

“Hard in Chicago and Mississippi Too”: Resistance to Northern Racism as Debated in Great Migration-Era Chicago Blues

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Introduction

During the Great Migration period from approximately 1910 to 1970, more than six million African Americans migrated from the Southern United States to the North and West.¹ These migrants typically sought economic opportunity and freedom from the region’s aggressive racism. The urban North offered abundant industrial jobs, primarily because of the expansions in manufacturing during the World Wars, while Southern agriculture had grown unstable.² The South also commonly imposed brutal segregation laws upon its Black population, with the threat of racist violence, such as lynchings and police harassment, ever present. In the North, conversely, formalised segregation was illegal, and no obvious barriers prevented Black residents from demanding further rights.³ However, the urban North concealed different, more insidious manifestations of racism that proved foreign to Southerners accustomed to explicit forms of discrimination. As these migrants acclimated to their new environment, they utilised varied tactics to navigate these distinct forms of bigotry.

Many electric blues songs written and performed by musicians who had migrated to the North offer insight into the strategies these migrants employed to negotiate the region’s pitfalls and resist its agents of oppression. Northern cities grew in popularity amongst aspiring blues musicians during the Great Migration, encouraging additional migration to the region, with Chicago particularly benefiting after World War II. This development was

¹ Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: the Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 21. This volume places the number at approximately 6.2 million migrants during this period.

² Mike Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), 26–27.

³ Keneshia Nicole Grant, *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party: Black Voters and the Realignment of American Politics in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020), 10–11.

mainly spurred by the success of independent Chicago-based record labels such as Bluebird and Chess.⁴ One of Bluebird Records' defining characteristics was its emphasis on the inclusion of social experiences related to migration in its artists' songs, a trend that assisted in foregrounding these issues within the genre.⁵ The blues in this era was also an important outlet for relatively free expression outside the confines of white hegemony due to its primarily Black audience, at times allowing greater discussion of cultural and sociopolitical issues than other genres. Thus, in this article, I will examine the representations of racism presented in electric blues songs produced by migrants from approximately 1945 to the early 1960s. In doing so, I will uncover the methods these migrants proposed for traversing the Northern landscape, and the societal role of the genre in facilitating their discussion.

To accomplish this task, I will firstly provide an overview of the historiographical discourse surrounding post-1945 electric blues, and the potential avenues for advancing this somewhat small field. Next, I will describe the unique manifestations of racism prevalent in Chicago during this era, due to its status as the epicentre of the blues and a common destination for migrants. This will explicate the challenges these migrants faced and the difficulties these blues songs address. I will then analyse a set of blues songs by artists who were migrants to Chicago. These works, including Eddie Boyd's *Five Long Years*, Elmore James' *Stranger Blues*, and Muddy Waters' *Country Boy*, directly depict migrants' experiences with exploitative industrial labour, racist harassment, and assimilationist pressure from the city's existing Black population. Further, they frequently disagree on how to confront these obstacles. In doing so, they demonstrate the ability of the blues in this period to act as a medium for public discussion. Additionally, these songs reframe and comment on their lyrical messages through their musical components; as musical and lyrical interactions are often neglected in the study of electric blues, this issue will be explored in depth. By examining musical elements such as structure, texture, vocal delivery, melody, and timbre, I elucidate their depictions of Northern oppression and their strategies for resisting its adversity. I find that the methods proposed vary significantly due to the

⁴ Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 61–63; 93.

⁵ Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 70–72.

differing historical and personal circumstances influencing these musicians' interactions with Northern oppression. The communicative approaches these performers used were also impacted by the expectations of their record labels and audiences. Ultimately, this article shows the position of electric blues in this era as a forum for debating the ways migrants might best resist Northern racism, and define themselves within their new environment. This highlights the role of music in articulating the upheaval of the Great Migration.

Contemporaneous Discourse on the Urban Monolith (c. 1960s–70s)

The earliest major studies of electric blues arose from the Black Arts movement in the 1960s, and were influenced by its principles. This ideological camp emphasised the concept of a uniquely African American artistic aesthetic, and challenged white-oriented portrayals of history by highlighting the importance of Black cultures.⁶ To promote political unity, the African American experience in the North is typically depicted as singular. Amiri Baraka, one of the movement's pioneers, posits that the Black population's progression towards conceptualising themselves as American citizens was consistent for all in *Blues People* (1963). Where Baraka distinguishes between African American experiences, he does so solely in terms of class, categorising the Black middle class as further along in the progression towards assimilation, and interested in distancing themselves from the lower classes to continue this development.⁷ With this single framework crafted to represent the African American population at large, Baraka affirms a common suffering caused by racial oppression, and a common path towards belonging. While this era of scholarship chiefly focused on lyrical examinations, Baraka's analyses of songs likewise gesture to universality, indicating that the greater cultural importance of growing Northern cities inspired lyrics describing the problems of urban life.⁸ He claims this encouraged consistent frankness and vulgarity among electric blues artists, as performers

⁶ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 408.

⁷ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 126–127.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 104–105.

and listeners sought relatability.⁹ Baraka thus introduced the concept of a singular experience into the discourse, part of his efforts to encourage unity, and foregrounded the tension in the discipline between representing the diverse reality and urging inclusive connection.

Charles Keil, the other preeminent scholar of the era, also framed Black communities as culturally monolithic. In *Urban Blues* (1966), he argues that entertainment functions as an area where Black musicians preserve authentic cultural expression without being stifled by white hegemony.¹⁰ This approach similarly assumes singularity, as he too indicates that the art produced reflects and stems from a general form of African American culture.¹¹ However, he differs from Baraka in noting that these perceived commonalities, and the resulting attempts to cater to all Black communities simultaneously, are often socially constructed. Keil claims that male blues musicians are inevitably moulded by commercial forces into the same societal role as a universally relatable “everyman,” and that this image obscures these musicians’ other attributes on a sociocultural level.¹² He implies that though individuals may benefit from or appreciate the efforts to appeal to these commonalities, individual agency is frequently irrelevant to the public view of these musicians or their music’s interpretation by an audience. The active construction of solidarity is also highlighted in his lyrical analyses. For example, lyrical examinations are used to elucidate the social meaning of “soul” among blues fans, and the relationship between these lyrics’ subjects and the performance practice provided for live audiences. To do so, he studies a performance by Bobby “Blue” Bland to explain the ways lyrical statements can be altered by musicians in live settings to express emotion and solidarity. Lyrical ideas of replacement can thus be transformed into a celebration of friendship and mentorship by allowing another singer to assist with the song.¹³ Therefore, Keil too describes the Black experience as singular, concurring with Baraka’s advocacy of unity, though he emphasises the ways in

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 15–16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 143; 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 184–185.

which the social construction of these cultural commonalities enables collective understanding and benefit.

