STEPHANIE SCHWARTZ

"Don't go," they say.
"We're already going," we say, and keep leaving.
—Richard Wright

I can only answer with another's words. Though this is not a cop-out, it is a conceit. It is one way of attending to the fact that the history of modernism called for in this questionnaire has already been written. By this I don't simply mean that I found my answers to the questions in the pages of *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*, the photobook that Richard Wright compiled with Edwin Rosskam in the early 1940s. I mean that answering requires taking stock of who is granted ownership of the words with which the histories that we have are written. Thus, I begin with another's words, which, not insignificantly, are words put into the mouths of unnamed others, and with another set of questions: Why are we arguing about the impoverishment of history? Isn't the problem that it is already inscribed? Is that even a problem?

I turn to *12 Million Black Voices* for many reasons, not the least of which is that it tells the story of America's modernism as a story of migration—of "leaving" and "going." With words and photographs, Wright and Rosskam narrate the ongoing and seemingly unending movements of Black men, women, and children to and through what became the United States. Like the migration, the narration is swift and relentless. In less than two hundred pages and three hundred years, millions move, in trains and trucks, from the holds of slave ships to the "holds" of plantations and the kitchenettes of cities. They move so that they can plow and clean and slaughter hogs and sheep and cattle; so that they can dance and sing the blues. Migrants, in this book's pages, modernize without becoming modern. There is no time for that, as Wright explains in one stunning sentence about what it was like to step off the trains and trucks in Chicago and Cleveland and Detroit in the first decades of the twentieth century: "We cannot shake off three hundred years of fear in three hours."[1] Wright made this journey in 1927.

Surely, with this book, Wright sought to render the Black men and women who make history happen seeable and sayable. He sought to give those who move, who are still moving, a voice. But that is not all—or that is not enough. In fact, the lesson inscribed in this book's pages, the lesson that we should heed, is that it will never be enough. Making visible and legible those who make and do requires attending to how invisibility and illegibility are made. It requires attending, as that one stunning sentence scripts, to how time is told. How, Wright seems to be asking, is it possible to write a history of migration for which there is not enough time? Or, how is it possible to write that history if there is too much time, if time only loops and repeats, or if those in motion go "nowhere"? *Nowhere* is not

1. Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), p. 100.

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Wright's word. It is the word that Hortense Spillers uses in her account of the African diaspora. The African persons in the "Middle Passage," she writes, remain "suspended."[2] They are removed but not moving. Time, in Spillers's consideration of the "scattering" or "dispersals" of peoples as and by capital, does not run forward.[3] It only continues or is repeatedly thrown back. "We are already going" and we "keep leaving" are Wright's words for this disjuncture between movement and stasis, for the incommensurability between movement and freedom. Even the move to the city or off the land can only be narrated as a "transition," or as a restriction of movement.[4] "Restrictive covenants," color lines, the lines between Black and white as well as redlines, undo the promise of movement or its end.[5]

In Wright's account, the migration of millions of Black men, women, and children does not happen or has not happened, because it is always still happening. It is continually present. We "keep leaving." Significantly, though, this is not a time of despair or for mourning. The repetition is a form of resistance. The hundreds of thousands of Black men and women leaving the South in the first decades of the twentieth century do so, Wright recounts, despite the request "Don't go." They go anyway. They leave the land, again. "We are already going." The refusal to stay in place is the repetition. Wright's narration repeats the act of resistance of those men and women who had left the South in the 1860s, who, as many have argued, with the words of W.E.B. Du Bois in mind, emancipated themselves.[6] Those men and women, to use Du Bois's word, went on "strike."[7] They stopped working and started moving. Wright's words recall Du Bois's words as well as the words that Florette Henri offers in her foundational study of the Great Migration. Those who left the land between the 1890s and the 1920s, Henri explains, "were choosers, makers, and doers." "No one," she continues, "drove the black man out of the South; he himself made the decision to leave familiar scenes and faces, to make a frightening journey to an unknown place with a strange, perhaps hostile, way of life."[8] Those men and women were not moved, nor did they move. They are

2. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 214–15. This essay was first published in *Diacritics* in 1987.

