

LISTENING TO THE LOMAX ARCHIVE:
THE SONIC RHETORICS OF AMERICAN VERNACULAR MUSIC IN THE 1930s

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

This dissertation brings to rhetoric a study of vernacular music that amplifies what is known about rhythmic practice in the rhetorical tradition. Responding to emergent conversations at the intersection of rhetorical and sound studies, this work engages with questions about sound and music's rhetorical roles in myth making, racial formation, cultural eloquence, progressive thought, and historiography. While recent scholarship has identified the sonic elements of rhetoric's classical roots, I argue that vernacular, folk, or "roots" music can be a key element—a sonic rhetoric—for interpreting the ebb and flow of cultural ideals within more contemporary historical moments, particularly during times of crisis. In 1933, folklorists John A. Lomax and his son Alan set out as emissaries for the Library of Congress to record the "folksong of the American Negro" in several Southern African-American prisons. As this dissertation demonstrates, the music they gathered for the Library's Folklife Archive contributed to a new mythology of "authentic" Americana for a people in financial, social, and identity crisis. During the 1930s, this music had paradoxical effects: even as the songs reified long-held conservative orthodoxies, they also performed as agents for social change and reconstitution. The recordings the Lomaxes made in the prisons, for example, were produced under the coercive auspices of white privilege, yet also provided incarcerated African-American men rhetorical agency they would not otherwise have enjoyed. Similarly, pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton enjoined Alan Lomax and the Library of Congress in his desire to insert and authenticate himself within the early history of jazz. He did so through deftly articulated sonic rhetorics—virtuosic performances and oral histories—but the recorded sessions brought more fortune and fame to Lomax than Morton, who died soon after. By 1939, Lomax was hosting a national radio program titled *Folk Songs of America* (one of many programs on CBS's *American School of the Air*) where, with a particularly authentic American irony, songs recorded in the prison yard were silently repurposed by professional musicians and broadcast to the country's white suburban classrooms.

Dedication

For Tina, Seth, Maryn, Jonas, and Asher. And my folks.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation probably began in the aisles of Zia Record Exchange in Tucson, Arizona. It was there, in the mid-nineties and while in my mid-teens, that I first experienced the excitement and anticipation of finding and listening to new music. Well, *old* music that was new to me. I found solace in the old cassettes, vinyl, and CDs that littered my room and spent time reading liner notes, old issues of *Rolling Stone*, and the occasional rock biography trying to crack the code, to discover the strange alchemy that gave music its power. My ragtag high school band, Only Anything, was an attempt to imitate what sonic knowledge my friends and I could glean from these sources. John Heidenreich, Jon Thwaites, Mat and Joe Richins, and I spent summers and holiday breaks in a house in East Tucson we called “Sauna Studios” playing old Cure tunes and writing songs of our own with titles like “Footsteps to a Castle,” “Starmaster,” and “Danger Boy.” I miss my childhood friends and the music we made. It occurs to me that as those original songs we wrote became album projects I learned something about collaboration, creativity, and seeing a project through to its end. We sold those albums to gracious friends for a \$5 a cassette. One day, this manuscript may become something that will sell for something similar, and likely to a group of similarly gracious friends and colleagues.

The dissertation project, as well as my wider graduate study, has been supported by a host of individuals in the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, across the U of I campus, and elsewhere across the country. My co-chairs, Professors Peter Mortensen and Spencer Schaffner are paramount figures within this network of support. I wish to thank them both for their guidance during the process. Peter’s keen (but always kind) critical eye and deep knowledge of rhetoric, writing studies, and their histories have guided me from this project’s earliest iterations. His patience, care, and mentorship were precisely what I needed during both

calm and stormy moments along the way. I asked Spencer to join as a co-chair mid-stream, but his generosity, friendship, and guidance began on (literally) my first night in Champaign-Urbana. During that first visit to town, Spencer didn't just offer me a room—he gave me full run of his home. In a similar way, he has given my ideas both shelter and freedom throughout this project's progress. Like any good mix, as stereo signals Spencer and Peter always complimented each other. This work is a product of and a testament to their generosity, intellect, and grace.

During my coursework at Illinois, I spent almost equal time next door from the English building in the historic Lincoln Hall. My colleagues in the Communication department there had a profound impact on my education and enculturation to the field and practice of rhetoric. Professors Cara Finnegan and Ned O'Gorman were particularly influential. As part of my dissertation Committee, Cara was a model as a rhetorical historian. Her work with visual histories in the 1930s inspired my decision to pursue a project focused on rhetoric and historical sound during that same decade. Similarly, Ned's expertise in rhetorical theory and history provided an important grounding to my work. He had an uncanny way of knowing precisely the question, book, or article needed to aid my next step. Also, Debra Hawhee, who had a dual appointment in English and Communication at Illinois for a time, was a key influence and mentor. Debbie recruited me to join CWS, was my first advisor, and her early confidence in my potential gave me the courage to reimagine myself as a scholar after several years wandering.

Many others in the Center for Writing Studies guided and supported my endeavors. Gail Hawisher, Paul Prior, Catherine Prendergast, and Kelly Ritter each gave me opportunities for growth and service at crucial moments that would provide important experiences toward my professional and scholarly development. Additionally, Thomas Conley in Communication and Thomas Turino in Ethnomusicology reintroduced me to Burke and banjos (respectively). Both

subjects have been important, if not always central, to my work. Fellow grad students—Kim Hensley Owens, Christa Olson, Patrick Berry, Amber Buck, Cory Holding, and Sarah Alexander Tsai—served as early mentors and also became treasured friends. Additionally, Julia Smith and Heather Vorhies were, as the well-known song intones, pals and confidants.

Graduate school is made tolerable only because some of your colleagues become life-long friends. Somewhere during the many long drives, shared conference lodgings, new-city explorations, late-night conversations, Chicago or St. Louis concerts (and crystalized forever in an ad-hoc Christmas carol band), Maggie Shelledy, Pamela Saunders, Kaia Simon, and Tom McNamara came to mean more to me than I can adequately express here. The same can be said about another special cohort. Late in my graduate career, Alexandra Cavallaro, Eileen Lagman, and Yu-Kyung Kang became fellow travellers during a grueling job search year. Our shared experience made an impossibly vulnerable time one of strength, support, and care. There were many other great friends at Illinois who offered crucial support at key moments along the way: Teresa Bertram, Lauri Harden, Leslie Crowell, Cody Caudill, Melissa Forbes, Lauren Marshall Bowen, Andrea Olinger, Ben Bascom, Silas Moon Cassinelli, Ian Hill, Paul McKean, Donovan Bisbee, Matt Pitchford, George Boone, Jermaine Martinez, Rohini Singh, Katie Irwin, Anita Mixon, and many others. It takes a village (and the occasional power ballad sung on Pam's porch).

Opportunities to collaborate with scholars at different institutions are also knitted into the fabric of this document. Kyle Stedman, Steph Ceraso, Harley Ferris, Steven Hammer, and Kati Fargo Ahern were among the first people I connected with in what is a now growing community of sonic rhetoricians and composers. Kyle and I bonded during a Pearl Jam show at Wrigley Field (and turned our experience into a publication!). On a research trip to Washington D.C.,

Steph gave me a place to stay, fed me, and took me to a concert at the 9:30 Club. Thanks to each of these folks for their sharp scholarship and their warm friendship.

Several more friends acted as sounding boards along the way: Jared Colten, Abraham Romney, Steven Hopkins, Casey Boyle, and especially William Reger, Spencer Snow, Jason Christensen, Genty Franz, and Cory Funk.

A generous grant from the Illinois Graduate College sponsored the above-mentioned trip to D.C. where I was assisted by the archivists at the American Folklife Archive at the Library of Congress. Todd Harvey, in particular, guided me through John and Alan Lomax's papers and recordings with care and great skill. Todd gave me access and insight over and beyond his duties. He has continued to be a friend and counselor to this project. Another important, if unexpected, D.C. mentor was Stephen Wade. Stephen is mentioned as a source early in the upcoming pages, but was kind enough to meet with me and give me advice on two separate occasions. This work is indebted to these experts in folklore and historiography.

Finally, my dear family: My spouse Tina has sacrificed much in order that I might succeed during this long and arduous process. Her patience and love were the scaffolding for this project. We brought our children Seth, Maryn, and Jonas, halfway across the country in order that I might pursue graduate education and Asher joined us along the way. All have thrived in Champaign-Urbana. They are strong, and smart, and faithful, and brave. I am so grateful for their willingness to travel with me toward what has been, nearly at all times, an unknown future. My parents, Jean and Walter Stone, as well as Tina's, Patricia and David Bertoglio, have supported us at each step as well. My love and deepest gratitude to them.

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Preface

(for Pete)

When Pete Seeger passed away on January 27, 2014 at the age of 94, his death prompted hundreds of articles, memorials, and remembrances. *The National Post* published one such remembrance four days later by Geoffrey Clarfield, who for three years worked as the Director of Research and Development for the Alan Lomax Archive housed with the Association for Cultural Equity (ACE) in New York. In the piece, Clarfield relates some of the details of his first and only visit with the aging folk singer and activist. They spoke over lunch about the various projects going on at the Alan Lomax Archive, and, as he writes:

After lunch, we retired to the living room. Pete took down his banjo from the wall, and [...] sang a tongue-in-cheek version of the Texan cowboy song Home on the Range. Just as we were all finishing the most popular verse, Pete said, “There’s another verse, did you ever hear this one?” And then he sang, “How often at night, when the heavens are bright, by the light of the glittering stars. I stood there amazed, and I ask as I age, does their glory exceed that of ours?”

Seeger, in his evocation of this vivid but often overlooked verse, acknowledged, perhaps, his own pondering of the unknown cosmos. But also, part of the lyric as Pete renders it was an update to the third verse of the well-known folksong: “I ask as I *gaze*” is how the verse typically ends. Pete’s playfully profound change in reference to his own aging body juxtaposed against the cosmic eternities was also an example of what he often called the “folk process”—the notion that folk songs are not static entities but are in constant flux. They change to suit the needs of the singer, the moment, the audience, the cause. Seeger then goes on to relate a story about the song’s origins:

The man who wrote it, oh, that goes back over a hundred years to about 1875. He was a man from New England, who split up with his wife and went from Connecticut out west to Kansas. But he liked to write poems and he wrote the words down, and a friend of his, a young man who worked in a local drug store said, “Would you mind if I try and put a tune to those words?” And the man who wrote the words said, “Sure, if you want to.” And with his girlfriend and his girlfriend’s brother, the three of them made up this tune. And a few people sang it here and there.

John Lomax who was in Texas, heard that there was a cook in a cowboy camp and he knew this song and sang it. Lomax wrote it down and put it in his book and then it became famous [...] but the man who wrote the words was dead and he never knew how famous the song had become.

Along with Seeger’s impromptu update to the song, he takes a moment to teach about the historiographical nature of folklore collection and, implicitly, the ways that the mystery of song origins often motivates that study. It is that mystery that compels a search for truth, whatever shape that truth may take.

Pete Seeger—his work, life, and legacy—is, in many ways, the inspiration for the dissertation that follows. He was a folksinger, though he was always quick to complicate what and whom the “folk” were. He was a rhapsodist: he foraged for songs and song fragments wherever he could—from friends and archives, roadside bars and hollers—and stitched them back together on a banjo emblazoned with the motto “This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender.” He was an activist, a teacher, a family man, and an advocate for marginalized

voices. It was in Seeger's musical advocacy for the union worker and labor rights in the 1940s, for race equality and civil rights in the '50s and '60s, as well as his sustained environmental work in New York cleaning up the Hudson River that I began to see and *hear* how music and folk traditions intricately tie everyday lived values with civic duty. Pete Seeger, then, was my personal pioneer—one of many other pioneers in the promotion of folk tradition in the last century. He blazed a trail in the United States by showing that folk traditions can impact contemporary problems. Once found, that trail led me to the materials from which I have begun to build my own home on the range—a range of rhetoric, rhythm, and reverence for both tradition and progression.

Introduction

Finding Folkness in Rhetorical Studies (Turn, Turn, Turn)

To everything: turn, turn, turn
 There is a season: turn, turn, turn
 And a time to every purpose, under heaven.

-Pete Seeger, via the poet of Ecclesiastes

Folk Symbols | Folk Seasons | Root Systems

Like so many songs that come to be called “traditional,” it is remarkable that the song “Home On the Range” (mentioned in the Preface above) has a recorded author or origin at all. Indeed, “traditional” as a byline is usually a marker used to designate authorial indeterminacy and that mystery and myth is an important component of folk ethos. Stephen Wade, a contemporary folklorist, musician, and author of *The Beautiful Musical All Around Us* (2012), spoke recently about the excitement but rarity of discovering folksong origins—a kind of holy grail for folklorists and ethnographers.¹ Wade’s discovery came during research for the song “Rock Island Line” during work on the second chapter in his book. A popular regional song in the South, “Rock Island Line” was also “discovered” by John Lomax and his son Alan, this time in an Arkansas African-American penitentiary in 1934. The disembodied voice of Kelly Pace leading seven of his fellow-inmates in the song is retained on acetate in the archives of the Library of Congress. In careful analysis of this and other recordings of the song, Wade deduced that while Pace or someone he knew had reworked the tune into a kind of work song, it was originally arranged as “a quartet song—unaccompanied, social, church based, arranged for singing, and staged for listening” (48). From that insight and with a couple of lucky leads, he was able to trace the song back to a booster campaign initiated to draw attention to the Rock Island

¹ Wade gave a talk in the University of Illinois Sousa Archives and Center for American Music titled “The Wanderings of ‘Rock Island Line’ and ‘Coal Creek March’” on December 31, 2013.

railroad which was, in the years preceding the Great Depression, experiencing declining patronage.

Among the campaign documents, Wade found the lyrics to a booster song titled “Buy Your Ticket Over Rock Island Lines” composed by Clarence Wilson for his vocal quartet and published in the internal railroad union newsletter *Rock Island Magazine*. The lyrics printed in the railroad magazine differ in some ways from the “Rock Island Line” that would “eventually become part of the American musical idiom” (Wade 47) but there were enough similarities between them that Wade knew he had found the source. *Eureka!* Like other iconic railroad songs, “Midnight Special” and “The Wabash Cannonball” among them, “Rock Island Line” contributes to the public memory of an important railroad line. It also became a tool for remembering a by-gone epoch of American commerce, Progressive-era ideals, and their relationship to African American identity. And then it would break even those boundaries. Wade writes:

[T]he song, like a trunk line whose branches radiate across the countryside, soon moved beyond this work site making new stops, shifting its contents, and streamlining its load. It migrated from a gospel quartet that the Arkansas prisoners performed to a rhythmic fable that Huddie Ledbetter created as he traveled with John Lomax as chauffeur, auto mechanic, and musical demonstrator. Eventually, the song reached an incalculable number of players, singers, and listeners via skiffle, rock and roll, country, pop, and the folksong revival, yet for all these crossings and couplings, “Rock Island Line” hung onto its proud message, emblazoned in boxcar letters of a train fleeting past, to become the poetry by which a proud railroad is still remembered. (48)

Wade's discovery of Wilson's composition, written in tiny letters in the pages of an internally published collection of railroad ephemera some fifty years after the song's heyday, is truly remarkable—and uncommon. In a strange but satisfying flip of the typical folksong narrative, “Rock Island Line” *began* as a commercial, if obscure, entity (rather than ending up there). But that detail was lost in the shuffle somewhere. Forgetting, it would seem, is as important to the folk process as remembering. Wade's arresting passage above draws on an elaborate metaphor of forgetting embedded within natural phenomenon: the trunk lines, roots, and branches of a tree whose sapling days are too far-gone to remember. The material reality of the complex root and branch systems of aged trees stand in as symbols of memory, forgetting, and the passage of time—symbols to aid our understanding of how traditions through music “radiate across the countryside.” These natural metaphors also evoke a kind of seasonal, rotational temporality in the circulation of public memory in and through musical material culture, one with springtime blooms and cross-pollinations, summer abundance and fruit, autumn migrations and golden decay, all punctuated by periods of desolate winter. This dynamic ecological framework—one reliant upon a continuum of blossom and decay, progression and regression for the survival of its root system—sets a scene for understanding and articulating the natural drama of folk musical traditions as rhetorical culture: turn, turn, turn.

This “roots” music, as vernacular musical traditions are sometimes called, carries with it certain tropes of “folkness” that work together, as Stephen Wade succinctly states above, to become the poetry of remembrance that give vernacular music (and its recovery and recirculation) cultural and rhetorical power. These tropes can be categorized within a few major categories, or *topoi*, which, like seasons blend into one another, moving not on a perfect temporal timeline, but nevertheless as a kind of environmental system of values in rotation. The

term “*topoi*” or “topics,” while an ambiguous in specific meaning across rhetorical history, generally names “recurrent themes appearing in a certain kind of discourse to abstract patterns of inference” (Leff 220). James Jasinski (2001) synthesizes Michael Leff and Kenneth Burke’s definitions of “topics” as a useful grouping reflective of commonly held values and beliefs (580). Because values and beliefs shift, my own invocation of *topoi* as a system of “values in rotation” is meant to conceptually underscore this oscillation and mark it as semi-regular to the ebb and flow of folk processes. These *topoi*, then, can be articulated in a number of vocabularies and tend to settle into different nomenclature depending upon which discipline is using them. I will state them in simple terms first, with efforts to locate them within the scholarly folklore tradition, and then expand upon them using rhetorical history and terminology below.

Finding Folkness

Folklore (and by extension, folk music) can be understood as an artistic material component to the process of cultural ideal production, dissemination, disintegration, and reintegration. In musicologist Charles Seeger’s words

Folkness [is] a funded treasury of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward life and death, work and play, love, courtship and marriage, health and hearth, children and animals, prosperity and adversity—a veritable code of individual and collective behavior belonging to the people as a whole (3).

These codes of everyday activity and practical wisdom become embedded—composed—within material culture and remain to be imitated, embellished, and scrutinized by internal and external audiences. Folk revival—the close study, recovery, and in many cases re-animation of past vernacular traditions (musical or otherwise)—plays an important function in the revolving

movement of myths and symbols within and between their epochs. Benjamin Botkin, a prominent twentieth-century folklorist, argued that these revolutions were related to the ongoing task of societal value maintenance and production:

In a changing society with concomitant rapid growth and mixture of disciplines, a folklore study of socio-historical myths and symbols should help us reassess old and new values and to understand the present in the light of the past and *vice versa* by providing a new approach to the positive or negative role of myth and symbols in unifying and separating people and promoting social progress or reaction. In the last analysis we may discover that whatever affects our values has symbolic meaning and whatever has symbolic meaning affects our values.

(Jackson xi-x).

The performance of symbol and community values (or *value-making*) within socio-historical landscapes, make up the *topoi* of traditional folkness and, not-incidentally, can be traced back into traditions of rhetoric, where Botkin's couplet ("whatever affects our values has symbolic meaning and whatever has symbolic meaning affects our values") also applies. While the rhetorical power of musical and rhythmic folkness should not be elevated over other products of folk material culture, music and rhetoric share a deep socio-historical connection to language and language arts and therefore draw upon many of the same tropes found within the *topoi* mentioned above. For instance, work on epideictic and constitutive rhetoric has shown that rhetors, like vernacular musicians, draw upon common codes of mythic wisdom—systems of value, and symbolic representation—in order to create, preserve, disseminate, and disrupt ideological systems (See Walker, 2000; Charland, 1987). The "products" of this process are codified as symbolic representations of these values and can be studied in a variety of forms.

Speeches and written artifacts are, traditionally, the most common artifacts of scholarly interest within rhetorical studies, but recent and ongoing scholarly attention to other rhetorical forms in multiple modes reminds us that rhetoric is no respecter of representative medium.

This study contributes to the nascent but growing body of scholarship around sonic rhetorics by focusing on both “roots” music and, in this introduction, the roots of rhetoric. In later chapters, and particularly Chapter One, I expand upon ancient rhetorical theory and terminology and draw upon more contemporary (but still historically embedded) ideas that link the socio-historical, mythopoetic, and vernacular “of-the-people” nature of folk music together with developing ideas of how vernacular music-as-rhetoric functions within society at points of cultural crisis and reconstitution. The 1930s, an epoch within the United States interposed by the various crises and conflicts of economic depression, provides an historical moment when the tension between traditional ideals and social realities were at a pinnacle. Those accustomed to the customary value of hard work as the logical antecedent to prosperity, for example, were left with the paradox of not just layoffs but rampant joblessness, poverty, and even hunger. As Terry A. Cooney writes, it is in “the tensions within and between values, ambitions, ideas, and circumstances” (xiv) that we are best poised to understand the 1930s. But the stark cultural contrasts of the 1930s also provide an opportunity to understand the rhetorical function of folk music as a representation of the various tensions that exist within society at any historical moment. Cooney continues:

The desire to move in more than one direction at once, to have it both ways, to live with or to resolve contradictions, appears during the 1930s in the most broadly public spheres as well as in the narrower territories of individuals defining their beliefs and families furnishing their homes. (xiv)

These cultural contradictions have only continued to expand in complexity over the last 85 years, so while my focus remains situated within the cultural milieu of 1930s conflicting ideals, a larger goal of the dissertation is to provide a theoretical framework useful for scholars of rhetoric, music, and vernacular culture (which has, of late, become *digital* culture) studying any historical moment. My focus on folk music lends itself well to arguments about tradition and progression, cultural authenticity, and the politics of representation (particularly those around racial identity). But these are but a few of the potential avenues for rhetorical engagement with the musical and rhythmic—and music is, of course, only a small portion of a much larger sonic rhetorical landscape. Sonic rhetoric, imagined along side other large rhetorical sub-fields such as visual rhetoric, has the potential to expand into a thriving and diverse scholarly field and might also become a significant contributor to the growing interdisciplinary field of sound studies.

Under the above taxonomy, music is a branch on a much larger tree of sonic rhetorics, but even that branch is vast. Music is a broad conceptual category, too broad to map here except to say its numerous cultural traditions, genres, instruments, styles, and performers as well as their affects and effects on history, culture, and civic life invite sustained scholarly (and multi-disciplinary) sonic rhetorical work.² But vernacular music, with its combination of poetic language, rhythm, and simple melody structures, is unique to other musical (and by extension, sonic) rhetorics in that vernacular music as a rhythmic and poetic practice codifying cultural “mythopoeia” shares a direct genealogical line with the development of rhetoric. They spring from the same roots. In the section below, I draw together these root systems and emphasize the places that their shared genealogical threads overlap in common terms, ideals, and persuasive purposes expressed within and through the “folkness” *topoi* outlined above.

² Gregory Clark’s *Civic Jazz: American Music and Kenneth Burke on the Art of Getting Along* (2015) is an example here. Clark’s book goes unreferenced in my own chapter about the jazz tradition only because it was released just as this dissertation project was concluding.

This framework should help to articulate how vernacular music as rhetoric works its way across the cultural landscape. It also raises important questions about the nature of the *topoi* themselves as folk values, myth, and symbolic authenticity resonate within the depths of rhetorical history but also within songs like “Rock Island Line” or “Home On the Range” which “radiate across the countryside” in vernacular voices, archives, airwaves, and in and out of commercial markets and political platforms. And while music (and particularly the folkness of vernacular music) can seem incidental or even insignificant to the larger or more visible aspects of cultural and political rhetorics at play within society—mere campfire tunes to be sung *after* the war, the election, the long day of work—our rhetorical and intellectual traditions are imbued with a profoundly musical sense. Cornell West sums up this ineffable relationship between humanity, tradition, and music well in a comparison to Johannes Brahms’s *Requiem* and John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*:

Music at its best [...] is the grand archeology into and transfiguration of our guttural cry, the great human effort to grasp in time our deepest passions and yearnings as prisoners of time. Profound music leads us—beyond language—to the dark roots of our scream and the celestial heights of our silence. (West xvii)

Perhaps, then, it is because of music’s profundity and not in spite of it that we sing around campfires, in our schools and churches, during various work-a-day labors, in our cars, in karaoke bars, with our parents and children and friends, and also by ourselves in our best and darkest moments. Music is a deeply personal rhetoric. It carries and completes and creates us. No surprise, then, that music’s power is so often exploited, abused, and manipulated to ignoble ends. And yet, in the words of the old hymn, “How can [we] keep from singing?”

Folkness in the Rhetorical Tradition

The rhetorical tradition can be understood as having a “folkness” of its own—“a funded treasury of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward life ...” productive of a “veritable code of individual and collective behavior belonging to the people” (Seeger 3). And with “continuing strands” that persist “throughout the history of Western Europe” and beyond (Kennedy 16), rhetoric’s folkness has had lasting and ongoing impact. Mirroring the three *topoi* of folkness outlined above (*myth, symbol, values*) rhetoric also comes to us from mythopoetic origins and is tied to a tradition of symbol and value making as well as moral and practical wisdom circulation. Rhetoric became an “art” once it could be abstracted conceptually and was given various symbolic vocabularies to describe and generalize its various uses, effects, and affects. These conceptualizations would authenticate rhetoric as a discipline and clear the way for its placement as an object of study alongside other distinct disciplines: philosophy, mathematics, medicine, etc. Skilled performance of practical wisdom (moral, political, cultural, etc.) demonstrates best what is *traditional* about rhetoric whereas the abstracted/symbolic formulation of rhetoric into technical, teachable terms is what would discipline rhetoric as an everyday practice into rhetoric as an art (*techne*) and also would ensure its persistence as a teachable skill into the future.

There is interesting tension between “tradition” and “discipline” here. “Tradition” denotes a kind of temporal trajectory—the meaningful historicity of developing wisdom, whereas “discipline” (especially when it follows or results from tradition) can be located along the historical trajectory in moments of systemization or codification of that wisdom into practical, teachable applications. The development of the rhetorical and philosophical “traditions” have experienced countless moments of disciplining—periods where unifying ideals about truth and wisdom converge long enough to get cultural traction and dissemination, that is,

until circumstances change, new truths emerge, and new cultural exigencies require new rhetorics. Over time, useful ideals remain (and even become ritualized) and less useful or cumbersome ideals are sloughed off. (Note, however, that what is “useful” is not necessarily or even usually ethical.) Under this model, rhetoric is revealed in its capacity for mythologizing value as *a priori*, for disciplining extrinsic cultural wisdom (or, at least, utility) and calling it intrinsic or “essential,” but then also being the means for overturning these practical “realities” when shifting circumstances, expanding knowledge, or various crises of faith reveal “truth” as incomplete, unethical, constructed, or out of date. Rhetorical “folkness” describes the cycle through tradition, discipline, and progression that make up the functional paradox at the heart of culture making.

Scholars interested in rhetoric’s potential for paradox as I describe it have articulated this system in other ways. This work, enlivened particularly within the past several decades, has refocused intellectual attention on pre-Platonic (and often pre-conceptual) rhetoric with the intent to (in part) historicize rhetoric outside of its disciplined Aristotelian (and neo-Aristotelian) reverb. Rhetoric has depth beyond its utility in the courtroom or classroom and can be tied to both epistemological and ontological knowledge, that is, to cultural habits of mind and to world-making practices. Searching for these ideas in the ancient record, and often within history that is, at best, opaque and frequently mythic, provides a kind of authenticity to the principles recovered: a *rhetorical folkness*. Like Wade, Seeger, and the Lomaxes of subsequent chapters, these scholars of rhetoric have mined rhetoric’s ancient history in search of mythic origins, often in hopes that the search will produce new frameworks—new methods and myths, symbols, and disciplinary values—for understanding current complex and vexing cultural problems. We see this in the move to adopt sophistic ideals and methods in contemporary scholarship. We also see

this kind of refiguring and revaluing in the work of Kenneth Burke, whom developed a complex new mythos for understanding the impact of language. Burke's mythos is complete with a grammar, rhetoric, and (never quite realized) symbolic that we have adopted and continue to mine as part of a current prominent paradigm in rhetorical studies. Both of these frameworks play into the larger questions in this dissertation and I take them up explicitly in the next chapter.

Ancient rhetorical history is important to this study for this same reason, but as I have been foregrounding, for other reasons as well. Below I describe the ways that pre-Platonic rhetorics relate to the folkness *topoi* described above (myth, symbol, values) and particularly how their performance plays into work around the rhythms of sonic studies in rhetoric. There are important corollaries between these ideas and others articulated in an ancient vocabulary: *mythos*, *logos* (as word, symbol, and speech), and *aretē* (which encompasses both value production and its virtuosic performance). Additionally, the term *sophia*, as found in the root of "sophist" and meaning "wisdom," is important in a discussion of how these ideas work together in the articulation of cultural systems of knowing and being. These terms help to expand our understanding of the role of rhetoric in cultural system building. It is also worth noting here that Aristotle's term "epideictic" is itself an attempt to unify these behaviors and practices conceptually and in that unification, they are relegated to a singular and simplified category: ceremonial rhetoric of praise and blame. I return to the importance of epideictic below. This brief ancient incursion will set a stage for the rest of the dissertation as it shows that the folk cycle I have been articulating might itself be described as "sophistic" and how these folk/sophistic *topoi* come together symbolically and in great power within musical discourse.

Teaching *Aretē* and the Soundness of Mind

In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, the first self-proclaimed sophist Protagoras³ engages with Socrates in a discussion over whether or not virtue—*aretē*—can be taught.⁴ As the conversation plays out, Protagoras argues that the reason Socrates may not be aware of the teaching of *aretē* is because of its ubiquity, not its disparity. “[E]veryone,” says Protagoras, “is a teacher of *aretē* so far as he is able, and so you don't notice any of them” (*Protagoras*, 327e).⁵ This comment is preceded by a discussion about the likely sources of this kind of teaching:

[W]hen children have learned the alphabet and are ready to read . . . then the teachers put works of good poets before them to read at their benches, and require them to learn by heart poems that are full of good advice, and stories and songs in praise of good men of old, so that the child will be eager to emulate them, and will yearn to grow up to be a man like them. (326a)

This is followed by an important comparison to musical training, another conspicuous source for instruction in virtuous living:

Musicians do much the same when they teach the lyre; they try to foster Soundness of Mind, and they keep the youngsters out of mischief. Besides that, once the children have learned to play the lyre they are taught more poetry by good lyric poets. Then the music-teachers set those poems to the music of the lyre and make sure that rhythm and harmony dwell in the souls of the children so that they will grow more gentle in their speech and their behavior will improve as they

³ Protagoras was a prominent Greek teacher and sophist in 485 BCE. See Michael Gagarin and Paul Woodruff's *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists* for a careful accounting of both the historical and the literary Protagoras.