Evolving Discourse on Unifying Traditions and Strategies (c. 1980s–1990s)

From around the 1980s onward, studies of the blues began to significantly emphasise continuity of artistic methods and traditions. This commonly manifested as an affirmation of common artistic methods within different genres and means of expression; Samuel Floyd, for instance, analysed numerous Black genres from various time periods, and adapted literary theories by scholars like Henry Louis Gates to do so.¹⁴ This era in scholarship also reincorporated performers that were previously seen as catering too excessively to white listeners to represent Black experiences into the canon of investigable works. Brian Ward's *Just My Soul Responding* (1998), for example, argues that the girl groups of the early 1960s must be seriously discussed as reflections of the era's optimism surrounding integration, rather than as an aberrant divergence from the "authentic" blues and R&B scenes.¹⁵ This effort recognised greater diversity of action by elucidating the circumstances around these artists' reasons for doing so. Floyd discussed subversive double-voicing among artists expected to satisfy white audiences, and their manipulation of degrading roles or stereotypes to subtly resist and affirm their identity.¹⁶ Thus, this period in scholarship promoted solidarity by acknowledging common artistic concepts underpinning a wide variety of Black artists and disciplines, and recognising that while musical responses varied in differing sociopolitical circumstances, this did not imply the existence of insurmountable cultural rifts.

Scholars in this period shifted their focus away from the divisions between middle and lower classes previously highlighted by Keil and Baraka. Instead, the main distinction noted within Black populations was that of urban and rural communities, as these authors noted the development of new rhetorical strategies and ideologies to navigate the novel racism of urban areas. These include "Signifyin(g)," Henry Louis Gates' theory of figurative

¹⁴ Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

¹⁵ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 3; 10–11.

¹⁶ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 88.

vernacular speech used to comment on situations and realign the balance of power in favour of the Black orator.¹⁷ Though Gates' argument concerns literary features that transform an original text, such as innuendo, mocking, circumlocution, verbal misdirection, and irony,¹⁸ Floyd adapts this to musical features, such as call-and-response and polyrhythms.¹⁹ He thereby contends that musical components are particularly capable of imparting such commentary by imitating sounds and concepts understandable to Black musicians and listeners, while remaining opaque to outsiders.²⁰ Floyd's translation of this theory into musical discussions advanced the notion of these common approaches and ideologies as being omnipresent in urban life, acting as a familiar point of unity. Additionally, it integrated the study of musical elements into the discipline to a greater degree by acknowledging their capacity to reframe lyrical messages. This approach recognises that while different challenges exist for different classes, the similar approaches used by migrants to the North to surmount them still represent a crucial commonality. Therefore, at this time the previous focus on class divisions was often eschewed in favour of noting the tactics developed in the urban North to resist its distinct forms of racism. This acknowledged the useful co-existence of diverse class experiences and common actions of resistance.

Modern Discourse on Agency and Commercial Success (c. 2000s–Present)

Conversely, a newer school of thought has stressed agency and diversity of opinion among urban Black communities, challenging the concept of the immutable African American musical essence earlier scholars allude to. In *Lying Up a Nation* (2003), Ronald Radano disagrees with both Baraka and Keil's emphasis on fundamental cultural commonalities, as well as with Floyd's belief in continuity of artistic methods. He claims these theories overlook intra-racial divisions and allow political messages to obscure the actual opinions within these songs. He agrees, however, that the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 95–96.

¹⁹ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 95–96.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

information in blues songs demonstrates the reality of racism.²¹ He thereby contends that the individual stories presented in blues songs must be disaggregated and examined to truly elucidate the position of the blues in its sociocultural context. This encourages greater attention to ideological and demographic diversity, and foregrounds personal perspectives and choices. This investment in individual stories and fluctuating identities also emphasises the manner in which lyrical themes can be used to deconstruct and reevaluate cultural concepts. In *Race Music* (2003), Guthrie Ramsey notably indicates examples of Southern and Northern lyrical imagery being combined to show the growing fluidity between these geographical identities as migrants began navigating the North. In his discussion of the Four Jumps of Jive's "It's Just the Blues," for example, he notes the use of both Northern slang terms, such as referring to male friends as "cats," and evocative rural images, like "high as a Georgia pine."²² This synthesis shows lyrics acted as a venue for altering and commenting on self-definition. Thus, these scholars sought to solve the ongoing debate concerning unity and diversity by centring performers' implied messages, recognising agency and heterogeneous thought.

The attention given to agency and diversity has been furthered by an increased focus on the ambivalent and ambiguous aspects of class and commercial success. While Baraka depicted the middle classes as socioculturally distinct from the lower classes due to their more assimilated position, recent academics like Adam Green have argued for a less discrete separation. In particular, the historical circumstances evident in certain cities, such as Chicago, have recently been studied to explicate the fluidity and circumstantial divisions between classes. One notable such case study is Amy Absher's *The Black Musician and the White City*. This volume frequently explores the tensions over racial integration apparent in musicians' unions, and the differences in opinion between union leaders and musicians.²³ The ability of a musician to establish themselves as prosperous and alter their class definition has also been considered a meaningful representation of autonomy and

²¹ Ronald Michael Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2–4; 25.

²² Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 49.

²³ Amy Absher, *The Black Musician and the White City: Race and Music in Chicago, 1900–1967* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 64–65.

power. Green claims that commercial recognition in Chicago's blues industry acted as an assertion of individual heroism that appealed to many audiences,²⁴ undermining the connections perceived between the lower classes and cultural legitimacy. This illustrates a renewed focus on agency in its manifestations within a Black-centric musical environment where blues musicians found success increasingly attainable, indicating agency's place as an investigable cultural hallmark of growing security.