3. For these words, see Kobena Mercer, "Erase and Rewind: When Does Art History in the Black Diaspora Actually Begin?," in *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, ed. Saloni Mathur (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2011), p. 18.

4. Wright and Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 102.

5. Ibid., p. 113.

6. See, for example, David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (London: Verso, 2014). I single out Roediger's study because, more so than others, it "uses" Du Bois's words to write the history of Emancipation as a history of self-organization. Du Bois's writing is not a source for Roediger. It is a model to be followed, a model that engages accounts of Emancipation as a means of adjusting how time could be told, "how history moves" (p. 12).

7. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York: New York Free Press, 1998), pp. 55–83.

8. Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900–1920* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975), p. x.

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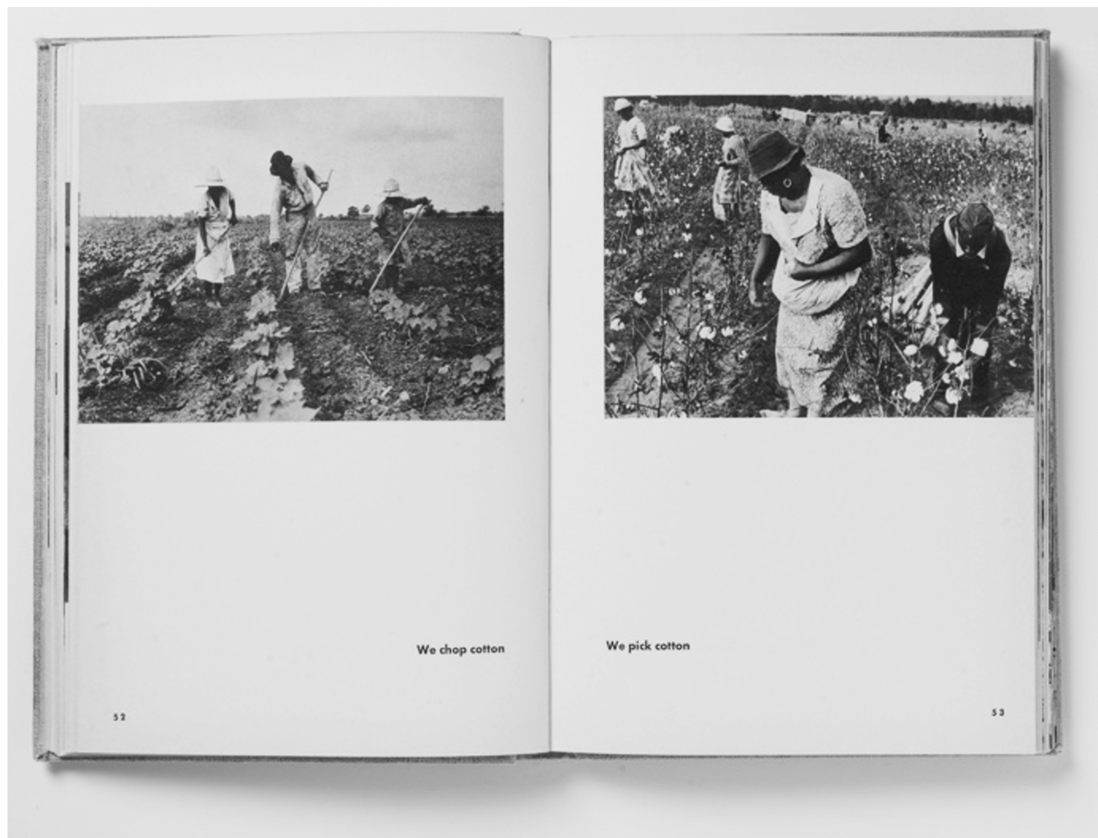

From Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam,
12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States. *1941.*

moving, again. It is our responsibility to give this story its time, to be attentive, as Wright is, to its grammar.[9]

Thus, I turn to *12 Million Black Voices* not because it is a book about migration, and not even because it acknowledges that the Great Migration is the engine of America's modernism. It is because it provides a grammar for writing that history differently. Wright's telling of the movement of Black men and women from the holds of slave ships to the "prisons" of kitchenettes as recursive and continuous refuses to count time as a measure of development, of either progress or regress.[10] According to Wright, time can be told as a loop. Wright's

9. I am using Spillers's word because it is used by scholars seeking to tell time otherwise or write history with a different model of time. See, for example, Christina Sharpe's insistence that "to be," the infinitive, is the grammar of the African diaspora. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 14.