⁴ *Aretē* is a congnate of *agathos* (“good”) “The standards for judging one to be *agathos* were not enunciated or objective criteria, they were values held tacitly and uniformly in society. The tradition of Greek ethics is grounded in this early concept of a unified and “instinctive” good. (191).

gain grace in rhythm. And harmony for all human life needs the grace of harmony and rhythm. (326b)

Protagoras' argument that civic virtue, wisdom, and shared cultural values—the unity of which the sophist called a “soundness of mind”⁶—are constantly being taught, reemphasized, and revised as new knowledge emerges from the experience of everyday living. The sophist epitomizes the mind/body disciplining nature of *aretē* as that found in the memorization and recitation of poetry, storytelling, and musical performance, each which contribute to a state of “rhythmic grace” and “harmonious” living. And while ancient Greek virtuosity extended well beyond the habituated practice of rhythmic oral traditions, its evocation in this context is not unlike the concept of folkness introduced above. Both folkness and *aretē* indicate a kind of situated rhetorical practice embedded into everyday life. In both cases, musical and rhythmic oral tradition is part and parcel to that embeddedness, affect, and distribution.

Virtue and Value | Rhythm and Rhetoric

Also like “folkness,” the teaching of virtue doesn't have an easily articulated, logical system for public distribution. *Aretē* is something better understood in the doing than in the saying. It is participatory and embodied. It is therefore distinct, but not altogether separate, from the various arts or “*techne*” that require *aretē* to be developed. Due to the breadth of practices that *aretē* embodies, it can have no formal methodology. As I return to in Chapter Three, *aretē* is less a body of knowledge than it is shared, *embodied knowledge*—a social agreement about the “normative poles” of virtue and vice (Cohen qtd. in Hawhee 187). Aristotle taught that *aretē* is

⁶ “Soundness of Mind” is part of a trivium mentioned in the *Protagoras* which also included two other ideals: Justice, Piety). Soundness of mind is epitomized by the virtues of moderation, sensible, self-control, prudence, etc. In this way, *aretē* doesn't just hearken to a single-dimensional configuration of “virtue,” but indexes a tradition of typified “wise” living ideals. It is the stuff ethics and morals.

an *ability*, specifically, “an ability [*dynamis*] . . . that is productive and preservative of goods, and an ability for doing good in many great ways,” to which he adds in hyperbole, “actually in all ways in all things” (I.9, 1366a36-b1). This definition, drawn from chapter nine of *On Rhetoric*, is offered by Aristotle as commentary on epideictic’s relationship to *aretē* or the “points of reference for praising and blaming [virtue and vice]” (I.9, 1366a). Epideictic, (or demonstrative) rhetoric is the third “species” (*ediē*) of rhetoric (alongside the genres of deliberative and judicial) and, as George Kennedy notes, “is the most problematic of the species and has remained a problem in rhetorical theory, since it becomes the category for all forms of discourse that are not specifically deliberative or judicial” (47). Problematic, perhaps, because epideictic’s potential opens theoretical doors rather than closing them as is typical for rhetoric under the Aristotelian paradigm.

That said, Aristotle’s description of epideictic as funeral oratory encompassing the praise and blame of “virtue and vice and [the] honorable and shameful” (I.9.1366a) is useful here in its simplicity for several reasons. First, and as noted above, Aristotle emphasizes and begins to theorize the important relationship between epideictic and *aretē*. Epideictic functions in the service of *aretē*; it reinforces, in words of praise and blame, the “abilities” related to excellence, honor, virtue. Also, Aristotle categorized his three species along a temporal line, with deliberative oratory useful for addressing future events, judicial for the past, and epideictic for the present. As such, epideictic has no specific argumentative “end” or *telos*; its influence is felt in the moment—or more accurately, at all moments—and it directs present choices according to the cultural norms it reinforces. In this way, epideictic is constitutive of *lifestyle*, it can be less about the persuasion of others and more about the persuasion of self. Herein, then, we have a nascent theory of epideictic—one that recognizes a category of rhetorical influence that operates

more comfortably outside of the courtroom, is without clear instrumental *telos*, and that succeeds rhetorically when the pursuit of personal *aretē* is activated within a community. This opens up several questions about the nature of epideictic: what is the experience of this type of rhetoric like? What were its material elements? And, most importantly, do they persist?

In his book *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (2000), Jeffery Walker explores these questions and in doing so expands upon Aristotle's epideictic theory. Walker's study focuses on how ancient epideictic (*epideiktika*) practice was different from *pragmatika*, the latter of which "was traditionally understood to include two main types of civic discourse: speeches of accusation and defense in courts of law; and speeches proposing, supporting, or opposing laws or resolutions in political assemblies" (7). It was in response to this practical, civic need that rhetoric (*techne rhetorike*) developed to support. *Epideiktikon*, on the other hand, "was more amorphous and inclusive" and "generally identified with discourse delivered . . . at festivals and ceremonial or symposiastic occasions" (7). Walker's important point follows that before Aristotle essentialized the meaning of "epideictic" by assigning it an instrumental function within the public sphere as a part of his theorized discipline for addressing the problems of civic life; indeed, before *techne rhetorike* emerged as an art for addressing "practical civic business," *epideiktikon* was already embedded within the practices of everyday life. Oral and discursive language practices crafted as value-maintenance adhere around cultural traditions in a variety of styles, from eloquent prose to rhythmic poetry.

Walker's work, which delves into the pre-history of rhetoric, can be added to other work interested in what Thomas Cole (1991) has called "protorhetoric" and Richard Marbeck (1999) summarizes as "the unsystemized and uncoded persuasive and oratorical tactics of the sophists and the poets" (6). Walker shows how rhetoric developed alongside the poetic tradition and how

even when each “discipline” was codified into separate “arts,” their histories and ends were and remain inextricably connected. Further, he shows that rhythmic poetics, as epideictic containers of value and virtue for a community, are what give rhetoric its power. Civic rhetoric, Walker argues, “necessarily depends on and appeals to the beliefs/desires that epideictic cultivates” (10).

This cultivation is sweeping:

“[E]pideictic” appears as that which shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives; it shapes the ideologies and imaginaries with which, and by which, the individual members of a community identify themselves; and, perhaps most significantly, it shapes the fundamental grounds, the “deep” commitments and presuppositions, that will underlie and ultimately determine decision and debate in particular pragmatic forums. As such, epideictic suasion is not limited to the reinforcement of existing beliefs and ideologies . . . [it] can also work to challenge or transform conventional beliefs.

(9)

And while Walker’s hypothesis is situated within an ancient context, I argue that it retains its salience to modern rhetorical study and criticism. As such, rhetoric’s origins as an “expansion of the poetic/epideictic domain,” as a means of cultivating and propagating sociopolitical values, provides an exigency for the study of how the poetic/rhythmic-as-epideictic persist in creating public agreement about what constitutes civic “virtue,” as “the central . . . fundamental mode of rhetoric in human culture” (10).

It is significant, then, that Protagoras claims that virtue isn’t just taught by those “qualified” to teach it—cultural virtues and values are part of everyday experience and are learned, as he mentions, in any number of venues, domestic, scholastic, musical, and athletic.

Each of these areas of learning are indicative of spaces of the struggle toward excellence, where both mind and body are engaged in movement and motion toward a specific disciplined end.

Bodily Arts (2004), Debra Hawhee's important book on rhetoric, athletics, and the body, connects the notion of *aretē* with *agōn*, usually translated as "struggle" or "contest" (15-22). Hawhee makes several observations that help to guide my argument. First, she draws together *aretē* and *agōn* in order to articulate what I see as the *epideictic* rhetorics—the "codes of value and belief"—spoken of by Jeffery Walker. *Aretē* was "associated with bodily appearance, action, and performance" and could be abstracted as a "guide" for virtuous action as "the struggling contest served as a stage of sorts" (17). Second, this "stage" is indicative of the public and performative nature of Greek becoming and was enacted in what Hawhee calls "a productive training practice wherein subject production takes place through the encounter itself" (16). Third, while Hawhee's book is about athletics, she frequently mentions the connection between agonistic and musical performance (in the gymnasium and the agora): "Music established a rhythm through the cyclical repetition of patterns, and this rhythm was replicated in the bodily movements of those in training . . . For the ancients, music facilitated training through the habit-forming quality of rhythm" (138). Supplemental to this educational use, then, music had a kind of mythic "soul"-changing power. As Hawhee reminds us, Aristotle described music as working directly on character (*ethos*) and soul (*psyche*). Plato (through his Socrates) concurs: "rhythm and harmonies have the greatest influence on the soul; they penetrate into its inmost regions and there hold fast" (*Republic* 401d). Finally, and as Hawhee gestures toward in her work, the principles discussed above are most likely to be found endorsed in ancient texts by or about the sophists. Indeed, sophistic wisdom and teaching were based in rhetoric's connection to

performative and competitive *agōn*, rhythmic and near-musical eloquence, and culturally embedded notions of *aretē*.

Vernacular Voices

Above I demonstrated ways my work draws exigency from a host of concepts and theories that are rooted in the ancient (Western) tradition of rhetoric itself.⁷ A wholesale application of these notions into a contemporary setting may, however, prove problematic. What is most compelling to me about rhetorical theory, however, is not the ways and names whereby it is conceptualized, but how terms from different epochs coalesce to mark, more or less, the same practices. As ancient terminology is evoked in the chapters that follow, it should be heard as a movement toward conceptual and disciplinary recognition and legibility—a familiar tune—rather than as a definitive attempt at establishing a kind of ontological conceptual stronghold for the emerging field of sonic rhetoric. Reverberance between academic, historical, and disciplinary borders will always be the goal here.

Related, there is also conceptual bleed between other terminologies that appears throughout this work. The word “vernacular,” for example, has a variety of potential meanings, depending on its context and discipline. I use it more or less interchangeably for the word “folk” to name the “everyday” lingual and discursive output of “average” people—the citizen.⁸ My scare quotes in the previous sentence betray the fact that such renderings are, themselves, problematic and inconsistent with common usage. “Vernacular,” for example, is often used as a

⁷ See also the work of comparative rhetorics outside of the Western paradigm: George Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric* (1998), but also Sue Hum and Arabella Lyon. “Recent Advances in Comparative Rhetoric” in Lunsford, Wilson and Eberly (eds.), *Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (2009).

⁸ Note, for example, that the word “folk” was often used by musicians like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie as a way of acknowledging the commercialization of “vernacular” traditions. My usage of either term tends to follow this imperative (but isn’t always consistent to it). Of course, when the 1960s brought with it a “folk revival,” the notion was complicated even further.

designator for not “everyday” people necessarily, but people who are in some way culturally distinct from those with the privilege to define what is “mainstream”—the *others*. I address the problematic nature of the phrase vernacular at the beginning of Chapter Two, including my decision to use it, not as a demonstrative othering, but as a way of acknowledging the legitimacy and diversity of all cultural traditions.

My project’s exigency also, then, rests on the fact that vernacular music, as a persuasive, embedded rhetoric of everyday life, is under-theorized within rhetorical studies. The notion of “vernacular rhetoric,” however, is already in circulation due to the work of Gerard A. Hauser. Like me, Hauser is interested in mapping the sources and traces of ideological consciousness. To do so, he describes vernacular rhetoric in a Bakhtinian key by focusing on how the ceaseless conversations of public life—the everyday discourse of everyday people—contribute to an ongoing public negotiation between competing authoritative (traditional) and internal (progressive) persuasive discourse (8). For Hauser, the term “vernacular” is useful in understanding the rhetorical character and dialogic multiplicity of a civically minded public body, or more precisely, the “*plurality of publics* in which strangers develop and express public opinions by engaging one another through *vernacular rhetoric*” (12, his emphasis). In other words, vernacular rhetoric emerges out of everyday expressions of public opinion. Conversely, publics are themselves “*emergences* manifested through vernacular rhetoric” (14). Hauser’s book is a critique (or complication) of the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere as a kind of monologic ideal where democracy is born standing up. And while Public Sphere Theory is not central to my project here, understanding various expressions of public opinion is. Hauser’s argument rests on the reality that a pluralistic public and a dialogic public opinion—or the vernacular—create a civic environment where democracy’s ideals become obscured. Politicians

do not trust “the people” to make informed decisions and the “probable cause for crisis of confidence is the sheer complexity of the realities confronting society” (25). Public opinion, then, becomes subject to various attempts at political manipulation (or, more generously, simplification) in order to find consensus enough to produce results. Hauser sites the role of media—newspapers, radio, TV, and now the internet—as substitutes for the public deliberation of average people displacing “traditional rhetorical processes for forming public opinion and instilling a sense of community” (26).

Surely we need look no further than popular programs like those on the average conservative talk-radio station or, to be fair, the massively popular left-leaning political “fake news” on cable television for examples of this kind of mediated simplify-and-codify-for-the-masses approach to opinion-making. Presidential campaigns, and particularly presidential debates, are frequently criticized for the glossing of more complex “real issues” for those more legible to the widest possible audience. For Hauser, vernacular voices are in danger of being drowned out by these louder and more carefully packaged political rhetorics unless greater rhetorical competence becomes a goal for a greater number of the vernacular public.

Hauser’s anxieties resonate through this dissertation as well. My work locates vernacular voices in their practical (if not originating) communities and traces how those voices are appropriated, coopted, and in other ways became rhetorics distinct from those practical origins—often due to the affordances of advancing mediated technologies. Such manipulations can (and should) be unsettling. But unlike Hauser, I am interested in how vernacular voices expressed through vernacular music are themselves simplifications of the more complex problems they represent, and also how this simplification has important rhetorical (and by extension, political) utility. In other words, alongside an attempt to harmonize with Hauser’s thesis, my work also

seeks to acknowledge vernacular music's paradoxical nature as a simple container for complex assemblages of values, ideals, politics, and socio-cultural norms, including those associated with race and racial formation.

Rhetoric and Sound Studies

The following chapters explore and expand upon the rhetorical possibilities of the vernacular sonic voice. In addition to activating and expanding upon the theories of rhetoric evoked above, my project also works to develop meaningful intersections and associations between rhetorical studies and sound studies. Sonic rhetorics of any kind remain undertheorized and, in many ways, work with rhetoric and sound still seems to be in preproduction. For example, in a recent review essay for *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, "Auscultating Again: Rhetoric and Sound Studies," Joshua Gunn, Greg Goodale, Mirko M. Hall, and Rosa A. Eberly survey several recent sound-related publications relevant to but largely outside of rhetorical studies. Their essay is offered as a practical roadmap for as-yet untraveled rhetorical excursions into sound studies, meant to be (as they phrase it) "helpful to the unfamiliar" (477), acknowledging implicitly that most of us, in fact, are. To this end, Gunn et al. deliberately resist "the temptation to rhetoricize sound studies or sound-out rhetoric" (477) or to "remix sound studies into a rhetorical studies groove" (486) in order to instead "cast a scholarly ethic" of listening (477). This much-needed ethic works as a kind of principled initiate of the unfamiliar by setting the current and historical scene—the "problems and debates"—within sound studies. For rhetoricians, the identification of these problems and debates as commonplaces offer potential inroads so that future work finds audience and resonance not just within rhetorical studies, but within much larger conversations around sound. For example, Gunn and his co-authors locate a

recurrent “tension in sound studies between those who examine mental or physical sonic experience (‘interiors’) and historical and material contexts (‘exteriors’)” (479). These tensions exist around competing interests between “phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and Marxian materialist” perspectives” (479) each of which find notable and active ancillaries within rhetorical studies debates.

As a review essay and as one of only a few recent published works that offer resources for scholars interested in rhetoric and sound, “Auscultating Again” understandably sticks mainly to its educate-and-rally objective as a “collaborative liaison” between various traditions (486). The article sends a strong message to scholars within rhetoric interested in sound to familiarize themselves with sound studies’ non-rhetorical roots. This advice makes sense—there is much to know—but may seem odd to those of us finding a complex sonic root system within rhetorical studies itself. In the spirit of the ethic of listening they recommend, my reading of Gunn et al. is an invitation to go broad *and* deep in our study of sound and rhetoric. They recognize the strong, kairotic pull to take advantage of the “unquestionably growing interest in ‘sonic rhetorics’” (486) but, in our excitement with our discoveries, they remind us to not ignore our call as rhetoricians to draw from all “available means” (Aristotle I.1.140).

Gunn et al.’s thesis that rhetorical work with sound should be attuned to sound studies leaves the details of that attunement largely to us. An earlier article by “Auscultation” co-author Greg Goodale titled “The Presidential Sound: From Orotund Speech to Instructional Speech, 1892-1912,” offers one potential “tuning” and more are needed. Goodale’s work is notable here for two reasons. First, in addition to his deft analysis of the sounds of presidential oratory, Goodale offers a useful genealogy of the ways that sound has, at various times, been “a central concern of the field of communication” (164). He traces sound-focused work within the field

back to the early 1930s when a number of articles on the sound of speech, the voice, and radio were published in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and also points to a number of more recent essays in hope that sound might again move to a more central place in the field.⁹ Second, he offers three suggestions aimed at helping “rhetoricians [...] bolster their scholarship” (167) through more attention to the sonic:

First and most broadly, reading sound adds another dimension to the study of rhetoric, complementing recent advances in visual rhetoric and the critical analysis of words that is at the heart of the discipline. Second, the analysis of sound provides a new method for understanding political persuasion and the relationship between politics and culture. [...] Thirdly, we have long been aware that rhetoric provides a window onto the past in a manner that elucidates history. The study of sound provides a microphone to the past, adding to the discipline’s erudite historical work. (167)

Goodale’s insights here remind us gently that sound (via speech and the written word) is already central to the discipline. The political, cultural, and historical circumstances that the field has become expert at examining will increase in sophistication as rhetorical analysis is expanded across the sensorium. Rhetorical studies’ current and on-going expansion into multi-sensory realms is a reminder that rhetoric doesn’t need to be “remixed” with sound. Rhetoric’s sonic dimensions have always been there.

There is a pressing need, however, for sustained conversations about the contours and complexities of those dimensions. And while there is evidence of sound’s resurgence within the

⁹ Goodale cites work by Joshua Gunn and Eric King Watts as two of the most notable current examples of work with sound in rhetorical studies. See Goodale’s notes for a full accounting of the historical resources. Also, Goodale’s recently published monograph *Sonic Persuasion* is, by my stars, the first major contribution to the emergent sub-field of rhetoric and sound studies.

field at multiple levels—in conference talks, professional workshop sessions, in “special” print and electronic journal issues,¹⁰ as well as in conversations around multi-modal pedagogies—sound-as-rhetoric still suffers from a perceptible disciplinary “neglect” (Gunn, et al. 477). Gunn, Goodale, Hall, and Eberly do their part to help us navigate that question broadly and in ways sure to circulate outside of the field and Goodale’s more discipline-specific directions point to both the history and potential futures of sound-related scholarship within the field, even while the many ambient conversations listed above remind us of its potential diversity. In fact, the sheer expanse of these sounded rhetorical potentials may be partially causal of the perceived neglect—such radical openness isn’t usually the stuff upon which disciplinary foundations are constructed and maintained.

This dissertation is another shout across that expanse, but one that will locate some definitive markers for future work as my chapters locate the sonic dimensions of rhetorical concepts already reverberant within the field. As I have already begun to articulate, the particular conceptual tools I locate hail from both ancient and contemporary theories of rhetoric and are useful in that they name rhetorical activities common across all historical epochs. These concepts require a common space in which to animate them and I have chosen the 1930s in the United States as that context. The 1930s offer a particularly rich set of *topoi* for examination and discussion due to the diverse array of social and economic crises that shaped that decade. And while this dissertation does not attend in depth with many of the decade’s usual analytical suspects (Depression, FDR, Dustbowl, WPA, etc.) in extended detail, those circumstances are frequently evoked as the staging elements for the subjects that do receive careful analysis.

¹⁰ Recent journal issues include 2006 special issue in *Computers and Composition*, “Sound in/as a Compositional Space,” as well as edited collections produced for the web: “Music/Writing Culture” at *Enculturation* (1999), “Writing With Sound” at *Currents for Electronic Literacy* (2011) and “Sonic Rhetorics” at *Harlot of the Arts* (2013).

Conclusion

In sum and invocation, the following dissertation brings to rhetoric a study of vernacular music that amplifies what is known about rhythmic practice in the rhetorical tradition. It responds to emergent conversations at the intersection of rhetorical and sound studies, and engages with questions about sound and music's rhetorical roles in myth making, racial formation, cultural eloquence, progressive thought, and historiography. As explored in this introduction, recent scholarship has identified the sonic elements of rhetoric's classical roots. I argue that vernacular, folk, or "roots" music can be a key element—a sonic rhetoric—for interpreting the ebb and flow of cultural ideals within contemporary historical moments, particularly during times of crisis.

In order to better understand the rhetorical effects of vernacular music in the 1930s, I focus on the careers of folklorists John A. Lomax and his son Alan, emissaries for and employees of the Library of Congress. In 1933, they set out to record the "folksong of the American Negro" in several Southern African-American prisons. In Chapter Two, I trace the Lomaxes' experiences in the prisons and examine the rhetorics of several recordings they made there. Throughout, I argue that the music the Lomaxes gathered for the Library's Folklife Archive contributed to a new mythology of "authentic" Americana for a people in financial, social, and identity crisis. During the 1930s, this music had paradoxical effects: even as the songs reified long-held conservative orthodoxies, they also performed as agents for social change and reconstitution. The recordings the Lomaxes made in the prisons, for example, were produced under the coercive auspices of white privilege, yet also provided incarcerated African-American men rhetorical agency they would not otherwise have enjoyed. Similarly, and as explored in Chapter Three, pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton enjoined Alan Lomax and the Library of

Congress in his desire to insert and authenticate himself within the early history of jazz. He did so through deftly articulated sonic rhetorics—virtuosic performances and oral histories—but the recorded sessions brought more fortune and fame to Lomax than Morton, who died soon after. By 1939, Lomax was hosting a national radio program on CBS titled *Folksongs of America* on the popular radio initiative known as the *American School of the Air*. Lomax’s radio program is the subject of the fourth chapter, and it is there, with a particularly authentic American irony, songs recorded in the prison yard were silently repurposed by professional musicians and broadcast to the country’s white suburban classrooms.

In order to give context to the case study chapters, Chapter One continues the introductory tone found here and is designed to orient the reader to the historical and intellectual climate of the 1930s, as well as to the theories and methods that guide the various strands of my argument. I conclude the dissertation with a chapter that projects the possibilities and futures of rhetoric and sound studies through a “reanimation” of the work of Walter J. Ong (a controversial figure in both rhetorical and sound studies) with the evocation of the concept “digital folkness.”

Chapter One

Sonic Rhetorical Cultures: Historiography, Re-Orientation, and the Sounds of Authenticity

“If you could strip from all poetry its music, rhythm, and meter, the residue would be nothing else but rhetoric.”

Plato, *Gorgias*, 502c¹¹

“The fact is that the sophists are no longer dismissed or ignored in the histories of Western thought; and this fact must be the starting point of any contemporary study about them.”

John Poulakos, *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece*, 2

“It was as if the American people, just as they were poised to execute more social and political and economic innovation than ever before in their history, felt the need to take a long and affectionate look at their past before they bade much of a farewell, a need to inventory who they were and how they lived, to benchmark their country and their culture so as to measure the distance traveled into the future that Franklin Roosevelt was promising.”

David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 256-257

Introduction: History making, lore, and rhetorical utility

I am your servant, composed this song;
Please, Governor Neff, let me go back home
I know my wife will jump and shout
When de train roll up and I come steppin' out.

Please, Governor Neff, be good an' kind,
Have mercy on my great long time,
I don't see to save my soul;
If I can't get a pardon, try me in a parole [...]

Please Governor Neff, be good and kind,
And if I can't get a pardon, will you cut my time?
If I had you, Governor Neff, like you got me,
I would wake up in the mornin' and set you free.
And I'm going home to Mary—po' Mary. (“Murderous Minstrel” 50)

In January of 1935, *Time* magazine ran a story in their music section titled “Murderous Minstrel.” Juxtaposed conspicuously alongside a more typical-to-form article about famed

¹¹ Translation found in Poulakos (2007), 341.

composer Igor Stravinsky, “Murderous Minstrel” was accompanied by the above verses and a photograph of a middle-aged African-American man wearing worn overalls and strumming a patched 12-string guitar. The article begins in a racially charged and sensationalized vernacular common to the day: “In Texas a black buck known as Lead Belly murdered a man.” The statement, while crude and patronizing, was accurate in that Lead Belly was convicted of murdering a man. It referred to a 1918 incident that led to Lead Belly’s imprisonment in Sugar Land Texas penitentiary. The story continues, recounting a simplified version of the circumstances that led to his release from Sugar Land in 1925 but then back into prison by 1930:

[Lead Belly] sang a petition to Governor Pat Neff and was granted a pardon. Back in the Louisiana swamplands, where he was born Huddie Ledbetter, his knife made more trouble. He was in State Prison at Angola when John A. Lomax, eminent ballad collector, stopped by last summer and asked the warden if he could please hear Lead Belly sing.

John Lomax arrived in Manhattan last week to lecture on ballads and with him was Lead Belly, wild-eyed as ever. The Negro had been pardoned again because Mr. Lomax had made a phonograph record of a second petition and taken it to Louisiana’s Governor Allen.

This and many other reports of Lead Belly’s *second* pardoning—a compelling but disputed detail related to the circumstances around his release from Angola prison—is part of a fascinating historical problem that, as both Lead Belly and Lomax’s biographers have acknowledged in different ways, remains “a central element of Lomax-Leadbelly lore” (Porterfield 331).¹² Lomax

¹² Porterfield spells Huddie Ledbetter’s nickname as the single word, “Leadbelly” as do many others including later commercial releases of his music. I prefer the two-word rendering because that is how Ledbetter signed his name. It is also the way his name appears on his tombstone (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=6121635>, retrieved February 12, 2014.)

himself writes about the event in he and son Alan's published compilation of Lead Belly tunes titled *Negro Folk Songs as Sung By Lead Belly* (1936): "I met [Governor Allen's] secretary, who took the aluminum record and promised to play it for his chief. On August 1, thirty days afterward, Lead Belly was across the Mississippi River and headed for Shreveport. In a paper bag he carried a carefully folded document. Governor Allen's pardon had come" (33). What was actually on that paper, however, has become the subject of a popular historical dispute among folklorists, as this second pardoning likely never occurred.¹³ The most compelling evidence for this is a 1939 written response from Angola warden L. A. Jones to New York's Probation Department, the latter of which had requested information about Lead Belly's release:

This man has been the recipient of wide publicity in various magazines of national circulation, the story usually being that he sang or wrote such moving appeals to the Governor that he was pardoned. Such statements have no foundation in fact. He received no clemency, and his discharge was a routine matter under the good time law which applies to all first and second offenders (Wolfe and Lornell 120).

Untangling the timeline of what was known and what was not (and by whom) about the alleged pardon hasn't been easy. In October 1934, several months before the *Time* article appeared, Lomax appears to believe that his trip to Baton Rouge with Lead Belly's recorded request to the Governor was successful. In a handwritten letter to Oliver Strunk, Lomax's supervisor and head of the music division at the Library of Congress, John reports on his recent experiences with Lead Belly:

¹³ Lomax does include a footnote to the above story stating simply, "General Manager Hymes has since written to me that Lead Belly's Pardon was due to his 'good time'" (Lomax, Lomax, & Herzog 36). Lomax still uses the word "pardon," however, which, as shown below, doesn't appear to be the reason for his release.

My driver and assistant [...] is a Negro ex-convict, Leadbelly by name, who two months sang a petition for pardon on a record, addressed to Governor O.K. Allen. I carried the record back to Baton Rouge a hundred miles away. The Governor listened to it and then pardoned Leadbelly. He came on to Texas and attached himself to me. He says that I will never again have to tie my shoes if I “don’t want to.” When I come to Washington in January I’ll bring him along and give you and Mrs. Strunk a specimen of Negro music as interpreted by a real Negro. (Lomax to Strunk, October 1, 1934)

This report, however, compresses the time between events and glosses the circumstances related to the supposed pardoning. For example and as he wrote in the above recollection, when he arrived in Baton Rouge, the governor was in a meeting and the disc was left with his secretary leaving one expert to conclude that “There is no evidence that ‘musical Governor Allen’ ever actually heard it” (Porterfield 331). If we take the other parts of the letter at face value (which, of course, we cannot), it is possible that Lomax thought Lead Belly had been pardoned because Lead Belly had told him it was so. Indeed, the origins of the lore around the second pardon may have very well come from Lead Belly. The musician may have jumped to conclusions about the circumstances of his release believing that Lomax had something to do with it, or he may have simply understood the utility of attaching himself to John Lomax, a man of influence and position whom had shown such a genuine interest in him, and made a compelling plea to Lomax for taking him on. The point is that we will never really know.

These murky historical circumstances, pieced together using several primary sources and the best attempts of historians intent on understanding them, reveal the contours and limits of the historiographical process. This anecdote illustrates that the writing of history (and therefore

“history” itself) is messy and distributed rather than linear, logical, or complete-able. In fact, I have intentionally belabored the difficulty of uncovering the “truth” around a particular historical detail in order to perform, briefly, this process and to begin this chapter with the argument that the writing of history (whether as a part of a scholarly project or in the “writing” of our own histories—as Lomax and Lead Belly seem to be doing here) has multiple contingencies and therefore is frequently skewed and prejudiced (and to some degree fictional) but that history is also practical, useful, and rhetorical. Lead Belly singing himself to a second pardon is a fantastic story, after all, and one with a variety of potential uses.

In short, discursive history is always, to one extent or another, *lore*. Lore abstracts, codifies, and gives circulation to the otherwise confounding nature of “true” history’s multiplicity and opacity. John Lomax most likely did not get Lead Belly out of jail, though he may have thought he did for a time. Either way, the story of how he did became a sort of “usable past”—a rendering of historical events crafted to have utility beyond the cold, discoverable facts. This artful, practical rendering of lived experience into a circulating dynamic artifact is central to this and the other chapters in this dissertation. In fact, the notion and paradoxical nature of *lore* undergirds and intersects the history, artifacts, and even the theory that support the arguments I work with throughout the dissertation. It follows that each chapter carries with it both explicit and implicit arguments for *lore* as a crucial, if often overlooked, component to understanding rhetoric’s relationship to and with history and history making. In my interest to contribute to an emergent body of scholarship working to theorize rhetoric in its sonic registers, my emphasis throughout will be on historical *sound*, particularly the “rhythmic rhetorics” of vernacular or folk music, but this idea of *lore-as-history-as-rhetoric* (and even as theory) presides over everything. In fact, the above rendering of the story of Leadbelly and John Lomax’s move into the public eye

is an attempt of my own to create a usable past. To craft representative anecdotes that gives exigency for this dissertation, I return again and again to this “cutting edge” of history making—one where distinctions between our notions of history, rhetoric, and lore (in this case folklore)—are made nearly indistinguishable from one another and can even be used interchangeably to describe, more or less, the same things.