This era of scholarship has often neglected to progress efforts to examine the genre's musical elements, however. While some scholars in the early 2000s advocated for such an approach, later socioculturally-oriented academics like Absher and Green have primarily grounded their analysis in lyrical studies. Ramsey, for instance, initially extended Floyd's thesis that musical elements could impart socially significant messages, demonstrating that the perspectives shown on the events depicted in blues songs are inherently dependent on musical information. In Ramsey's aforementioned example of melding Southern and Northern signifiers, he interrogates musical components alongside lyrical analysis to elaborate on a song's interpretation. In doing so, he further details the lack of boundaries between the two geographical identities. For example, the vocalist transitions from a declamatory folk blues vocal delivery to a city-style croon after the song's introduction.²⁵ This allows an investigation of the capacity of musical aspects to contradict, reinforce, or add information to a song's lyrical themes. Additionally, although recent blues-oriented works have largely omitted musical examinations, electric blues songs are now incorporated as examples in publications that illustrate frameworks for analysing the personas created in popular music of all genres, including Allan Moore's *Song Means* (2012). These approaches often foreground the study of narrative personas and their construction through musical elements. Moore defines the elements of a narrative persona as the attributes adopted, and relationships perceived, while the performer assumes the role of a song's narrator,²⁶ a crucial component in an audience's interpretation of the song. In doing so, the song's meaning may be

²⁴ Green, *Selling the Race*, 72.

²⁵ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 49.

²⁶ Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (London: Ashgate, 2012), 187.

further discussed, and the performer's beliefs and perspective on the topics portrayed may be uncovered through their treatment and presentation of the narrator. Therefore, while there is still significant work to be done in this field, musical analysis may be used to investigate other dimensions of meaning that frame or comment on lyrical narratives, providing greater insight into the individual opinions that support or challenge collective experience and memory.

How Can We Represent Diversity of Thought?

This shift towards emphasising the impact of agency and diversity raises the question of how to proceed in further research on representations of racism in this genre. First, the restrictions placed upon personal expression must be clarified to fully elucidate the issues these blues songs discuss. Further analysis must delineate the artistic expectations imposed upon these performers by the music industry during their pursuit of affluence, as well as the deliberate changes in self-portrayal and societal commentary depicted in their music as commercial standards of success became increasingly or less relevant.

To do so, a full study of the narrative personas created in these songs will be explored in this article. This analysis will entail an investigation of numerous musical elements, including rhythm, melody, harmony, structure, delivery, and instrumentation, and their interactions with the lyrics. Continuing the work of Floyd, Ramsey, and Moore, this effort will incorporate further musicological techniques into analysis of the genre, and centre the ability of musical components to impact the interpretation of lyrical messages. Similarly, as discussions on class have evolved to show the divisions and power imbalances within wider class categories, elaboration is required on how these personas comment on the diverse range of authorities perpetuating discriminatory structures, such as Black intellectual leaders who opposed integration. This will better explain not only the varied opinions within classes, and the extent to which existing power determined one's ability to express agency, but the impact these issues had on the artistic landscape.

The Unique Forms of Racism in Chicago During the Great Migration

To almost all migrants, the North initially appeared significantly more free and socially liberal than the South. The North promised

liberation from Jim Crow laws, voting restrictions, and, at least nominally, the omnipresent threat of violence. However, while Chicago offered an increased degree of freedom and a plethora of new opportunities in employment and cultural unity with Black Northerners, these aspects also contained particular manifestations of racism that differed greatly from those in the South.

De Facto Segregation

While the North provided freedom from segregation laws, *de facto* segregation, a system based on implicit understandings that forbade Black Chicagoans from ostensibly usable facilities, thrived. Formalised segregation of public property was illegal in Chicago, unlike the South,²⁷ but these laws were not consistently enforced, and Black residents were often barred from public services in practice. Certain playgrounds, parks, and beaches were limited for white use by tacit agreements, leading recreational directors or police to urge Black residents away from the premises.²⁸ This presented a singular challenge to migrants, who were accustomed to explicit laws and demarcations for Black residents, and often expected to be able to use all facilities freely upon arriving in Chicago. Additionally, many private institutions excluded Black people, with separate banks, sports teams, and medical sites established in the 1920s to cater to Black residents unable to use their white counterparts.²⁹ Another notable aspect of *de facto* segregation was Chicago's extensive housing discrimination. Individual neighbourhoods were segregated to the degree that some white residents would attempt to attack any Black person trying to cross Wentworth Avenue.³⁰ Black Chicagoans relocating to white-dominated neighbourhoods would also face significant harassment.³¹ Thus, though segregation could not be legally

²⁷ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 127–128.

²⁸ Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 205–206.

²⁹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 130.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

³¹ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1991), 71. In 1946, white residents of the Airport Homes housing project rioted for two weeks following Black families' relocation to the area, ceasing only when they agreed to leave the neighbourhood.

enforced, white Chicagoans' violence, neglect, and insistence upon distance from Black residents, through tacit and bureaucratic forms of discrimination, created an order that behaved like a segregated society without blatantly signalling its injustice to external observers. This proved a new challenge for migrants to the region to confront.

The Industrial and Unionised Economy

The urban North's industrial economy, with its abundant jobs and unions, also incurred unique manifestations of employment discrimination. Black and white workers interacted freely, as attempts to separate them were deemed wasteful.³² However, Black workers were drastically overrepresented in hazardous menial jobs. Most migrants possessed few skills transferable to industrial work, and thus were typically hired by industries with minimal prerequisites, such as steel and meatpacking.³³ Further, there were significant barriers for those seeking white-collar work; public utilities and city banks generally ignored Black applicants,³⁴ and many employers only provided listings for blue-collar positions to Black-oriented newspapers.³⁵ This ensured most Black workers were trapped in low-paying jobs they were inappropriately qualified for, despite the plethora of jobs available. The expanded role of unions in the North also created particular forms of racial discrimination. In the South, there existed no significant unions for farmworkers, and union leadership in other sectors was highly conservative, occasionally even harbouring Ku Klux Klan sympathies.³⁶ The average Black migrant thus had little exposure to union activities before arriving in the North. Unions varied in their approach to Black membership. While those in the Congress of Industrial Organizations embraced Black workers and condemned segregation, for example, the American Federation of Labor permitted segregated locals.³⁷ As Black Chicagoans were less likely to belong to unions, Black workers were more easily fired; during the Great Depression, Black workers were discharged so commonly

³² St. Clair Drake and Horace Roscoe Cayton, *Black Metropolis: a Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1945), 117.

³³ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 183–184; 191.

³⁴ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 112.

³⁵ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 185.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 214–215.

