutral assault on welfare waste and fraud” as politically safe forms of “racial antagonisms and resentments” (“Color Line,” 52).

102. Aid to Families with Dependent Children was part of the US Department of Health and Human Services until 1996,

when it became Temporary Aid to Needy Families (“Aid to Families”). Supplemental Security Income, also part of DHHS, began in 1974 (“Supplemental Security Income”).

103. In Kirk Fletcher’s cover of the song “Welfare Blues,” Finis Tasby makes this move more explicit, singing “You know they done took their welfare check; they said they can’t feed *me* no more.”

104. Stop time describes sections of music where the ongoing rhythmic pulse stops and only short phrases are played. In the case of sung verses, the instrumental parts punctuate a cappella vocals, as in Collins’s “When the Welfare Turns Its Back on You.”

## CHAPTER 6

1. Bush, “Syd Nathan’s ‘Race Records.’” The crediting of Nathan enables him to receive half of the royalties owed to Myles for “I Love the Woman.” King complained in interviews about artistic interference from Nathan on recordings as well as his failure to promote him (O’Neal and van Singel, *Voice of the Blues*, 369–71). Echoing King, Fox asserts that Nathan invented some of the sillier names for King’s instrumentals (*King of the Queen City*, 145). Those songs, such as “San-Ho-Zay,” “Sen-Sa-Shun,” and “Swooshy,” were credited to pianist, composer, and A&R man Sonny Thompson and King, but not to either Nathan.

2. Jakobson distinguishes six functions of language correlating to elements of communicative acts. The *yes* performs the expressive or emotive and phatic functions, focusing attention on the emitter of the message and the means of communicating (“Closing Statement,” esp. 89–93).

3. Compare my detailed analysis of King’s instrumental solo in “Have You Ever Loved a Woman” (*Time in the Blues*, 128–31).

4. Radano’s analysis of slave music underscores the power dynamic of performance (“Black Music Labor,” 187). Hartman likewise underlines the significance of

performance as a display of the master's power (*Scenes of Subjection*, 46).

5. Radano, "Black Music Labor," 201.

6. See my discussion of the "fattening frogs for snakes" complex of songs in *Time in the Blues*, 49–52.

7. Lyrics as provided in Rush, *I Ain't Studdin' Ya*, 259.

8. Cone makes a general argument that all "Black music" unifies communities consistent with liberation theology (*Spirituals and the Blues*, 5). Keil recognizes soul music's response to the need for identity, especially after *Brown v. Board of Education* (*Urban Blues*, 165–66). Both Cone and Keil use race to construct musical distinctions without regard to form or style. For an excellent debate on the issue of "Black music," see Floyd and Radano, "Interpreting the African-American Musical Past." The need for a sense of an African American communal identity dates back at least to the end of slavery and the relative isolation of sharecropping (Foner, *Reconstruction*, 404–5). Clearly, the problem of community is ongoing for African Americans. Chuck D, leader of the rap group Public Enemy, articulates a position he calls the "Plantation Theory," that African Americans have no community because they lack control over education, economics, and (law) enforcement (*Fight the Power*, 31).

9. Early studies of the blues sometimes found them lacking in social protest messages; see, for example, Charters, *Poetry of the Blues*, 12. Scott critiques the safety-valve theory of mechanisms that "occasionally cool the fires of resentment," arguing that all strategies of dissent work to renegotiate power relations (*Domination*, 186–90). Articulating messages with a partially cathartic function can at the same time aid group formation.

10. As part of the trickster tradition, the signifying monkey employs verbal finesse, including deceit, to disrupt power relations temporarily. Within the blues, signifying as the deployment of irony to trouble power relations relates to trickster tales

and other traditions, such as the toast and the dozens. See Wald's excellent analysis for numerous links, including between the "Signifying Monkey" toast and the dozens (*Talking 'bout Your Mama*, esp. 110–11). Trickster tales date at least as far back as slavery (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 582–83; Hurston, "High John de Conquer"). Gates famously traced the tradition back to Africa (*Signifying Monkey*, 3–43), to argue in favor of African retentions, including in African American musical culture. Levine underscores the desire for justice expressed in trickster tales (*Unpredictable Past*, 77), while Scott highlights the use of trickster tales as "veiled cultural resistance" (*Domination*, 162). Hurston's theoretical link between "lies" and "truth" within African American vernacular culture identifies what she terms "feather-bed resistance," which also involves dissimulation to achieve greater goals (*Mules and Men*, 2–3).

