

inequality are neither talked about or addressed. By contrast, the present work will examine the historical origins and current manifestations of planter bloc hegemony, the appeasement of it, resistance to it, and the roads still open to regional development based on economic democracy, social justice, and cultural sanctity.³³

The Blues Tradition of Explanation

... had it not been for the blues, the black man wouldn't have been able to survive through all the humiliations and all the various things going on in America ... he had nothing to fight with but the blues ... the blues is the facts of life.

Willie Dixon¹

Although they call it the blues today, the original name given to this kind of music was "reals." And it was real because it made the truth available to the people in songs ...

Henry Townsend²

The blues epistemology is a longstanding African American tradition of explaining reality and change. This form of explanation finds its origins in the processes of African American cultural construction within, and resistance to, the antebellum plantation regime. It crystallized during Reconstruction and its subsequent violent overthrow. After two hundred years of censorship and ten short years of open communication, the resurrected plantation bloc thoroughly demonized all autonomous forms of thought and action for another century. The blues became the channel through which the Reconstruction generation grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it. The Mississippi Delta is the home of the blues tradition in music, popular culture, and explanation. It is therefore fitting that this popular consciousness is used to interpret both the continuous crisis in the Delta and African American attempts to create a new regional reality based on cultural freedom and economic and social justice.

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate that the blues epistemology is embedded, necessary, and reflective. It is a self-referential explanatory tradition among working-class African Americans in which development debates occur. The blues epistemology was first fully explained by the Mississippi author Richard Wright in 1937. Wright developed this approach originally as part of his studies on African American daily life and as part of a music-based critique of African American literature. The discussion below extends his theory into the field of regional studies by integrating several related discourses.³

Edward Soja argues that physical, functional, and cultural definitions of regions fail to explore fully the processes that distinguish regions: construction, reproduction, crisis, and the conscious activities of institutions and social movements. The analysis of this "social-spatial dialectic" is a central feature of the emerging regional critique. According to Anne Gilbert, the relational concept of the region traces its origins to the intense debates over the relationship between ethnicity, gender, and consciousness and political economy that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Distinctive regional identities and relations are constructed, and reproduced, through mobilizations and countermobilizations:

the existence of a particular region is assumed to depend on the actual domination of certain social groups in the regional structure. If a group within this structure is strong enough to impose standardization in a certain area at a certain time, the regional entity emerges, and its differentiation from other areas is sharpened. If the groups within a given regional structure are instead too weak to generate some sort of unity, they are integrated by groups dominant at other scales and the regional differentiation associated with the former disappears. The regional whole comes from the power of certain groups to impose their values and norms upon the majority and the cultural solidarity necessary to the specification of an area.⁴

To comprehend this process, a dynamic conception of how various regional blocs respond to, and anticipate, the general processes of uneven development must be utilised. Several conceptions are key to this undertaking. First, successful regional reproduction is not solely dependent upon preserving, at all costs, a comparative advantage in the production of a single commodity or group of commodities. Also, the ability of dominant regional blocs to maintain control over the regional structure cannot be assumed. Third, ethnic and gender divisions of labor are reproduced and reinforced within all aspects of the region's institutions, sectors, and spatial organization. What comes from the entire discussion is that a distinctive regional or subregional "state" emerges. Finally, the relational approach also enables us to see through the mask of normality that hides the permanent state of crisis in the Delta.⁵

The term "regional bloc" is used in the body of this work to understand the forces constructing and contesting regional power structures. The bloc can be conceived of as an alliance, a bargain, or a contract between disparate ethnic, gender, class, and other elements. The goal of the regional bloc is to gain control over resources and over the ideological and distributive institutions governing their allocation. The institutions and movements of the dominant group are typically explained in terms of moral, psychological, biological, and intellectual imperatives and superiority. According to Antonio Gramsci, after the dominant or hegemonic bloc "creates a new ideological terrain," it "determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge . . . when one succeeds in introducing a new morality in conformity with a new conception of the world, one finishes by introducing the conception as well." Similarly, Barbara Fields argues that race relations must be understood in the

context of the drive by dominant blocs to portray themselves as natural while identifying, classifying, disciplining, and institutionalizing difference, "deviance," and nonconformity. For Peter Jackson, the "real innovation in Gramsci's work was the realization that, in capitalist societies, hegemony is never fully achieved – it is always contested . . . Resistance may not always be active and open, often it will be latent and largely symbolic."⁶