This chapter draws out and connects this presiding idea in three strands. Since this is primarily a historical project, I continue first, with the discussion begun above about the rhetorical nature of the historical process. I look to scholars of rhetoric and history as guides for navigating the various paradoxes, and difficulties involved in producing critical rhetorical history. Second, and also related to history, I begin to set the historical stage for the project. The 1930s in the United States can be imagined as a complex drama of human activity respondent to a seemingly unprecedented array of economic, intellectual, artistic, political and other social upheavals. I touch briefly on several of these upheavals and their impact, focusing in on the experience of Kenneth Burke, a lodestar in the field of rhetoric. Burke’s experience and ideas in development during this time are resonant with both the classical sophistic ideal of *dissoi logi* as well as notions connecting history and history making with lore. Burke’s 1930s also connect us into developing ideas about art, poetics, and music in the decade’s popular, intellectual, political, and vernacular cultures and will help to make sense of where and how these ideas converged around a growing interest in folk artifacts and music. Third, in the midst of this drama and as a result of this convergence, an interest in a kind of mythic “authentic” American vernacular culture emerges. This interest, like the complex scene it emerges from, had a variety of exigencies (which I take up in subsequent chapters), but at the center of a particularly productive stream of activity were the folklorists John and Alan Lomax. I introduce them and outline their

contributions and relationship to the history of folksong collecting in the United States and also how they engaged with the authenticity trope that was so prevalent.

The work I begin here and take up in case studies across the dissertation contributes to the development of a multi-channeled body of work around music and sound within rhetorical studies, a grouping that, taking a cue from the popular designation “visual rhetorics,” might be called, tidily, “sonic rhetorics.” Sounded rhetoric, however, is anything but tidy. Learning to “think with our ears,” requires developing our listening, learning to “think across sounds,” and to “think conjuncturally about sound and culture” (Sterne, *Sound Studies Reader* 3). I address, then, the intellectual spaces where these disciplines of listening are being developed and how sonic studies in rhetoric connects up with the goals of this much larger contingency of interdisciplinary scholarly project known as Sound Studies. Here and throughout, I begin answering an important and always pressing question: What is the promise of developing theories around the sonic within the field of rhetorical studies? What value will these theories hold for the field? Answering these questions adequately is a project far beyond the scope of a single dissertation, and so my emphasis—as has already been advanced—will take on three main *topoi* and are related to those I expand on below: Lore and historiography, rhythmic rhetorics and poetics, and the mythos (and politics) of authenticity, including the rhetorics of *authentication*.

Part 1

“Usable Pasts”: Sounding out Methodologies for Rhetorical Historiography

“[An accurate understanding of the 1930s should be] less concerned with asserting the centrality of one [ideological] impulse than with thinking about the tensions within and between values, ambitions, ideas, and circumstances. The desire to move in more than one direction at once, to have it both ways, to live with or to resolve contradictions, appears during the 1930s in the most broadly public spheres as well as in narrower territories of individuals defining their beliefs and families and furnishing their homes.”

Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts*, xiv

This dissertation is a historical project, but with an asterisk. It is set, more or less, within temporal parameters of the 1930s in the United States, which puts it in the same historical epoch as the Great Depression—but it is not a history of the Great Depression. Neither, as mentioned in the introduction, is it a detailed history of any of the major historical events that play out in the U.S. during that time, most notably Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency and policies, but also other significant geographical, political, artistic, and military upheavals: the calamitous “Dust Bowl” drought that stretched across Oklahoma and other plains states, the rise and decline of a prominent radical left in the United States, the height (and some would argue final gasp) of artistic “modernism,” and the slow but sure congealing of European and Asian military superpowers that would eventually push the world back into war. Instead, this project cuts across these historical events. Its subject—the reemergence of musical folklore collecting as a viable scholarly, historiographical, and commercial practice—was made possible by these historical events and was a response to them, but also was part of a larger set of practices that made the upheavals manageable and coherent for many during that decade, and, it follows, part of what makes the 1930s discernable to us now. The dissertation, then, is an analysis of what it means to try to compose history by boiling it down to its “authentic” bones. It is a study of the many ways the collection of folk music contributed to the composition of a usable past and of this music’s movement from mere artifacts to rich rhetorics.

The phrase “usable past” is attributed to Van Wyck Brooks and his essay “On Creating a Usable Past” published in *The Dial* in 1918. Brooks’s influential critique of United States art culture at the beginning of the 20th century encouraged American artists to move beyond European models for inspiration. Instead, artists (and writers in particular) should begin forging

their own artistic traditions drawn from a past curated from values distinct from European ideals.

Said Brooks:

The present is a void and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value.

But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it

inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one? (339)

Discovering and presenting the “living value” of a usable past draws out the distinctly rhetorical elements of historiography. The term “usable” also underscores the mythos surrounding and intersecting rhetorical/historical narratives and their attendant artifacts and helps to lay plain the ways that history is not so much a fact-finding pursuit of the Truth as it is a curated collection of useful *topoi* that meet particular exigencies. Like the story above, usable pasts also contain the paradox of representation inherent to all historical work in that history’s authors, like folklorists, always subvert, codify, and gloss historical details and in so doing insert authorial tone, rhythmic logics of cause and effect, and other affecting elements through the pseudo-poetic process of composing cohesive narratives out of past events. In his influential meta-historical work, Hayden White comments on the conspicuous overlaps between history and poetics and how historical writing takes on many of the same tropes and cadences as literary fiction. The “facts” of history “do not speak for themselves,” after all (*Tropics of Discourse* 125) and writing history in a way that it “speaks” requires a skilled and artful hand: “[T]he historian speaks for [the facts], speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is—in its representation—a purely discursive one” (125). White also comments on the representative nature of history calling historical narratives a “*complex of symbols* which gives us directions for finding an *icon* of the structure of those events in our literary tradition” (88, emphasis in

original). Rendering history in this way, however, creates tensions around the traditional binaries of fact and fiction, what is real and what is imagined, and erases any lingering illusion that history is, simply, a pseudo-scientific process of gathering objective data and putting it into chronological order.

This anxiety about the difference between the real and the represented is, of course, similar to the Platonic anxiety about writing (as opposed to speech), which has reverberated continuously every time traditional media is challenged by the latest innovation or remediation. This dichotomy is present in the shifting view of historical writing as well, but the problem of narrative history not being perfectly representative has strong correlation to another (if related) Platonic anxiety as well, this one around poetry. Plato's critique of poetry is, at its center, an anxiety about misrepresentation. In the last book of the *Republic*, Plato accuses poets of fostering a kind of theatre-mentality where audiences of dramatic renderings (or poetic speech *qua* rhetoric) of the various political and practical elements of life will begin to mistake the imitation for the actual due to a general civic malaise: "For the representation imitates a type that is alien to them" (10.605a). The poet is guilty then, of "fashioning phantoms far removed from reality" (10.605a).

I bring Plato to the conversation because the utility of poetics plays an important role throughout the various arguments in this and subsequent chapters, but specifically here because his anxieties represent well the classic paradox of working within, through, and despite representation. Plato's famous mistrust of writing and rhetoric, which included this skeptical stance on poetry, might be seen as a kind of reactionary, if realistic, response to the difficulties inherent within the ongoing march toward new modernities. Interestingly, while Plato can be understood as "pious"—devout to a metaphysical Truth and to certain time-tested, value-laden

ideals—his traditionalism wasn't unreasonable. Part of his anxiety about poetry was that it encouraged adherence to a public pedagogical system, a cultural didacticism, which he saw as antiquated. As Eric Havelock (1986) argues, Plato attacked poets

less for their poetry (one might say) than for the institution which it had been their accepted role to provide. They had been the teachers of Greece. Here was the clue. Greek literature had been poetic because the poetry had performed a social function, that of preserving the tradition by which the Greeks lived and instructing them in it. This could only mean a tradition which was orally taught and memorized. It was precisely this didactic function and the authority that went with it to which Plato objected. (8)

Plato had new methods in mind. He sought with his prose (which was itself written, poetic, and rhetorical and therefore in seeming paradox to our understanding of his own ideologies) to displace the poetic tradition he was anxious about. In short, Plato was an innovator—a traditionalist perhaps, engaged in a gathering of “usable pasts” within that tradition, but only those that suited him.

Plato himself, then, might be understood poetically as a representation within this pious archetype, working carefully (and not without intellect or great struggle) with the problems of a complex society. Plato's antithetical adversaries, the sophists, came at similar problems, but from the other side. As Sharon Crowley asserts in her essay “A Plea for the Revival of Sophistry,” the sophists addressed the problems of modernity with a “skeptical epistemology” (instead of through metaphysical ideals). They recognized within poetic discourse a way of dealing with the paradoxes within modern life. They didn't seek to destroy truth so much as they sought methods of dealing with traditional “Rightness”—and getting what was needed out of a situation rather

than what was already predetermined. Similar to my archetypal characterization of Plato, Crowley sees the sophist Protagoras as a representative of the sophist's alternative "impious" ideology of multiplicity and tolerance for contradiction. Protagoras taught that existence was an area of intense strife, where two opposing *logoi* (*dissoi logoi*), or possible accounts of reality, exist in every experience: "to every *logos* another *logos* is in competition."¹⁴ The subjectivity of individual perception forever deprived humans the opportunity to know which of these competing versions of experience to be true. So, rather than imagining the Platonist and sophistic perspectives as binary or opposite, it is useful instead to understand them as prime examples of *dissoi logoi*—not in ideological opposition to one another, but rather, in *competition*. As such, both perspectives are important as they stimulate productive *agōn* (or contest) rather than conclusive (and dogmatic) ends or *telos*. As Debra Hawhee (2004) writes, this "agonism produces rhetoric as a gathering of forces—cultural, bodily, and discursive—thus complicating the easy portrayal of rhetoric as *telos*-driven persuasion [...] or as a means to reach consensus" (16). Both Plato and the sophists were interested in "usable pasts" but chose to use history, tradition, and rhetoric in different ways. These differences and the agonism they create in the pursuit of scholarly representation are just as important (and likely have greater significance) as the conclusions that they help us to draw.

¹⁴ The "two-*logoi*" fragment is attributed to Protagoras by later Greek sources. Edward Schiappa highlights two common translations of the "two-*logoi*" portion of the fragment in his book *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (2003). The first, called the "subjective interpretation" forwards a "two-sides to every argument" translation. "Such translations," argues Schiappa, "reduce Protagoras' statement to the proposition that a debate is possible on any topic" thus reducing "all sophistic teaching to [deliberative] rhetoric" (90) The other interpretation, called "Heraclitean," acknowledges that the "sides" themselves "are created solely by the arguers rather than being aspects of an object of inquiry" (90). This is the interpretation, casts the *logoi* as not in opposition but in competition: "Of every thing, two contrary accounts can be given" (91).

Toward a Sophistic Historiography

The rhetorical historian's work, particularly those interested in—to borrow David Zarefsky's (1998) distinction—"the rhetorical study of historical events," can be understood as the pursuit of cataloging and representing the constant swell of societal upheaval, conflict, and change.¹⁵ Put succinctly, rhetorical history might be thought of as the tracing of agonism and its effects over time. This pursuit includes the careful curation of what Kenneth Burke called a "perspective by incongruity," one attendant to divergent cultural ideologies, replete with tensions, with *dissoi logoi*, between "tradition" and "progression," and performative of how power and privilege are at odds with justice and accountability. The work of rhetorical history should be a *critical* work, as "[g]ood criticism, like good history, is reflective; it offers reasons to sustain good judgment" (Zarefsky 21). Writing history with the understanding that it is "a series of rhetorical problems, situations that call for public persuasion to advance a cause or overcome an impasse [...] and how well people invented and deployed messages in response to the situation" (30) is a good first step. In their essay, "Pan Historiography: The Challenge of Writing History across Time and Space," Debra Hawhee and Christa Olson point out just how prevalent this kind of rhetorical history production has become over the last several years. They note that a move to large, century-spanning histories of rhetoric to histories that focus on a single short time period are evidence of a "rhetoric's coming-of-age as a discipline" (91). But, perhaps of greater note is that these new histories have begun to make explicit the tools needed to aid those critical judgments, including Zarefsky's, that the work of rhetorical criticism is tied to the theorizing of new ways of understanding rhetoric itself.

¹⁵ David Zarefsky describes the work of rhetorical history as incorporating four areas ("useful not for boundary drawing but for understanding the richness of our field"): the "history of rhetoric, the rhetoric of history, historical studies of rhetorical practice, and rhetorical studies of historical events" (26). My work falls most neatly into the final distinction, but, as Zarefsky implies, cross-pollinates into the others.

Within this oeuvre of emerging histories is a growing body of work that provides just what I have been advocating: criticism and methodologies that encourage new theories of rhetoric derived from the study of rhetorical historiography. I reference several throughout this chapter. These methodologies have roots in established rhetorical theory that play on the radical nature of historiography as both an epistemological (knowledge making) and ontological (being or reality making) project (the *dissoi logoi* at the heart of the Sophistic/Platonic dichotomy). These possibilities underscore the ways in which history, as we imagine it, is not re-assembled through the light of clear and discoverable empirical evidences or a carefully lit stage of coherent, logical events, but is instead more like a hall of echoes: reverberant, cacophonous, and at times enveloping.

Further, as a “usable” past, history can and should be understood as both representation and reality, as useful in the upholding of tradition and in imagining new futures, as both conservative (in the literal and political senses) and progressive. As invoked earlier, the writing of history can be understood as an ongoing project dealing in the management of *dissoi logoi*. Given the inherent paradox of history, Susan Jarratt’s (1991) development of a sophistic approach to understanding and composing history and historiography provides a useful methodology that I have already begun to employ here. This historiography, she argues, is based in a “comprehensive epistemic sense” (xx) of rhetoric that dislodges history from “philosophic” logics and relies instead on sophistic values as guiding principles of a rhetorical historiography. These values include “the primacy of human knowledge, possibilities for non-rational and emotional responses to the whole range of discourse types, a fundamental understanding of knowledge and values as historically contingent, a recognition of all discourses as ‘rhetorical,’ [and] an integral relationship between theory, practice, and the political sphere” (xviii-xix).

Jarratt is in conversation with a larger body of scholarship interested in recovering the ancient sophists from their relegated state and drawing on a sophistic value system to inform theories of rhetoric and writing studies as approaches to and attitudes toward history. Drawing on Eric Havelock, for example, Jarratt explains how sophistic ideals lend themselves particularly well to historiographic practices because a sophistic rhetoric is a radically practical rhetoric, one that lays bare the nature and contingency of ethics, knowledge-making, and the ways that “group values evolve out of custom or habit as ‘pragmatic solutions to temporal and historical needs’” (qtd. in Jarratt 10). This pragmatism, in turn, is well suited to examine rhetorical and historical nature of vernacular culture, with its distinctly epideictic structure as a site for virtue and value production and dissemination. Jarratt’s ground rules for “the practice of a sophistic historiography” underscore and give direction to the goals for this project. I list them below, pausing to comment and expand through conversation with another rhetorical historian, Carole Blair, and to begin to flesh out how a theory of sonic rhetorics might be conceived of within and through a sophistic framework.

Jarratt’s first tenant toward the practice of a sophistic historiography is “a redefinition and consequent expansion of the materials and subject matters of rhetorical history, resulting in what today would be styled multidisciplinary—historical investigations on the margins of traditionally conceived disciplines” (Jarratt 264). Since 1991 when *Rereading the Sophists* was published, this call for enlarging the boundaries of what constitutes “legitimate” rhetorical history and its “materials and subject matters” has been sounded with increased frequency. In fact, in 2015, books and articles published in rhetorical studies that take up the multi-disciplinary, multi-mediated, and expansive subjects (women, queer, disabled, of color) and subjectivities (affect, the body, the mind, the non-“American,” the non-human) of rhetoric may

exceed those in the more traditional scope (particularly the great white speeches of great white men genre). Indeed, the margins are beginning to be traversed and re-theorized.¹⁶

Carole Blair has been influential in calling for rhetorical histories beyond their well-worn conceptions, along what she names their “influential/preservative” and “systematic/progressive” tracks and towards a more “critical” history of rhetoric (405). In her revisionist 1992 *QJS* article, “Contested Histories of Rhetoric: The Politics of Preservation, Progress, and Change” she deploys this approach in a way that works to undermine the privilege of classical authors and also to dispel the myth of “progress” attached to many contemporary theorists, because such “politics are fundamentally in conflict with any program that sanctions current or future theorizing” (418).¹⁷ This notion dovetails with Jarratt’s second key practice within a sophistic historiography: “the denial of progressive continuity” (12). This denial is “a conscious attempt to disrupt the metaphor of a complete and full chain of events [what Blair calls “influence”] with a *telos* in the revival of rhetoric in the twentieth century [Blair’s “system”]” (12). For both Jarratt and Blair, history is a radically rhetorical notion and Blair recommends rhetoricians working with history move beyond the *telos* model in favor of a critical historiography of rhetoric. This critical historiography resists fabricating monuments (or relics) out of histories, people, and theories and instead suggests that “historical rhetorics should be regarded as texts” which, “because they are written, [...] have the same nuance and uniqueness of any text,” and therefore invite reflection on context and contingency to other texts/histories (all of which are constructions, corruptions, creations) (418). Which isn’t to say that such contingencies relieve

¹⁶ In writing studies (and to name only a few recent influential texts), see Byron Hawk, *A Counter-history of Composition* (2007); Joddy Murray, *Non-discursive Rhetoric* (2009); Collin Brooke, *Lingua Fracta* (2009); Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric* (2013); Christa Olson, *Constitutive Visions* (2014); and Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender* (2014).

¹⁷ In their essay “Revisionist Historiography and Rhetorical Tradition(s),” Richard Graff and Michael Leff describe Blair’s essay as “the last major entry in the wave of revisionism that proceeds from Duhamel through Ehninger, and is also, within the field of speech communication, one of the earliest entries in the newer, poststructuralist approach to historiography” (16).

the historian of the need to seek out particular, practical circumstances from which history's rhetorics emerge. "Critical history," Blair argues, "would regard rhetoric's past as a myriad of specific articulations of rhetoric, any of which might bear important insight, and all of which tell us something about the historical conditions in which they were articulated" (419). Critical history, which "opens the door to multiple rhetorics," is not plural for plurality's sake, and recognizes that all formulations are significant in some way" (419)—a notion that ties Jarratt's first two recommendations together, with an implicit warning, perhaps, that a sophistic framework doesn't give the rhetorician a pass to write irresponsible or incoherent history.

Jarratt's third and final recommended practice for a sophistic historiography is "the employment of two pre-logical language *technai*, antithesis and parataxis, creating narratives distinguished by multiple or open causality, the indeterminacies of which are then resolved through the self-conscious use of probable arguments" (12). This final methodological element is, perhaps, the most difficult to put into practice, but is also the most important. As Jarratt explicates, both antithesis and parataxis operate outside of the still-preeminent "Aristotelian logic of noncontradiction" (21). Indeed, the sophist's legacy as mendacious manipulators stems from these pre-logical or "non-rational" stylistic techniques for persuasion which often rely on affect for their effects: poetic genres (parable, encomium) and poetic stylistics (wordplay, rhythm, rhyme, sound, etc.), for example. For the sophist, while "fully capable of understanding a logic of non-contradiction" (22) the emotional, feeling body is on equal grounds with the logical mind. Much has been written to "recover" the body and its phenomenological strata and emotional "data" as a legitimate site for study within contemporary rhetorical studies.¹⁸ These elements are,

¹⁸ See Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley (eds.), *Rhetorical Bodies* (1999); Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts* (2004) and *Moving Bodies* (2009); James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture* (2001); Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (2014); Shannon Walters, *Rhetorical Touch* (2014).

no doubt, central to this project as well—particularly those related to sonics—but they also introduce the possibility of antithesis into the methodology as a viable, or even *integral*, aspect of the historiographic process. Antithesis is a literary device that “function[s] to overthrow a commonplace about a historical character” (24). The need for antithesis might be understood as a method for dealing with constant paradox—of encountering within the historical archive (and then seeking to represent) the presence of complex subjects (and their rhetorics) who experience constant double-mindedness, conflicting emotional multiplicities, and fractured and re-sutured ideologies, and therefore act in contradictory ways. It represents an acknowledgment of the uncertainty of historical causalities within disparate narrative assemblages rather than giving into the temptation constructing a teleological or deterministic history that elides these elements. It also means encountering these same inconsistencies within oneself during the historical writing process. But, antithesis “is not a spurious trick for clouding the minds of the listeners, but rather works to awaken in them an awareness of the multiplicity of possible truths” (22). Quoting Mario Untersteiner, Jarratt declares, “The sophistic historian will ‘not confine reality within a dogmatic scheme but allow it to rage in all its contradictions, in all its tragic intensity’” (qtd. in Jarratt 22).

Under this formulation (or anti-formulation), the historian both seeks out texts with antithetical possibilities and performs/composes them herself. One of Jarratt’s key texts is Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen*, which, given encomia’s mythic status has implications for the fictions inherent to literary renderings of history. Gorgias selects Helen as a historical subject not for the “establishing of irrefutable facts” but for the story’s “usefulness in the reconstruction and interpretation of culturally meaningful and instructive pasts” (16). Further, “The opportunities for speculation provided by the narrative situation [...] supersedes the establishment of the ‘factual’

status of the materials themselves as a goal for discourse” (16). This view of history supplants the traditional “fact” finding aim of historiography and accounts instead for “the inevitably literary or mythic quality of any historical reconstruction and its relevance to the present” (16). She also points out that the *Encomium of Helen* contains an argument without a conclusion. It “organizes probabilities toward the end of reinterpreting elements of mythic history” and is not overly concerned with a logical chain of causal relations (which traditionally lead to judgment, i.e. Helen’s guilt), but instead “on the interplay among causes” (22). Importantly, Gorgias’s refashioning is playful and in that play he reveals the indeterminate nature of causal language and challenges “the conventions of factual, continuous history, historical time, and simple cause/effect relations” (23). To sum up, “In Gorgias’s hands history becomes not a search for the true, but an opening up of questions: an enterprise not so much of reaching conclusions but of uncovering possible contradictions” (23).

I’m nearly full circle to my earlier argument about lore as an important historiographic genre. Jarratt’s sophistic methodology underscores “history” as it is animated through careful historiographic assemblages and I forward that this bears a strong resemblance to lore. Indeed, Jarratt shows us the way that lore can help us to reimagine history as it embodies each of the above characterizations: it is generally extra-disciplinary to rhetoric or at least on the margins, lore denies and even undermines any sense progressive continuity, and in its radical semiotic openness, is easily rendered antithetical. The same folksong, for example, can be imbued with ideals from opposing ideological values. In her final suggestion towards enacting sophistic historiography and as a paring with the deconstructive potentials of this antithesis, Jarratt evokes *parataxis* as a mode for reconstruction: “antithesis creates an openness to the multiplicity of possible causal relations, then parataxis demands the employment of probable arguments in the

reconstruction of provisional historical narratives” (21). And further, “Antithesis allows for laying out options; parataxis their loose coordination in a narrative” (27). Parataxis is a rhetorical term that emphasizes the juxtaposition of coordinating clauses (rather than subordinate clauses, or hypotaxis) that create their intended meaning in juxtaposition rather than independently. Jarratt describes parataxis using a visual/aural analogy. A hypotactic approach to historiography “seems to exist as a complete two-dimensional visual construct [...] whereas discourse structured paratactically creates the effect of evolving in time, through sound striking the ears, minds, bodies of its listeners in a temporal experience” (27). The former obscures its own existence as contingent by *appearing* “complete” while the latter exists despite or even because of its incompleteness, taking meaning from each element along the temporal trajectory. As such, antithesis and parataxis function together in much the same way as “remix” or even “mash-up” for a musician: The historian/story-teller “plays with the material like Frankenstein with body parts” where “the point is not exposing or discovering the unknown, but rearranging the known” (28). This rearrangement is a *reevaluation*. Sophistic history makes it explicit that values structure how a story is told—and takes advantage of that arrangement. As such, “In sophistic history the pretense to distanced objectivity is overshadowed by an open acknowledgement of value orientation: any realignment is made for a purpose” (28). Sophistic historiography, then, brings a study of value-formation itself to the forefront of the historical process as both events and their representations are subject to the agonistic competition between value-laden subjects and the events, places, and people that demand the performance of those values, a process that literally brings into being that which we can point to and call “history.”

Carole Blair’s arguments toward developing a critical history within rhetorical studies concludes with a kind of resolution for the productive, sophistic, agonism between traditional

and progressive ideologies. Recognizing that tropes of historical preservation and progress are both mired in determinism and “entail preconceived valuations of history” that often become confused with “historical succession,” Blair recommends that history should instead be “a recognition and account of change” (419-20). Following Foucault’s *Archeology*, she argues that “Change is an ‘empty, abstract notion’ in itself [and] allows for multiple elaborations” (qtd. in Blair 420). This formulation has a distinctly sophistic bent—the same that I have been gesturing toward that places the historian/theorist/rhetorician within a both/and mode of discourse. With *change* comes a simple (but still open) generative purpose (if not *telos*). This call for a critical emphasis on change as well as the rather complex methodology I have assembled above are rather meaningless without a historical context within which to both implement and test them.

I explore these ideas, then, within the context of a grouping of responses to the crises of the 1930s that can be traced across the spectrum of civic experience, from the lives of “everyday” people, through intellectual and artistic thought and activity, and into the ideological structures of political systems and their various propaganda. That something as simple as folk music could have such a dynamic reach in its influence is exigence enough for its study within rhetorical frameworks, but there is something about that elasticity that begs certain questions about the folk artifact as a rhetorical object. Jarratt gives us a starting point to begin answering these questions at the methodological level. This methodology reveals sweeping potentials for lore as both a rhetoric of history (as a site where careful and prolonged study will reveal “history” as a vast network of complexities and paradoxes) but also as a rhetorical tool for those actors and agents for whom that lore became an instrument. As an “empty, abstract notion” on which multiple elaborations can be cast, a folk song can be used in service of both social and cultural permanence and change.

Part 2:**Permanence or Change? Poetics, Shifting Ideals, and Re-orientation in the 1930s**

“[R]adicalism is but one voice of the thirties, and it is not necessarily the loudest. Scholars have put forward a number of organizing themes for the culture history of the decade, each one of which tends to reduce the others to a supporting role at best. These themes include the cultivation of nationalism, the discovery of the concept of “culture,” the impact of “modern” media, the preoccupation with past or future, and the pursuit of an ideal commonality.”

Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts*, xiv

In the reflective prologue to *Permanence and Change*, written in 1953, nearly twenty years after its initial publishing, Kenneth Burke makes the following observation about the book and the cultural and personal milieu from which it was written:

This book [...] was written in the early days of the Great Depression, at a time when a general feeling that our traditional ways were headed for a tremendous change, maybe even a permanent collapse. It is such a book as authors in those days sometimes put together, to keep from falling apart. Not knowing quite where he was, this particular author took notes on “orientation.” Not being sure how to read the signs, he took notes on “interpretation.” Finding himself divided, he took notes on division (or as he calls it in this book, “perspective by incongruity”).

Looking for some device by which to reintegrate the muddle, he asked about the possibility of a “resimplification” that would not be an over-simplification. (xlvii)

In spite of the keen specificity of this accounting of Burke’s particular situation in the 1930s, the anxieties he evokes about disorientation, division, and the desire for greater simplification—for new symbols to assist the navigation of the rapidly changing world—aptly represent a prevailing bitter wind experienced by many during those uncertain years in the early 1930s. This

disorientation was experienced in multiple ways across the gamut of American experience largely due to the massive tectonic economic shifting effecting a good portion of the nation's "everyday" citizens, but also due to the (not unrelated) movement and upheaval within artistic, political, and even scientific spheres. Ideas about rhetoric were shifting as well. The Depression, along with the greater interwar period that encapsulated it, marked a time when, according to rhetorical historian James A. Herrick, "scientific thinking was [...] ascendant, and the methods of reasoning and speaking about contingent matters that had traditionally been studied and taught under the name of rhetoric were derided as decidedly inferior to scientific method" (204). This attitude of logical positivism (which had earlier echoes in both Ramist and Enlightenment attitudes about rhetoric), however, failed to prevent financial collapse, devastating war, and dangerous political extremes.¹⁹ The "new" rhetorics of Burke, I. A. Richards, and later Richard Weaver (among others), that began to emerge in the 1930s can be seen as a small part of the response to a growing intellectual suspicion of cut-and-dry empiricism as containing the answers to the world's social problems. Indeed, George Kennedy notes that this emergent work stood as "strong reactions to the circumstances of the 1930s and 1940s: economic depression, fascism, and the Second World War" (295).

Burke's work and life in the 1930s has particular resonance to this project in that he seems, in his persistent attempts to understand and theorize the paradoxes prevalent to 1930s culture, to personify both the struggle (*agon*) and the production inherent to experiencing *dissoi logoi*. Burke was deeply engaged in the scrum of 1930s New York leftist culture and those years would be, as Ann George and Jack Selzer (2007) posit, "the decade of his most remarkable productivity" (xi). *Permanence and Change*, which Burke published early in 1935, was a work

¹⁹ See Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958) and Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (1990) for insights on Enlightenment rhetoric as well as its shifting into the 18th and 19th centuries.

of “cultural history”—a “largely discarded form” but one that had many antecedents at the time—each of which grapple with ways, as Burke reflected later, to keep from falling apart (133).²⁰ Burke’s attempts to lionize art and poetics as a response to the economic, political, and artistic problems of the historical moment left us with a convenient list of theoretical terminology that can, without too much trouble, be adopted as a way of articulating what made a reorientation toward the aesthetics of vernacular culture so appealing during and after that decade. As I argue throughout the dissertation, vernacular culture was one of the many possible sites where the “possibility of a ‘resimplification’ that would not be an over-simplification” could be found (xlvii).