11. For songs with this line or a variant, see chapter 4, note 4.

12. Songs containing a version of this line include Lucille Bogan, "You Got to Die Some Day"; Mississippi Bracey, "You Scolded Me and Drove Me from Your Door" and "I'll Overcome Some Day"; Clifford Gibson, "Stop Your Rambling"; Bertha Henderson, "Lead Hearted Blues"; Jesse James, "Lonesome Day Blues"; Skip James, "Cypress Grove Blues"; Tommy Johnson, "Bye-Bye Blues"; Mance Lipscomb, "You Got to Reap What You Sow"; Charley Patton, "Pea Vine Blues"; Bessie Smith, "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair"; Frank Stokes, "Mistreatin' Blues"; Ramblin' Thomas, "So Lonesome"; Robert Wilkins, "Dirty Deal Blues"; Sonny Boy Williamson I, "Miss Louisa Blues"; Little Junior Parker, "Next Time You See Me"; and Jimmy Rogers, "I'm Tired of Crying Over You."

13. See my discussion of "Someday, After Awhile" in *Time in the Blues*, 110–13.

14. In his critical examination of resistance, Scott discusses the false distinction between self-indulgent and selfless acts that mask a spectrum of actions that promote group formation (*Weapons of the Weak*, 289–303).

15. For discussions of the use of gospel music in the civil rights era, see Floyd, *Power of Black Music*, 171, 183–84, 200; Ramsey, *Race Music*, 204–5; and Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 210–24. The crossover of Thomas A. Dorsey (Georgia Tom) from blues artist to gospel composer signals the proximity of the two musical genres stylistically. In a song about Parchman Farm, Bukka White employs the verb *overcome* in a secular and personal expression of hope: “I’m down on old Parchman Farm, I sure want to go back home / But I hope someday I will overcome” (“Parchman Farm Blues”).

16. See my discussion of coming to awareness in the blues and migration narratives in *Time in the Blues*, 118–26.

17. Broonzy, “Big Bill Broonzy Interviewed by Studs Terkel,” 36.

18. Songs with this lyrical formulation include Scrapper Blackwell, “Back Door Blues”; Sleepy John Estes, “Diving Duck Blues” and “Jack and Jill Blues,” Bertha “Chippie” Hill, “Trouble in Mind”; Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Deceitful Brownskin Woman”; Tommy Johnson, “Big Road Blues” and “Maggie Campbell Blues”; Thelma La Vizzo, “Trouble in Mind”; Walter “Furry” Lewis, “Sweet Papa Moan”; Bessie Smith, “Sobbin’ Hearted Blues”; Trixie Smith, “Freight Train Blues”; and Sonny Boy Williamson I, “She Don’t Love Me That Way.” See Oliver’s extended discussion of the possible meanings of “the sun’s gonna shine in my backdoor someday” (*Screening the Blues*, 19–20). The second couplet is from Eddie Boyd, “Five Long Years,” discussed in chapter 1.

19. The song was included in Charters, *Country Blues*, originally published in 1959 with a goal of introducing white audiences to the blues. Charters’s inclusion of Washboard Sam’s “I’ve Been Treated Wrong” speaks to both Charters’s social and political aims and the anachronistic qualities of the song (188–89).

20. For a discussion of recording executives’ influence on this Bluebird version of Chicago style, see Greene, *Invention and Reinvention*, 49–95.

21. Variants of this line appear in Barbeque Bob, “Poor Boy a Long Way from Home”; and Walter Rhodes, “Leaving Home Blues.”