Blocs, agendas, and movements that challenge the dominant regime are often eliminated from the historical record and from popular memory by the normal workings of the dominant institutions. In *Farmer Movements in the South, 1865–1933*, Theodore Saloutos provides the following insights into the importance of these movements:

society is composed of ephemeral groups with whom many of us are in disagreement, and for whom many academicians in particular have nothing but contempt. But these people existed, agitated, and proselytized; they constitute a significant part of their times . . . The amazing thing about all this is that—despite the numerous errors and reversals—so much of what these people dreamed about and aspired for became an accepted part of our agricultural thinking long after the visible structure of their organizations had melted away.⁷

The above discussion of relational regions and regional blocs provides a theory of social change that can be incorporated into the blues epistemology. Attempts by working-class African Americans to establish social democracy within a plantation-dominated economy provided the material basis for an ethic of survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation from the antebellum period to the present. The kin, work, and community networks that arose from these efforts served as the foundations of thousands of conscious mobilizations designed to transform society. Through a historical examination of these little-documented, long-forgotten, and seemingly ephemeral organizations and agendas, African American traditions of explanation, development thought, and social action become visible once again.⁸

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is an invaluable study of the military, political, economic, and academic foundations of the worldview of a dominant bloc. To Said, the material dependency of the imperial power upon the colonized produces an internally consistent imagery that is increasingly detached from how the colonized actually live their lives. Therefore, for Europeans the Orient "can become a discourse, a career for poets, journalists, scholars, soldiers, priests, administrators, etc . . . However, in the final analysis, it is the hegemony of one region over the other which gives durability to this phenomenon."⁹ Similarly, many scholars, etcetera, outside the African American community in the Delta have built careers interpreting and managing African American life and culture. One of Said's most important contributions is his assertion that orientalism is not dogmatic or a single-minded grid, but as complex as the individual authors who have produced thousands of works on the subject. The key to understanding this complexity is the positional superiority of one region, bloc, class, or ethnic group over the other. Also important

are the desires, repressions, investments, and projections circulating within that culture which weigh upon the imagination and logic of the individual. This approach allows the combined evaluation of social science, humanities, and policy studies in terms of their relationship to regional power structures.

Briefly reviewed below are examples of the ways in which some regional blocs define themselves, the region, its history, and the "other." First, Benedict Anderson suggests that blocs make investments in creating "imagined communities" which command emotional legitimacy. These communities are not coterminous with humankind or even with all segments of a region. They are, however, bound by deep horizontal networks of kinship, fraternity, sorority, and obligation. These networks and material relations are often explained not in terms of class or political affiliation or by rational calculation, but in terms of being sovereign in relation to their "gods," national ethnic and regional destiny, golden pasts and golden futures. Raymond Williams suggests that all these golden periods are used both to spur memories and to provide intellectual discipline in preparation for future mobilizations.¹⁰

Born in the Delta city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1915, the late bluesman Willie Dixon worked tirelessly to get the blues recognized as a social philosophy and to get its performers the respect they have been so systematically denied. In his 1990 autobiography *I Am the Blues*, he explains how the working-class African American representational structure, the blues, has maintained its grip on a constantly shifting reality despite the pressures of falsification, distortion, romanticism, cynicism, piracy, and commercialization:

All the blues songs actually related back to Africa or some African heritage things . . . By knowing about yesterday, how things came along and are still advancing, it can give you a greater idea of what the future could be. This is why the blues represents the past, the present and future . . . It's necessary for people to know all the various parts of the blues and the various things that have happened in the blues so they won't make the mistakes in the future that have been made in the past.