It should be acknowledged that adopting Burkean terms for a rhetorical project “without too much trouble” in the way I describe above can actually be a bit of a problematic norm for rhetoricians. Kenneth Burke’s terminology is perhaps too often used without much troubling and without an admission of the esoteric Burkean density from which the terms emerge. *Permanence and Change* is a challenging book—full of the complexity that we’ve come to expect (but sometimes ignore) from Burke. But when viewed as a cultural history of the 1930s, we can do something rhetoricians may not usually do with respect to Burke: put he and his ideas in context within a particular historical moment and use the terms he suggests to first better understand what they meant for him and then make arguments about how they illuminate other significant events, artifacts, and experiences in and around that moment. This theoretical approach avoids the lifting of terms and concepts wholesale from their foundry and instead identifies the terms themselves as historical constructions—as attempts to symbolize a trend, ideal, or norm into an

²⁰ George and Selzer have a list of nearly twenty books that meet their specifications for culture history, among them, Van Wyck Brooks’s *Three Essays on America* (1934), John Dewey’s *The Public and its Problems* (1927), I.A. Richards’s *Science and Poetry* (1926), and William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* (1925). See pg. 133 for their complete cultural history catalog.

easy package or “tool” that can be “used” to make the complex coherent. In this way, like history, theory (Burkean or otherwise) is also a process of lore making.

Burkean thought in the modernist 1930s

The closest thing we have to a biography of Burke during the interwar period are two books, Jack Selzer’s *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village* (1996) and Ann George and Jack Selzer’s *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s* (2007). The books seek to revise the common picture of Burke during the 1920s and 1930s as the isolated and independent autodidact he’s often characterized as and situate him within the intellectual, political, and artistic milieu of New York of those decades where he was a very active participant. Selzer and George’s work reads not only as a close study of Burke’s developing ideas, but of the landscape of intellectual and artistic modernism in New York over these two decades. Selzer (1996) describes modernism in much the same way as he presents Burke: as a developing conversation, and as dialogic rather than monolithic (3, 18). Further, he characterizes the years leading up to the 1930s as years of shifting values—of *reevaluation*:

In the final decades of the nineteenth century and particularly in the first two decades of the twentieth, modernism amounted to a dialogue on how people might appropriately respond to the civic and artistic stresses created when various nineteenth-century certitudes about nature and human nature eroded or collapsed.

(4)

These various endemic certainties were the residuum of post-Emersonian confidence in a God-animated nature, Victorian ideals supporting a “stable, hierarchical civilization,” and “nineteenth-century absolutes about law, morality, conduct, and the workings of nature” which

were beginning to decay under the influence of Darwinian, Kantian, and post-Newtonian ideas about mortality, morality, and science (5). Modernist ideals emerged as a represented desire to disassociate with genteel society, and to imagine “radically novel, radically shifting” and “relentlessly experimental” alternatives. It follows that modernist ideology during the interwar period was plural by nature, and often in productive competition (7).

These various modernisms revealed themselves as new creative ideas in all fields were intersected by the constant dialogue of competing ideologies that played out in popular journals of the day. Publications such as *The Masses* (later *The New Masses*), *The New Republic*, *The Dial*, *Broom*, *Smart Set*, *Aesthete*, and *Contact*, functioned as both modernist arcade and political soapbox. These were the journals that published the poetry of T.S. Elliot and William Carlos Williams, the fiction of expat authors Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemmingway, and the criticism of Malcolm Cowley and Kenneth Burke (as well as dozens if not hundreds of others)—many of whom “felt they could encourage a new and indigenous American culture that would combine radical politics with artistic experiment” (34). But these authors and artists were not all likeminded. Modernism flourished within the *agon* of arguments about the inherent value of art (such as those around formalism and the emergent “New Criticism”), artistic experimentation (such as Dadaism), and rich political diversity and dialogue. Much of the political discussion was between various left-leaning groups, each in its various shades, “liberal,” “socialist,” “communist,” but also “Marxist,” “Trotskyist,” and “Stalinist.” Various traditionalist stripes complicated this radical left as well. Selzer describes, for example, how political difference underscored the approaches of two groups, the New Humanists and the Literary Nationalists. On one hand, the New Humanists “shared the modernists' negative assessment of contemporary American art and society and strove to reinvigorate American culture; they criticized the

materialism, industrialism, and culture philistinism that in their eyes dominated the American scene” (39). The New Humanists were traditionalists who “opposed the moral and epistemological relativism of many of the moderns” and sought out “‘timeless’ moral and aesthetic values present in classical texts and cultures” (39) as a response to both the problems of capitalism and to European fascism. Literary Nationalists, on the other hand, responded to these same problems with a commitment to establish “a vigorous and coherent and anti-genteel American culture, supported by civil liberties and free speech” (35) and “sought to ameliorate American society through forward-looking artistic innovation” (39). Burke’s own political and artistic leanings might be understood as somewhere between these extremes, or more accurately, as attempt to reconcile both at the same time. Burke’s short fiction, poetry, and criticism in many of the publications mentioned above as well as his close association with *The Dial* where he was an editor and translator put him in position to be, as Selzer argues “one of the best informed students and practitioners of modernist art in the world” (57). Yet, for all his connectedness to the various cultural movements of modernity and his interest in the concept of the “common” (common ground, common sense, and the “common man”), Burke seldom comments directly on vernacular or folk culture—despite his stated desire for “simplification.”

Burke remembered the 1930s, and particularly the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, as “a time when, on every side, there was the feeling that, for better or worse, an earlier way of life had come abruptly, to an end” (lvi). That feeling of loss was reflected in anxieties about new, less-familiar ways of life which now included often dissonant realities formed in the wake of industrialization, materialism, mass culture, and other trends made prominent through rapid technological advance. The Depression began with a stock market “crash,” but that crash also sounded the tumble of key failures within the ideological systems

propped up to support these advances. “There was a general consensus among New York and *New Republic* intellectuals [...] that radical change was needed, probably of a Marxist model, if the nation were to endure” (George and Selzer 18). Artists also struggled toward a consensus on the role of art in the midst of crisis. As George and Selzer succinctly summarize, Burke, like many of his contemporaries struggled with a variety of these questions:

What exactly are the responsibilities of the artist to society? What should be the function of art, especially during times of political and social crisis? Should art reflect, create, or mold life—and in what proportions? To what degrees is a writer’s artistic rebellion also a political one? How should writers balance the claims of art and politics, the individual and the collective? (60)

These questions were poignant indicators of the kinds of changes that the various crises of the 1920s and ‘30s were inflicting upon both the creators and consumers of aesthetic culture. As alluded to above in the description of New Humanist values, adherents to philosophical aesthetic purity, which included such tenets as “a commitment to novelty and experimentation, individuality, and originality, impersonality and the autonomy of art,” and personal satisfaction as an artistic “motive [...], rather than commercial or rhetorical success” (61-62), found themselves increasingly at odds with those who saw in art a potential for political propaganda and persuasion.

For those in the latter group, the Great Depression was the *kairos* needed for socialist, proletariat revolution. The John Reed Club, for example, formed in October 1929 (the same month as the stock market crash) and with the motto “Art is a Class Weapon” fostered young writers and artists in the proletarian cause (20). John Reed Clubs across the country

exposed those young writers to industrial settings to add to the authenticity of their proletarian writing, organized and promoted art exhibits, supported little magazines, and held dances, concerts, and shows to enhance proletarian appreciation for art even as that art moved the masses toward revolution. (20)

An attempt by the Soviet Communist Party to create less radicalized and more inclusive left-leaning groups across the world would soon push JRC members to reform into “Popular Front” Programs, “an effort at a still broader, more inclusive and powerful leftist membership capable of aligning with other socialist and workers’ groups” (21) and from there sprang a group in 1935 known as the League of American Writers.

The League of American Writers, who boasted membership from a wide variety of well-known authors, scholars, and critics, was formally organized at the first Congress of the League of American Writers held in New York City from April 26-28, 1935. Kenneth Burke’s controversial address at that congress titled “Revolutionary Symbolism in America,” reflected his own ambivalence related to the conflict described above.²¹ According to the official call that appeared in the January 22, 1935 issue of *New Masses*, the Congress was formed to bring together those in “clear sympathy to the revolutionary cause [...] who do not need to be convinced of the decay of capitalism, of the inevitability of revolution” (357). But while the Marxist ideal implied here was promoted religiously by such “revolutionaries,” Burke found “Marx’s account of economic determinism to be neither realistic nor logically compelling” (George and Selzer 75). Instead, and as explicated in his speech, Burke saw these ideals as “symbols” that helped to make up the larger myth (an important form of lore) surrounding the

²¹ The *third* biennial Congress of the League of American Writers, held in 1939, is of passing interest here in that along with Kenneth Burke, Alan Lomax—fresh from a performance at the White House (see chapter 4)—was also in attendance and was networking with keynote speaker Langston Hughes (Szwed 150). There is no evidence suggesting that Burke and Lomax met at the conference or at any other time.

developing movement. “Myths,” he argued, “may be wrong, or they may be used to bad ends—but they cannot be dispensed with [. . . T]hey are our best psychological tool for working together”—for “cooperation” (267). Myths lose their potency, however, when their constitutive symbols begin to decay: “A symbol [...] loses its vitality when the kinds of cooperation it promotes—and with which its destiny is united—have ceased to be serviceable” (268). For Burke, both radical Marxism and the “bourgeois nationalism” that it was competing with based themselves on unsustainable symbols. To revitalize the former (which was closer to his personal ideologies), Burke recommend a re-orientation of the communist symbolic propaganda, away from “the worker” trope and towards the alternative symbol of “the people” which he saw as rating “highest in our hierarchy of symbols” (269). The distinction he draws between the two provide a keen insight into the nature of successful myth making through symbolism, particularly related to the successful representation and propagation of American values. George and Selzer help to synthesize Burke’s nuancing of the two terms: “A term such as *the worker* tended to exclude the very elements that Communist propaganda hoped to recruit, whereas for Burke ‘the symbol of the people’ contained ‘connotations both of oppression and of unity’” (17). Said Burke, “In suggesting that ‘the people,’ rather than ‘the worker,’ rate highest in our hierarchy of symbols, I suppose I am suggesting fundamentally that one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle-class without using middle-class values” (17) These arguments are in service to Burke’s larger interest in freeing the writer/artist/poet from the narrow demands that his colleagues at the Congress were recommending:

the *proletarian* novel has been oversimplified, leading to a negative symbol (that enlists our sympathies) rather than to a positive symbol (that incorporates our ideals). . . .By informing his work mainly from the standpoint of this positive

symbol, he would come to see, I believe, that a poet does not sufficiently glorify his political cause by pictures of suffering and revolt. Rather, a poet makes his soundest contributions in this wise: he shows himself alive to all the aspects of contemporary effort and thought The complete propagandist, it seems to me, would take an interest in as many imaginative, aesthetic, and speculative fields as he can handle—and into this breadth of his concerns he would interweave a general attitude of sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards our oppressive institutions. (270)

These words, which reflect Popular Front ideals more than those promoted by John Reed Clubs, would cause a bit of a stir at the Congress. However, “By taking up the topic of symbolism, Burke signaled to the audience the importance of communication and rhetoric in broadening the appeal of communism among the American public” (Giamo para. 19).

This call for broadening communism’s national appeal through the identification of common symbols was an echo of a theory Burke had already begun articulating in *Permanence and Change*, which was published just before the New York City Congress. *Permanence and Change* also “recommended a ‘poetic’ orientation as a gentle leaven to the hardcore Marxist interpretive slant” (George and Selzer 22). Burke saw the myth and symbol-making inherent to poetics as “creating a dynamic superstructure with the potential to transform society both culturally and economically” (89), one where a “better life” could be imagined and articulated symbolically/aesthetically by the writer, gleaned metaphorically by the reader, and then promoted and adhered to as an ideal by an identifying audience. This move from the symbolic language of poetics to the symbolic *action* of social value agreement is a roadmap for better understanding Burke’s championing of the poetic (and later dramatic) metaphor which “stresses

man's nature as a moral-ethical animal and takes into account the drama of choice which the self necessarily experiences in its quest" (Rueckert 52). Burke's interest throughout *Permanence and Change* revolves around the ways that human action is based in and around ethical constructs or a "scheme of values." People are motivated towards the proverbial good life—and to understand those people, you should start by understanding the "goods" they are motivated by. The great financial crisis of the early 20th century was, as he sees it, a direct result of a misguided ethics developed from the pursuit of an unsustainable system of "goods"—commercial wealth drawn from a mechanized ethics and infrastructure. In the wake of the industrial revolution, new means of wealth production resulted from rapidly advancing mechanistic technologies and these new means brought with them new moral structures which, according to Burke, lacked distinct humanistic (and communistic) virtues (another form of wealth) derived from artful cooperation. "There is a fundamental relationship between *wealth* and *virtue*," Burke pronounces in *Permanence and Change*, "which no 'spiritual' scheme must be allowed to deny by fiat. *Property* and *propriety* are not etymologically so close by mere accident. Morals and property are integrally related. They are obverse and reverse of the same coin. They both equip us for living." (212). Burke would use the phrase "equipment for living" in a later essay to argue for literature or poetry ("any work of critical or imaginative cast")—as "the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations" (*Philosophy of Literary Form* 1). Or, in other words, poetry (or more broadly, *poetics*) contains within it an artful rendering of moralistic structures—rules for life. Property and material goods represent, in the same way poetry does, a different set of moral structures—rules for a different kind of life. The central argument in *Permanence and Change* revolves around Burke's perception of the tension between varying systems of morality and how they construct and motivate an orientation towards a "good life"

with the widest potential human benefit. Burke believes that a poetic “terminology of motives” is “foremost.”

Poetry and Piety: Making and Breaking Society’s Moral Grooves

“Morals are fists,” Burke argues late in *Permanence and Change*. They motivate and punctuate both good and poor behavior. When the motives behind morals are understood, we can know “*why* people do as they do” and can therefore “know *what* to expect of them and of ourselves,” which “shape[s] our decisions and judgments and policies” (18). This “vocabulary of motives” is an “orientation,” which “includes a vocabulary of ought and ought-not, with attendant vocabulary of praiseworthy and blameworthy” (21). Burke’s “scheme of duties and virtues” as contained within moral structures of human motivation is akin to Aristotle’s epideictic theory of rhetoric. Both are containers for language that flesh out a “rationalization, a set of motives belonging to a specific orientation” (23). Burke’s notions of “piety,” or the differences between the pious and impious, is developed in *Permanence and Change* and is connected to his notions of “perspective by incongruity” and “orientation.” Above, I used the term piety to describe a kind of traditional adherence or orientation to time-honored values. This is drawn from Burke’s own definition of piety as an implicit “sense of how it ought to be” (71), or drawing on George Santayana, “loyalty to the sources of our being” (69). In this sense, piety can act as both groove and rut. It can guide “at times of weakness and doubt, when [...] convictions are not enough to sustain [you]” and help to keep you “under discipline by the walls of [your] monastery (that is, *by the ruts* which his experience itself has worn)” (79 my emphasis).

This notion of rationalization, or that which is “rational” or pious within a given orientation, plays an important part in the Burkean understanding of world and value-making.

Burke views history as having moved through (and between) successive rationalization constructs: magical, religious, and scientific. Each rationalization is an ontological response and challenge to mystery in the human world and as such each works as a means of knowledge production and management within its system. Magic and positivistic science based their rationalization on assumptions that “nature operates through immutable laws” (59) which can be manipulated by savvy practitioners. Religion, on the other hand, is a kind of *non*-rational rationalization most useful for understanding and dealing with realities out of human control or on the outside of human understanding. Religious mysticism also provides a space wherein paradox—a construct not generally legible within magical or scientific rationalizations—can be managed not only successfully but also with significant meaning (and for good or ill).

The distinctions outlined above are important for Burke insofar as these ontological systems of rationalization produce a viable ethics—an epideictic scheme of values—for both understanding and critiquing the human motives produced within those systems. Burke is most interested in promoting an ethics that responds to the deep complexity of human motivation, one at home with the non-rational elements that a religious rationalization provided, but also one that would provide a vocabulary for developing systems of meaning despite and even through those complexities—a “secular mysticism” (113). For Burke, the poetic or dramatic metaphor becomes the

ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man’s relations to it. . . . In adopting such metaphor as key, we have a vocabulary of motives already at hand, evolved through the whole history of human thought. Indeed, beginning with such a word as *composition* to designate the architectonic nature of either a poem, a social construct, or a method of practical action, we can take over the whole

vocabulary of tropes (as formulated by the rhetoricians) to describe the specific patterns of human behavior. (263)

He then does so, showing that onomatopoeia, synecdoche, and other rhetorical tropes are themselves methods for representing common human actions and their motives symbolically through language. “Symbolic action” is another phrase familiar to those who study Burke. Generally, Burke uses the phrase to describe how language mediates the complexities of human thought, action, and being. Poetry, then, with the rich rhetorical potentials named above (and many others), is well met for the job.

Beyond poetry’s ability to represent human emotional complexity, Burke is particularly interested in poetry’s symbolic potentials for discovering “new meanings”—particularly during crisis—as “the crumbling and conflict of values” (116) leads to the “breaking down [of] old schemes of orientation” (111) and the need to build new ones. The method he provides for this action is a kind nurturing of a prophetic ability to “see around the edges of orientation in which a poet or thinker lives” (117). He calls this sight “perspective by incongruity.” In *Attitudes Toward History*, the follow-up to *Permanence and Change* published in 1937, Burke defined it as “[a] method for gauging situations by verbal ‘atom cracking.’ That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category” (308). Burke uses two examples, one pious and one impious, to demonstrate that an incongruous perspective or the deliberate manipulation of perspective (“planned incongruity”) is functional as a means of cultural comment and critique. Humor, which is the first, plays on the pious adherence to systems of “order” and orthodoxy by highlighting natural incongruities and “introducing a kind of artificial blindness, a complete vacuity as their [a] new point of view” (111). Humor is pious because it relies on a normative orientation for its

effectiveness. It may, in Burke's words, throw "a shoe among the wheels of our judgment" but it succeeds by leaving the "favored judgment completely in tact" and even "deliberately strengthening it." The grotesque, Burke's second example, redraws norms through the juxtaposition of rational but unrelated parts which, in their new coupling, produce new ways of seeing and new ways of thinking. Like the maker of medieval gargoyles, the use of a man's head and a bird's body "was offering combinations which were completely rational as judged by [the maker's] logic of essences. In violating one order of classification, he [sic] was stressing another" (112). Burke then points to several places where perspective by incongruity is at play within the Modernist aesthetic: in Hemmingway's exquisite depictions of the horrific (110), in Joyce's "blasting apart the verbal atoms of meaning" (113) only to make new elements from the ruins, in the super-realism of *The Persistence of Memory*—Dali's "dripping watch" painting (113), and even in the Freudian interpretation of dreams, gargoyles that "seek to connect events by a 'deeper' scheme of logic than prevails in our everyday rationale of utility" (113). Finally, perspective by incongruity is illustrative of how Burke wants us to view systems of orientation. A juxtaposition of the scientific orientation with the religious, for example, illuminates how each scheme draws on similar linguistic/poetic metaphors for its construction and circulation and thereby diminishes the primacy of whichever perspective is currently in vogue. Burke will later call these areas of overlap "modes of convertability between economic, religious, and esthetic vocabularies" (*Attitudes Toward History* 313–314). Scientists and prophets are, it seems, cut from the same linguistic cloth and each write holy books.

Some synthesis here between several terms (which includes some of my own "modes of convertability" between rhetorical epochs) will help to bring the themes I have been exploring in this chapter together and give exigency to the work I engage in throughout the chapters ahead.

Burke's Perspective by incongruity is, for all intents and purposes, another way of stating the general ideas behind the sophistic *dissoi logoi*. Both denote ways in which pious and impious attitudes and ideologies overlap or should be made to overlap in order to create new ways of understanding and avenues for cooperation with one another. Burke points to poetics as the "ultimate" metaphor for capturing and creating these symbols of human action and, as I have already expressed in the introduction, I see this insight as an expansion of what Aristotle termed epideictic rhetoric. And while Aristotle and other scholars have focused on epideictic's constitutive, value sustaining qualities, Burke's championing of the poetic register of rhetoric invites a reconsideration of epideictic rhetoric as value-making and even value-critiquing and revising. Rhetoric in the epideictic/poetic mode can be both pious and impious, and often both at once when planned incongruity is at play.

This both/and, *dissoi logoi*, perspective by incongruity, sophistic historiography is precisely the frame that I would like to use to think through the resurgence of interest in folk traditions during the 1930s. Burke didn't have much to say about folk music, but he was interested in the reasons people "[begin] to seek for fresh a fresh basis of simplification" related to conceived notions of human purpose (a powerful if conceptual motivating force) (*Permanence and Change* 172). This "purpose" is generally conceived of within either ethical (teleological) or logical (mechanistic) systems of orientation, a dichotomy that becomes "bewilderingly complex," as positivistic accounts of causality revealed greater and greater "unknown unknowns." Scientific certainty, it would seem, requires its own sort of faith. "Thinkers 'went nudist'"—a practice common "at every point in history when an orientation has been radically brought into question" (172). "Nudism," Burke continues, "represents an attempt to return to essentials, to get at the irreducible minimum of human certainty, to re-emphasize the *humanistic*

as the sound basis above which any scheme of values must be constructed” (173). When economic, scientific, and other “accepted terms of authority [have] fallen into disrepute, [people] seek in the cosmos or in the catacombs some undeniable body of criteria. They try to salvage whatever values, still intact, may serve as the basis of new exhortations and judgments” (173). In 1930s America, the humanistic values of ordinary (and often rural) American people sprang to the forefront of the popular imaginary as a place to find renewed or persistent values. The seemingly authentic and essential humanism of vernacular poetic and artistic culture represented a kind of moral safe house among the turmoil of toppling superstructures of certainty.

Burke’s contribution to this repeating historical cycle isn’t the demonstration that it exists, but rather his acknowledgement of the mutability of the poetic to “authenticate” the values of seemingly conflicting orientations. Folk culture—and folk music in particular—became a vehicle for both conservative moral stabilizing but also would be useful in pushing towards revised and progressive value systems, particularly those around race. The fascinating aspect of this process of mutability is how fast it can revolve from recovered authentic history, to progressive value marker, to codified commercial product and back again. Authenticity as a trope is itself a *dissoi logoi*; it is a container of incongruous perspectives come together to motivate by making the mythic momentarily real. It persists as lore until the cultural imaginaries producing those exigencies expire and authenticity has expended its rhetorical utility and is let go, back into the mytho-historical wild: catch-and-release.

Part 3:

Depression Era Authenticity: Reviving and Re-forging the Past into a Tool for the Present

“[T]he market crash and subsequent Depression engendered a new cynicism toward the institutions of Anglo-American culture. Instead of being viewed as a threat to civilization, the

primitive became its potential savior—the means by which a decadent West could restore its lost vibrancy. The threat was no longer primitive insurgency but the random cruelty of a whimsical marketplace and the government's inability to resolve a domestic crisis.”

Paul McCann, *Race, Music, and National Identity*, 61

Folklore collection, often understood (especially at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th) as the romantic preservation of an idyllic vernacular past—a kind of bottling up of residues from the “good ol’ days” for safe keeping—began in the 1930s to take on a different tenor. This shift from the “endangered relic” paradigm to one that recognized the living and vibrant utility of vernacular artifacts underscores the historiographical nature of material culture. As the Coen Brothers’ character Llewyn Davis quips in the recent film about the folk revival of the early 1960s, “If it was never new and never gets old, it’s a folk song.” That sentiment sums up the appeal of folk music—it is both old and new simultaneously. Folk music had utility in the 1960s for the same reason that it did during the 1930s: It could be a container of expression for current and emergent ideologies, packaged within the ethos of “tradition.” Vernacular music traditions provide a kind of road map for genealogical and ideological exploration—a sonic keyhole to the past that can be pursued and then lived in as old folk traditions are adopted and incorporated into contemporary exigencies. I’m reminded, for example, of Kurt Cobain’s deft appropriation of the Lead Belly classic “Where Did You Sleep Last Night” for Nirvana’s 1994 *MTV Unplugged in New York*. Cobain remade the song (titled “Black Girl” in the Lead Belly version) which became a reminder of the deep connectivity between succeeding generations of “alternative” music, in this case between traditional blues and 1990s “grunge.” The tune would also become Kurt Cobain’s swansong—the last recorded musical artifact before his suicide just five months after taping the Unplugged session. In this way, “Where Did You Sleep Last Night” took on new layers of signification and Lead Belly’s sonic thread can now be tied to the early

1990s and the tortured genius of Cobain and will certainly have a life beyond this. “Where Did You Sleep Last Night” is a song that was never new and never gets old.

Folk “revival,” then, is cyclical and generally emerges to meet the cyclically reoccurring necessity of renewal: the desire to find stability during or following a period of uncertainty, a search for a sense of permanence despite continued change. The renewed interest in vernacular music during the 1930s was part of a trend emergent during the period between World War I and II—especially in the midst of the Depression—to seek out the “real” or “authentic” aspects American culture during a moment of shared crisis. As Regina Bendix (2009) asserts, “The quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and antimodern” (8)—or, in line with my earlier argument, it is a *dissoi logoi*. “[Authenticity] is oriented,” she continues, “toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity” (8).²² In the 1930s, these “methods and sentiments” were tied to both the technological advances in the instruments of representation—photography, audio recording, and film—and to a popular sentiment fascinated with representations of emotional “human-ness.” William Stott (1986) argues that “The adjective ‘human’ recurs throughout the thirties literature as a synonym for emotional, or touching, or heartfelt” (6). He cites the example of a critic who praised Virgil Thomson's score to *The River* because it borrowed folk melodies and hence was “full of the emotional content inherent in anything essentially human” (6).²³ Technological advances provided a larger population immediate and accessible ways to document or experience representations of the “everyday.” Stott references Warren Susman’s essay “The Thirties,” quoting this significant passage: “The whole idea of documentary [was that it makes possible]—

²² See also Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (1989).

²³ See the footnote marked with a double-asterisk (**) on p. 6 for this reference.

not with words alone but with sight and sound—to see, know, and feel the details of life, to feel oneself part of some other's experience” (Susman in Stott 8). Authenticity might be described, then, as the complex phenomenology of identity-making that occurs through the imagined identification with either the people or ideals (or both) of a mythic past. In a like manner, Charles Taylor has written that authenticity maintains a kind of non-rational ethic of “what it means to be true and full human beings” (26). Whether this ethic circulates as part of the soul-enhancing paradigm of the “good” (Plato), as a road to God (Saint Augustine), or even a non-theistic (but romantic) assumptions of an earlier and higher moral plane, it serves the same purpose: “Our moral salvation comes from recovering authentic moral contact with ourselves” (27).

These formulae begin to express authenticity’s potential for power as it is evoked through the competing representations of moral humanness and individuality that translate into workable “ethics.” This might also be understood as a kind of epideictic continuance or the survival and persistence of what constitutes the goods and ills within a society. Taylor rightly identifies the contemporary culture of authenticity as one engaged in rhetorics of difference. The authentic individual is “original”—wholly unique from others—and therefore “diversity” becomes a worthy ideal to seek after. Authenticity, however, can be both powerful and problematic. At worst, the search for both “self” and “other” motivated by an impulse for cultural gatekeeping and moral self-aggrandizement through the essentializing difference. Under this model the racist, classist, or sexist tropes of the past might merely be replaced with new tropes of equal or only slightly diminished inequity, refashioned and fit for the times.

Like other interwar period folklorists, John and Alan Lomax were not innocent of these kinds of reductions, but their perspectives grew more nuanced over time. In particular, the Lomaxes came to understand folklore in general and vernacular music in particular not so much

as an endangered relic as a substance with living and vibrant utility, which elevated its status from artifacts to rhetorics. Said Alan Lomax in 1981, “I realized [...] that the folklorist’s job was to link the people who were voiceless and who had no way to tell their story, with the big mainstream of world culture” (Lomax & Cohen 94-95). Getting a sense for the tension between the competing polarities I have been collecting (tradition/progression, individual/other, originality/diversity, relic/rhetoric) is vital to understanding the social and political function of institutions like Archive of Folk Song and their practitioners. Lomax and other New Deal folklorist/scholars promoted what historian Benjamin Filene (2000) summarizes as “new ideas about what constituted authentic folklore, how to preserve it, and what roll it should play in contemporary society” (137). These new ideas posited a functionalist view of the authentic that rejected the popular notion that modern(ist) society had evolved beyond the need for “primitive” mythopoetic cultural constructs to define itself.

Burke’s notions of “substance” and “consubstantiality” (which, though unpublished in those terms, were in development in the 1930s alongside the ideas explored above) are useful here in parsing the ways that authenticity can be redrawn as a useful ideal rather than an essentializing one. Substance is understood as the recognition of that which “stands beneath or supports the person or thing” (*Grammar of Motives* 22) or the complex arithmetic between personal and cultural identity: one’s “roots.” On the other hand, “consustantiality” is the identification between two or more substances with intent to create mutual understanding. For Burke, these ideas and ideals were at the heart of rhetoric. This also was the project of the Lomaxes. At their best, John and Alan Lomax sought out the “substances” of America through the collection of vernacular musical sounds in order to promote a national consubstantiality or a

more democratically rich understanding of U.S. national identity, particularly around the African-American male subject.

In Search of the Authentic Vernacular Other: John and Alan Lomax in the 1930s

“During the late spring of 1932,” records John A. Lomax in his autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (1947), “at the nadir of the general financial collapse, my fortunes had reached their lowest ebb [...] I was worth less than nothing; I was heavily in debt, I had no job” (106). He and his wife, Bess Brown Lomax, had also just suffered a terrible illness and, to his great distress, she had not survived it. Lomax’s experience was becoming more and more typical for Americans, as 1932 marked the beginning of the third full year of the Great Depression in the United States and would be one its most devastating. In 1932, the GNP would fall a record 13.4 percent and unemployment across the nation would rise to 23.6 percent—thirty-four million people without an income and essentially no social safety net.²⁴ John Lomax was (at that time) a banker, and everywhere banks were failing. Earlier in the narrative, he writes solemnly of the experience of dejected bond buyers confronting him at his desk in the bank where he worked, aghast because the bonds he had recommended were now worth nearly nothing. “I was forced to sit and take it,” he recalls. “The market in New York had gone mad. What could I say? Nothing. And I said nothing” (104).

That spring, Lomax had a hopeful but somewhat desperate meeting in New York with H. S. Latham, president of the Macmillan Company. Having had success with a book published by Macmillan (*Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads* published in 1910), Lomax was hopeful that his proposal for a new project would be accepted and funded with an advance against the royalties

²⁴ See “Timelines of the Great Depression:
http://www.hyperhistory.com/online_n2/connections_n2/great_depression.html

by the company. He shopped several ideas with Mr. Latham, the last of which caught the publisher's attention, the story-ballad of "Ida Red," an African-American song John had learned during research for his earlier book on the Texas Gulf Coast:

I went down town one day in a lope
 Fooled around till I stole a coat,
 Then I came back and did my best,
 Fooled around till I got the vest—
 Oh, weep, oh, my Ida,
 For over that road I'se bound to go.