³⁷ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 313–315.

that Chicago's Black-owned *Defender* newspaper began discouraging further migration.³⁸ Therefore, the urban North's industrial economy created yet further concealed avenues for racist white employers to deny Black workers success through policies favouring white employees, and an extensive role for unions that did not exist in the South.

Old Settlers' Refusal to Resist

An additional distinct manifestation of racism within the North was the unwillingness of its old settlers to utilise their cultural leadership to spur meaningful social change. While various types of old settlers existed, with their key commonality being only that they had comprised the region's Black population present before the Great Migration, this demographic was disproportionately represented among Chicago's Black intellectual and elite classes. Initially, wealthier old settlers proved resistant to social activism to avoid upsetting their white business associates.³⁹ By the 1920s, these affluent groups had been partially displaced by professionals who had garnered their wealth from within Black communities. Scholars since St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's seminal 1945 sociological study *Black Metropolis* have argued these old settlers were invested in preserving the Black-oriented network of social institutions they had created and generated prestige from.⁴⁰ Neither type of old settler, therefore, had any great interest in demanding integration. Old settlers would often also explicitly perpetuate racist paradigms, attempting to force migrants to conform to their standards of "respectability" to earn white approval. Many old settlers claimed that security from white violence would be obtained if migrants would behave in a less aggressive manner.⁴¹ To

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77; 83.

³⁹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 129.

⁴⁰ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 120; 122.

⁴¹ These notions are reminiscent of the "politics of respectability" Higginbotham discusses in *Righteous Discontent* (1993). While old settlers believed they resisted racism by demonstrating their professionalism and morality to white Chicagoans, who typically denied them these expressions, this further entrenched the values held by white society and continued to degrade the African Americans unwilling or unable to comply. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 186–193.

urge their assimilation, organisations like the Urban League targeted migrants through pamphleting and door-to-door visits, demanding they dress neatly and speak quietly,⁴² while the *Defender* repeatedly encouraged migrants to emphasise their cleanliness, restraint, and trustworthiness when in public.⁴³ Thus, old settlers commonly disdained integrationist actions, instead exhorting migrants to appear more 'reputable' to inspire accommodations from white Chicagoans. This created a distinct manner of perpetuating racist paradigms even as old settlers expected to further the cause of civil rights.

Therefore, while the North supplied new opportunities for migrants due to its lack of segregation laws, vibrant industrial economy, and existing Black population, these ostensible advantages also concealed insidious types of discrimination that proved novel to migrants. This created a particularly fraught setting for migrants to navigate, with countless implicit pitfalls that were invisible from a seemingly objective perspective.

An Analysis of Resistance Tactics as Revealed Through Chicago Blues

Many Chicago blues songs from this period discuss oppressive industrial work, *de facto* segregation and racist harassment, assimilationist pressure from old settlers, and disillusionment with Chicagoan racism. In doing so, they indicate migrants' most critical tactics included the use of assistive networks of fellow migrants, and the weaponisation of creative skill. Their depictions of migration away from the North demonstrate the value of these techniques, as they portray Chicago as an improvement to the South, despite its shortcomings. However, the perspectives presented vary significantly, often being impacted by the societal and professional circumstances of these performers. This illustrates the ways that the blues was commonly used in this era to negotiate how migrants might best defy Northern oppression.

Resisting Exploitation and Poverty in the Northern Industrial Economy

The strategies blues songs propose for weathering the extreme difficulty of Northern industrial work typically rely on emphasising

⁴² Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'?: the African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 104.

⁴³ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 168.

solidarity. In these examples, St. Louis Jimmy Oden's *Hard Luck Boogie* and Eddie Boyd's *Five Long Years*, both narrators describe the exploitative and exhausting nature of employment in the North. These songs were released in 1953 and 1952, respectively, in the early period of a minor economic recession that led to increased unemployment among Black Northerners.⁴⁴ This was exacerbated by the dearth of protections for Black workers due to the discrimination in certain labour unions, causing a rash of firings and demotions. The two songs highlight the oppressive conditions found in professions such as steelwork and meatpacking by likening these conditions to the degrading brutality of Southern plantation labour. This affirmation of a common suffering across regions and eras is reminiscent of Baraka's theories, as this is utilised to establish solidarity concerning Northern abuse of Black workers. However, these songs denote financial success as an admirable quality. This allowed working-class Black Chicagoans to celebrate their wealthier acquaintances' prosperity while acknowledging the inescapability of their own poverty. This reflects the use of group solidarity to navigate the North through the communication of grievances, and the appreciation of individual success. These circumstances thus highlighted the necessity of forging connections with other workers, as doing so would vindicate their concerns, communicate their anger, and permit the working classes to appreciate affluence even when it proved impossible, assisting in the navigation of this hostile landscape.

St. Louis Jimmy Oden's *Hard Luck Boogie* calls for solidarity by both condemning the oppressive character of the industrial landscape to support the working classes and recommending unity with wealthy Black Northerners. First, Oden denounces the maltreatment rife within Chicago's industrial economy, indicating its jobs are akin to those on Mississippi's plantations in their intense strenuousness:

"I worked hard in Chicago and Mississippi too
 Worked hard in Chicago and Mississippi too
 Can't find nothing easy to make big money like you" (0:32–0:48)

The persistent four-on-the-floor beat marked in these verses by the percussion, the walking bass, and the guitar further accentuates the

⁴⁴ Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 121–122.

implication that the work involved is never-ending and aggressive, with long hours and no opportunities for advancement. Oden thus decries Chicago's industrial work as exploitative, and validates the objections industrial employees would be penalised for voicing by arguing Chicago and Mississippi are alike in their abuse of Black workers. Another suggested strategy in *Hard Luck Boogie*, however, is identification with prosperous Black Chicagoans when poverty proves inescapable. Oden's narrator addresses a wealthier acquaintance, and shows both admiration and jealousy of this acquaintance's circumstances:

"Every day you're Sunday, you're dressed up all the time
Every day you're Sunday, you're dressed up all the time
I'll be like you when I get work off my mind" (1:41–1:56)

The narrator notes his own persistent efforts, claiming he "work[s] so doggone hard [he] can't even eat or sleep" (1:01–1:04), but remains convinced this will never lead to financial stability. In doing so, the narrator recognises his powerlessness, but argues for the importance of sharing in the joy of other Black Chicagoans' demonstrations of agency and strength to alleviate his fury. Therefore, Oden implies the formation of a collective consciousness assisted in surmounting the stresses of the Northern industrial economy, as this would both communicate grievances among workers and allow working-class Black Chicagoans to take pride in wealthier acquaintances' autonomy.