They've got blues books out there that tell a little about everybody—his name and what songs he sang—but they don't have none of the actual blues experience involved . . . Ninety-nine percent of the people that wrote stories about the blues gave people phony ideas and this gave the blues a bad reputation. They had people believing the blues was a low-down type of music and underestimating the blues one hundred percent. The majority of people have been taught to stay away from the blues because the world didn't actually want you to understand what the blues want.

The majority of the blues have been documented through time with various people involved with the blues. All of this is unwritten facts about the blues because these blues have been documented but not written—documented in the minds of various men with these various songs since the first black man set foot on the American shore . . . My old man would explain it all so we accepted his philosophy more than we did anybody else's because it made sense.¹¹

The Blues as Epistemology

Lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness. They display a greater freedom and initiative in pushing their claims upon civilization than even the petty bourgeoisie. Their organizations show greater strength, adaptability, and efficiency than any other group or class in society.

Richard Wright¹²

The intellectual traditions and social organizations through which working-class African Americans lived, understood, and changed their reality have typically emerged in spite of, and in opposition to, plantation powers. This conflict is one of the defining features of African American social thought. From the unique experience and position of the enslaved Black Southern working class there emerged a self-referential classificatory grid. This distinct and evolving complex of social explanation and social action, this praxis, provided support for the myriad traditions of resistance, affirmation and confirmation that were to follow. This pillar of African American identity is referred to in this work as the blues epistemology.

In the following chapters the historical evolution of two blocs will be traced. Most familiar to the reader is the plantation bloc and its system of representation. This fragment of society can be generally viewed as a Southern ethno-class grouping engaged in the monopolization of resources, power, historical explanation, and social action. The plantation classificatory grid has at its center the planter as the heroic master of a natural ethnic, class, gender, and environmental hierarchy. African Americans in general, and African American women in particular, are at the bottom of this order. The growth in power of the first bloc was directly linked with the growth in potential power of the second bloc, the blues bloc. The blues bloc consists of working-class African American communities in the rural South and their diaspora. The ontology, or worldview, embedded in these communities has provided a sense of collective self and a tectonic footing from which to oppose and dismantle the American intellectual, cultural, and socioeconomic traditions constructed from the raw material of African American exploitation and denigration.¹³

In the African American experience, the plantation bloc set the parameters of this conflict for several centuries as it attempted to suppress independent thought, cultural expression, and action. To ensure the autonomy of thought and action in the midst of constant surveillance and violence, African Americans constructed a highly developed tradition of social interpretation. This practice finds its origins in the secret societies prevalent during slavery. During this period, African, Native American and European intellectual traditions were forged in the crucible of the plantation South. What emerged was a highly developed introspective and universalist system of social thought and practice whose influence upon the modern world can never be underestimated.

The blues epistemology rests on two foundations. The first involves the

constant reestablishment of collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks by the plantation bloc and its allies, and in the face also of a daily community life that is often chaotic and deadly. Therefore, the location, timing, and forms of communications necessary to reestablish the conditions for collective thought and action are of critical importance. Across a constantly changing and dangerous terrain, the first question faced by an African American musical, literary, religious, and political performer/investigator is how can an individual express the thoughts of the audience authentically when authentic thoughts and actions are routinely and violently condemned. Consequently, those able to link historic African American objectives and expressions with present realities and visions of the future are often viewed as having been the recipients of ancestral gifts.

This brings us to the second aspect of the blues epistemology, social relations in the plantation South as one of the foundational pillars of African American culture. The plantation was a site both of conflict and of cultural formation. Even many of the descendants of the 6 million African American migrants who left the South between 1910 and 1970 (3 million of them between 1950 and 1970 alone) still measure social progress and spirituality in relation to their physical and psychological distance from "down home." For many of the diaspora communities in the Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West, the 1980s represented a reversal of progress, the collapse of the Second Reconstruction, and the return to the older forms of oppression that they fled the South to escape. Segments within some of these communities had dismissed the blues many years ago. For example, the biographer of B. B. King, a native of Clarksville, Mississippi, described the reception King received in the early 1960s during national tours:

His appearances on these tours gave him exposure to young, racially mixed, audiences, and they might have bridged the waters around his cultural island. But they didn't. On the contrary, they isolated him further because the audiences were cold, indifferent, at times even hostile to his music . . . They . . . were impatient with his slow tempos and mournful lyrics . . . Sometimes he was booed. The heckling came more from black teenagers than from whites, a fact he attributed to the blues being associated with black Americans' poor origins in this country.¹⁴

During the 1980s the blues were rediscovered by one generation of African Americans while another generation created rap which reaffirms the historic commitment to social and personal investigation, description, and criticism present in the blues. However, the question remains of how African Americans investigate and explain changing social relations when they still live in or adjacent to plantation-dominated counties and states; and where, in some instances, the same African American working-class families and the same White planter families have coexisted with, and combated, each other sometimes for over 300 years?

Some of these questions were addressed during a series of seminars held in 1988 and 1989 by the Margaret Walker Alexander Research Center for the

Study of Twentieth Century African American Culture at Jackson State University in Mississippi. According to the Duke University Professor of Religion, C. Eric Lincoln, those African Americans who stayed in the South were heroic:

because they did, America has been changed . . . True freedom cannot be imposed from the outside, it has to originate in the hearts and minds of the people who want to be free. There were such people in the South—people who stayed put, but people who were no less determined to see America be America. Their names were legion: Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr, Daisy Bates, Wiley Branton, Fred Shuttlesworth and ten thousand others whose names are known only to God, but whose faith, whose determination and whose sacrifice brought us to where we are . . . many who had once quit the South in despair, came bringing unexpected succor, encouragement and reinforcement. But the brunt of the battle was borne by the black citizens of the South, the African Americans who stayed "down home" determined to make "down home" a true and viable home for themselves, for their posterity, and for every American of whatever race, or creed or color.¹⁵

Described as the "Mother of the Modern civil rights movement," Rosa Parks compared the past and the present:

I felt that we were intelligent people and we must exercise our freedom. I felt that we should have our own self worth and think of ourselves as first class citizens in spite of the obstacles. I feel the same way today, that we should not feel that because we are in a certain location we must feel helpless, oppressed and accept the persecution, the pressure and intimidation that is placed on us.¹⁶

Novelist, essayist, Professor Emeritus of English and Director Emeritus of the institute Margaret Walker Alexander addressed the accomplishments of those who stayed to lead the so-called Southern Revolution:

Black people who stayed built social institutions, families, churches, businesses, and other social organizations . . . Those who stayed here therefore built a nation within a nation. We are a completely Black nation. Segregation forced us into every profession, business and vocational endeavor. We became self-sufficient despite the fact that billions of our dollars went regularly into the coffers of our oppressors.¹⁷

At the very end of Dr Martin Luther King Jr's life, he recognized that the movement would remain hollow so long as it failed to address the entirety of plantation relations so eloquently explored in depth by the blues. He came to realize that the plantation complex was central to both the construction and destruction of African American identity and aspirations. This is why the march King was organizing at the time of his death had as a goal a nationwide general strike directed at the Mississippi Delta plantation bloc. King along with many other African American leaders only discovered the power and continued relevancy of the blues epistemology after a long and circuitous route.

Cultural critic Richard Powell argues that the blues is an aesthetic found in

African American art and life throughout the USA, and that it has philosophical foundations that are essentially humanistic:

The term "blues" is an appropriate designation for this idea because of its association with one of the most identifiable black American traditions that we know. Perhaps more than any other designation, the idea of a blues aesthetic situates the discourse squarely on: (1) art produced in our time; (2) creative expression that emanates from artists who are empathetic with Afro-American issues and ideals; (3) work that identifies with grassroots, popular, and/or mass black American culture; (4) art that has an affinity with Afro-US derived music and/or rhythms; and artists and/or statements [whose] *raison d'être* is humanistic.