They had me tied with a ball and chain,
 Waiting all ready for de east-bound train,
 And every station we passed by,
 Seemed like I hear little Ida cry,
 Oh, weep, oh, my Ida,
 For over that road I'se bound to go.

If I'd a-listened to what Ida said,
 I'd a-been sleeping in Ida's bed,
 But I paid no mind to my Ida Red,
 And now I'se sleepin' in a convict's bed.
 Oh, weep, oh, my Ida,
 For over that road I'se bound to go.

I wash my face an' I comb my head
 I'm a'mighty fool about Ida Red;
 When I git out-a this old shack
 Tell little Ida I'se a-comin' back.
 Oh, weep, oh my Ida
 For over that road I'se bound to go. (Lomax & Lomax 110)

According to Lomax's autobiography, after hearing "Ida Rose," Latham was amused and intrigued (109). He authorized Macmillan to contract the book that would later become *American Ballads and Folksongs*, published in 1934. The book had several close ancillaries in the market, but none that centrally emphasized folksongs like "Ida Red" from the African-American vernacular tradition. The book contract accompanied with a small advance would give sixty-five-year-old John Lomax new hope and a fresh beginning in the career as a folklorist he'd always

hoped to have but could never quite launch. The project would bring about an association with and formal mission from the Library of Congress to collect songs and, subsequently, pave the way for his son Alan Lomax's later employment there. For John Lomax, it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

By May of 1933, both John and Alan Lomax were in route to what both considered the most likely place to find authentic African-American music the likes of "Ida Red": Southern penitentiaries, where they would find a literally captive audience for their project. Prisoners were cut off from the general public engaged in menial and often back-breaking farm labor and, if the Lomaxes' hunch was right, possessors of generations of otherwise lost folk songs. John's interest in "Negro music" wasn't incidental to this particular project. Since at least 1904, three years before the publication of his popular first book *Cowboy Songs*, John's enthusiasm for black vernacular music was noted in personal correspondence and in various publishing proposals and by 1910 he already had evidence that there was a rich storehouse of "authentic" African-American music if one only knew the right places to look.²⁵ John's attitude and excitement were likely related to his mentor, George Kittredge's belief "that black folksongs and folklore had never been collected by anyone with a genuine interest in preserving them in their native forms" (Porterfield 168). Black music had been collected and published before but was always corrupted either by white scholars who, in Lomax's words "dressed them up for literary purposes," (Porterfield 509n17) or by literate blacks who "sought to polish [the songs] in order to present their race in the best possible light" (168). Lomax maintains, however, that Negro folksong was

²⁵ In a 1904 letter to his wife Bess, John Lomax mentions his excitement related to the music he heard among black students during "inspection trips to the state college for blacks at Prairie View (Porterfield 168). In 1907, John's original proposal for the book that would eventually become *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* was actually a book on "Negro songs"—which was rejected in favor of the Cowboy tune project (167). And in 1910, he had already collected at least one hundred examples of what he called "mating ballads" and was anxious to find a potential publisher for Negro music in its "native form" (167).

“the most natural and distinctive [music] of any America had produced” (168) and that scholars had yet to devote significant energy to it. Lomax’s biographer Nolan Porterfield points out that these three thematic elements, “the lack of serious attention to Negro music despite its important cultural significance,” the “corruption of ‘Negro ideas’ by whites for literary purposes,” and “the regrettable efforts of educated blacks to suppress or refine their race’s lively and authentic vernacular music” emerge again and again as significant to the work of John Lomax (168).

In sum, Lomax’s interest in the black vernacular culture appears to be based on a legitimate scholarly exigence: a gap in knowledge. Lomax’s early concern with the quality of that scholarship—of the need for its guarded “authenticity” against both white “corruption” and black “polish” is, perhaps, the most persuasive evidence to this end. On the other hand, its Lomax’s research methods and relationships with the African-Americans who would begin contributing their voices to the Library of Congress’s archives that can create some ambivalence around the scholarly objectivity of his work. If nothing else, the juxtaposition of these two competing ideologies—that of the scholar and that of the “mossback” Southern gentleman—present a complex figure in John A. Lomax as one worthy of careful investigation.

In his book, *Disturbing the Peace* (2009), Bryan Wagner comments on these delicate relationships between racial codification, cultural representation, and other symbolic rhetorics of circulating vernacular music. He references a well-known story told by W.C. Handy (self-named “father of the blues”) of his career-changing encounter with a African American vagrant who was “loose-jointed,” “[whose] clothes were rags,” and “feet peeped out of his shoes” (26). The man, who was waiting for a train sang and played a song on the guitar about waiting for trains. “That was not unusual,” Handy writes. “Southern Negroes sang about everything. Trains, steamboats, steam whistles, sledge hammers, fast women, mean bosses, stubborn mules—all

became subjects for their songs” (Handy in Wagner, 26-27). Handy would go on to become one of the most successful composers in the United States and using the standard blues idiom gleaned from this nameless vagrant, would effectively introduce blues music (rendered for orchestra) to the wider United States.²⁶ Wagner comments how the so-called black tradition was often collapsed and codified by collectors and enthusiasts like Handy through the musical renderings of a “folk soul” and racial “trueness” found most prominently in the music of “manual laborers, loafers, and near-criminals” (34). This music gave collectors access to what John Lomax called the “actual workaday experience of the Negro” and, listening closely, one could hear “a negro thinking out loud” (34). Wagner’s observation complicates the opinions of scholars such as Amiri Baraka (referenced above) about there being a direct conduit between received folk traditions and an easily constructed understanding of “blackness.” Yet, in the early twentieth century, this was precisely the approach:

The best songs, it was said, were like a “folk-mirror.” As soon as this cross-referencing is under way, nothing else has to happen for the black tradition to become a folk tradition. Based on the glow of natural alignment between the tradition and its speakers, ethnographers were free to follow their presumption that black culture came from a traditional world where expression was still indexed directly to its producers. The black tradition was a folk culture where singing and storytelling retained the stamp of its authors, a tradition unlike modern communications that lost their aura as they became standardized, market-based, and mediated by mechanically reproduced image and sound. (Wagner 34-35)

²⁶ Handy’s subsequent and controversial claim as “the inventor of jazz” and jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton’s famous response is the subject of this dissertation’s third chapter.

The train-stop songster of Handy's memory is significant to this paradigm in that he is (and remains) nameless in our public memory. He is only understood through his "unindividuated" symbolic representation as vagrant, which meets with expectations of authentic African-American representation. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Lomaxes selected the prison as the site with the greatest potential for accessing and transmitting black tradition into folk tradition where African-Americans existed (in their minds) in similar strokes of caricature. There is a significant difference, however, between Wagner's and Baraka's interpretations of significance of this process of transference. Wagner is interested in the indeterminate and radical complexity of blackness in the United States. Blackness indicates "existence without standing in the modern world system" and is a "situation in which you are anonymous to yourself [and is therefore a] kind of invisibility" (1). Being black can be defined "not as a common culture but instead as a species of statelessness" (23). In Wagner's view, any attempt, musical or otherwise, to reduce blackness to a single tradition is suspect. Baraka, on the other hand, sees the potential of microcosmic unification of African-American tradition through a study of its blues tradition. The tension between these two perspectives underscores the rhetorical nature of the vernacular artifacts in question. They are contingent and therefore flexible. Vernacular rhetorics can be codified by rhetors into constitutive bundles of representative (and paradigmatic) meaning but can also be dispersed, fragmented, complicated, historicized, and undermined in order to understand and explore the *lack* of any real representative meaning.

The acknowledgment of this paradox—one that recognizes the power of and potential for both paradigmatic and fragmented renderings of sonic vernacular cultural artifacts should be at the center of our understanding of the functions of sonic rhetorics. As described above, the paradox has certainly been at the core of various scholarly passes at (and uses of) archival music.

In the following chapter, I conduct an in depth analysis of eight songs the Lomaxes collected during their trips to Southern African American prisons. This case study activates, where possible, the methodologies introduced in this chapter and also works to explain and understand a current tension between rhetorical studies and sound studies related to the sonic archive. Careful listening to the subjects of the Lomax archive will reveal African-American music as a conduit for both shared cultural memory and a complex for necessarily-incomplete (and often mysterious) renderings of black racial formation in the United States. Wagner and Baraka highlight this paradox but it also found, as I have shown above, within the theories of sophistic historiographers, as well as in developing theories of rhetoric emergent in the 1930s, particularly Kenneth Burke's. As approaches to folklore continued to develop in the early-to-mid twentieth century, the indeterminacy of "blackness" began to be represented with increased poignancy as vernacular music was collected and made legible, powerful, and eventually essential to a nation grappling with its own paradoxes during the interwar period.

Chapter Two

Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings

“I must place that group of Negro “boys” who this summer, cheerfully and with such manifest friendliness, gave up for the time their crap and card games, their prayer meetings, their much needed Sunday and evening rest, in order to sing for Alan and me—that group whose real names we omit for no reason than to print the substituted picturesque nicknames. Those black “boys” of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee by their singing removed any doubt we may have had that Negro folk songs are without a rival in the United States. To Iron Head, Clear Rock, Chin Scooter, Lead Belly, Mexico, Black Samson, Lightnin' Eyes, Double Head, Bull Face, Log Wagon, Creepin' Jesus, Long Distance, Burn Down, Steam Shovel, Rat, Black Rider, Barrel House, Spark Plug, to two "girls" Ding and Bat, and others who helped without giving their names, and to many another the thousands we saw, in happy memory tinged with sadness, I offer grateful thanks.”

John Lomax, in the acknowledgements to *American Ballads and Folksongs*, xiii

“[B]lackness indicates. . . existence without standing in the modern world system. To be black is to exist in exchange without being a party to exchange. Being black is belonging to a state organized according to its ignorance of your perspective—a state that does not, that cannot, know your mind.”

Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery*, 1

“The Lomaxes were in rebellion against what Zora Neale Hurston derided as ‘the spirituals dressed up in tuxedos’: black culture dressed up for national consumption in the pretentious garb of European high cultural forms. Rather than disguising or denying the folk roots of black music, the Lomaxes sought to present to the American public the results of their wanderings: an authentic black folk figure performing authentic black music. However, what exactly constituted this authenticity was determined and defined by the Lomaxes themselves.”

Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men*, 102

Introduction

This chapter considers the rhetorical potential of sound and particularly the historicized sounds of the sonic archive. I argue for sound as both a material and theoretical mode useful in decentering traditional text and image-based rhetorical approaches to history—away from certainty and towards a model that embraces multiplicity, slippage, and paradox. To this end, I

curate eight songs from recordings made in 1933 and 1934 in Southern African-American prisons by John and Alan Lomax. This music, housed at and occasionally released by the Library of Congress, would become a means for both racial understanding during the 1930s and the problematic codification of historical African-American identity in the US. Listening to the voices on the records in a rhetorical key offers a way to understand more fully the multiplicities of meaning and the paradoxes inherent to racial representation. I argue that such a close listening not only provides a more nuanced understanding of the complications and politics of representation during this time but also reveals the complex nature of the individual, communal, and political agencies at play among the prisoners themselves. I begin, first, by outlining the exigence for a sonic approach to rhetorical history work, particularly in a field where visual representation has become a ubiquitous go-to medium when looking to expand rhetoric's historiographical work beyond textual representations.

From Seeing to Hearing: Decentering our Sense of Rhetorical History

Over the last several decades, the study of the visual has become so enmeshed within rhetorical studies that "visual rhetoric" is no longer merely a subfield to which a few scholars of rhetoric lay claim but part of the very culture of the field. This current reality within rhetorical studies is, however, part of a much longer historical trajectory of what is often termed ocular-centrism in Western culture, where "knowing and believing [are] grounded in seeing and the visualized," perhaps as far back as Plato's allegorical cave (Gronbeck xxii). The visual, it would appear, has had much to teach us about rhetorical practice, culture, and history and will continue to do so. But, what of sound?

In his recent *Sonic Persuasion* (2011), Greg Goodale traces the neglect of sound within the Western tradition in its preference for other visualist methods of knowledge making. This attitude ramifies across intellectual history with particularly cacophonous moments during the Enlightenment in the development of scientific method and observation (both visualist practices) and then again during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when print culture reached its apex. “Our captivation by visual culture,” Goodale concedes, “has produced a legacy that will take decades if not centuries to overcome” (5). From a rhetorical perspective the neglect of “ear culture” as Marshall McLuhan termed it, along with the growing preponderance of electronic sources for publishing, present a kairotic juxtaposition of circumstance and recognized need around the development of a sound-based rhetorical study and outlets for such work. There has been a definite shift within rhetorical studies in the direction of greater openness toward what is sometimes called “multimodality,” or the notion—most notable in *multimedia*—that discourse is not of a single mode. So what is the use, then, is a rejoinder for sound? Especially amidst critiques that a focus on multimodality is still one of “parts” rather than their sum and casts a discriminating shadow over the reality of our experiences within the complex ambience of the sensorium (Rickert 142). The simple answer is that even as we begin to explore the benefits of ambient and multi-sensory approaches, sound itself remains under-theorized. Given the prolonged emphasis on the visual, a sustained scrutinizing of the sonic will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the multiplicities of rhetorical practice itself. Sound’s multiple layers, affects, and voices provide an opportunity think carefully about the sensorium and re-theorize the “multi-” as present across *and* within all modes, especially those still understood and theorized as discrete. As will prove to be thematic throughout this chapter (and as explored in Chapter 1), the study of the sonic is keyed to a both/and approach.

This model has several advantages, but most important to this chapter will be sound's promise within rhetoric for complicating and expanding the reach of historical work in post-modernity when so much of our understanding has swung (productively) away from certainty and toward the constant slippage of multiplicity, simultaneity, and dissonance. Unlike many visualist paradigms, sound is also always multiple, simultaneous, and (outside of our ear-buds) dissonant and therefore replete with new constructs with which to build new theoretical models within rhetoric—open models where uncertainty is the celebrated paradigm and the scholarly search is as important as what might be found.

Stepping away from the search for certainty as a guiding principle in our work, allows us, in Christa Olson's words, to "learn, not teach, about the rhetorical histories we describe" (82). Olson answers the difficulty of working in a post-certainty age by inviting us to make that decentering part of our approach—to "build our histories on shifting sand yet find ways to make them stand" (82). Echoing the methodology for sophistic historiography forwarded by Susan Jarratt, Olson invites us to seek out and build "theories to slip" and to choose "conceptual frames that call tensions to the foreground" (96). This shift toward tension, slippage, learning, and dissonance is where I begin. Sound has not yet had a significant impact on the field, and the problem, perhaps is that we have not yet learned to listen for dissonance with a rhetorical ear.

To address this state of critical affairs, recent scholarship in rhetorical studies enjoins us towards a new scholarly "ethic of listening" (Gunn et al. 477). This slowly growing movement to bridge sound studies with rhetoric (which I take up in more detail in the next chapter) emphasizes the importance of scholars of rhetoric to draw deeply from the sound studies literature already in circulation. Still, a new ethic requires more than just a well-informed body of participants; it also must include disciplining the physical body itself toward various listening

practices. Compared to the traditional scholarly environment where academic practices have evolved and become engrained within visual practices (reading, skimming, and, of course, looking at the pictures), listening can be a different and demanding experience insofar as it requires of rhetoric scholars more time and patience (you can't skim audio artifacts) in shaping potentially new sonic literacies.

Historical work, Olson suggests, offers an indispensable arena where we may begin working through the processes of a decentered approach to rhetoric. Historical work on recorded sound, and particularly historical music, provides a conspicuous and auspicious place to begin the practice of listening rhetorically. Many of us are already equipped with some history-based musical listening skills or literacies, even if they have come as a result of casual listening. Such listeners are generally attuned, for example, to music as belonging to the popular culture of a particular epoch and/or genre: '50s doo-wop, '70s disco, or '90s grunge. Casual listening yields enough experience with the sonic to warrant listening critically, but more developed and nuanced sonic literacies present a variety of new scholarly opportunities for rhetoricians. The ready collections of archival music housed in archives such as the American Folklife Center at the Library Congress (not to mention the growing number of online collections such as the [Association for Cultural Equity](#)) paired with the current ease in which sonic artifacts can be obtained, shared, and circulated presents a compelling case for the rhetorical study of such music. For decades, archival music was tied to its geographical location and circulation depended upon a complex network of institutional decisions, funding availability, and audience demand. Now, given the current technological affordances, this is simply no longer the case.

In what follows, I study a shift in cultural history when technological development made a variety of sounds (and particularly music) more accessible to the public, thereby influencing

how sonic material culture could circulate and have influence. The emphasis here will be on sonic artifacts—prison recordings—housed at the Library of Congress.²⁷ I examine the historical circumstances of production of those recordings—the people who sing on them, as well as the field workers behind the recording machines—in order to understand better how sound as rhetoric decenters traditional approaches to and understandings of cultural history and historiography. Four case studies provide the bulwark for this study and will be supported by a theoretical framework reliant upon notions of rhetorical sound and voice provided by Eric King Watts and others. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of how historical sonic artifacts such as those in my study productively complicate our understanding of racial formation and the ongoing racial project of reifying notions of racial otherness in the US.

Most importantly, this chapter invites rhetorical historians to stop reading history for a moment and listen to it. Listen to the archived voices and music of the prisoners and thus participate within and contribute to the ethic of listening described above.

Prison Moan

<<Listen: Audio Track 1. The Angels Drooped their Wings and Gone on to Heaven>>²⁸

Sponsored by the Library of Congress, John A. Lomax and his son Alan traveled to eleven Southern African-American prisons during the summer of 1933 to record the “folksongs of the Negro[es]” incarcerated there. This music, John later wrote, was “in musical phrasing and

²⁷ Many, if not all, of the recordings I present in this chapter have been released in a variety of places, some sanctioned by the Library of Congress, others not. My selection of recordings, which are not yet a part of the public domain, have been graciously curated and sanctioned by the Library of Congress with the help of Todd Harvey, collections specialist and curator of the Alan Lomax Collection. Harvey’s first response to me when I asked about publishing the songs was on the ethics of the process: “a good faith effort [should be made] to contact the rights holders.” Unfortunately, no contact information is currently available for the estates of John Gibson, Mose Platt, or James Baker.

²⁸ A detailed Library of Congress citation for each song in this chapter is included in the Appendix in order of their appearance in this dissertation. (The exception is audio file 5, which was recorded by the author.) Each song accompanies this draft as a supplemental electronic file and should be listened to when referenced.

in poetic content . . . most unlike those of the white race [and the] least contaminated by white influence or by modern Negro jazz” (J. Lomax 112) Both he and Alan understood the vernacular music of the isolated African American as a protected and preserved remnant of slave and, by extension, black culture—a mysterious world that, for most white citizens in the US, seventy years after Emancipation, was only just beginning to receive sustained scholarly attention. Their work that summer would produce over one hundred aluminum discs of recorded material, most of which the Library of Congress preserves, and now and then releases commercially.

Many of the recordings from the prison trip, along with dozens of others collected from other sources, were carefully transcribed and published in the Lomaxes’ *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) which was introduced briefly in the preceding chapter. Such publications were once relatively common and followed a similar production formula: a professionally trained musician worked with a vernacular musician to painstakingly transcribe a tune that would then be re-presented visually as sheet music within the text. *American Ballads* was among the first folk collections to be so compiled, using recordings instead of live performance as the source material. Re-presented in various stage-performances organized by the Lomaxes over the course of that decade, and then released in the early 1940s by the Library of Congress, the field recordings would eventually change how American vernacular music could be experienced, studied, and emulated by an expanding audience of both scholars and citizens. In its various phonographic releases, US vernacular music could be experienced beyond mere transcribed textual representation. The voices of the convicts, farmers, preachers, and those of many others, could at last be heard.

<< **Listen: Audio Track 2. Black Samson - “Levee Camp Holler”**>>

One voice was John Gibson’s. When he first met John and Alan Lomax, Gibson had just begun serving a twenty-year sentence in the State Penitentiary in Nashville, Tennessee. Upon that meeting, Gibson (also known as “Black Samson”) asked the Lomaxes to help facilitate his release (Lomax and Lomax 151). Perhaps that was why, despite his uneasiness, Gibson relented and allowed himself to be recorded for the Library of Congress archive. In December 1934, a little more than a year later, this report about John Gibson and the song “Levee Camp Holler” was published *American Ballads*:

This song is the workaday of the Negro behind a team of mules. . . . Black Samson, whom we found breaking rocks in the Nashville State Penitentiary, admitted that he knew the song and had once sung it; but since he had joined the church and had turned away from the world, he no longer dared sing it. All our arguments were in vain. The prison chaplain protested that he would make it all right with the Lord. But Black Samson replied that he was a Hard-shell Baptist and that, according to their way of thinking, he would be in danger of hell-fire if he sang such a song. At last, however, when the warden had especially urged him to sing, he stepped in front of our microphone and, much to our surprise, when he had made sure that his words were being recorded, said: “It’s sho hard lines dat a nigger’s got to sing a worl’ly song, when he’s tryin’ to be sancrified; but de warden’s ast me, so I guess I’ll have to.” And he did. But he registered his protest before the Lord on an aluminum plate, now filed in the Library of Congress at Washington (49).

John Lomax’s frankness about Alan’s and his involvement in persuading Gibson is astounding, but the added detail of their having exerted pressure from ecclesiastical and institutional authority is dumbfounding. Obviously, such machinations were once tolerated, but

there can be little doubt that the Lomaxes exploited John Gibson's desire for freedom by exhorting him, despite his pronounced and explicit reluctance to sing, an act of inducement that 80 years later we can readily call coercion.

A close listen of the field recording reveals more of interest in "Levee Camp Holler." The track begins with an introduction from John Lomax followed by a short protest Gibson: "Lord, this levee camp song is mighty bad to sing...." It is unclear why Gibson's words do not match up better with Lomax's published rendering. The track is also uncertain; there are starts and stops during the recording and another muted voice can be heard prompting Gibson with forgotten lyrics. He doesn't seem to know the song that well or acts as if he doesn't. Also, "Levee Camp Holler" cuts out abruptly during the middle of the ninth stanza—this compared to the 28 stanzas that appear in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. The aluminum recording discs were cut in real time with a diamond-tipped needle and could only fit about fifteen minutes per side. Recordings frequently ended mid-song the way that "Levee Camp Holler" does, but those songs would usually be rerecorded on a fresh disc. Perhaps Gibson couldn't be persuaded into a second take.²⁹

Though the dialectic is captivating, there is more to listen for on the recordings than the drama between present and muted voices. It is impossible not to notice the sound of the recording materials themselves—the scratch and glitch of technology's age and decay as well as the buttressing residues of preservation. There is the revolving swoosh of the original aluminum disc decipherable in an ebb and flow of static and a needle skip, caught and cut off quickly at the end. There is also evidence of the transfer by Library of Congress technicians, decades ago, from

²⁹ West Virginia University Press recently released "Levee Camp Holler" on *Jail House Bound* a collection of songs culled from the Lomaxes' 1933 prison trip. In the liner notes, they observe correctly that John Lomax often "altered the sequence of stanzas, changed words, or even compiled a version from several sources" for *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. He justified this from the standpoint of a curator. His goal was a comprehensive understanding of a song's variety, not the capture of a single performance, or a statement about a particular performer (even when one is implied).

disc to magnetic tape. One can hear a hiccup in the audio—a faint echo of Gibson’s voice as magnetic tape folds over onto itself momentarily in the mix. Finally, though much more difficult to detect, the song was transferred into the binary code of a compact disc where all previous imperfections codify forever in the digital version. Here, compressed again as an mp3 and stored in a university database, “Levee Camp Holler” is available in ubiquity streaming on the Web (from iTunes to YouTube)—this song John Gibson never wanted to sing in the first place.

Gibson’s travails were not atypical. Recording for the Lomaxes offered a unique opportunity, but one with spiritual and ethical consequences for both the subjects and Lomaxes themselves. These prison performances and the subsequent records offered a new if complicated rhetorical agency to a few of the musically talented convicts and also yielded lasting effects on how African-American culture circulated within the US. Portals to a remote, unfamiliar subculture, many of the songs that the Lomaxes archived would eventually contribute to African-American vernacular culture receiving a mainstream (largely-white) public reception that it hadn’t yet enjoyed. Yet a tension emerges out of the knowledge that scholarly work arising out of the Lomax archive is scaffolded upon early 1930s social realities, realities that included a fascination with racial difference as well as concomitant objectification of the black subject/prisoner as historical material. Prejudice’s power is, in this way, a paradox; it both motivates and constrains our ability and capacity for understanding and identification. The Lomaxes and other white scholars interested in cultural preservation shaped the reception of that history in profound, often problematic ways. The recordings thus remain a rich yet thorny resource for scholarly and popular inquiry to the extent that they indexed both black experience and the ongoing production of whiteness in the US.³⁰ We receive the Lomaxes’ project, then,

³⁰ According to folklorist Patrick B. Mullen (2008), it was John Lomax’s southern paternalism that made the “idea that the white man was the hope of freedom for the black convict” so resonant within his worldview. In contrast, the

within the dissonant complexity of both prejudice and progress. They understood themselves as part of a progressive initiative far ahead of their time. That time has long passed, however, and a contemporary point of view makes moral demands on the Lomaxes that may well have been incomprehensible to them. This, of course, is the paradox of progressive thought: it will be regressive soon enough.

In acknowledging this paradox, I hope to sidestep some of the potential pitfalls of working with this kind of archival material—it is flawed from the beginning and cannot be otherwise. To be certain, the Lomaxes' collection of prison recordings assembles important historical sonic artifacts and listening carefully to them can be a harrowing experience. The sounds of the prisoners' toil, sorrow, and longing are preserved as vocal specters on the records. They are thus easily fetishized, as they were by the Lomaxes, as somehow "authentic" or exemplary of some essential component of African-American life or experience. As I listen to the men singing in the recordings from the prison archive, I get caught somewhere in the historian's dilemma mentioned above. I'm faced with the choice of which narrative to focus on. At one moment I am grateful to the Lomaxes whose recorded work is nothing short of national treasure. In the next, I recognize their piracy and see that their treasure is ill gotten, despite what they thought of as worthy means. I hear unmistakable humanity in the disembodied voices of the men on the recordings, some of whom died in prison nearly 75 years ago. And it is in that experience—one impossible without the agonism at the center of these two conflicting narratives—that a kind of resolution emerges. More an anti-resolution, actually (at least in the harmonic sense) as the descriptor most apt in describing this experience is "dissonance." I'm

growing leftist sentiment among the rising educated generation shaped Alan's ideals and contributed to his sense of "pity and desire to help" the African-American men and women he began to meet during his first field recording trip. Both Lomaxes "had their whiteness reinforced by contact with blackness and their own sense of freedom intensified by the lack of freedom of the prisoners they were recording" (84).

familiar with dissonance as a musical experience of notes-in-tension, and so it is apropos that dissonance becomes the rhetorical frame that best represents the historical tensions of the prison recordings in the Folklife Archive.

The dissonances particular to the early 1933 and 1934 prison recordings are made more comprehensible through conceptual framings that lend themselves well to managing ambiguity. The first is a guiding principle of revisionist historiography—one cued to the both/and-ness of historical “fact” and music’s power to capture the layers of that dissonance. Along with this notion of a conflicted representative historiography, another instructive dissonance reverberates instructively across the prison recordings: that of rhetorical voice. Voice as a theoretical concept already enjoys a rich literature within rhetorical and sound studies, which I contextualize and expand upon below. I trace three coalescing agencies of personal, communal, and political voice and describe how traditional subject/object representative relationships within and among these agencies in the archive blend together within the sonic. Interested as I am in the agency of the prisoners—particularly the new agency that a chance to perform for the archive afforded a few of the most talented among them, I also wish to complicate the notion of agency to understand its inherently discordant contradictions.

Thomas Rickert has recently invoked the term “ambient rhetoric” to describe the “attunements” among these complex interrelationships and I draw on his insights as well as several others whose work in race, material rhetorics, and rhetorical agency guide the task of deeper rhetorical listening. “Rhetorical listening,” invoking Krista Radcliffe’s widely recognized work on the subject, particularly the idea that in practiced rhetorical listening there is “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture” even (or especially) when those relations are troubled. (her emphasis, 17). Since I too am interested in the

ways that listening draws out opportunities for empathetic identification between and across political, cultural, and racial difference, I deploy rhetorical listening in this sense across two undergirding planes. First, the prison recordings do bring about a more nuanced understanding of African-American experience in the US in the 1930s. Yet, the number of those who heard the recordings before their release in the early 1940s was limited to those with access to the Library of Congress, and even then, interest in them was likely limited to scholars and, later, musicians looking for ideas and inspiration. John and Alan Lomax were, in a sense, the delegated listeners for the country and because of their positions of national power, their limited capacity for rhetorical listening turned out to be particularly influential. Our historical understanding of the archive is thus filtered through the Lomaxian identification rendered historically in the recordings and books they produced. In this sense, dissonance, and not the more comfortable “harmony” that “understanding” (identification’s ideal) often evokes, is the theoretical ideal to reach towards through sonic rhetorical analysis.

Interlude: Listening Closely

We can begin to get a sense for the dissonance I mention above by listening carefully now to several field recordings from the prison archive. While the casual listening skills I have described above are a good place to start, deeper understanding of the music requires a more attentive ear. I have modeled what might be termed a “close listen” of the song “Levee Camp Holler” in the above “Overture,” though there is a good deal more to say about the potential draw of such a listen. For example, I have mentioned sonic and non-musical clues of the material and historical conditions present during the recording (and after), but I have not yet addressed more traditional sonic components such as lyrics, tone, and melody (which are, perhaps, more

intuitive). For now, permit me to emphasize the simple practices of care and attention. For example, it took several listens before I realized that someone was supplying John Gibson with the lyrics to “Levee Camp Holler.” Sentient listening to this particular grouping of archival music can often be an affecting experience, but some recordings are more difficult to listen to. Their challenge results from the material conditions present at the time of the recording as well as the way that the wear and tear of technology’s decay obscures their clarity. More poignantly, perhaps the most exacting difficulty in listening lies in the content of the recordings themselves. The prison recordings echo a despicable past of de jure segregation—resounding of evidence of oppressive injustice, systematic cruelty, and omnipresent prejudice. Each of these listening observations and experiences are important and lend themselves to a more nuanced understanding of sound’s rhetorical impact.