Eddie Boyd's *Five Long Years* similarly denounces the manner in which the Northern industrial economy degrades Black Chicagoans and affirms solidarity, though Boyd maintains a greater emphasis on correspondence between workers. Northern employment is lyrically and musically likened to slavery, with steelwork equated to the harvesting of corn:

"I got a job in a steel mill
Shucking steel like a slave" (1:05–1:11)

The structure and texture of this verse appears to evoke a field holler, strengthening the simile. This section shifts from a twelve bar blues progression to an ABCB rhyme scheme with no repeated lines. The piano, electric guitar, and saxophone also disappear entirely while Boyd sings, reappearing solely to issue a simple riff

between vocal phrases in call-and-response. Further, Boyd's vocal delivery is loud and declamatory, with the bulk of this verse relying on one note. This viscerally demonstrates the arduous nature of such jobs, and confirms to the audience that racist exploitation is rampant in the industrial North. The song additionally creates an atmosphere of extreme exhaustion, reinforcing this concept through structural alterations. The song opens with a verse based around a full twelve bar blues progression, including a repeated initial line. However, on the next two occasions this verse appears, the first line is only sung once, omitting the first four bars of the progression. This, combined with the previous verses directly leading into the reappearance of this partial twelve bar blues section with no instrumental break, creates the impression of the song's structure collapsing as the narrator becomes increasingly fatigued. This not only displays situational exhaustion, but asserts the importance of openly expressing long-term pessimism due to consistent exploitation at the hands of the narrator's employer. Lastly, Boyd's narrator addresses those who identify with the song directly:

"If you ever been mistreated, you know just what I'm talking about" (0:16–0:26)

This is furthered again by the reference to steel mills, as a significant portion of Chicagoan listeners would have been employed in similar industries. These efforts to ensure relatability and involve the listener in the song's narrative reveal the belief that sharing their experiences of maltreatment would vindicate Black workers' existing concerns. Thus, Boyd claims that communication among workers was crucial in navigating the exploitative urban industrial economy, as this raised awareness, provided emotional support, and created a foundation for future action.

Resisting De Facto Segregation and Racist Harassment

Blues songs in this era often show the necessity of networks of fellow migrants to assist with the circumvention of white hegemony. They stress the importance of utilising other migrants' knowledge and connections to uncover temporary solutions to issues such as *de facto* segregation, police brutality, and vilification by white society. This is frequently represented as musical communication that may be used to augment a discussion within a

friendship, or persuade an ally to support one's cause. Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon's *Chicago House Rent Party* (1960) and Elmore James' *Stranger Blues* (1962) address the use of these networks to transmit information and offer assistance, a strategy ideally permitting their protagonists to locate suitable housing and avoid harassment by white Chicagoans. *De facto* segregation in this era proved a complex array of tacit understandings, bureaucratic gerrymandering, and clear exclusionary rules that could lead to violence if a Black resident attempted to enter certain neighbourhoods or use certain facilities. This aggressive environment thus was deeply confusing to recent migrants. While established Chicagoan hitmakers Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon present their characters as easily able to convey and acquire the knowledge needed to navigate it, Elmore James, a Mississippian recently arrived in the North to advance his musical career, describes a lack of access to insider information and anger at his harassment. Such guidance-sharing arrangements recall Floyd's hypothesis that the blues' most critical link to other African American modes of expression was its ability to convey insider knowledge among its practitioners without arousing the suspicion of outsiders.⁴⁵ However, academics like Radano have argued that a genre's characteristics are more indebted to its local sociopolitical environment than to any immutable inner force.⁴⁶ This implies that while the disclosure of insider knowledge was often crucial to migrants, its position as a concept uniting blues musicians nationwide has remained contentious in both songs and scholarship. Therefore, these songs indicate the importance of obtaining arcane information and assistance from other migrants to surmount the unassuming manifestations of racism in the North, though the extent to which the strategies to do so were intrinsic to the blues, or readily gleaned from other Black Chicagoans, are debated within.

Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon's *Chicago House Rent Party* is framed as a conversation in which the main character consults a friend for advice on addressing his overdue rent, availing himself of such insider knowledge in the process. During their discussion, the narrators consider the possibility of the protagonist relocating to

⁴⁵ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 78.

⁴⁶ Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 3; 34.

Washington Park with his friend, and the protagonist receives guidance on avoiding the aggressive police presence in the area:

“Why don’t you come on over and stay with me in Washington Park? You won’t have to worry about no landlady. Just dodge the police”

“Yeah, but my feet is already sore from last summer in the park”

“Man, if you hide behind Bush Nine they’d never find you out”
(3:55–4:15)

The song is lyrically and musically arranged to evoke a compassionate and familiar atmosphere. This is crafted for the listener through the use of humour, slang terms, and references to other figures the characters know. Further, numerous in-jokes about Chicago are mentioned with little explanation, such as “Bush Nine” and the titular “house rent party,” a scheme to pay rent by collecting contributions from acquaintances. In doing so, these performers illustrate the methods they believe they and their listeners typically utilise to navigate issues like housing and the threat of aggression. This concept is enhanced musically by showing these tactics through the piano and bass’ mutual support. During the bass’ solo passages, the piano generally mimics the bass or plays upper-register chords rather than overpowering it (3:01–3:12). Similarly, when the piano is demonstrating virtuosity (2:06–2:11), the bass continues at an even tempo, without challenging it. This again suggests the successful use of a mutually beneficial alliance to functionally assist in avoiding white violence. In *Chicago House Rent Party*, the characters also display their music-based methods of acquiring information and allies by verbally speculating about the protagonist’s landlady’s interests. They thereby wonder if playing a particularly impressive blues solo may awe her sufficiently to cause her to ignore the overdue rent payments:

“Or if you play them blues lonesome enough, she’ll be there. Kind of wink your eye at her a little bit. She might give you your rent free...” (1:10–1:17)

“Man, you got to play some real lonesome blues to make her forget that rent, though”

“I’ll show you a little part she’ll like” (1:50–2:03)

Interspersed with this section is a series of virtuosic instrumental passages as the characters display the accomplished techniques the landlady might best be appeased by, including rapid piano triplets (2:06–2:11) and elaborately bent bass notes (2:37–2:50). This likely evinces a belief in a link between the transmittal or discovery of insider information and musical expression through the blues. These efforts therefore show the importance of disseminating obscure, Chicago-specific knowledge among networks of migrants to locate areas of safety and secure functional assistance, and indicate that the blues proves a critical representation of these tactics.