Although one could argue that other twentieth century Afro-US musical terms such as ragtime, jazz, boogie-woogie, gospel, swing, bebop, cool, rhythm and blues, doo-wop, soul, funk, go-go, hip-hop, or rap are just as descriptive as "the blues," what "the blues" has over and above them all is a breadth and mutability that allows it to persist and even thrive through this century. From the anonymous songsters of the late nineteenth century who sang about hard labor and unattainable love, to contemporary rappers blasting the airwaves with percussive and danceable testimonies, the blues is an affecting, evocative presence, which endures in every artistic overture made toward black American peoples.¹⁸

According to the African American folk critic Stephen Henderson "the blues continues as its own reference point . . . speaking the truth to the people in the language of the people." Like other working-class and peasant knowledge systems, it has been denigrated by hegemonic institutional structures and by African American scholars, artists, professionals, entrepreneurs, and political figures hoping to put some distance between themselves and their demonized working class.¹⁹

The legendary Richard Wright commented on this last tendency in a historic 1937 article:

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, [by] prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America . . . For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks . . . On the other hand, these often technically brilliant performances by Negro writers were looked upon by the majority of literate Negroes as something to be proud of . . . That the productions of their writers should have been something of a guide in their daily living is a matter which seems to have never been seriously raised . . . it became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation [and] it became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice . . . Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations.²⁰

According to Wright, these yearnings were met, in different ways, by two African American institutions: the Black church and the blues. Both the Black church and the blues emerged in rural areas where Black political and economic institutions were subjected to constant surveillance and often destroyed. Both prospered in Southern cities and spread throughout the Northern and Western diasporas. With its theology of liberation and common

metaphorical language, the church helped to move the social, cultural, economic, and human rights goals forward while giving institutional and physical form to the African American vision of the ideal community and utopia. Although the schism between the church and the blues is often emphasized, the two shared music, adherents, and leaders. According to Wright, it was difficult for individuals to divorce themselves from the blues given that its text was folkloric and its philosophy was based upon both materialism, realism, and spirituality:

The blues could be called the spirituals of the city. They are the songs of a simple people whose life has been caught up in and brutalized by the inflexible logic of modern industrial existence . . . Since the best-known blues have love as the main theme, people have a false idea, an incomplete one, of their true range and role in the life of Black people. There also exists blues which indict the social system and they have been judged not commercial enough because of this satirical bent . . . Common, everyday life, the background of our national life, is to be seen through the blues: trains, ships, trade unions, planes, the Army, the Navy, the White House, plantations, elections, poll tax, the boll weevil, landlords, epidemics, bosses, Jim Crow, lynchings . . . All such blues are as natural for the Black people as eating and sleeping, and they come as a rule out of their daily experience. Their very titles indicate the mood and state of mind in which they were written.²¹

However, Wright believed that because it was embedded in daily life, the knowledge which flows through the blues channels was typically "unwritten and unrecognized":

It was, however, in a folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, the confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns—all these formed the channels through which racial wisdom flowed.²²

In his works, Wright connected ethnic and class consciousness with daily life. He identified orature in general and music in particular as a point to begin the study of African American representational structures. Ruth Finnegan's exploration of the relationship between oral traditions and social theory in "Literacy versus Non-literacy: The Great Divide" represents an important contribution to this endeavor:

When people wish to make a basic distinction between different societies or historical periods, one of the commonly invoked criteria is literacy . . . those wishing to avoid the connotations of "primitive," "uncivilized," and "aboriginal" tend to turn to a description of "non-literate" or "pre-literate."²³

It is assumed that non-literate translates into a lack of intelligence. It is assumed that societies which are without writing are without true culture. What is clear is that non-literate societies have their own lyrics, panegyric

poetry, religious poetry, love songs, prose narratives, and drama, often referred to as folklore:

individuals in societies without such formal institutions are not without an opportunity for literary education in the broader sense. The Akan child in the West African forest areas grows up hearing spoken, sung and intoned poetry, as well as the special verbal poetry for horns and drums and the constantly recurring imagery of proverbs, while a little further east the Yoruba are exposed from birth to tonal, metaphor-saturated language which in its ordinary prose form is never far from music in the aural impression it gives and which has produced an extensive variety of spoken art characteristic of the people.²⁴

Tradition in both form and content are also components of orature; however, the function of orature is social, moral, educational and pragmatic, and not simply entertainment or art for art's sake:

The fact that oral literature is unwritten does not ipso facto absolve the poet from adhering to locally accepted canons of aesthetic form ... nor prevent him from delighting in the elaboration of beauty in words and music for its own sake. To be sure, there is often little interest among non-literate and semi-literate peoples in the individual personality of the author, particularly of the romantic and intense kind characteristic of a certain period of western literature or western capitalism. Nor is there often an idea of copyright.²⁵

Using this approach, we can begin to understand the fullness of an oral tradition. The demands of performance significantly structure African American orature, particularly the traditions that have emerged through the interaction between language, music and movement. As explained by Harrison, language represents a layer of orature that possesses its own dilemmas:

The blues ... are a means of articulating experience and demonstrating a toughness of spirit and re-creating that experience. Two qualities highly valued in the black community, articulateness and toughness, are thus brought together in this art form. Fluency in language is considered a powerful tool for establishing and maintaining status. Thus a man or woman who has mastered the art of signifying, rapping, or orature ... is held in high esteem (the present-day phenomenon of grand masters of rap music demonstrates the continuation of this value among blacks in cities).²⁶

Music is similarly an important component of orature. Several recent studies have identified the continuation of numerous African vocal, instrumental, and composition traditions in the blues. They have also noted the continuity of the role of performers as educators. African string instruments range from the one-string bow to the twenty-one-string kora. Furthermore, in various parts of Africa, griots, musical families, and orchestras serve as historians, genealogists, counselors, reporters, diplomats, and social, cultural, and economic innovators. It was not a great leap from the stringed instruments of Africa to the diddy bo, the violin, the banjo, and, later, the guitar in the Americas. Despite intense efforts at suppression, the African musical sensibility and scale were preserved:

Aaron Copeland has also noted the technically specific nature of the blues scale and feels that this African element is a most unique contribution to American music. The blue or flattened note, sung just under the note as it should have been sung on the Western musical scale, has become almost the hallmark of the blues ... Blue notes are not notes played out of tune but notes played in a specific way. It was created when slaves tried to fit African scales to European scales.²⁷

Language and music also intersect with performance styles. Lomax believes that these too are heavily informed by African practices:

It became clear that black Africa had distinctive performance styles, quite as formal as those of Western Europe ... Careful comparisons showed that black African nonverbal performance traditions had survived virtually intact in African America, and had shaped all its distinctive rhythmic arts, during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. It was this unwritten but rich African tradition that empowered the creativity we had encountered in the lower depths of the Mississippi Delta.²⁸

This complex of language, music and performance must be understood as a whole. Albert Murray has taken to task those who associate blues music and lyrics with a state of emotional depression. Attempts to analyze the lyrics separately as literature ultimately fail because meaning and abstraction in the blues emerges from the simultaneous interaction between language, music, and movement.

Blues music is always an artful combination of incantation and percussion. It is not always the song in the conventional sense of the word ... The essential message is usually conveyed by the music, whether vocal or instrumental ... verbal statement can be contradicted and in effect canceled by any musical counter-statement. If the lyrics laments but the music mocks, that statement is not one of lamentation but mockery ... The words may bemoan the loss of a lover, but if the singer is also involved with such choreographic gestures as finger popping, shoulder rocking, and hip swinging all the while, the statement can hardly be considered a form of bereavement.²⁹

Sidran attempted to link this "oral physicality" to the process of the construction of individual and community identities:

The essential nature of communication through rhythm is an unknown quantity due primarily to a lack of interest on the part of Western science. Rhythm ... is the cultural catharsis Fanon has suggested is necessary to black culture ... it simultaneously asserts and preserves the oral ontology ... it is on this basis that black music can be seen ... as a source for black social organization ... [According to Raymond Williams] "the process of communication is in fact the process of community."³⁰