Dissonant Voices

<< Listen: Audio Track 3. “Good God Amighty”>>

After being refused admission to the Texas State Penitentiary in Huntsville and rebuffed by a negative experience at Prairie View state school for blacks (Now Prairie View A&M University), John and Alan Lomax made their first real headway in recording African-American prisoners when they visited the Central State Prison Farm in Sugar Land, Texas. At “Sugarland,” the Lomaxes encountered two aging men who would become central to the prison archive. The first was seventy-one-year-old Mose “Clear Rock” Platt, who had been jailed for forty-seven years on a murder charge. The other, James “Iron Head” Baker was sixty-four and knew so many songs that John Lomax would later refer to him as a “black Homer.” Platt, on the other hand, was a master improviser and could sing the same song with seemingly infinite variations and, just as

easily, could make up new ones on the spot, making him, as John Szwed has written, “a folklorist’s dream” (41). John Lomax recalls first meeting Platt and Baker in the hospital building on the complex while recording a convalescing man named Mexico in one of the large bedrooms there. Baker was watching the recording session with interest and said (in John’s rendering), “I’se Iron Head, I’se a trusty. I know lots of jumped-up, sinful songs—more than any of these niggers” (Lomax 165). He recorded with the Lomaxes for the rest of that night and throughout the next day, taking turns singing with his “pardner,” Platt. The Lomaxes observed that the songs produced at Sugarland were of immense diversity. There were “rhythmic, surging songs of labor; cotton-picking songs; songs of the jailbird” as well as “songs of loneliness and the dismal monotony of life in the penitentiary; songs of pathetic longing for his ‘doney,’ his woman” (166). Above all, the Lomaxes averred the “words, the music, the rhythm, were simple” and the result of the “natural emotional outpouring of the black man in confinement” (166).

Listening and Voice: Mose Platt

In the following case studies, I move within the narratives that the Lomaxes collaborated on with Platt, Baker, and other prisoners to demonstrate sound’s relationship to the oral/aural process of personal, communal, and institutional/political agency and remembering. Such processes can be understood as useful nuances of rhetorical voice. While voice as a theoretical concept has been employed to various (and sometimes disparate) ends, Eric King Watts usefully frames a way of understanding the theoretical potential of voice within the sonic mode.³¹ Watts

³¹ In his recent edited collection *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012), Jonathan Sterne curates a productive list of scholarship on the voice as the subject relates to the nascent field of sound studies. Among those whose work is important to the discussion of voice are Ferdinand de Saussure and his *Course in General Linguistics*, which situates the voice “as a fundamental modality of social enunciation”; Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, who “based an entire psychological theory of orality around ideas of the voice as presence”; as well as Jacques Derrida’s critique of these positions as a misguided “metaphysics of presence” (491-2). Sterne’s own positioning on voice is resonant

distinguishes a “middle road,” between the “ontic and symbolic” potentials of voice, drawing out the tensions between “speech as a sensual, personal, and ‘authentic’ phenomenon and language as an abstract impersonal symbolic system” (180). These tensions are ever-present in the prison recordings and show up in the relationships and rhetorics at play at each level of the rhetorical situation. An example of such a tension can be heard in James Baker’s singing voice, which, in concert with the material clues on the recording and the Lomax book excerpt, is a powerful reminder of his humanity and the reality of his subjugation. On the other hand, “Levee Camp Holler” was interesting to the Lomaxes as a *symbol* expressing African-American prison life and by extension an even more abstracted symbolic slave culture. Within such a paradigm, John Gibson himself is unimportant. For the rhetorical listener, the seemingly distinct ontic (or that concerned with *being*—in this case human being) and symbolic components of the recording merge. One cannot exist without the other, and indeed, the presence of a listener (us) opens up other possible meaning relationships between the recordings, the voices on them, and the institution that produced and distributed them.

In this way agency is both contingent to and emergent from the rhetorical situation that produced the recordings and has various meaning dependent upon which relationship is emphasized. Getting at this kind of rhetorical nuance was very much the point of Kenneth Burke’s pentad, but I also find a recent framing from Thomas Rickert useful here. Following the work of Jenny Edbauer Rice and others, Rickert encourages an “ecologic” approach to rhetoric that embraces these complexities where “the interactions of numerous agents mutually form and condition a chaotically dynamic system” (xiv). For Rickert, rhetoric is ambient, and does its work “responding to and put forth through affective, symbolic, and material means, so as to . . .

with Derrida and his collection draws together several other works that complicate and expand upon traditional conceptions of voice.

reattune or otherwise transform how others inhabit the world . . .” (162). Music performs this ambience well, particularly how its affective, symbolic, and material aspects reveal tensions and dissonances within the rhetorical process which, in turn, requires an understanding of rhetoric in its complexity rather than as a tool for clear or incisive determinate persuasion.

An example of these various tensions and dissonances can be found in the voice of Mose Platt who, unlike Gibson, willingly participated in the field recordings. His voice can be heard on at least twelve distinct recordings, which include several solo performances as well as a number of collaborations with other prisoners, including Baker, his friend. Platt has a deep, distinctive baritone singing voice. His seemingly effortless vocal and pitch control indicate years of practice and performance. When other men join in singing with Platt, their ease and enthusiasm reveals participatory singing as part of a deeply embedded culture, not just a shared casual pastime among the prisoners.

<< Listen: Audio Track 4. Mose Platt – “Run Nigger Run” >>

I have selected two of Mose Platt’s recordings for a close listen, both about slave escape and capture. The first, a song with the dubious title “Run Nigger Run,” is presented here in preface to the second. “Run Nigger Run” evokes the long tradition of slave escape. In fact, a song with a nearly identical refrain can be connected to Nat Turner’s slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831 (Lomax and Lomax 228). But listening to Mose Platt sing his version, it is difficult to mistake the enthusiasm in his voice as he performed it proudly for the Lomaxes, the warden, and an audience of his peers. Halfway through the recording (43), we even hear several voices encouraging Platt to keep singing. Clearly, a song about escape had meaning similar as well as particular to the tune’s historical context. In a sense as much

transgressive as comic, there is dissonance between these two renderings, one historical and symbolic, the other kairotic and salient to the moment. Platt had a dark sense of humor.

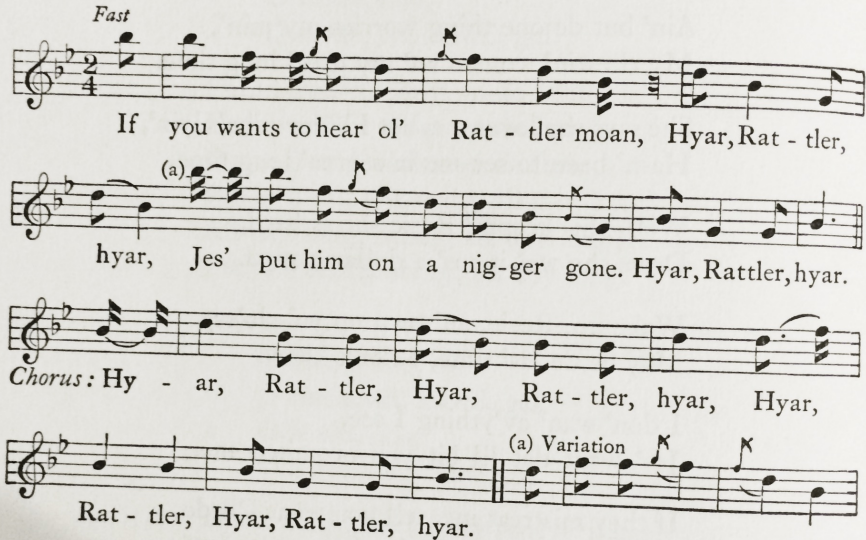
We see this dark humor again in another escape slave-escape song, called “Ol’ Rattler.” “Ol’ Rattler” is a song named for its subject, a mythic prison watchdog. The dog’s job was to chase and maul any escaping prisoner, a job presumably tied to a longer tradition of slave capture. For this example, I’m interested in making the humanistic/symbolic dichotomy explicit by comparing recorded sound in varying shades of abstraction, from recorded vocal singing to its abstract visual/textual rendering. To make my point I work backward—from most abstract to least. At the far end of that trajectory is Mose Platt and other voices on the recording which present a striking, unmistakably human contrast to the other representations. But in this most “present” and least abstracted space, I pause to complicate the move toward championing the salience of the voice or its ability to access or understand deep humanity. A voice on an archival recording is still an abstraction and there is still an insurmountable distance between that recording and the people who made it.

American Ballads and Folk Songs

OL' RATTLER

Mose Platt ("spells it P-L-A-W-P [P-L-A-double T], jes' lak you plait a whip"), alias Big Foot Rock, tells how he ran away from prison upon a time, how "ol' Rattler, de fastes' an' de smellin'es' bleedhoun' in de South" trailed and treed him.

Fast



If you wants to hear ol' Rat - tler moan, Hyar, Rat - tler,
 hyar, Jes' put him on a nig-ger gone. Hyar, Rattler, hyar.
 Chorus: Hy - ar, Rat - tler, Hyar, Rat - tler, hyar, Hyar,
 Rat - tler, Hyar, Rat - tler, hyar.

Fig. 1, Lomax and Lomax 66 (scanned page)

In the above excerpt (fig. 1) from *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, consider how race is represented discursively in the text of the sheet music through lingual dialect and in the short excerpted quote at the top from Mose Platt. Consider also how both textual and musical elements of this discursive artifact might have racialized the interpretation of the content. Lyrics rendered as dialect and grace notes in four of the five opening measures are each attempts to represent the sound of Mose Platt's voice, one approximating his vocal style; the other, seizing on the vocal nuances of his sung musical intervals. The lyrics to the song, printed on the opposite page, also approximate (and do not always match) with the recorded version. They do, nevertheless, depict a bleak reality of African-American prison life, one defined by its invisible and insurmountable rural borders. Ol' Rattler didn't simply keep prisoners from escaping, for those who made the

attempt would not survive his attack: “If I trip this time” one lyric relates, “I’ll trip no more.” A close reading of the lyrical texts reveals several other elements, which, when paired with an analysis of other songs in the collection, reveal a complex association of fear, oppression, back-breaking labor, and the constant threat of death and violence—punctuated here and there with a cathartic line of comedy or bawdy tale of sexual conquest. The Lomaxes’ meticulous inclusion of the lyrics allow for this careful analysis and, even in dialect, allow the interested reader an opportunity to reflect on the experience of captivity and the terror of attempted escape:

Now I run till I’m almos’ blin’
 I’m on my way to de long-leaf pine.
 I didn’ have no time to make no thimpathee
 My nighes’ route was up a tree.

The various visual, musical, and textual renderings of the transcription, however, contain several significant elisions. They tell us very little about Mose Platt. (We’re fortunate to have his name at all given that many of the recordings are attributed merely to “unknown prisoner.”) Platt is caricatured in the sheet music, with only his blackness, criminal status, eagerness to escape, and inability to do so represented in the song. Each of these subjectivities can then be re-inscribed and mythologized as representation stands in, ominously, for historical reality.

<< Listen: Audio Track 5. “Ol’ Rattler” – Piano rendering >>

In the above audio clip, I recorded a pianist’s rendering of “Ol’ Rattler” from the sheet music in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. While the simple melody is also an abstraction of the actual vocal performance, it at least provides interested and musically literate readers with an approximated version of what the song sounds like. Scholars might use this melodic rendering in

comparison to other folk melodies or it might even be appropriated by a jazz or blues musician and riffed upon in their own work.

<< Listen: Audio Track 6. Mose Platt - Ol' Rattler >>

Now, compare both the sheet music and the simple piano melody of “Ol’ Rattler” with the Lomax recording. The differences jump out. Platt’s voice is rich and expressive compared to the piano’s monotones. Variations on the melody are noticeably present on the recording, even within the few verses captured. Platt’s phrases sometimes garble together; it’s difficult to understand his every word—just like they might in an everyday encounter. Also, his singing companions emerge as important pieces of the song’s arrangement while these parts go unmentioned in the text. In contradistinction to a prescriptive understanding of rhetoric as logical clarity in persuasion, the most powerful aspect of voice rendered here or anywhere else isn’t the clarity of its communicative potential, but its variety, nuance, and multiplicity.

Another powerful aspect of an “ontic” listen of recordings like “Ol’ Rattler” is that it momentarily diverts attention away from the heroic white-savior narrative so prominent in Western culture and demands that attention be granted to the person’s voice on the recording. Symbolic meaning is laid aside for a moment and we are reminded of Roland Barthes’ characterization of the voice’s uncanny ability to connect us with the human. For Barthes this human essence is the “grain of the voice,” —or language “in its very materiality” (506). If, as John Durham Peters reminds us, “the voice is a metaphor of power,” tied distinctly to the experience of embodied identity, then “[e]ach person’s voice is a creature of the shape of one’s skull, sinuses, vocal tract, lungs, and general physique. Age, geography, gender, education, health, ethnicity, class, and mood all resound in our voices” (“The Voice and Modern Media” n.p.). We hear each of these things in the recorded voice of Mose Platt—evidence of his distinct

humanity, and even though incarcerated, his power and agency. However, and in line with Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence,³² the humanistic qualities of Platt can only reach out so far. Eventually his voice gets lost in the mix of the earlier representations, and, under scrutiny, the recording also cannot bear the weight of a true *present*-ation of the subject. The recording—which has a grain all its own—reminds us of the disconnection and temporal distance between his human body and mechanized historical reproduction. And suddenly, Mose Platt becomes a ghost.

Iron Head Blues: Secular and Spiritual Communion

Platt's singing companion James Baker ("Alias: Iron Head," as he was wont to say on the recordings) had lived and worked as a prisoner in the Central Imperial Prisoner near Sugar Land Texas. Tall and quiet, he had a reputation among fellow-inmates as having a large repertoire of songs. Over several years of acquaintance, John Lomax got to know him well and would devote a whole chapter in his autobiography to Baker. As mentioned before, Lomax called Baker a "black Homer" because he knew hundreds songs of all varieties and his abilities for improvisation and on-the-fly composition may well have matched the genius of ancient epic poets. This comparison is more apt than even Lomax would have imagined. Baker's rhythmic facility contributed to his popularity with and also to his respect among fellow inmates. Baker

³² Joshua Gunn's work on speech, the voice, and, by extension, Derridian presence is instructive for further reading on the various material and theoretical tensions between sound and presence. See his 2011 essay "On Recording Performance or Speech, the Cry, and the Anxiety of the Fix," and his "Speech is Dead; Long Live Speech" from 2008.

said he got his nickname while on the Ramsey State Farm, a work prison in Angleton, Texas while cutting wood. A felled oak tree fell nearby and “Some of the limbs hit my head, an’ it broke ‘em off; didn’t knock me down, an’ it didn’t stop me from working.” So he became known as Iron Head.

On the other hand, Baker referred to *himself* as “De roughest nigger what ever walked de streets of Dallas. In de pen off an’ on fo’ thirty-fo’ years” (J. Lomax 166). Calling himself, after six convictions, an “H.B.C.—habitual criminal, you know” (166). Lomax comments, however, that he didn’t really look the part. His dignity and tenderness far outshone any residual evidence of hardness in his face. By Lomax’s description, Baker seemed a solemn and honest figure, one whom “unlike the other Negro convict[s] [...] confessed that he was guilty of other crimes than those that had put him in prison”: “Mos’ of de times dey didn’t catch me” (168), he was said to say. Indeed, if anything, Baker had a familial relationship with other inmates. One night while he was recording for the Lomaxes, his colleagues crowded the room and shouted requests. One of those requests, Lomax writes, did cause a bit of a rise out of Baker. They urged him to sing “Shorty George” a song about “the short passenger train that ran from Houston to the farm once a month on a Sunday, bringing visiting wives and sweethearts” (168). They begged until Iron Head had to shout at them: “You niggers know dat song always tears me to pieces. I won’t sing it,” after which he walked away and stood in the corner shadows and motioned for Lomax. “I’ll sing dat song low for you”:

Shorty George, you ain’t no fren’ of mine

Take all de wimmens, leave de mens behin’

<< **Listen: Audio Track 7. James Baker - “Shorty George”** >>

“It makes me restless to see my woman,” he confided in Lomax. “I’s e a trusty an’ I has a easy job. I could run down one o’ dem corn rows an’ git away, any day. But when de law caught me, dey would put me back in de line wid de fiel’ han’s. I’s e too ol’ for dat hard work” (167).

In the spring of 1936 and after corresponding with Baker a few times, Lomax returned to Sugarland and arranged for Baker’s parole. The conditions of his release were that he would work for Lomax as a chauffeur and as an ambassador in the prisons, “acting as a go-between with black musicians and demonstrating the kinds of songs Lomax was looking for” (Porterfield 375). After the recording trip concluded—and if Baker cooperated—Lomax would help him set up a business doing the work he had done in prison. Lomax tried unsuccessfully to teach him to drive, but Baker was more successful in his second role. “Feels sorta like home,” he remarked after a stop at Parchman prison (Lomax 172). While they drove, Iron Head would often sing his favorite song, “Go Down Old Hannah,” which was “one of the best known of the slow drag work songs sung by Negro prisoners in South Texas” (Botkin 5). Baker claimed to have first sung it in prison in 1908 “on long hot summer day when about three o’clock in the afternoon the sun (Old Hannah) seemed to stop and ‘just hang’ in the sky” (5). Unlike earlier examples, I have provided all of the lyrics for “Go Down Old Hanna” in order to call attention to the juxtapositioning of the sacred and secular represented there (which will be the focus of the next section).

<< **Listen: Audio Track 8. James Baker – “Go Down, Old Hannah”** >>

Chorus:

Go down, old Hannah,
 Won't you rise no more?
 Go down, old Hannah,
 Won't you rise no more?

Lawd, if you rise,
 Bring judgment on.
 Lawd, if you rise,

Bring judgment on.

Oh, did you hear
 What the captain said?
 Oh, did you hear
 What the captain said?

That if you work
 He'll treat you well,
 And if you don't
 He'll give you hell.

Chorus

Oh, long-time man,
 Hold up your head.
 Well, you may get a pardon
 And you may drop dead.

Lord there's nobody feels sorry
 For the life-time man.
 Nobody feels sorry
 For the life-time man. (Marable, Frazier, and McMillian 453)

The inmates generally considered songs like “Go Down, Old Hannah” and “Shorty George” “sinful” and, like John Gibson, many refused or had to be persuaded to sing them. This, however, didn’t seem to be the case for Mose Platt or James Baker who sung them often and without much prompting, as often the anecdote above reveals, as part of the daily experience of living. “Sinful” songs are part of a rich tradition of secular African-American songs that, unlike the “negro spiritual,” were sung for pragmatic rather than religious purposes. As a product of an antebellum African-American consciousness, Lawrence Levine writes, such African-American secular music was “occasional music” and “as varied, as narrow, as fleeting as life itself” (19). Spirituals, he argues, were the best source for understanding the black world-view during slavery because “slaves used it to articulate their deepest and most enduring feelings and certainties” (19). Despite these differences, Levine concedes that the two styles of music had unmistakable

similarities: “In both the temple and the field, black song was for the most part communal song” (217).

This is the sense one gets listening to James Baker’s songs in the Lomax archive. He was a master of both the secular and the sacred, and—in his case—the two styles often merge. It can be difficult to tell if a song is meant for working or worshiping. “Go Down, Old Hannah” is a prime example here. The song was a “slow drag work song” used in the field for laborious work with a hoe or other ground tilling implement. Listening to the song, the slow but intense rhythm of that work is manifest, but so also is the depth of the tune as an emotional petition to the sun, Hannah, to “rise no more.” The song, despite its seemed secular content, is sung in a distinctly spiritual style and in the traditional call-and-response, or antiphonal, structure of sacred songs. This antiphony was intentionally communal and, as Levine and others have shown, residual of African life and sociality (33). In the case of “Go Down, Old Hannah,” both the secular and the sacred are present. For Baker and his fellows, Hannah (the sun) is a source of both suffering and light. Her persistent rising and falling is a reminder of the rhythms of prison life, hard work, and the lack of hope for the “life-time man.” Death-as-escape is welcomed and characterized here in the petitioning of the sun to “raise no more.” However, the line “Lord if you rise, bring judgment on” could as easily be part of a hymnal. And the connections to the sacred may go even deeper than just style. Christians often see Hannah, the Old Testament mother of the prophet Samuel, as a type and shadow of Mary, mother of Jesus (see 1 Samuel 2). Like Jesus’, Samuel’s birth was miraculous; the rising and setting “sun” Baker sings of—one explicitly connected to judgment in “Go Down, Hannah”—is reminiscent of the other, homophonic, “son.” In this case, the song has both a functional, practical communal purpose for the inmates as well as what sounds to be a more implicit, symbolic one. Still, the rhetorical complexity of the song makes it hard to classify

as either secular or sacred. Instead, we can understand “Go Down, Hannah” as an amalgam of enmeshed rhetorical components, material, practical, spiritual, historical, and, for Baker, even sentimental.

Lead Belly and the Sonic Politics of a Pardon

We have thus far explored the ontic and symbolic meshing of sound-as-voice as well as the rhetorical implications of such a meshing for personal and communal meaning making for incarcerated men in Southern Jim Crow prisons. We have seen—or *heard*—multi-vocal nuances within those two modes and I have sought to parse the ways that voice-in-song cuts across easily classifiable rhetorical ideals. Instead, those ideals are always in tension, always dissonant, and always decentered. So, even as voice is significant to personal identity, Gibson’s, Platt’s, and Baker’s individual identities are easily subsumed by the symbolic in even the most carefully drawn attempt to focus in on ontological individuality. An intentionally symbolic understanding of voice, while a more familiar rhetorical positioning, is also complicated by this multi-vocality. Songs can be abstracted from their original voices and be given new meanings by external parties for specific institutional, nationalistic, or racial purposes, but the same music can also be richly symbolic for its originating users. Institutionalized or nationalistic symbolism codifies African-American experience (and race itself) into a reduced and simplistic monotone. To use a sonic metaphor from earlier in the chapter, the institutionalization of the prison recordings has the same effect as their digitization: compression, distortion, and the codification of various imperfections. On the other hand, the sonic symbols at play within the vernacular context of the song itself—represented nicely in the antiphony of call-and-response—is that of community, sympathy, and shared struggle. The former symbolization is reductive, the latter productive.

In this final case study, I wish to discuss the political voice, which along with the personal and communal rounds out three agencies or rhetorical modes sonically discernable in the prison recordings. As I have asserted, the differences between these modes do not necessarily differ in the ways that they sound, rather they work together in concert and, depending on context, reach out to meet one rhetorical need or another, depending on what the moment offers up. This, perhaps, is one of the most exciting and frustrating elements of studying music rhetorically: it is rife with significance. Any one voicing can have a multitude of rhetorical implications. John Lomax understood this and used the music from the prisons (as well as the prisoners themselves when he could) to further his career. This was a part of the political environment of the prisons while the Lomaxes were on site making records. They weren't just there to gather recordings, philanthropically for the greater good of the country. Occasionally, however, prisoners also recognized the political possibilities of their involvement with the Lomaxes and others from whom they could leverage privilege, and also took advantage.

In the above example, I mentioned that John Lomax helped to arrange James Baker's parole. Lomax then employed Baker as a traveling companion until their relationship and tolerance for one another dissolved and they parted company (see the postlude below for a brief exposition of this episode). Lomax encountered Baker a few years later in the Ramsey State Convict Farm where Baker was working on the garden squad. "I should have left him at Sugarland to weave from corn shucks horse collars and rugs for Captain Gotch and Captain Flanagan," Lomax later wrote (177). As much as Lomax laments the ultimate results, Baker's release was a significant political triumph for both. Recall that John Gibson also hoped that his interaction with the Lomaxes would lead to his release. In a rhetorical situation where privilege is so unevenly distributed, the political agency of the incarcerated would be limited to the few

things that might set them apart, like good behavior and cooperation. In Baker's case, when the Lomaxes arrived, his talent as a singer gave him sufficient agency to negotiate release—even though his freedom would not last long.

Baker's story is reminiscent, however, of the much more famous example of Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter's releases from both Sugarland penitentiary in Texas in 1925 and Angola prison after an encounter with John and Alan and their recording machine in 1934 (see Chapter One, introduction). Recall that both John Lomax and Lead Belly would claim that Lead Belly's second release occurred due to a pardon from the state governor. Recall also that the second pardoning was a likely fiction—it never actually occurred, but Lomax and Lead Belly would both use the tale to advance their commercial and professional success.

The first pardon, however, is a fact of record. It is also a remarkable example of how music was one of the few political tools afforded prisoners serving in the Southern African-American prison contexts at the beginning of the twentieth century. "Governor Pat Neff (Sweet Mary)" was the name of Lead Belly's sung petition. For it, Lead Belly drew on a number of rhetorical tactics to accomplish his goal of release. For example, Lead Belly knew Governor Neff was a Baptist and wished to appeal to his religious sensibilities. His girlfriend's name was Mary, but calling Mary his "wife" in the song was conflated powerfully with the symbolic Mary of scripture: "I put Mary in it, Jesus's mother, you know. I took a verse from the bible, around about the twenty second chapter of Proverbs, around the fourteenth verse: if you will forgive a man his trespasses, the heavenly father will also forgive your trespasses" (86). This compositional choice was part of a larger, more carefully composed process for Lead Belly. He didn't usually write down his compositions, but in this case he wanted to be precise. One of the

better lines from the song, “If I had you like you have me, I’d wake up in the morning and set you free,” is a good example of this precision.

I resist the temptation to complete a point-by-point analysis here—to do so would be to suppose that there is a determinable equation within the song that led to Lead Belly’s release. Surely his musical talent, his persistence, his correct assessment of audience, his timing, and his lyrics were all contributing factors, but one cannot point casually to any one combination of those factors leading to his pardon by Governor Neff. This indeterminacy is part of the larger rhetorical decentering that occurs within a sonic rhetoric. A close listen paired with a careful historical analysis reveals several resonant and contributing details that point toward causality, but they also raise several unanswerable questions. Indeed, what is unknown about the release of Lead Belly from Sugarland in 1925 is as interesting as what is known. One question that looms large for this study, for example, is to what extent did Lead Belly pardon lore resonate within John Gibson, a captive of that same Sugarland complex in 1933, the year the Lomaxes arrived. We’ll never know, but listening to Gibson again knowing he was very likely acquainted with Lead Belly—the man who had sung his way to freedom—may very well have influenced his decision to engage with John and Alan Lomax.

Conclusion: Toward a Sonic Rhetoric of African-American Vernacular Culture

To speak of “vernacular culture” is to consider how highly particularized experiences of quotidian folklife are everyday represented and codified both within that culture as a shared cultural identity and also as a means of presenting and differentiating that identity from other, sometimes competing, vernaculars. For Margaret Lantis, a more complete rendering of the idea might be the “vernacular aspect or portion of the total culture” which expresses the notions of

“‘native to . . .’ or common of a locality, region, or, by extension, of a trade or other group: the commonly used or spoken as distinct from the written” (203). Vernacular culture, then, is more readily found in the currency of everyday experience (speech, and by extension song, but also in the “handmade” and material). The residue of tradition is represented within these practices, but the traditional need not mean antiquated. Indeed, Lantis’s entomological analysis of the word reveals that the “Latin does not seem to suggest traditional or primitive but rather ‘of one’s house,’ of the place. This is the connotation we want: the culture-as-it-is-lived appropriate to well-defined places and situations” (203). “Since speech is not only essential,” she continues, “but an important essential of situationally structured behavior, it is quite all right if ‘vernacular culture’ suggests first speech, then an extension to other behavior” (203).

Though the Lomaxes were not necessarily of the first investigators drawn to African-American study, their interest in collecting the musical vernacular artifacts of African-American prisoners is distinguished by their pioneering attempt to understand and give structure to an obscure, distinctly racial history of slave and postbellum culture through the study of recorded, speech-based vernacular artifacts in the study of African-American culture. Though the Lomaxes saw their work as one of cultural preservation—of locating and preserving a distinct and authentic African-American musical past—we can understand it as one exploring both racial difference *and* also racial formation through the collection and distribution of African-American vernacular music. The proto-blues music that the Lomaxes and others recorded in the South carried with it vernacular evidence of what was taken by some to be a “new race” forged in the blending of African extraction and American emancipation/reconstruction. Amiri Baraka underscores this point by using this phrase in his influential study *Blues People*, arguing that the “African cultures, the retention of some parts of these cultures in America, and the *weight* of the

stepculture produced the American Negro. A new race” (7, his emphasis). Baraka makes music the “persistent reference” of his study because “the development and transmutation of African music to American Negro music (a *new* music) represents . . . this whole process in microcosm” (7-8). The Lomaxes’ work, then, might be understood in terms of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call a “racial project,” which is “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (56). Furthermore, “racial projects connect what race means in a particularly discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning” (56, their emphasis). Thus do Omi and Winant call attention to the linkage between social structure and representation in the processes of racial formation. These two elements can be understood in the same terms as the contrasting-but-linked elements discussed above related to voice where both internal/social and external/representative rhetorics are in circulation.

In the prison recordings the vernacular genres of African-American life on the sharecropping farms of the Jim Crow South help to understand distinct types of behaviors within African-American experience during that era and likely, as the Lomaxes suspected, much earlier eras as well. They also provide a keystone in our understanding of African-American music’s progression from the 19th to 20th century. As well as presenting the rhythm of work life in the prisons in 1933, work songs such as “Levee Camp Holler” or “Pick a Bale O’Cotton” can be understood accurately enough as “the immediate predecessors of blues” (Baraka 18). Spirituals, as I have sought to show, characterize the merging of American and African superstitious/religious traditions; and secular or “sinful” songs like “Ol’ Rattler” or “Run Nigger Run” were

expressions of sorrow, rebellion, sexuality, and playful levity. Each of these genres carry with them what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has famously named “Signifyin(g)” elements.

Though dated, Gates’s theory remains a poignant descriptor for African-American artistic, rhythmic, and poetic culture. Signifyin(g) is the “black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures” (75) and can be found in the African-American linguistic stylings of (among others) trickery, half-truth, innuendo, boasting, and playful circularity. The manipulation of these “classic black figures of Signification” created African-American agency—the opportunity for “the black person to move freely between two discursive universes” (76) and help to understand Lead Belly’s political petition. His music successfully Signified both African-American suffering and virtuosic creativity—a kind of masterful pairing of everyday black experience and white genre expectations. This both-and sonic rhetorical appeal allowed both he and James Baker to secure freedom from prison. Even when release wasn’t the end result, all of the examples I have discussed above showcase vernacular African-American music’s rhetorical power. We’ve heard this power in the voices of convicts engaged in everyday (and often personal) activities and emotions, in the symbolic cadence of community, and also as decontextualized representation of African-American culture appropriated by the powerful voice of institutional authority. Though we now see the cracks in the Lomaxes’ methods and ideologies, their recordings would, for a time, have significant progressive impact on scholars’ and later a (largely white) middle-class by nuancing previously held views of both racial difference through an increased understanding African-American experience during and in the decades immediately following slavery.