10. Wright and Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 106.

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telling of time this way registers the fact that there is more than one time to tell. "Standing now at the apex of the twentieth century," as Wright puts it in the book's closing pages,

> we look back over the road we have traveled and compare it with the road over which the white folk have traveled, and we see that three hundred years in the history of our lives is equivalent to two thousand years in the history of the lives of whites![11]

It is the telling of time that matters for histories of migration and modernism. Modernism's presumed singularity is a form of equivalence—of equality—designed to deny as much as produce difference. The telling of time as singular, that is, denies that difference is produced. Those who decided to leave the South in the first decades of the twentieth century knew this. There is the story of a group of migrants traveling from Mississippi who not only knelt and prayed when they crossed the Ohio River but stopped their watches.[12] This handling of time, as Walter Benjamin wrote, is an act of revolution.[13] It enacts the possibility of writing history with a different measure of time.

The grammar of Wright's modernism is not only open but plural. "We" is the subject of this book, not "I" or "me." Simply put, Wright generalizes. He speaks of and for *all* the Black men, women, and children who have migrated and will continue to migrate from one enclosure to the next. Like many novelists, journalists, and poets writing about the working classes in the late 1930s, he, too, puts words in the mouths of others.[14] He assumes their words. For some, this is the limit of Wright's script, and his modernism.[15] Why not let those who are leaving and going tell their stories? Why not tell of the leaving and going of many classes, not just, as

11. Ibid., p. 145.

12. Recounted in Henri, *Black Migration*, p. 59.

13. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 261–62. The essay was completed in 1940 and first published in 1950.

14. The now-canonical example of this modernism is the photobook by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1937). In the book's foreword, the authors note that, to "avoid unnecessary individuation," the captions under the photographs are their words, not the words of those represented. The collaboration has been widely criticized by historians of American documentary. For the history that set this criticism in motion, see William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 219–23. I draw together *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *12 Million Black Voices* to challenge not simply the assumption that *You Have Seen Their Faces* is crass and unethical because it doesn't let its subjects speak but also that individuation should be the measure of a "good" documentary.

15. See Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). Natanson develops James Baldwin's critique of Wright's modernism and his novel *Native Son* (1940) in "Many Thousands Gone" in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955; Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), pp. 25–45.

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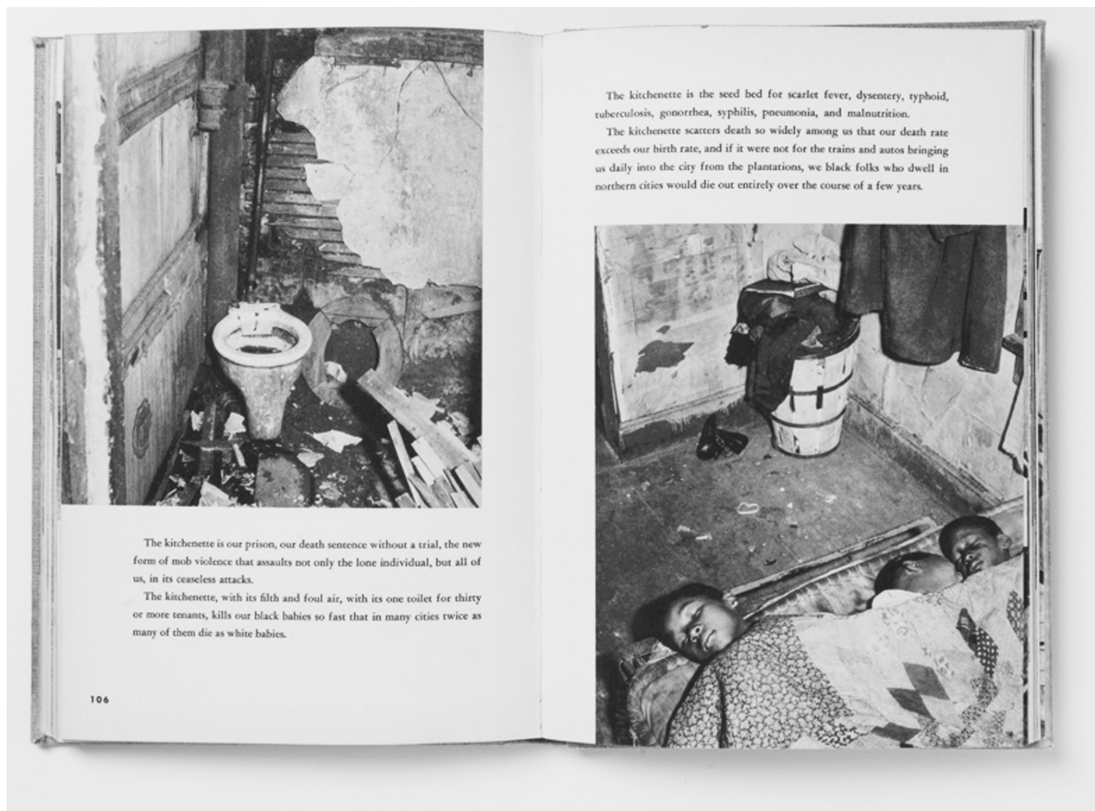