Finally, it is often assumed that societies reliant upon orature are isolated and ethnocentric. First ethnocentrism is part of the daily bread of "literate cultures." Second, written

literature, particularly the printed word, does indeed provide certain opportunities for wider communication. But so too can oral literature. We can instance the

traveling jellemen of the Great Western Savannah region of Africa who created a vast cultural area throughout many different kingdoms and linguistic groups by their arts of word and music; the wandering Azmaris of Ethiopia who helped to bring about a striking uniformity of Ethiopian poetry among the many groups of the area; the unifying effects of their reverence for Homer among the disparate Greeks; or the early poets of Ireland who in the absence of towns or any centralized political system . . . were the only national institution – all performing the same kind of functions as the medieval jugglers and minstrels of Western Europe or their counterparts in the Arab World.³¹

Similarly Black musicians have created a vast cultural region of global proportions through the spread of the blues and blues-influenced genres such as jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, country and western, reggae, soul, funk, and rap. Furthermore, the blues, its schools, and its various extensions can be considered a national institution on a par with the Black church. It has its own schools and masters. According to Gates, among the African American art forms, in music given the “required mastery of technique and a highly critical audience, there evolved a tradition of master not found in literature.” Poet Amiri Baraka also juxtaposes the traditions:

American Negro music from its inception moved logically and powerfully out of a fusion between African musical tradition and the American experience . . . It is, indeed, a chronicler of the Negro's movement from African slave to American slave, from freedman to citizen. And the literature of the blues is a much more profound contribution to Western culture than any other literary contribution made by American Negroes . . .³²

There has always been a great deal of diversity in the blues, particularly in the form of distinct local and regional schools. Constant movement and migration ensured both continuity and further differentiation. The local traditions were created and maintained by individual performers and audiences who shared, and built upon, a set of foundational songs, sounds, techniques, instruments, lyrics, language, dances, etcetera. The interaction between local schools and the distinctiveness of regional power structures, daily life, and aesthetics become the foundation of the regional blues traditions, those of the Delta, Piedmont, Texas, Chicago, etcetera.

The blues emerge immediately after the overthrow of Reconstruction. During this period, unmediated African American voices were routinely silenced through the imposition of a new regime of censorship based on exile, assassination and massacre. The blues became an alternative form of communication, analysis, moral intervention, observation, celebration for a new generation that had witnessed slavery, freedom, and unfreedom in rapid succession between 1860 and 1875. Perhaps no other generation of a single ethnic group in the United States, except for Native Americans, witnessed such a tremendous tragedy in such a short period of time. Performer Cash McCall described the blues as the almost magical uncorking of the censored histories of countless people, places and events:

Well, in the old days, you see, you weren't allowed to express your feelings all that much. A lot of stuff was bottled up inside. Coming up from the old days until now . . . You can't explain it in a conversation so the best way to do it is to sing.³³

On the other hand, guitarist Willie Foster described them as the irrepressible voice of daily anguish:

The black folks got the blues from working . . . You work all day long, you come home sometimes you didn't have nothing to eat. You got the blues. "Lord have mercy I ain't got nothing." You sit down and cry. You ain't got nothing to eat. And that's where the blues come from.³⁴

The multiple perspectives and levels of expression inherent in the blues operating within a rigid racial hierarchy ensured that the study of the blues would proceed with great difficulty. One of the key problems identified by Stephen Henderson was that the community that created the blues was deemed incapable of analyzing them:

while one may admit to the existence of “folk poetry” or of a “folk” poet, the category of folk critic is unthinkable . . . on the assumption that unlettered people lack sufficient capacity for judgement, even of the works which they create themselves . . . Folk poetry is thus a lower form of expression which must be subjected to the informed discursive intelligence before it becomes a great literature or “real poetry.”³⁵

Beginning in the 1910s, scholars began examining the blues using the categories and standard of Anglo-American and European musical and poetic traditions. Still prevalent, this tradition of blues scholarship actively distorts the history of the blues while crippling its philosophical implications for African Americans and the world at large. Within the emerging African American literary tradition, the exploration of blues forms and themes was begun by Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Zora Neal Hurston, and other writers in the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement. Blues as criticism arose during and after the Great Depression from authors such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray, and during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s important contributions were made by Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and others. In the present period, many African American scholars working in the disciplines and fields of music, history, folklore, drama, poetry, art, literary criticism, cultural studies, theology, anthropology, etcetera have acknowledged the blues as a hearth of African American consciousness. As stated earlier, the social sciences remain a barrier not breached.