In Elmore James' *Stranger Blues*, conversely, this network of sympathetic migrants fails, and the narrator proves unable to understand the North's unique manifestations of racism or comprehend its insider knowledge. First, the narrator's access to the complexities of navigating the Northern landscape is thwarted, as his connections in the region refuse to acknowledge him upon his arrival:

"And sometimes I wonder do my baby know I'm here
 Yes sometimes I wonder do my baby know I'm here
 Well I know she do, she sure don't even care" (1:02–1:25)

The narrator repeatedly notes that "everybody dogs [him] around" (0:28–0:31) due to being a migrant, likely suggesting constant harassment and vilification from both racist white Northerners and perhaps old settlers aiming to enforce their standards of conduct. The narrator's anger at the lack of support in this unfamiliar environment is evident in James' agitated vocal delivery, as he begins each line on the highest note of its melodic contour, singing loudly enough to cause significant distortion in the recording. The guitar is also distorted, and spends the majority of the song playing the same staccato riff. This shows the narrator's rage at his abandonment, and his fear of the danger presumed to continue if he is unable to rapidly learn the tacit rules of *de facto* segregation in Chicago. Musically, the narrator is implied to be incapable of utilising his artistic ability to his benefit due to his anger and lack of understanding of the North. For the first three verses, the guitar, saxophone, piano, and bass are all playing the song's foundational riff with minimal harmonisation, indicating the narrator has been overwhelmed by his frustration and is unaware of the ways

Chicagoans may use their musical skill to acquire assistance. As the narrator resolves to return to the familiar South in the fourth verse, however, his creative capabilities return, allowing the guitar to progress to a solo passage afterwards (beginning at 1:56). This denotes the existence of uniquely Northern methods of conveying and obtaining information that the narrator feels unable to access or unwilling to pursue as a recent migrant, and presents the blues as failing to provide the narrator with the access to this network he requires. *Stranger Blues* thus portrays the alienation experienced by recent migrants as they attempt to avoid the dangers of white Northern society without help, showing the crucial nature of these networks and the inability of the blues to fundamentally render any insider information comprehensible.

Resisting Old Settlers and the Denigration of the South

Chicago blues songs from this era also allow migrants to propose tactics to resist the assimilationist pressure applied by old settlers. To do so, they often demonstrate pride in Southern cultural aspects and twist stereotypes foisted upon migrants by old settlers. Champion Jack Dupree's *Nasty Boogie* (1958) and Muddy Waters' *Country Boy* (1952) represent similar but distinct approaches to this concept; the former depicts the merits of Southern cultural practices and portrays their disreputable attributes as desirable, while the latter implies these negative depictions are exaggerated by framing them as a role migrants are made to assume. *Nasty Boogie*, however, appears on an album that frequently describes the brutal aspects of urban life, including drug addiction (*Junker's Blues*) and disease (*T.B. Blues*), while *Country Boy* was issued as a single, perhaps accounting for this disparity in their stances. Old settler organisations frequently told migrants they behaved in a disreputable and untrustworthy manner, urging that they instead conform to white standards of conduct to win white Chicagoans' respect.⁴⁷ Additionally, old settlers were generally resistant to integrationist activism. "Signifyin(g)" allows the Black vernacular tradition to comment on the formal discursive sphere using implicative speech;⁴⁸ blues musicians' efforts to resist old settlers' cultural hegemony and control of the political realm commonly involve methods from these philosophies. As Dupree and Muddy

⁴⁷ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 168.

⁴⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 14.

Waters mockingly present themselves as parochial and dangerous, they show the blatant untruths of old settlers' propaganda and reverse the balance of power. Therefore, blues songs from this period often exhibit pride in Southern traditions and emphasise the invented nature of these negative stereotypes by appearing to agree with these insulting labels foisted upon migrants by old settlers. This was an attempt to oppose the assimilationist pressure old settlers applied and indicate migrants could defy Northern racism without sacrificing their identities.

Champion Jack Dupree's *Nasty Boogie* embraces the negative portrayals of migrants by old settlers, emphasising the social value and entertaining qualities of Southern cultural practices to depict their disreputable elements as beneficial. First, *Nasty Boogie* maintains a vulgar atmosphere through its intertextual references and barely concealed profanity, ostensibly accepting old settlers' claims migrants were profane and provocative:

"Mama bought a chicken, she took him for a duck
Laid him on the table with his leg stuck up
Yonder come the children with a spoon and a glass
Catch the gravy dropping from its yas-yas-yas" (0:37–0:46)

Much of this verse quotes from the risqué St. Louis blues song *The Duck's Yas-Yas-Yas*, which features extensive descriptions of hedonistic parties and sexual innuendo. *Nasty Boogie* also utilises words like "nasty" and "mess" in a positive fashion, framing these terms as compliments for the titular dance. As Gates notes, such uses of humorous irony to expose the nonsensical nature of another group's arguments are a key component of "Signifyin(g)."⁴⁹ Additionally, the song is simplistic, with the chorus consisting almost entirely of the phrase "nasty boogie-woogie, don't you know" repeated several times. The texture is dense throughout, featuring the piano, drums, bass, and saxophone playing loudly for essentially the song's entirety. These components allow Dupree to reclaim stereotypes of Southerners as vulgar, brash, and uncouth, instead wielding these notions as points of pride. Dupree then notes the positive attributes of allegedly uncouth Southern music. He highlights the delight various characters take in the titular dance, describing the ways it revitalises an elderly listener:

⁴⁹ Ibid., 111.

“Well, my grandma was too old to go
She listened in on the radio
Her feet got happy and she pulled up her dress
The first thing she hollered
‘That boogie’s a mess!’” (0:57–1:06)

This indicates a staunch belief in the power of Southern genres like boogie-woogie, implying although old settlers may disapprove of its boisterousness, such aspects allow it to provide a sense of social connection for a wide audience. Musically, the song is based around a rapid boogie-woogie piano arrangement and prominently features strained vocal and instrumental timbres, contributing to its excited atmosphere. The musicians also vocally encourage each other as they play their solos through calls and cries, another element Floyd identifies as crucial to musical “Signifyin(g)” through the construction of an emotional environment.⁵⁰ Dupree illustrates the euphoria experienced by the performers as well as by their assumed audience, and demonstrates to old settlers that the supposed disreputable and unrestrained qualities of Southern musical practices are a direct product of their capacity for entertaining their listeners. Therefore, Dupree openly acknowledges old settlers’ views of migrants as disreputable; however, he argues that Southern cultures’ exuberant and audacious qualities are the attributes producing its enjoyability and social meaning, wielding rhetorical skill to affirm the value of Southern practices.