The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.

The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies.

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The kitchenette is the seed bed for scarlet fever, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, syphilis, pneumonia, and malnutrition.

The kitchenette scatters death so widely among us that our death rate exceeds our birth rate, and if it were not for the trains and autos bringing us daily into the city from the plantations, we black folks who dwell in northern cities would die out entirely over the course of a few years.

From Wright and Rosskam,
12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the
Negro in the United States*, 1941.*

Wright notes in the book's foreword, the "debased feudal folk"?[16] Why not acknowledge "your" difference? Wright's answer is simple: There is also no time for that. Telling time that way denies the need to tell time differently. It denies that the story of this migration is not "mine" or "yours" to tell. Not multiple but continuous and recursive, it must be told with a grammar that acknowledges its "generation." "Inheritors of Slavery" is the title of the second chapter of *12 Million Black Voices,* just as Du Bois's story about the twentieth century is a story of the "freedmen's sons" in the "land of their father's fathers."[17]

The generation of time is the work of the photographs in *12 Million Black Voices.* Pulled from the archives of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), that New Deal department set up to resettle those "farmed out" or dislocated by the Great Depression, the photographs are tasked to take on too much time. They

16. Wright and Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices,* p. 5.

17. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), pp. 11–12.

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become or could be records of the past, the present, and the future. The photographs of the men and women working in the fields, for example, represent more time than they record. This is the 1930s and the 1890s, if not the 1950s. These times pose the same questions: “How can we win this race with death when our thin blood is set against the potency of gasoline, when our weak flesh is pitted against the strength of steel, when our loose muscles vie with the power of tractors?”[18] Slotted into a history of modernism that accounts for its three hundred years, the photographs, which are printed without dates, evidence time’s recurrence. Men and women are already and still plowing and hoeing. They are already and still bending and bowing in the fields.

Rosskam, who designed the book’s layouts, certainly took advantage of photography’s capaciousness or contingency—its openness. But it is not the slippage between photographs and words, between times, that generates the book’s diasporic time. This time is generated by the refusal to represent the time that the photographs record. Wright never mentions the New Deal in his telling of America’s history, and only mentions “another depression.”[19] The depression happening now, at the time of writing, is neither capitalized nor singled out as “great.” Like the Great Migration, it is accounted for as another dislocation of space and time that perpetuates and reproduces the circulation of capital since its “birth,” which, in these pages, is marked by repetition. In Wright’s narration, the men and women of the African diaspora were born twice. “We millions of black folks who live in this land were born into Western civilization of a weird and paradoxical birth” is how Wright begins his recounting of the migration of a debased feudal folk into the twentieth century. Transported in the “foul holes of clipper ships, dragged across thousands of miles of ocean,” “we,” he explains, were born a “second” time in a “strange” and “hostile” land.[20] Set against this time, the photographs no longer represent the Depression, and the Depression no longer represents a singular time.