The continual presence and growth of this tradition will exponentially expand the crisis that has continued to sweep through the social sciences and the humanities as a result of the domestic and international movements of the 1950s and 1960s. There is now an intensified struggle over interpretation in the midst of another national and international expansion in the popularity of the blues. For example, in years past White scholars have criticized African Americans for their lack of interest in the blues. Lomax recently made the following observation:

The error in African-American studies had been to look to print and to language for evidence of African survivals. For instance, musicologists discovered that American blacks performed many European-like melodies, but failed to notice that the whole performance context—voicing, rhythmic organization, orchestration—remained essentially African. Such scholarship turned university-trained black intellectuals and writers away from the heritage of their parents, who had a nonprint, nonverbal heritage that the educated falsely labeled “ignorant.” Nonetheless, it was because of this culturally biased “ignorance” that African culture had been largely passed on in America—that is, through nonverbal and oral channels, out of the reach of censorship.³⁶

Similar observations were offered by Samuel Charters:

With the rise of the black middle class new musical forms and styles have emerged, but the root language for it all is still the blues and when black historians and black sociologists begin the assessment of what has been the cultural achievement of the years in America, it is to the blues that they will have to turn for many of their answers.³⁷

These observations both celebrate and denigrate African American working-class intellectual traditions. Not only did the audiences and performers create, listen and shape the blues, they were also its first students and scholars. The epistemology, or perspective, of these folk intellectuals eventually began to influence numerous “educated” African American artists, writers, and professors who were more likely to be recognized by the dominant institutions. However, such an essential feature of American identity as Black music could not be left to the interpretation of Blacks themselves, whether working-class or middle-class.

The struggle over who will interpret Black music is an intellectual battle that has been raging throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The above authors seem to want to forget the existence of this conflict and their role in it. They also fail to understand that African American Studies was a movement led by the African American working class. This movement should be seen as a stage in the further institutionalization of both the African American development agenda and the blues epistemology. It can also be viewed as an intensification of the debates over, not just African survivals, but American survival. The authors must evaluate their own work in light of these realities. They must also examine the strong resistance to accepting African American intellectuals on the part of the guild-like fraternity of White Black music scholars.

Rosemont argues that slightly below the surface of traditional blues scholarship is a “dark truth” that is being consciously avoided because few American institutionalized scholars, African American or White, wish to confront the full implications of African American culture:

It should be emphasized, since so many critics pretend not to notice it, that all authentic blues and jazz share a poetically subversive core, an explosive essence of irreconcilable revolt against the shameful limits of an unlivable destiny. Notwith-

standing the whimpering objections of a few timid skeptics, this revolt cannot be “assimilated” into the abject mainstream of American bourgeois/Christian culture except by way of diffusion and/or outright falsification. The *dark truth* of Afro-American music remains unquestionably oppositional. Its implacable Luciferian pride—that is, its aggressive and uncompromising assertion of the omnipotence of desire and imagination in the face of all resistances—forever provides a stumbling block for those who would like to exploit it as mere “entertainment,” a mere ruse to keep the cash register ringing. Born in passionate revolt against the unlivable, the blues and jazz demand nothing less than a new life.³⁸

Willie Dixon sung about this dilemma in “You Can’t Judge a Book by Its Cover”:

You can’t judge the sugar by looking at the cane
You can’t judge a woman by looking at her man
You can’t judge the sister by looking at her brother
You can’t judge a book by looking at the cover.

You can’t judge the fish by looking at the pond
You can’t judge the right by looking at the wrong
You can’t judge one by looking at another
You can’t judge a book by looking at the cover.³⁹

The above discussion has attempted to establish the terrain upon which the blues epistemology emerged and now operates. During the last three hundred years, the African American working class has daily constructed their vision of a non-oppressive society through a variety of cultural practices, institution-building activities, and social movements. By doing so, they have created an intellectual and social space in which they could discuss, plan, and organize this new world. The blues are the cries of a new society being born.