Muddy Waters’ *Country Boy* likewise outwardly agrees with old settlers’ negative portrayals of migrants, though he differs in utilising this acceptance to stress the artificial nature of these views, thereby asserting the validity of Southern cultures. The narrator highlights Southerners’ supposed disreputability by detailing his reckless behaviour, as well as claiming this is an inherent aspect of Southern society:

“You know I’m a country boy and I just love to stay out all night”
(1:20–1:27)

The lyrics also refer to stereotypical Southern grammar through their use of phrases like “I stays out” (0:06) and “I won’t never”

⁵⁰ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 96.

(0:53); however, Muddy Waters enunciates clearly, perhaps subtly signalling old settlers' fears are irrational. Like *Nasty Boogie*, *Country Boy* is simplistic, as the lyrics are highly repetitive, with either "don't say I don't love you" or "you know I'm a country boy" beginning every line, and the percussion is merely a four-on-the-floor bass drum beat throughout. Rather than employing a thick texture, *Country Boy* simulates one with only three instruments. The guitar thus often switches between playing licks in a higher register and playing a bassline. Though this may have been a product of limited musician availability, it suggests to listeners again that while the narrator may seem belligerent and untrustworthy, his actual constitution is more tempered. This continues the concept of using irony to resist these negative stereotypes, in this case by indicating old settlers' discriminatory attitudes are unwarranted. These musicians thereby utilise "Signifyin(g)" against the culturally repressive aspects of Black Chicagoan society, twisting old settlers' own assumptions to reverse the balance of power. *Country Boy* also rejects the notion that Southerners must discard their cultural practices to earn the respect of white Chicagoans. Near the song's end (2:28), a recording engineer is heard loudly speaking over the talkback microphone, drawing attention to the fact that this allegedly uncouth genre is being afforded significant commercial prestige. This simultaneously denotes the unpolished qualities of the recording, heightening the juxtaposition. As Muddy Waters' record label, Chess, was operated by the white Chess brothers, this effort to centre the commercial distribution of blues songs signalled to old settlers that Southern genres were indeed capable of forming common ground with white Chicagoans and engendering professional respect. This acted as a major repudiation of the typical old settler opinion that migrants would need to conform to "respectable" standards of behaviour to secure white allies and triumph over racism, and illustrated the irrational nature of this argument. Thus, *Country Boy* similarly shows the use of irony to resist the negative stereotypes affixed to migrants by old settlers, though Muddy Waters dismantles these assumptions by indicating these notions are unrealistic, demonstrating that migrants are capable of maintaining positive relationships with white Chicagoans on their own terms.

Resisting Disillusionment With the North

Lastly, Chicago blues songs often reveal their performers' thoughts on the disillusionment of migrants with the North, due to their confrontations with the region's racism through their discussions of migrating onwards. Blues songs generally identified returning to the South as a possibility due to the difficulties of supporting oneself financially in the North, or comprehending its novel forms of discrimination, as in *Stranger Blues*. However, this course was typically viewed with great apprehension.⁵¹ J.B. Lenoir's *The Mountain* (1952) and Muddy Waters' *My Home is in the Delta* (1964) represent similar opinions on the topic, concurring that remaining in the North constituted the superior option, despite their vastly different communicative approaches. The former song portrays a migrant displeased with the North's pitfalls who grows overly eager to relocate westwards, convinced the region will prove entirely free of hardship. Lenoir was outspoken on both issues of Southern racism (*Alabama Blues*, *Born Dead*) and nationwide injustices, such as excessive taxes on the working class (*Eisenhower Blues*). While he was occasionally urged to record alternative versions of his works with fewer overt political references, including reissuing *Eisenhower Blues* as *Tax Paying Blues*, J.O.B. Records, a smaller label with less extensive commercial aspirations, largely permitted Lenoir to offer complex activist messages during this period.⁵² *My Home is in the Delta*, conversely, is the opening song on Muddy Waters' acoustic "Folk Singer" album, released by the premier blues label Chess to capitalise on the folk revival era of the early 1960s. This was anticipated to garner a wider audience due to its shift in genre, including white listeners, limiting the political sentiments expressed, and ensuring the album's subject matter remained focused on the South to maintain its image as a folk blues product. Therefore, while blues songs note the great difficulties migrants faced in the North, many examples argue the region offered the most significant freedom possible through their varying topics and expressive methods, condemning the concepts of migrating onwards or returning to the South.

These examples illustrate the relative safety of the North and the pitfalls inherent in migrating onwards, despite their differing communicative methods. In *The Mountain*, J.B. Lenoir depicts a

⁵¹ Absher, *The Black Musician and the White City*, 72–73.

⁵² Rowe, *Chicago Breakdown*, 93; 97; 121–122.

narrator who is frustrated with the North's failures and naively eager to migrate westwards, and notes the folly of such an approach.

"I can't sleep, the Rocky Mountain's on my mind
I can't sleep, the Rocky Mountain's on my mind
Yes, you know, I've got my suitcase packed now, you and my
friends can have this town" (0:51–1:24)

The narrator demonstrates little knowledge of the West, only being aware that it's "where the eagle bird build [sic] her nest" (0:18–0:21), and needing to ask for the train schedule in the final verse. Further, he excitedly reiterates his intentions to leave numerous addressees in the North, including "you fine girls" (0:40) and "you and my friends" (1:21), indicating his gullible enthusiasm that the West will provide the improvement he desires. However, while the lyrics do not detail the narrator's specific predicament, phrases like "don't I never have no rest" suggest his troubles are ever-present and unlikely to be solved by additional migration, a concept supported by Lenoir's anti-racist activism. Musically, the song maintains a dreamlike atmosphere through Lenoir's languid vocal delivery, slow tempo, and thick texture, which frequently obscures each instrument's melodic material; for example, the guitar and piano play different solos simultaneously in the instrumental passage. This too illustrates the narrator's uninformed idealisation of the West. Though Lenoir refrains from overtly criticising the narrator, he thereby contends that migrants must be aware that no region is free from racism, and the North's failures remain superior to the South's horrors. Muddy Waters' depiction of a migrant reluctantly returning to the South in *My Home is in the Delta* (1964) largely mirrors this opinion, though his communicative approach differs due to his record label's restrictions on his subject matter.