22. *Satisfaction* or its variant occurs in the following Muddy Waters songs: “I Be’s Troubled,” “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” “Rock Me,” “She’s Nineteen Years Old,” “Sugar Sweet,” and “Tiger in Your Tank.” *Satisfied* and its variants occur in many prewar blues as well, for example, C. J. Anderson, “Thirty-Eight and Plus”; Kokomo Arnold, “The Twelves”; Willie Baker, “No No Blues”; Lottie Beaman, “Going Away Blues”; Blind Blake, “No Dough Blues” and “Rope Stretchin’ Blues—Part 2”; Lucille Bogan, “T N and O Blues”; Big Bill Broonzy, “Down in the Basement Blues,” “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” “Worrying You Off My Mind—Part 1,” “How You Want It Done,” and “Good Liquor Gonna Carry Me Down”; Bob Coleman, “Sing Song Blues”; Chasey Collins, “Atlanta Town”; Walter Davis, “Travelin’ This Lonesome Road” and “Let Me in Your Saddle”; Pearl Dickson, “Twelve Pound Daddy”; William Harris, “Bull Frog Blues”; Barbecue Bob, “Poor Boy a Long Way from Home”; Son House, “My Black Mama—Part 1”; Peg Leg Howell, “Doin’ Wrong” and “Low Down Rounder Blues”; Harvey Hull, “Don’t You Leave Me Here”; Mississippi John Hurt, “Got the Blues Can’t Be Satisfied”; Bo Weavil Jackson, “You Can’t Keep No Brown” and “Poor Boy Blues”; Charley Jackson, “Take Me Back Blues”; Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Black Horse Blues” and “Bakershop Blues”; Louise Johnson, “Long Way from Home”; Robert Johnson, “From Four Until Late” and “Me and the Devil Blues”; Tommy Johnson, “Bye-Bye Blues”; Charley Jordan, “Big Four Blues”; Luke Jordan, “My Gal’s Done Quit Me”; Charley Lincoln, “Jealous Hearted Blues”; Kansas Joe McCoy, “Cherry Ball Blues” and “Shake Mattie”; Alex Moore, “It Wouldn’t Be So Hard”; Buddy Moss, “Gravy Server”; Hambone Willie Newbern, “Hambone Willie’s Dreamy-Eyed Woman’s Blues”; Ma Rainey, “Slow Driving Moan”; Walter Rhodes, “Leaving Home Blues”; Clara Smith, “Deep Blue Sea Blues”; John T. Smith,

"Howling Wolf Blues—No. 1"; Frank Stokes, "Sweet to Mama" and "Right Now Blues"; Minnie Wallace, "The Old Folks Started It"; Washboard Sam and His Washboard Band, "Big Woman"; Sylvester Weaver, "Can't Be Trusted Blues"; Peetie Wheatstraw, "Working Man"; and Robert Wilkins, "Long Train Blues" and "Get Away Blues." Alan Lomax did a field recording of Florence Stamp and a group of girls performing a call-and-response rhyme that he titled "Satisfied" on 26 July 1942 in Friars Point, Mississippi, underscoring the word's ubiquity.

23. The Rolling Stones, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" and its numerous covers speak to the longevity of the theme and its crossover into rock and roll and popular music. *Satisfaction* occurs in Big Bill Broonzy, "How You Want It Done," but forms of the verb *satisfy* are far more common than the noun in blues lyrics.

24. On vocal quality, see Malawey, *Blaze of Light*, 102–3, 106; Heidemann, "System," para. 3.2; and Jungr, "Vocal Expression," 147.

25. The reflexive form also appears in Charley Jackson, "Take Me Back Blues."

26. Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed. (2008), s.v. "satisfaction, *n.*"; etymologically, *satisfaction* comes from the prefix *satis*, meaning enough, and the verb *facere*, to do or make.

27. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 140. Sojourner Truth's petition on behalf of former slaves in the aftermath of the Civil War also deploys the notion of repayment of debt. Kelley writes, "Immediately after the war, Sojourner Truth organized a petition seeking free public land for former slaves. 'America owes to my people some of the dividends,' she argued. 'I shall make them understand that there is a debt to the Negro people which they can never repay. At least, then, they must make amends'" ("Day of Reckoning," 205). While the blues as a genre cannot imagine reparations, later genres like rap and hip-hop are more able to make that demand; for example, see Chuck D's stance on reparations from Hollywood (*Fight the Power*, 52–53).

28. Compare Small's discussion of "what a person taking part in a musical performance is actually doing," including "modelling, in the relationships between the sounds he or she is making, listening to or dancing to, the relationships of that ideal society" (*Music of the Common Tongue*, 74).

29. Scott makes the important point that if one allows the form of domination to determine what resistance looks like, one risks overlooking acts of resistance (*Weapons of the Weak*, 299).

30. *Ibid.*, 23.

31. "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" was the B side of Jefferson's "'Lectric Chair Blues." Blind Willie Johnson's "You'll Need Somebody on Your Bond" is an example of a more religious working of the same theme with an implied critique of the criminal-surety system.

32. The Wikipedia entry on Blind Lemon Jefferson notes ironically that his grave remained unmarked until 1967, thirty-eight years after his death, and that a new headstone was installed in 1997 because of the disrepair of the earlier marker (s.v. "Blind Lemon Jefferson," last modified 14 June 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind\\_Lemon\\_Jefferson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_Lemon_Jefferson)). See Lipscomb's discussion of the song and his performance of it for Woody Guthrie's widow in the early 1970s (*I Say Me for a Parable*, 212–15).

33. Kant distinguishes between duties of justice, which can be enforced through laws, and those of virtue, which are internally derived and whose omission does not represent an infraction (*Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, xiv, 20–21, 23, 47).

34. There are formal analogues in music to the ideological positions concerning faith in a particular telos. McClary describes Western classical music as containing a narrative structure that focuses on the tonic as both origin and telos (*Feminine Endings*, 155–56). Rose, relying on McClary's characterization, draws a distinction between European American and African American musical forms (*Black Noise*, 69). The blues seems to defy the

binary opposition between teleological narrative structure and its lack in music. Each sequence of twelve bars contains the arc of a narrative with a strong reliance on the tonic, and yet the repetition of sequences of twelve bars defies arrival at an end point. The turnaround functions both to provide closure and subvert it by simultaneously concluding a chord sequence and setting up for its repetition. From the standpoint of lyrical content, Cone locates a nonreligious form of transcendence in the blues, a form of overcoming that is historically and materially grounded, which he contrasts with the eschaton in spirituals (*Spirituals and the Blues*, 83, 90, 95, 113).

## CONCLUSION

1. Brooks, *Atonement and Forgiveness*, x.

2. *Ibid.*, 1, 98, 99, 135, 142. Darity points out that accepting monetary restitution entails relinquishing "an ethical claim," something that many find unsatisfactory ("Forty Acres and a Mule," 4).

3. Corlett, "Reparations to African Americans?," 171. Several essays in Richard

F. America's collection *Wealth of Races* address the question of attempting to calculate the "cost" of slave labor, Jim Crow segregation, and discrimination, including lost opportunities and diminished capital. See especially Whatley and Wright, "Black Labor"; Neal, "Calculation and Comparison"; Marketti, "Estimated Present Value"; Vedder, Gallaway, and Klingaman, "Black Exploitation"; Swinton, "Racial Inequality and Reparations"; and Danziger and Gottscalk, "Income Transfers."

4. Brooks, "Age of Apology," 3, 11.

5. *Ibid.*, 9.

6. The phrase in brackets occurs in "Working Man's Blues" only.

7. The 1948 "Working Man's Blues" version is slightly clearer than the verse in "Crowing Rooster": "Man, we have got to get together, something's got to be done / We make the money while the pimps really have the fun / And when there's only house rent and grocery bill, no mon' no fun."

8. See my discussion of these songs in *Inconvenient Lonnie Johnson*, 94–96.



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