Wright begins the story of modernism in a different place and with a different model of time, but, significantly, he does not begin with different “words” or photographs. He uses photographs that were being used to tell a story of resettlement and relocation. This, no doubt, was the commission: to use the photographs from the FSA archive to visualize the story of Black life in America.[21] But what this book visualizes is that it couldn’t happen any other way. Making visible the subjects of this diaspora or that the subjects in the photographs represent the many generations of people on the move, who are still moving, requires

18. Wright and Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 49.

19. Ibid., p. 136.

20. Ibid., p. 12.

21. On the commission, see Maren Stange, *Bronzville: Black Chicago in Pictures, 1941–1943* (New York: New Press, 2003), pp. xv–xvi.

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a record that has been seen—or is known.[22] After all, *12 Million Black Voices* is written for those who claim to see and know the history of America, or, more precisely, it is written for those who think they know what they see. "Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us . . . " is the book's opening line.[23] *12 Million Black Voices* corrects the record by reinscribing it, by suggesting that the only way to write history differently is to write with and through words that are already said and seen.[24] Du Bois knew this. It is one of the many lessons of his Depression-era reckoning with America's modernism, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. Published in 1935, his more than seven-hundred-page tome on the failure of Reconstruction offers little new research, and not only because Du Bois was barred from the archives.[25] It is because he did not set out to write a new or different story of the nation's division. He set out to *retell* the story that had been told about how the history of America's modernism happened—or could have. Accordingly, his telling overturns the right of the "victors" to own that history or the words.

With *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright uses the state's archive to dislocate the telling of time from the time it was made to tell. Working this way, with others' words, he recognizes not only that the migration of millions of Black men and women is ongoing, going on, but that it will continue to be until the desire for holding and owning a place or a voice, the desire for property and possession, no longer organizes time. The abolition of that telling of time is the lesson of Wright's modernism. Abolish accounts of time that tell the story of freedom as being located, in a place or a time, or owned. As many championing this call have insisted, there is no possibility of locating those who don't have a place, who are "always out of place" or made not to belong.[26] There is only the dislocation of the desire to tell history that way.

In short, telling again—reusing the words and photographs that have been and will continue to be used to write the history of America's modernism—undoes the binaries that hold history in place. These include not only the opposition between progress and regress and movement and stasis but also "them"

22. Wright did add photographs to the FSA file. In addition to taking his own photographs and taking a few from the archives of the daily papers, including the *New York Daily News*, he invited two FSA photographers, Rosskam and Russell Lee, to Chicago to photograph life in the city, which was not part of the FSA script. However, as I argue elsewhere, these photographs are no less generalizing or standard than the photographs that fill the state's files. See Stephanie Schwartz, *Walker Evans: No Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), pp. 72–73.

23. Wright and Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 10.

24. Kobena Mercer refers to this process as diaspora's dialogical principle, which he addresses through the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin in "Erase and Rewind," pp. 19–20.

25. David Levering Lewis attends to Du Bois's method in his introduction to *Black Reconstruction in America*, p. x.

26. This is how Rinaldo Walcott describes the problem of dislocation in *On Property: Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition* (Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2021), p. 63.

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and "us." "Look at us," Wright seems to bellow in the closing pages of *12 Million Black Voices*, "and you will know yourself, for *we* are *you*, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives."[27] Wright's mirror foregrounds the dialectics of difference, its production in and through the words of others.[28] This act of writing is diasporic and modern. It suggests that the engine driving modernism is mediation, not appropriation. In turn, the answer to the question "What should we do with the modern?" is simple. Hold on to it. Replay it. Reuse it. Start over, from the same spot. Engage the violent "paradox," as Wright scripts it, of having to use others' work and words to write the histories that need to be rewritten.

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27. Wright and Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 146. Emphasis in the original.

28. Perhaps not surprisingly, Wright's mirror recalls Du Bois's "veil," the surface of subjection he discusses in the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*. And for those attending to the dialectics of difference, these surfaces may also recall Frantz Fanon's "look" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; London: Pluto Press, 2017), and, perhaps, Jean-Luc Godard's montage. As one of the wannabe Maoists in *La Chinoise* (1967) explains, we *are* "the words of others."

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