"Well my home's in the Delta, way out on that farmer's road
Now you know I'm leaving Chicago, and people, I sure do hate to
go
Now you know I'm leaving here in the morning, won't be back no
more" (0:17–0:55)

Here, the narrator describes his overwhelming sadness at his departure, later noting that he also "feel[s] like crying" (2:30). The

narrator's sorrow is additionally shown through the progressive degradation of the song's lyrical structure. While the first two verses have three distinct lines, the third verse replaces its second line with a repetition of its first, and the fourth verse is chiefly wordless vocalisations followed by a contextless reprise of part of the second verse. The song is musically syncretic, however, as it combines the acoustic slide guitar of Delta blues with the expanded band of urban blues due to its inclusion of bass, drums, and a rhythm guitarist. This implies that regardless of the terrifying prospect of returning to the South, the North has irrevocably changed and strengthened the narrator by offering a respite from its disasters. Despite Chess Records' expectations that the album be presented as a triumphant restoration of Muddy Waters' original Mississippi style, this syncretism suggests a migrant is generally justified in dreading a return to the South, and has been altered too greatly to simply regress to their pre-migration personality and role in society. This is reminiscent of Floyd's concept of subversive double-voicing, and the manipulation of the degrading ways African Americans were urged to present themselves into an opportunity to subtly disseminate their own messages.⁵³ Therefore, these songs demonstrate the view through their portrayals of migrations westward and repatriations to the South that while Northern circumstances remained arduous and dangerous, there existed no better alternative in the United States, and the region provided a reprieve and source of strength in comparison with the South.

Ultimately, Chicago blues songs in this period allowed migrants to voice opinions on how best to navigate Northern poverty, racial discrimination, and assimilationist pressures from old settlers, commonly referring to the importance of the assistance of fellow migrants and the weaponisation of rhetorical skill. Many songs indicate in their depictions of migrating onwards that Chicago has proved a valued improvement over the South with the assistance of these techniques, despite the city's pitfalls. However, there exists a variety of perspectives on which strategies are appropriate, the role of music in forging common understanding among migrants, and the degree of accuracy in old settlers' depictions of the migrant population. These disagreements are compounded by the distinctions in communicative approaches apparent due to the

⁵³ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 88.

differing societal circumstances and commercial expectations placed upon their performers. Therefore, while this analysis elucidates the tactics migrants frequently used to defy the societal danger imposed upon them by the North's novel agents of oppression, it also bespeaks the capacity of the blues in this era to act as a forum for the debate of critical issues of self-preservation and identity.

Conclusion

By explicating the narrative personas constructed in these songs through their musical elements, this article has demonstrated the blues' position as a forum for migrants to discuss matters of identity during this time. I have advanced the modern discourse on agency and diversity of thought by noting that these musicians' capacity to express their opinions freely varied significantly, as the expectations of audiences and record labels at times restricted the content presented. My analysis has also assisted in incorporating further musicological techniques into the discipline by emphasising the need to interrogate the interactions of musical components with lyrical information, an understudied aspect of the field. Secondly, detailing the historical factors informing these works has proven critical to this article's endeavour, as this has revealed the North's unique agents of oppression, and the complex ways these songs comment upon them. This has indicated the insidious character of Northern racism, as while the region ostensibly appeared to provide a greater degree of liberty than the South, cities like Chicago presented concealed challenges like *de facto* segregation, employment discrimination within the industrial economy, and the racist paradigms imposed by old settlers. In fully elucidating these issues and the ways they are portrayed musically, I have shown the societal role the blues played in the urban North and the diversity of thought apparent on how to approach these obstacles.

As these performers' experiences navigating the novel nature of Northern racism often differed, numerous distinct strategies are proposed in their music to accomplish this task. The agency these musicians were able to express musically also varied markedly due to the commercial pressures placed upon them, causing the communicative techniques utilised in these songs to additionally diverge. Although these musicians may present analogous tactics for traversing the North, their methods of conveying these concepts are frequently affected by the expectations of their record

labels and audiences. Thus, the genre accommodates a diverse spectrum of beliefs, allowing these performers to continually negotiate how migrants might best navigate and define themselves within their new environment. This offers crucial insight into the manner in which many migrants may have understood the urban North and their place within it, and is essential to our comprehension of music's role in modern American history.

ABSTRACT

This article investigates representations of racism in electric blues songs from 1945 to the early 1960s. During the Great Migration, more than six million African Americans relocated from the Southern United States to the North and West, primarily seeking these regions' abundant industrial jobs and freedom from the South's segregationist laws. However, while the urban North was ostensibly more socially liberal than the South, it concealed unique manifestations of racism that proved difficult for Southerners to traverse. The post-WWII period also saw the development of the North into the epicentre of the blues music industry. Songs created by musicians who were migrants often demonstrate the tactics migrants used to navigate the forms of discrimination specific to the urban North.

To examine this topic, I firstly detail previous historiography on electric blues in this era. As modern discourse has increasingly acknowledged the ideological diversity apparent in Black communities, I advance this discussion by exploring factors that limited musical freedom. In doing so, I identify distinct agents of oppression in Chicago that challenged migrants to the region. In analysing blues songs by artists who had migrated to Chicago, this investigation studies not only lyrical information, typically the main focus of blues scholarship, but also musical features to elucidate the strategies these performers propose for resisting Northern racism. The methods suggested vary significantly due to the differing historical and personal circumstances influencing these musicians' experiences with Northern oppression. The communicative approaches these performers used were additionally impacted by the expectations of their record labels and audiences. These factors allow the genre to contain a range of views, demonstrating its position as a forum to debate how migrants navigated and defined themselves within their new environment.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Harlan Ockey completed a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in Music at the University of Sydney in 2020. Prior to this, he obtained his initial Bachelor of Arts degree in 2019 from the Australian National University, where he majored in both Music and History. The multidisciplinary investigative methods learned in the process were crucial in informing the blend of musical analysis and historical research seen in this study. Apart from the blues, his musical interests include genres like rock, folk, and pop, and his tertiary field is political science. This is his first published article.