As a racial project, then, the Lomaxes’ work within African-American prisons had two significant opposing ideological consequences, one expansive, the other, reductive. First, the

sounds of toiling, worshipping, and otherwise Signifyin(g) prisoners would help to redraw the racially coded parameters of African-American vernacular culture for white audiences comfortable with paradigms drawn from other long-held black cultural representations.³³

Theorists within critical race studies call this process “rearticulation.”³⁴ On the other hand, these representations would themselves become tropes of typical African-American life in the South—codified as the “African-American tradition”—and therefore limit and even re-essentialize public understanding of the complexities and always-evolving nature of African-American culture in the United States.

These ideas voice the ways that the study of vernacular music as rhetoric offers various possibilities for understanding cultural formation and difference. This is especially so when the vernacular is part of a racial project because of vernacular music’s ability as a discursive practice to express multiplicity concisely. As I expressed in the introduction of this chapter, the seeming paradox of concision/multiplicity should be a heralding attribute of a sonic rhetorical approach. In the prison recordings we listen to what seem to be a simple expressions of lived experience. But, as I have explored above, deeper listening reveals interpretation, representation, and historical explanation of racial experience in their various complexities, complexities inherent to racial dynamics in the US (Omi and Winant 56). Rhetorical meaning here is derived not through so-called *persuasion*, but from the difficult, often painful dynamics of working through and against difference—of both working towards a sustainable *understanding* of otherness and of working from the other side out of obscurity, discrimination, and subjugation and toward

³³ These representations include (but are not limited to) the highly influential and distinctly racist blackface minstrel show which permeated American culture from 1840-1940 and beyond, popular “race records” of “classic” city blues singers like Bessie Smith and others, and an increasingly whitewashed but popular jazz music of the day.

³⁴ As Omi and Winant write, “*Rearticulation* is a practice of discursive reorganization or reinterpretation of ideological themes and interests already present in the subjects’ consciousness, such that these elements obtain new meanings or coherence. This practice is ordinarily the work of “intellectuals.” Those whose role is to interpret the social world for given subjects—religious leaders, entertainers, schoolteachers, etc.—may on this account be “intellectuals.” (195)

equality. In the 1930s, African-American vernacular music was beginning to be understood as more than a body of artifacts to be collected and indexed for the archive, but as a discourse engaged in changing understanding of race and racial difference itself. Indeed, during the interwar period, some began to realize, as Baraka argues, that African-American music was not just representative of black cultural experience “from slave to citizenship” but instead could be understood as being symbolic of American culture itself.

Historical Interlude

Oral History's Exigence: John Lomax and Narrative Rhetoric in the Federal Writers Project

With the 150 field recordings that John and Alan Lomax had collected during their 1934 Southern journeys (including the precious prison recordings), the holdings of the Music Division at the Library of Congress nearly doubled. However, bureaucratic ills, loss of an important Carnegie Corporation grant, and dealings with an ornery and conspiring supervisor Oliver Strunk would work together to make Lomax feel undervalued in his work and on the brink of quitting his honorary position as curator of the Archive of American Folk Song (Porterfield 384). Lomax was worried that if he didn't quit, Strunk would find a way to push him out for what the former was reporting (cruelly) as a "relatively small accumulation to date of your two years' efforts" (Porterfield 536n3). In reality, the archive was thriving. During those two years (1934-1935), it would grow by over 500 recordings almost solely due to the Lomaxes' fieldwork.

Fortunately, John Lomax was well connected. Through the influence of his friends on Capital hill—particularly Texan senators Morris Sheppard and Tom Connally—he was able to forcefully and persuasively plead his case before the Head Librarian and, as a result, was given the opportunity to renegotiate the grant that funded his and Alan's field trips, and was able to secure new recording equipment. He was also provided with traveling expenses, a secretary, and a new vehicle for travel (Porterfield 385). John was also named the *head* of the archive, which, though finally adding some authority and prestige to his position, still had only a \$1 yearly salary.

The good fortune continued when John was offered two new opportunities with the government that would dovetail with his work in the archive. These new jobs were both with New Deal/WPA initiatives: one with the Historical Records Survey (HRS) and the other with the

Federal Writers' Project (FWP). John's new work indicates that the fieldwork the Lomaxes and other folklorists were engaged in was not only growing in popularity but was beginning to be seen as having powerful cultural and, perhaps more significantly, national capital. John's work with the Historical Records Survey, under another fellow Texan Luther Evans, was to oversee and advise a project then underway "involving a national survey of historical records in county courthouses and the collection of interviews with several thousand ex-slaves" (Porterfield 386). During his first few weeks working with the Writer's Project and as National Advisor of Folklore and Folkways, John worked to expand existing research on the subject of slave life. He was given the task of writing instructions for the HRS fieldworkers who were interviewing former slaves, and he issued them a list of "detailed and homely questions" designed to "get the Negro thinking and talking about the days of slavery" (Mangione 263). Given his years of experience talking to people about their lives and recording their stories, John had the right qualifications. As Porterfield notes, "With his lifetime interest in blacks and their way of life, Lomax was well prepared for the task and came up with a set of questions that elicited valuable information" (388). These questions were aimed at developing a more comprehensive understanding of African-American life before emancipation by asking for minute details on everything from clothing, food, living accommodations, and even childhood games and traditions. Lomax also encouraged interviewers to inquire after information that might aid future readers in understanding living conditions, relationships with plantation and other slave owners, and "the manner in which [the slave] was informed of his freedom" (388).³⁵ The project would produce "more than two thousand vivid and comprehensive narratives that provide an invaluable

³⁵ These slave-narratives were revelatory to a still-large grouping of the American population largely ignorant to the realities of slave life. This collection would work to debunk prevalent "plantation myths" including the "Sambo" or happy, contented slave, and other prominent stereotypes that had been doing untold damage to African American people and culture for decades.

eyewitness account of slavery and its terrible ramifications” (388). The interviews would eventually become a large anthology, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (1945), compiled and edited by Lomax’s colleague and fellow folklorist Benjamin Botkin.

John Lomax's detail-oriented interviewing method, paired with his second wife Ruby Terrill Lomax’s deft skill with language, transcription, and record keeping,³⁶ would inform another widely acclaimed collection of folk history: the 1939 publication *These are Our Lives*.³⁷ Like the slave narrative collection, the editors of this text were charged with recording the stories of average citizens in the American South: on the farm, in textile mills and factories, in service occupations—business, dentistry, law enforcement, etc.—and those engaged in WPA relief work. “The idea,” wrote the project director W. T. Couch, “is to get life histories which are readable and faithful representations of living persons, and which, taken together, will give a fair picture of the structure and working of society” (ix). This belief in the importance of offering a “faithful” and “fair” representation of otherwise underrepresented America embodied not just the work of the ex-slave and *Lives* project, but also a sentiment that ran through the entire Federal Writer’s Project, which had its source in the headwaters of the executive office. “So far as I know,”

³⁶ Lomax married Ruby Terrill in 1934 after several months of correspondence. She was employed by the University of Texas at Austin as a dean of women and associate professor of classical languages. As a professional administrator and language expert, Terrill was a valuable asset to the Lomaxes’ various projects. Once Alan became busy with school and other projects, Terrill was companion and assistant to John on field recording trips, where she was, in John’s words, “chauffeur, valet, buffer, machine operator, disk-jockey, body-guard, doctor and nurse, wife and companion” (Porterfield 402). In a letter to his supervisor at the Library, Harold Spivacke, Lomax described Terrill’s contribution to his now-famous 1939 “Southern States Recording Trip” thusly: “In nearly every instance Miss Terrill is including typed copies of the words contained on each record; also the slang of the song and the singers. This will be a big saving for the Library. Writing down the words from the record playing is a long, tedious job.”

³⁷ *These are Our Lives* includes in its appendix the interview instructions given to the relief workers compiling the life-stories. Titled simply, “Instructions to Writers” these instructions may very well have been written or at least overseen by John Lomax and include an outline on how life-stories might be encouraged from interview subjects. Collecting an “authentic” story is stressed as the interviewer is instructed to do her or his best to “discover the real feeling of the person consulted and must record this feeling regardless of his own attitude toward it” (418). The listing includes instruction on what kinds of stories contain the highest degree of potential human interest, the importance of knowing when to veer from the outline in order to allow fruitful side-stories to emerge. Throughout all, there is built into the instructions encouragement for the interviewers to be sensitive: to keep personal opinions and feelings in check and to refrain, for example, from acknowledging distain related to poor living conditions or other undesirable circumstances that interviewers might come across.

Couch continues, “this method of portraying the quality of life of a people, of revealing the real workings of institutions, customs, habits, has never been used for the people of any region or country” (ix). And, for the most part, it hadn’t—not in the ways being developed by the WPA. As noted in the previous chapters, while the “soundness” of some of Lomax’s methods have received scrutiny over the years, the expertise and experience that he brought to the Writer’s Project had a significant impact upon not just the greater project and mission of the WPA through the projects mentioned above, but in oral or “life-history” and ethnographic practices in general.

Couch touches briefly on these developments in his introduction by pointing to several advantages of oral history, but also by implicitly acknowledging a shift in the exigency related to an emerging public understanding of the usefulness of these practices. Life histories, Couch argues, offer a different perspective—“certain possibilities and advantages”—to traditional histories or historical but fictive portraits of vernacular America (Crouch x). A history of the people, the “folk,” in their own words, avoids the composite and homogenized character present in popular fiction (perhaps implicitly acknowledging works of fiction like Steinbeck’s acclaimed *Grapes of Wrath*, which was published in April of 1939—the same year as *Lives*) and also retains a sense of individual humanity—something often lost in the social-scientific case study model, which, in order to access the roots of specific social problems, “treat[ed] human beings as a abstractions” robbing subjects of the nuances of personal identity (x). This was particularly true for minority voices, which is one reason John and Alan Lomaxes’ pioneering work in the Southern States (especially their work in the prisons), the slave narrative project, and then this work overseen by Couch, were so revolutionary. Theirs were not the only projects of their kind, but they pointed toward a slightly revised historiographical methodology that was open and

inclusive rather than reductive and/or empirical. This work, when combined with the technological advantages of new audio recording methods, revolutionized how Americans might hear and by extension understand themselves and, perhaps more importantly, how they might understand others. On this point, Couch's serious sentiment is instructive still: "This is no trivial matter. The People, all the people, must be known, they must be heard. Somehow they must be given representation, somehow they must be given voice and allowed to speak, in their essential character [...] Here, then, are real, living people" (xiii-xiv).

Oral/Aural History:

The Democratization of History through First-Person Rhetorical Narrative

By and large, the life stories collected by the field workers in the Federal Writers' Project were done through interview and transcription. And while efforts to represent subjects' unique voices through the careful alphabetic rendering of dialect (in the way that literary renderings of African American Vernacular English often appeared), Lomax's predecessor Sterling Brown urged, "truth to idiom be paramount and exacting truth to pronunciation secondary" (qtd. in Mangione 263). Textual renderings of spoken interviews, be they idiomatic or in dialect, represent a remediation that, while rendering the discursive "data" more easily transferred, also repurpose the audience's experience of the words as well as extract them from the phenomenological sphere created by a speaker's voice. Such renderings reduce the aural cadences and rhythm of spoken dialect and transform voices into text, which can then be taken up and redistributed as data for any number of scholarly, commercial, scientific, or personal uses. The benefits of this type of rendering, in the case of the New Deal projects, are undeniable. Print is more easily reproducible, more easily circulated, and generally then, more accessible. With

relative ease, a large audience had access to the life-stories of a widely diverse group of fellow Americans—some, like the former slaves, who never had an audience before. In this way and others, textuality (through print technology) efficiently met perceived demands of a consumer public in the process of discovering their interest in themselves as a people. But what of the voices left behind? What might have been the reception of *These Are Our Lives* had it been produced as a series of phonograph recordings and then sold or produced for a national radio broadcast?

While music had always been their primary goal, John and Alan Lomax had by this time recorded several spoken stories, sermons, personal histories, and yarns. But these oral histories were rarely heard by the public and most remain in the ephemera between the more carefully cataloged element of the recordings, the songs. For the Lomaxes, the non-musical recordings were likely deemed less marketable than the music that typically would accompany them. A carefully edited book collecting the most striking and sensational stories would likely be more interesting to the commercial market. The aural nature of recorded history may also be less accessible to a general public because of the difficulty and effort involved in listening. These difficulties range from the actual sound of the recording—its affective materiality—to the difficulty of understanding accent and dialect of both rural whites and blacks. Both of these listening practices represent consumer work less present in textual renderings, especially if that text has been heavily edited, normalized, and codified for a large public audience.

The advantages and potentials for attention to oral/aural histories in rhetorical criticism is a subject only just beginning to receive explicit attention and often in the work of digital rhetoricians working with found or re-appropriated aural artifacts.³⁸ This emerging work

³⁸ See, for example, Erin Anderson's "The Olive Project: An Oral History Composition in Multiple Modes" (2011) and Jody Shipka's "To Preserve, Digitize and Project" (2012).

underscores how listening to oral/aural history enhances our understanding of historical individuals but also emphasizes oral history as a “co-constructed process of narrative composition” (Anderson, “Background” para.1) This co-construction is made explicit in the transformation of oral history from audio recordings into cohesive narrative artifacts, as was the case in the above examples. Attention to oral history as it is rendered from aural to textual artifacts requires attention to the ways that movement within modalities shifts both meaning and experience. This process also calls attention to how mediation transforms the message and reforms the rhetorical situation.

These practices will be crucial to understanding jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton’s oral musical history (which is central to the next chapter). In the below section, and leading up to Morton and Lomax’s dialectical oral history making, I discuss briefly how oral/aural history making and especially the stories and narratives central to them, has been taken up in rhetorical studies and related disciplines. The goal here is to highlight that oral/aural historiographical practice is indeed rhetorical, and according to some scholars, centrally so. This discussion works as an important interlude between the more general history above of the WPA, FWP, and John Lomax’s work as an oral historian in the early 1930s and the more specific discussion of John’s son and predecessor Alan in the American Folklife Archive near the end of that decade. Alan’s oral-history recording sessions with Jelly Roll Morton and the variety of mediated artifacts resulting from those sessions represent a compelling example of sound recording’s paradox as a medium in “seeming abstraction from the social world even as it [is] manifested more dynamically within it” (Sterne, *Audible Past* 6).

Constitutive Rhetoric and the Narrative Paradigm within Rhetorical Criticism

Generally speaking, history, including biography and autobiography, is represented and mediated through and within a narrative structure. Wayne Booth recognized his work as a literary critic and rhetorician as dealing directly with narratives as they are represented through the “presentation of time-ordered or time-related experience that in any way supplements, re-orders, enhances, or interprets unnarrated life” (Booth 14). Booth recognized that this “re-ordering” extended even to self-making and that making sense of ourselves as actors within the paradox of lived experience—its simultaneous chaos and monotony—was an act of story making. Part of the appeal of oral history to a study interested in sonic rhetorics is related first to this grand tradition of narrative creation I have been exploring but also of the nature of storytelling as an oral/aural practice. Oral history—especially when recorded using audio technology—retains both its narrative and its aural characteristics and allows the researcher to consider what the presence of a sonic component contributes to the rhetoric of message being related.

It is true that much of our storytelling has moved into literate, multi-mediated, and even digital spaces, but the act of story making has remained a practice with goals of dialogic resonance and of identification through shared experience. Unsurprisingly, narrative as a rhetorical practice has been the subject of scholarly inquiry and debate since classical times. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasized the importance of plot in his discussion of the elements of tragic narrative (the others being spectacle or setting, character, thought, diction, and melody). The tragic dramas that Aristotle was interested in theorizing were important to the culture not as depictions of actual events, but still “real” or imitative renderings of various types of value-laden potential—experiences that audiences would have found compelling. As such, plot was important both as a way of setting up the chronology of events, but also as creating a structure of

meaning around the events depicted in a way that presented this mimetic or imitative “reality” as something from which general causality and reason/rationality might be extracted. In other words, plot created a narrative structure for understanding the important morals and ethics of a community, “what [they] consider[ed] important, trivial, fortunate, tragic, good, evil, and what impel[ed] movement from one to another” (Martin 87). Modern and ancient storytelling, be they in Aesop's fables (which predates Aristotle by several centuries), Greek and later Shakespearean drama, or in radio, television or film draws on the epideictic power of mimetic narrative as a means value sustaining and constituency. As Jasinski (2001) relates, during the 19th century's turn toward Romanticism, the utility and primacy of the imitation paradigm in rhetorical narrative would find a rival in a growing interest in personal expression as the most important function of artistic narrative production. “The Aristotelian-Romantic tension—the question of whether literary art (and all discursive practice, for that matter) functions primarily to imitate or reflect the world or to express or evoke the inner world of the author—remains a topic in aesthetic an discursive theory” (392).³⁹

Recent study of narrative as a rhetorical device or mode addresses this tension in the way that it draws together and creates meaning around the *effects* of rhetoric, be they aesthetic/visceral, instrumental, or constitutive. When a narrative works rhetorically “it functions aesthetically to create a vivid, memorable, and compelling world” (Jasinski 393). This world can be *inhabited* or *presented* or both. As a world-making agent, narrative functions constitutively and within this mode, narrative-as-rhetoric can “shape and transform how a community understands its world” (393) through a process that Maurice Charland (1987) argues happens *before* persuasion. Constitutive rhetoric contributes to “the production of ideology” or “the

³⁹ These two sometimes-competing paradigms are rounded out holistically by musical discourse, especially vernacular and, more widely, “popular” music – pop music, combines both mimetic literary/narrative elements and attempts to imitate the emotional tenor of the moment depicted through musical tropes.

constitution of the subject” (213). “Narratives ‘make real’ coherent subjects”; indeed, “this making real is a part of the ontological function of narratives” (221). The “real,” however, is an illusion. Ideology is, necessarily, a useful illusion of “a unified and unproblematic subjectivity” (221). Further, “Subjectivity is always social, constituted in language, and exists in a delicate balance of contradictory drives and impulses” (222). Constitutive rhetoric, then, is a part of the larger discourse of epideictic rhetoric. It is value-laden and used to create and sustain values within a worldview. Constitutive narratives are built to provide structures for characters to dwell, and, once lived in for long enough, have the potential of becoming part of the rhythmic fabric of a culture’s discursive body. In this way, narratives achieve the status of “reality” and “beyond the realm of rational or even free choice, beyond the realm of persuasion” (214) where choices related to social identity, religion, faith, and even sexuality can seem predetermined and embedded within the meaning, making myths of ‘the way things are and always have been.’

On the other hand, narratives also work instrumentally to persuade internal and external audiences. In these cases, the goal is to prove or maintain a belief in the efficacy of the internal logic of a certain understanding/opinion of the way things are or should be. Within Walter Fisher’s theory of narrative paradigms each narrative structure relies on an internal rationality constructed by the rhetor as part of a functional understanding of the world. Potential conflicts arise when competing ideological narratives come into contact with each other. Narrative is used instrumentally in order to respond to the exigencies created by a conflict, to negotiate the contours of those conflicts through appeals to the audience’s internal logics, and—where possible—to find common ground, common values, common stories. Fisher argues “prevailing theories of human communication and logic—ancient, modern, and contemporary—do not answer these questions adequately” and that human values have gone largely ignored as a

resource for understanding the “constitution of knowledge, truth, or reality” (xi). The results of this misstep has been the “unquestioned superiority” of technical discourse over the rhetorical and poetic leading to gross social and political misunderstandings from both internal and historical perspectives.

To address this problem, Fisher argues for a reconceptualization of humans as, primarily, storytellers (or *Homo narrans*). This perspective leads to an understanding of human communication as primarily one of story-making—as “symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character”—and of “good reasons” (xi). Reason and by extension rationality within this narrative paradigm is a contextual construct with internal logics that reflect “values or value-laden warrants for believing or acting in certain ways” (xi). This logic doesn't depend on scientific rationality, but it instead depends upon the fidelity of the story to existent narrative structures within a cultural or sub-cultural rendering and a story's resonant fidelity within those constructs. Rhetoric, from this perspective, can be a way of subverting the violence and/or subjugation that occurs when opposing paradigms come into contact and conflict with one another. Consider, for example, that various projects of empiricism and colonialism operate under the assumption of the superiority of one system of narrative logic over another. Also, contemporary critiques of anthropologic and ethnographic practices have centered largely on the acknowledgment that levying external scientific logics or judgments of “rationality” about the internal “realities” of a subject's culture or discourse community can be damaging to the population or individuals studied. Narrative logics might be understood as producing

rationality ... determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and

their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives. (65)

The existence of external or competing story sets (along with their competing logics) does not go unacknowledged within the narrative paradigm, rather these stories “must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation” (65).

This way of thinking about rationality undermines the idea that some forms of communication are superior to others, or that “true knowledge” exists universally outside of the constructs of culture. From this rhetorical perspective, “truth” can exist within cultures in complete opposition to outside logics or empirical/scientific renderings of what constitutes true knowledge. What matters is coherence and fidelity within the internal logic of the systemic story structure that undergirds the society. The stakes for an application of this kind of open, non-rational epistemology for truth may seem untenable—particularly in courts of law, scientific labs, or other knowledge paradigms where truth is determined logically or with carefully established empirical methods. Historical rationality, however (and harkening back to White) is always already fiction but that does not mean we should jettison truth as an ideal altogether. Instead, historical inquiry requires a different, more porous understanding of and patience with truth—particularly considering the ways individual truths about the past contradict as often as they coalesce.

As I now address Jelly Roll Morton’s story, several notes from the above discussion should hang sustained in the air in relative harmony. First, that his oral history—his version of the story—is “true.” Also, that Morton’s tale is itself constitutive of history and furthermore that constitution is most powerful when it is also most musical. Morton’s take is “true,” then, in the sense that it is presented as a part of a relatively coherent narrative with an internal logic that

reveals Morton to the listener as the mythic prophet in his version of the jazz narrative/mythos. As a myth maker, Morton asserts certain assumptions, truisms, and conflations of the historical ground he covers, but throughout, his argument rings true: “[I am the] originator of jazz, stomps and swing.”

Chapter Three

Jazz *Aretē*:

Jelly Roll Morton and the Sonic Rhetorics of Virtuositic Musical Performance

“When the settled Creole folks first heard this jazz, they passed the opinion that it sounded like the rough Negro element. In other words, they had the same kind of feeling that some white people have who don't understand jazz and don't want to understand it. But, after they heard it so long, they began to creep right close to it and enjoy it. That's why *I* think this jazz music helps to get this misunderstanding between the races straightened out. You creep in close to hear the music and, automatically, you creep close to the other people. You know?”

Dr. Leonard Bechet, in Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 120-121

"Jazz was the hybrid of hybrids and so it appealed to a nation of lonely immigrants. In a divided world struggling blindly toward unity, it became a cosmopolitan musical argot. This new musical language owes its emotional power to the human triumph accomplished at the moment of its origin in New Orleans—a moment of cultural ecstasy.”

Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 122

“We had all nations in New Orleans.”

Jelly Roll Morton, in Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 122

Introduction

This chapter considers the rhetorics of virtuosic musical performance, arguing that a critical reconsideration of the rhythmic potentials of *aretē* and *mythos* expand recent developments in epideictic rhetorical theory and contribute to current conversations within rhetoric and sound studies. This expansion allows sociocultural musical performance, skill, and artifacts to be understood as robust sonic rhetorics that have power to influence beliefs, racial experience, and historical understanding. To demonstrate these processes, the chapter examines jazz pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton's sessions recorded with archivist Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress in 1938. Morton hoped his virtuosic performance on the recordings would authenticate his connection to jazz's nativity and thus revise jazz canonical history. Using

Morton's distinctive sonic rhetorics during the sessions as evidence, I argue for a renewed interest in histories of rhythmic rhetorical practice and for its connection to claims of historic and cultural authenticity.

In the introduction to his recent edited collection, *The Sound Studies Reader*, leading sound scholar Jonathan Sterne entreats us to develop our “sonic imaginations” (5) by learning to “think sonically” (3). In Sterne's rendering, “Sonic imaginations are necessarily plural, recursive, reflexive, driven to represent, refigure and redescribe” (5). They are “driven to fashion some new intellectual facility to make sense of some part of the sonic world” (5). This developmental process involves the critical pairing (or “conjuncture”) of sound and culture in order to “ask big questions about [our] cultural moments and the crises and problems of [our] time” (3). The challenge for those working within sound studies is, Sterne argues, “to think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another—as *types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves*—whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performances, or another path into sonic life” (3). It is within the meaningful articulation of these various sonic phenomena that rhetoric scholars are equipped to offer contributions and critique to sound studies. Rhetoric as the study of *influence* (as persuasion, affect, cooperation, and culture) invites “big questions” about sound's potential for influence but also about how sound is designed, shaped, and disciplined to have influence and meaning as an extension of the sonic imagination. Thinking with a rhetorical ear, then, is to think not just about a sound's particular or peculiar materialities but about how relationships between sonic phenomena reveal distinct sonic rhetorics: sonic rhetorical practices, artifacts, embodiments, and histories (to name just a few).

I now set Morton's historical stage and will then circle back to the rhetorical tools and my own big questions about the crises and problems within Morton's particular cultural moment. In

this chapter, I question the interrelationships between embodied and historical sonic phenomena and their rhetorical effects within specific sociocultural contexts—their “cultural moments.” My focus is on musical performance and on embodied musical excellence, or *virtuosity*, as an agency for rhetorical influence, change, and reconstitution. Specifically, I describe the experience and sonic rhetorics of Jelly Roll Morton, a pianist who in 1938 was anxious to insert himself into the history of jazz on the power and authority of his capacity for virtuosic jazz performance.

Drawing together various classical rhetorical terms, particularly those related to value performance (*mythos*, *aretē*, *epideictic*), I give an ear to the ways that virtuosic performance has the rhetorical potential to authenticate, or prove genuine, in a demonstration of that excellence.

In this way, I argue for musical virtuosity as a sonic rhetoric of embodied, probable evidence.

Related to and with precedent from ancient formulations of rhetoric’s soundness (in both senses), I argue that performed excellence has power to create and revise historical narratives as cultural mythos that in turn translate into potent imaginaries (or reconstitutions) of national, cultural, and racial identity.

Jelly Roll Morton’s Musical Mythos: “[I am the] Originator of Jazz, Stomps, and Swing!”

In May 1938, New Orleans jazz pianist and composer Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton arrived at the Library of Congress, anxious to speak to Alan Lomax, “Assistant in Charge” of the Archive of Folk Song, about the origins of jazz. Morton, who was managing a small nightclub in Washington D.C., was out of money and in poor health but interested in correcting the emergent published history of what was often referred to as “hot” music—or jazz. Morton felt he was being unjustly written out of that history. “[I am the] originator of jazz, stomps and swing,” he claimed, echoing a letter to Robert Ripley (of “Ripley’s Believe It or Not”) that had been

published in both *Baltimore African-American* and *Downbeat* magazine few months earlier: “It is evidently known, beyond contradiction that New Orleans is the cradle of jazz, and I, myself, happened to be the creator in the year 1902 [...]” (Morton, *Downbeat*).

Morton was a pianist of incredible skill—a jazz virtuoso. He is now recognized alongside Buddy Bolden, Sidney Bechet, and Freddie Keppard as one of several key musicians tied to the emergence of New Orleans jazz at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ Morton came of age during the first decade of the 20th century and during what might be considered the final cacophonous refrain of Old New Orleans—the city’s blistering coda. At the turn to the twentieth century, New Orleans was a contradiction of progressive and conservative mores. It had an open and diverse public society but also had terrifying and often deadly ethnic, racial, and class conflict. African Americans were rarely restricted from labor unions, enjoyed decent schools for their children, but suffered bitterly under corrupt police and government clashes. The city was the stage for multiple riots, Jim Crow segregation, and damning disenfranchisement under *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1898. Music, however, was everywhere. On St. Peter street in the French Quarter, from Jackson to Congo Square, and inside public parlors and busy churches, one might hear the hollers, shouts, tambourines, and hand-claps of parishioners and performers. The sounds of old opera and new ragtime, stride-piano, brass bands, string bands, blues bands, and the famous New Orleans funeral processions and parades came together in the coastal city as a great cacophony of sound. And nowhere was that juxtaposition of turbulence and jubilee more pronounced than it was in the world-famous red-light district of New Orleans, Storyville. The Storyville District was one of the first places where folks like Buddy Bolden, Papa Tio, and Frankie Dunson were playing music that seemed to draw from all these styles, music that

⁴⁰See chapter two of Burton W. Peretti’s *The Creation of Jazz* for a succinct history of early New Orleans jazz as well as the development of jazz in other regions during the early twentieth century.

wouldn't be recorded and named until many years later, but music we would certainly recognize today as jazz.

It was during this early part of the 20th century that Morton, Bolden, and others in New Orleans began to turn up the proverbial temperature in the music scene. Hunched over makeshift Storyville bandstands, these players, in raucous rhapsody, began to stitch parts and pieces of the musical culture together and, in so doing, declared a new and potent reconstruction of musical values. And wherever the music played, those values spread.

By the end of the first decade, however, the musical climate in New Orleans had begun to change. In 1907, Bolden suffered a nervous breakdown and never played there again, and Morton had already been gone for years. He left New Orleans in 1905 to seek his fame and fortune—not as a pianist, at first, but as a pool shark, hustler, and pimp. His hot piano playing would follow him anyway. Soon he was playing in many of the hottest clubs and pubs in greater America, from Los Angeles to Chicago to New York. In those clubs, he found many poor and lack-luster players, but he also began to curate a group of musicians who shared his values and who were in conversation with a music that wouldn't find semi-formal acknowledgement as “jazz” until 1915. And surely, Morton wouldn't have given such formalities a second thought or wouldn't until many years later.

Like many musicians of the time, Morton rarely published or copyrighted his music. In an era when artists rarely saw royalties for their published work, Morton didn't see the sense in selling a song to a publisher for fifteen or twenty dollars when he could often make more than a hundred dollars a day playing in the busy clubs and “sporting houses” of the city (Morton, *Jelly Roll Morton* 7). This oversight would later prove problematic for Morton. For example, one of the songs he recorded in 1938 during the sessions at the Library of Congress with Lomax was the

classic jazz tune, “Tiger Rag.” Although it would not actually be published and recorded until 1917 by the Original Dixieland Jass Band, Morton asserts that “Tiger Rag” was his composition, written early in the first decade of the 20th century. The 1917 “Jass Band” recording sold a million copies and would become one of the most recognizable jazz standards of all time: Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman—and later even Frank Sinatra—made it a part of their repertoire. Yet in 1938, “Tiger Rag” and a host of other household-name standards that Morton likely composed or arranged, and which would tie him inextricably to the early history of jazz, brought the pianist neither enduring fame nor fortune.

Given this significant obstruction to Morton’s public and historical recognition, claiming himself the inventor of jazz required validation of a different kind: skilled performance embedded within a concert of embodied rhetorical activity. While Morton’s motive to authenticate himself as one of jazz’s creators was not without hubris, he required the national ethos of Lomax and the Library of Congress to meet his goal. By 1938, Alan Lomax had gained a national reputation for his work as a field recorder, archivist, and occasional performer and had, along with his father John A. Lomax, been responsible for the discovery and recovery of a wide variety of folk musicians and their music. Like the many others he recorded that decade and over the course of his long career, Lomax would come to see Morton as a rich source for understanding the connection between musical traditions and vernacular culture in the United States, which included the development of jazz as a unique “American” creation.

Searching for “uniqueness” during this period in the United States was part of the response to the national traumas of the Great Depression which had shattered the glitzy façade of Progressive Era ideals and left the nation searching for a new wholeness and for a truer, more authentic identity. As Cara Finnegan (2006) notes, “During the 1930s, people sought evidence of

an ‘American way of life,’ relying on a developing cultural belief that with proper investigation one could locate a uniquely American culture and history ‘out there’ if one only looked hard enough” (“Photography” 119). This search is epitomized by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, which, in addition to funding projects building infrastructure, also initiated thousands of Works Progress/Projects Administration (WPA) programs dedicated to searching out, re-presenting, and celebrating “the people” of the United States through works of art, theater, photography, and music.⁴¹ As has been well-documented by Finnegan’s historical work in her monograph *Picturing Poverty*, photographic representations of poverty, especially in the Dust Bowl region of the Midwest, resonated deeply with the American people, many of whom were facing challenging financial situations themselves and empathized with iconic representations of rural poverty. Similarly, new national perspectives during the interwar period brought about a slight plot-shift in the continuously evolving drama of race and the racial divide in America. Cultural and racial appropriation in the United States, especially of African-American artistic traditions, had long been a part of American popular culture. The blackface minstrel show was, for example, the most popular form of entertainment in America for nearly a hundred years (1830-1930) and still echoes residually in contemporary national popular imaginaries.⁴² The rise in popularity of jazz during 1920s, however, marked a shift away from the appropriation of racist grotesque/comic representations of African American identity and culture toward the appropriation of African American genius as white musicians began to compose and perform in jazz and blues vernaculars. Ironically, but true to history, white audiences persisted in their affinity for black culture even as they remained wary of black faces.

⁴¹See Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* for a rich discussion of the New Deal as a cultural project toward the construction of a distinct “Americanness.”

⁴²See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*.

Part of the cultural re-assemblage of the following decade championed by Roosevelt, Lomax, and others included the search for a more complete understanding of American identity, one that included people of color in its constitution. The relationship between Lomax and Morton, then, is part of this larger rhetorical ecology of constitutive meaning making within the United States during this time. Lomax understood Morton (and Morton presented himself) as possessing archetypal qualities of the vernacular jazz musician. Morton's knowledge and performance of his musical abilities could be evidence to the library (and, by extension, to the nation) of not just his place within jazz history, but of the sound of jazz itself as an important thread within the tapestry of an American "people" suddenly interested in knowing themselves in greater nuance.

Mythos, Virtuosity, and the Roots of Epideictic Rhetoric

Jelly Roll Morton's unique exigency to provide proof of authenticity through musical virtuosity raises larger questions about the depths of rhetorical practice itself: How do cultural traditions (musical or otherwise) begin and how do they then take root? What are the discursive and non-discursive means for those beginnings? And, important to students of sound in particular, what do rhythmic practices have to do with these processes? I turn now to a consideration of *mythos*, virtue/value production, and epideictic rhetoric to begin to answer these questions and to demonstrate virtuosic musical performance's potential for symbolic (re)constitution—for history making.

In addition to providing a pseudo-historical "reality" from which to build cultural meaning, myth, "is always an account of a 'creation;'" it relates how something was produced, [how it] began to *be*" (Eliade 6). By extension, as Christopher Johnstone (2009) writes, "In its

primal meaning *mythos* comprehends the idea of telling a story, of presenting a narrative that enables a people—a tribe, a clan, a culture—to make sense of the mysterious” (16). Further, myth “expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of men” (Bronislaw qtd. in Johnstone 17). In short, *mythos* sets the parameters of the values, virtues, and shared ideals within a cultural construct. The processes by which these ideals or virtues are practiced, performed, and embodied as a way of demonstrating and circulating community wisdom are what Aristotle might have called “epideictic” (or demonstrative) rhetorical processes. Epideictic activity involves the distribution of judgments about community values through the public performance of ritual and rite, which, not incidentally, were often couched in rhythmic language or accompanied by music. If epideictic activates shared ideals and virtues, the epideictic rhetorician is most effective when she embodies the ideals in perceptible ways and inhabits a social position of relative power and influence. Shared notions of virtue and value circulate through social agreement on the praiseworthy quality of a virtuosic performance, which in turn perpetuates a desire to both emulate the performance and exalt the performer.

Jelly Roll Morton’s claims of authenticity were made through careful storytelling and rhapsody, which, in the classical sense, is the stitching together of value-laden narrative in rhythmic virtuosity.⁴³ Generally speaking, the Ancient Greeks understood virtuosity, or *aretē*, as a standard of excellence applicable to any activity.⁴⁴ When applied to knowledge or performance, however, *aretē* takes on the virtuosic “quality” that Robert Pirsig (1974) has

⁴³In ancient Greek, rhapsode or *rhapsōidōs* (ῥαψωδιστής) means “stitcher of songs.”

⁴⁴*Aretē* and, more generally, the circulation and performance of public virtue is a more rich and expansive topic than there is room here to cover adequately. For a variety of resources on the subject see Michael Gagarin and Paul Woodruff’s “Protagoras,” in *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists*; chapter four of Robert Hariman’s *Political Style*, and Mark Garrett Longaker, *Rhetoric and the Republic: Politics, Civic Discourse, and Education in Early America*.

described in connection to deft, improvisational rhetorical practice: literally the almost-reflexive situational response that occurs for the rhetor who has become, through careful cultural and pedagogical training, *excellent in eloquence*. As advanced in the introduction, I argue again for an understanding of *aretē* as shared, *embodied knowledge* (rather than a stable, abstract body of knowledge). *Aretē* is the social agreement and performance about what constitutes “quality” excellence within a culture. Virtuosity, in this sense, is the internalization of external cultural norms learned in the act of the public and private practice or performance of those norms. In this way, excellence is eventually habituated—as Debra Hawhee has written—as both a “repeated/repeatable style of living [. . . and as a] performative, bodily phenomenon [. . .] produced through observation [and] imitation” (187). Recall also, from the earlier section on ancient rhetoric that Aristotle explicitly draws *aretē* together with epideictic rhetoric: *aretē* sets the parameters of *epideictic* and activates the virtues and vices commonly held within a community or culture by making them subject to (and the subjects of) performances of praise and blame. In this way, epideictic rhetoric is a kind of performed excellence or virtue that both produces and perpetuates codes of value and belief.

I evoke these terms in reference to Jelly Roll Morton’s argument for his place in jazz history because of the nature of his task: First, he had to make a claim to and demonstration of his knowledge of the “basic codes of value and belief” within jazz culture and society. Those codes are presented for the Library of Congress as an epideictic narrative that included rich descriptions of race, space, place, and people all of which evoke a particular quality of life in the Storyville district of New Orleans (including detailed accounting for the *lifestyle* of a jazz musician). Second, this process of authentication required the performance of specific and embedded jazz values as they existed as part of the matrix of musicianship, mentality, and

sociopolitical realities of the day, including performances of racial identity. These values are communicated in Morton's deep repertoire knowledge (well over forty tunes and melodies are represented in the sessions), but also in his performance of a central jazz value: "hot" playing. Third, and most important, Morton had to prove his excellence—his embodied *aretē*—through not only pristine virtuosic jazz performance within that matrix, but also a careful explanation and conceptualization of those virtuosic elements. These three elements—rich epideictic narrative, virtuosic performance, and technical demonstration—well performed and positively received, work in concert to constitute the necessary ingredients for rhetorical inception. They would give Morton the tools to revise the creation myth of jazz and insert himself as an "authentic" contributor in the tradition's origins. In the process, they would also produce a rhetoric of jazz: a set skills that could be practiced, perfected, and then applied to any tune. Before he could do so, however, a professional relationship with Alan Lomax needed to be established and maintained. I briefly discuss the circumstances around that relationship before moving to a more detailed analysis of the elements that would constitute Morton's rhetoric of jazz in the remainder of the essay.

Rendering an Epideictic Mythos: Jelly Roll Morton at the Library of Congress

"I realized that Jelly was telling me the history of jazz, because jazz was a neighborhood project. Only a few individuals in this small, sleepy town were involved in evoking the music of jazz out of the broad basis of American Negro folk song. The Downtown Creoles could play their notes, but the Uptown boys had much to teach them. As Papa Big-Eye Nelson told me: 'You had to put your cryin' into your clarinet'"

Alan Lomax, in Szwed 137

In 1938, Alan Lomax also had some concerns about jazz's place in United States culture and history. Alan and his mentor and father John A. Lomax had always steered clear of New

Orleans, a town they considered well past its musical prime by the time they were gathering songs in the 1920s and 30s. Alan Lomax subsequently avoided recording jazz musicians because he was weary of how jazz as a commercial juggernaut dominated the airwaves and especially that white performers had for years appropriated and changed the genre to make it more accessible to white audiences. Jelly Roll Morton's appearance at his office in the Library of Congress marked a turning point for Lomax in his attitude toward the study of jazz roots. Lomax had been across town to the Jungle Inn, Morton's dilapidated jazz club in Washington D.C., where he heard the man play. He was compelled, then, when the aging musician—one clearly from the old guard of the jazz tradition—came to the library hoping to partner with Lomax in the recasting of jazz history and in so doing wrest it away from competing voices and from the colonizing forces of the American corporate recording industry. Something about Jelly Roll Morton's audacity was persuasive for Lomax. He recalled Morton's dress, in particular: an aging but sharp hundred-dollar suit, beautiful hand-painted silk tie with matching shirt, socks and handkerchief, gold rings and the famous half-carat diamond in his front incisor: "I looked at him with considerable suspicion. But I thought, I'd take this cat on, and . . . see how much folk music a jazz musician knows" (Szwed 9).

The Library of Congress sessions that followed this first meeting weren't originally planned to be very lengthy. However, Lomax was immediately enthralled by Morton's cool demeanor, his genius behind the piano, and his detailed recollection of the music scene in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. Having a keyboard under his fingers allowed Morton to punctuate his history with chords and melodies giving those stories a multi-modal richness not possible in a typical interview. As such, not only were the Morton sessions unique as musical output, but they

were also the first recorded oral history in jazz.⁴⁵ To boot, Lomax saw Morton as a resource in his ongoing project: to find and record folk or “vernacular” music, to preserve it, but also to share it with the country in an effort toward an updated national mythos—one that included a reconstituted notion of who “the people” were.

By 1938, and though only twenty-three years old, Alan Lomax had emerged as a well-known author, folklorist, and national public figure. His field recording work collecting folk songs had commenced in 1933 with his father, John in a trek through Southern African-American penitentiaries. By the time of his sessions with Jelly Roll Morton, he had traveled all over North America, including trips to the Bahamas and an extended recording trip to Haiti with author and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. In the analysis of the Morton sessions below, it should be remembered that while Lomax’s vocal presence on the session recordings waxes and wanes, he is present throughout: questioning, encouraging, prodding, and occasionally (as critics of Lomax’s methods have pointed out) supplying Morton with whiskey, as he sometimes would to lower his subjects’ inhibitions.⁴⁶ To be sure, Morton and Lomax’s partnership on the project is marked with the paradoxes of competing rhetorical agendas and complicated further by the clear asymmetry of both racial and institutional power between them. Yet, co-creation occurs amidst and through these imbalances. And unlike polished alphabetic biographies, in a sonic rendering of this dialectic, we can listen for ourselves to Lomax’s interruptions or hear Morton’s voice begin to slur when he has had sufficient drink. Whatever power Lomax hordes as gatekeeper of

⁴⁵ In September 2005, the Library of Congress released *The Complete Library of Congress Recordings* through Rounder Records. This expansive box set marks the first time that the complete, unedited, Jelly Roll Morton sessions were made available commercially. The release includes eight compact discs of interview and musical content presented in the order that Morton related it. The CDs are packaged with book-length liner notes and electronic documents which include a transcription of the interview, a biography of Morton by John Szwed, and photographs of archival materials, among other content.

⁴⁶ For one of the more incisive critiques of Alan Lomax’s methods during the Morton sessions, see Howard Reich and William Gaines, *Jelly’s Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton*.

the project, it is tempered for the listener by the persistence of Morton's musical tale, an eight hour epic from beginning to end.

Historian Philip Pastras compares Jelly Roll Morton's narrative style and ethos in the sessions to the mythopoetic ode of an ancient epic poet. The story, he says, is, "An American odyssey, with its particularly American brand of near misses, and narrow escapes, of Sirens, Circes, and monsters, of far-flung travels and homecomings" (Pastras 3) but also full of the "verbal one-upmanship" and "braggadocio" essential to black language practices (16). Much of Morton's tale revolves around his status as a Creole and the various class hierarchies found in New Orleans and Storyville including the diverse African American community there. In one segment on the first day of recording, Jelly Roll describes the scene where musicians would gather, and especially the various class mixing among the clientele of the music clubs:

At that time, uh, that was the year of nineteen-two. I was about seventeen years old. I happened to go to Villere and Bienville, at that time one of the most famous nightspots after everything was closed. It was only a backroom, where all the greatest pianists frequented after they got off from work. All the pianists got off from work in the sporting houses at around four or after unless they had plenty money involved. And they would go to this Frenchman's (that was the name of the place) saloon, and there would be everything in the line of hilarity there. They would have even millionaires that come to listen to the different great pianists, what would no doubt be their favorites maybe among 'em. (Morton 12).

A bit later, he elaborates on the scene at Frenchman's and other establishments in the district:

[Spoken as Morton plays slowly modulating chords on the piano] Of course, it was a free and easy place. Everybody got along just the same. And, uh— and

that's the way it was. There wasn't no certain neighborhood for nobody to live in, only with the St. Charles Avenue district, which is considered the millionaire district. In fact it was. And that's how it was. Why, everybody just went anyplace that they wanted. Many times you would see some of those St. Charles Avenue bunch right in one of those honky tonks. They was around—they called theirselves slumming, I guess, but they was there, just the same. Nudging elbows with all the big bums. (19)

He goes on to describe less “free and easy” times including a deadly race riot in 1900, his exploits as a pool shark, and even some of the more bawdy and sexually explicit tunes that he and others would play in the honkytonks and brothels of era.

From time to time, Morton lets his prejudices show, by commenting on the ugliness or “thick lips” of the darker African Americans that he was associated with. Morton guarded his liminal status as a Creole and while he credits many of his African American colleagues as sharing in his authorship of jazz, he is often quick to point out their otherness. The performance of race was important to Morton. He was born into a middle-class French-European family of African decent and was part of a racial group generally designated “Creole of color.” The lighter-skinned Creoles in New Orleans had, by 1904, been part of a long, complicated, and increasingly bitter struggle for social status in an increasingly Black and/or White racial public sphere. Jazz historian Burton Peretti remarks that “Creoles of color [...], caught between a growing ‘American Negro’ population and increasingly intolerant whites, developed an intense caste consciousness in these years”—one where “downtown creoles” looked down their noses at “uptown Negroes”—and this view was reinforced by the starkly racialized social arrangement (24-25). The larger mythos of jazz, then, was knit to the history of struggle between competing

classist and racial ideologies. Morton's epideictic rhetorics are evidence of the ways an active participant within that sociocultural context embodied that struggle. The rhetorics also then reinscribe and reconstitute the politics of that struggle for the wider audience of the Library. Morton's frequent references to the sometimes-symbiotic/sometimes-not relationship between African American and Creole American musicians in New Orleans around the turn of the twentieth century indicates that the sessions with Lomax were important to Morton in forwarding Creole-ness as one of the "essential" elements of jazz's genesis.

Virtuosity and "Hotness"

"Two neighborhoods, disjoined by all the sordid fears of our time, were forced to make a common cause. This musical union demanded that there be not merely acceptance and understanding, but respect and love on both sides. In this moment of ecstasy an interracial marriage was consummated, and the child of this union still jumps for joy wherever jazz is hot."

Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 122

The racial tension within the adjacent districts of New Orleans had a peculiar effect on the developing musical landscape and created one of the early synonyms for jazz music: "hot" playing. Hot playing was a way of acknowledging a certain kind of virtuosic performance—one tied to extraordinary skill but also to racial identity and, by extension, the tenuous race relations mentioned above in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. In 1949, and as part of his work researching the book that would become *Mr. Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz"* (1950), Alan Lomax recorded an interview with Dr. Leonard Bechet (brother of the legendary saxophonist and clarinetist Sidney Bechet) and asked him to describe this moment in New Orleans history and jazz mythology. Bechet's response helps to understand the connection between racial identity and musical style:

You have to play with all varieties of people. Some of the Creole musicians didn't like the idea of mixing up with the—well, the rougher class, and so they never went too far. You see, [Alphonse] Picou—Picou's a very good clarinet, but he ain't hot. That's because he wouldn't mix so much.

You have to play real *hard* when you play for Negroes. You got to *go* some, if you want to avoid their criticism. You got to come up to their mark, you understand? If you do, you get that drive. Bolden had it. Bunk had it. Manuel Perez, the best ragtime Creole trumpet, he didn't have it.

See, these hot people they play like they *killing* themselves, you understand? That's the kind of effort that Louis Armstrong and Freddy Keppard put in there. If you want to hit the high notes those boys hit, brother, you got to *work* for that. (Lomax 98).

Hot playing was a style—a kind of intensity applied to the music—and was generally the product of the alchemy of a culturally-mixed and racially-diverse influence. Hot playing modified the standard melody through deconstruction, modification, improvisation, and reconstitution. For most, these modifications weren't easy to classify technically—knowing “hotness” was in the performance, not the definition. Bechet has trouble defining hotness as anything other than something that the greats either had or didn't. It wasn't technical but you could *feel* it. Hot players played *hard*, were *driving* and were working so hard at being hot that it sounded like it was “killing” them. Also, hotness was also a kind of racial gatekeeper. From Bechet's description, it appears that hotness was a quality generally only performed by the best African American players and one's ability to match that intensity was part of the sociopolitical requirements for successful interaction and collaboration between races.

“Hotness,” then, stands in as an early notch on the thermostat of jazz’s complex creation myth—as an aural epideictic designator of a certain kind of shared praiseworthy virtuosity. Hotness was part of jazz’s *aretē*. If you were a hot player (or knew how to recognize what “hot” was), you were keyed into a certain standard of excellence that was marked as valuable in an emergent community. Those values were centered most prominently in the music, but might also be understood as reflective, resonant, or respondent to the tumult and general upheaval of the civic value system that had been mounting for years within the city of New Orleans and others like it. Morton shows off this hotness in his song “Tiger Rag.” He also begins to explain the ways that jazz as a creative process combining embodied experience and specific virtuosic skills works.

“Tiger Rag”: Jazz is style “you can apply to any type tune.”

Late in the sessions, Morton moves to a demonstration of his composition methods for the song “Tiger Rag.” In so doing he begins to nuance his claim as “inventor” of jazz. This begins in his assertion that jazz is not necessarily a genre or type of music separate from other genres, but rather something more accurately defined as a style that “you can apply to any type tune . . . depend[ing] on your ability for transformation” (Morton 36). Like many of the songs Morton played for the Library of Congress archive, the origins and authorship of the song “Tiger Rag” are contested. The Original Dixieland Jass Band first recorded it in 1917.⁴⁷ They recorded it again the next year and the record sold a million copies. “Tiger Rag” would subsequently go on to become a jazz standard and by 1938 when Morton claimed authorship, it would have been as well known in the popular American landscape as any song on an “oldies” radio station might be now. Morton demonstrated his claim to authorship in an interesting way. He did not actually

⁴⁷ Incidentally, it was around this time that the common spelling would change to “jazz” and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band would follow suit.

make a strong claim for composition of the piece, but rather for his “ability for transformation” (36) of “an old quadrille” (31) that it was based upon. The quadrille was an historic form of music dating to 18th century France composed to accompany a “multisectioned, multithemed” French dance for couples into what would come to be known as the “Tiger Rag.” This transformation is performed over several tracks in the archival material. Morton begins by introducing the tune by way of the quadrille form and tying it to the beginnings of jazz:

Now jazz started in New Orleans. And this, uh, “Tiger Rag” happened to be transformed from an old quadrille that was in many different tempos. And I’ll, no doubt, give you an idea how it went. This was the introduction, meaning that everyone was supposed to get their partners. [Plays introduction.] “Get your partners, everybody, get your partners!” And people would be rushing around the hall getting their partners. And maybe—have maybe five minutes lapsed between that time—and, of course, they’d start it over again and that was the first part of it. (Morton 31)

Morton’s biographer John Szwed points out that ex-slaves interviewed for a WPA project said that the “dances most often remembered from slavery days were contra dances (or “contredanses”), square dances, the cotillion, the waltz, and the quadrille” (Morton 37). The quadrille as a form exemplifies Morton’s contention that jazz used ideas drawn from operas, symphonies, and overtures. Said Morton: “There is nothing finer than jazz music ... because it comes from everything of the finest class music” (36). So too did the quadrille. Jazz historian Thornton Hagert teaches that “Quadrilles [were made up of] music [from] bits of popular songs or snatches from opera arias” (41). Borrowing, improvising, and stitching together was the norm for jazz as Morton begins to theorize it, but the musical curator would also need a set of

practiced skills to apply to those tunes in order to bring the disparate parts and melodies into a single stylized whole. After he plays the fifth strain of the quadrille, the strain carrying the melody he claims Tiger Rag is drawn from, Morton says:

Now I will show you how it was transformed. It happened to be transformed by your performer [meaning himself] at this particular time. “Tiger Rag,” for your approval.

Alan Lomax: Who named it the “Tiger Rag”?

Jelly Roll Morton: I also named it. Came from the way that I played it by making the “tiger” on my elbow. [...] A— a person said once, “It sounds like a tiger hollerin’.” I said, “Fine.” To myself, I said, “That’s the name.” So, I’ll play it for you. (Morton 32)

The transformation is marked mainly by Morton’s flourishes and a slight uptick in the tempo of the piece. The underlying melody is still there but the song takes on a different character with extensions and exaggerations of the melody here, improvisations there, and movement between riffs and figures each of which represented forms that, according to Morton, might be applied to any tune, from any tradition, dependent on the virtuosity of the players in the band. Again, Morton claimed, jazz was a style that could be applied to any type of tune.

As such, he definitively declares that he made this transformation “many years before the [Original] Dixieland [Jass Band] had ever started” (Morton 32) using his music and technique as evidence for his claim. In this case his argument rests mainly on the melody he constructs in the fifth strain of the unnamed “old” quadrille. If Morton is indeed the author, it makes sense that that fifth strain would bear resemblance to the song, “Tiger Rag,” developed from it. If he is not the author, the fifth strain would have to be backward engineered into a pared down version.

Morton was capable of both, of course and so, again, the implicit argument has more to do with his technique and style than it does some kind of indisputable piece of evidence. Though it is somewhat paradoxical to his claims for invention, note also that it is his assertion of the *transformation* taking place from the fifth strain to what he names “Tiger Rag” that seems most important to him in this description. This slight semantic change marks a shift in the sessions. While Morton’s argument thus far had been centered on the idea of invention and creation, he moves now to the more conservative (and more persuasive) assertion that jazz wasn’t, in fact, something one could *invent*. As Szwed posits, “[Morton] never truly claimed to have invented jazz, only to have transformed music into jazz” (*Jelly Roll Morton* 33). The recording of his transformation of “Tiger Rag” offers compelling evidence for that claim. Morton is never that interested in arguing for the originality of a song only that he was the one who developed tools for jazz transformation. He is always, therefore, anxious to show off how a tune would or should be played in the jazz vernacular and in performing the elements within the song that tie it to turn-of-the-century New Orleans. For example, the section of the song that Morton describes as “making the ‘tiger’ on my elbow” is compelling. He is referring to a section in the song where each first beat in the measure is played in the low notes on the piano with his left arm and elbow. The effect is not unlike the sound of a large cat growling or grunting. This stylistic flourish is a bit of a trademark for Morton but also appears in nearly every version of the song that follows when it is picked up as a jazz standard.

(Re)constituting the Jazz Mythos: Elements of Virtuosity

Soon after the “Tiger Rag” section, Morton continues to flesh out his rhetoric of jazz. “Every musician in America had the wrong understanding about jazz music,” he says

hyperbolically (Morton 36). “[S]omehow or another it got into the dictionary that jazz was considered a lot of blatant noise and discordant tones” (36). High tempo playing was a parlor trick of many ragtime pianists and it was easier to fake good musicianship when you fudged the details because of speed. But high tempo playing was the paragon of swing-era jazz. Louis Armstrong’s orchestras were known for their break-neck speeds. Morton admired Armstrong but was critical of the ways that tempo was placed before style during the various evolutions of jazz up until the Lomax sessions. Speed didn’t necessarily add up to “jazz,” but rather, a collection of virtuosic skills and intuitive affectations did. Again, Morton insists that jazz is something “you can apply to any type tune” depending on your “ability for transformation” and not on your ability to play quick and loud:

Jazz music is to be played sweet, soft, plenty rhythm. When you have your plenty rhythm with your plenty swing, it becomes beautiful. To start with, you can’t make crescendos and diminuendos when one is playing triple forte. You’ve got to be able to come down in order to go up. If a glass of water is full, you can’t fill it any more. But if you have a half a glass you have an opportunity to put more water in it. And jazz music is based on the same principles. (36)

He then plays a tune in order to demonstrate these qualities. The song is an improvisation and, when asked by Lomax for a name, he doesn’t have one. Instead it’s “just a number that I thought I’d play awhile here, just to give a person a good idea.” (36-37). He modulates the song into double-time and then utilizes the moment to demonstrate one of the elements he’d earlier tried to explain to Lomax: the riff. “A riff is what you would call a foundation, as, like— you would walk on. Something that’s standard” (35). A jazz tune might modulate through several of these “standard” riffs. As Morton demonstrates a riff, it becomes clear that he’s speaking of a sort of

musical trope or figure—a way of “jazzing up” the melody—that can be applied to a section of a tune. Like a rhetorical trope or figure, riffs are standardized in a way that makes them tool-like. They can be moved from tune to tune and when applied, they enhance a melody. Morton’s decision to compose a melody on the spot to demonstrate this is interesting, though it might have been more instructional if he had chosen a well-known, non-jazz melody and then showed how that song could be “jazzed.”

For Jelly Roll Morton, jazz was a flavor, a seasoning “tinge.” Later in the sessions he refers to another important jazz element and one that, for him, advances his thesis that New Orleans was the “cradle” of jazz. Before playing the song “New Orleans Blues,” Morton encourages the listener to pay attention to what he calls the “Spanish tinge.” “New Orleans Blues” was transformed into a “playable composition” in about 1902 and “All the black bands in the city of New Orleans” played it (Morton 104). “This has much to do with the typical jazz idea” he says, “If one can’t manage a way to put the tinges of Spanish in these tunes, they’ll never be able to get the right “season,” I may call it, for jazz music” (104). By acknowledging these “tinges” Morton “was calling attention to what some call the habanera, and others call the tango bass line” (Szwed, “Doctor Jazz” 33). There is some controversy around the place of these elements in jazz music as some critics saw them as merely a passing fad, but, as Szwed argues, “Those who ignored him erected a false evolutionary perspective that emphasized jazz as a radical break from the musical past, and by excluding the whole range of folk, ritual, and foreign musics from jazz history, all of the music of the United States was grossly oversimplified” (33). There were many other names for this way of playing. Including those mentioned above, some called tunes played in this style “slow drags” or “sashays” and often with a beat pattern that differentiated from a straightforward 4/4 European rhythm. Instead, the rhythmic patterns would

have syncopation or different emphases in their eight-beat cycles. And while Morton designated this style of polyrhythmic playing as Spanish, the “Spanish” part was likely a misnomer “since this rhythm figure does not appear to be specifically Spanish or even Latin” (33). Instead, this type of playing is a characteristic of much of sub-Saharan African music and could be found in Brazil, Jamaica, Haiti, and other traditions that had come to influence African-American musical traditions, especially in New Orleans. Morton recognizes this rhythmic flavor in jazz because it had circulated within African American music for decades. You could hear it in the offbeat accents and syncopations of ragtime and early jazz but also in the rhythms of rural Black religious songs and early blues. Whereas “riffs” were generally musical in nature, the “tinge” was a rhythmic trope (though it often had the accompanying “habanera bass line”). These rhythms were and still are “at the heart of the famous New Orleans ‘second line’ beat, a pattern so widely shared by New Orleans musicians that it constitutes the center of that city’s party and parade tradition” (33). They also wind their way in and out of early rock & roll.

The “Spanish tinge” falls in among Jelly Roll Morton’s rich repertoire of performed virtuosic evidence, each of which combine to demonstrate his cognizance of the primordial elements essential to the jazz sound as well as his deep knowledge of jazz’s cultural value system, from “hotness,” to “transformation,” to riffing, and beyond. Morton’s rhythmic rhetoric is a demonstration that *mythos* and *aretē* persist in their resilience as epideictic tools for the building of cultural systems of value and virtue. I conclude here, then, with a reminder of music’s power within embedded networks of historicized rhetoricity. For instance, the current obsession with ironic imitation in popular music is as well disposed for this kind of sonic rhetorical analysis as the 1930s preoccupation with notions of cultural authenticity. In either case (and in any number of others), virtuosic musical performance has power to both synthesize and

re-present traditional cultural norms and create new *mythos* and revised values for the next generation. The substance of virtuosic performance—what it sounds like and what valued elements are performed—is always embedded within and contingent to the historical moment and its milieu. Jelly Roll Morton’s performance was particularly poignant. As I have sought to demonstrate, Morton revised the trajectory of jazz history itself and inserted himself into it as not only a participant, but as one of its prophets.

Later in his life, Alan Lomax reflected back on his experience with Morton and oral history making:

I later came to call this process ‘the cultural feedback system,’ where people talk their images into a recording instrument or into a film, and suddenly begin to find that they have importance, what they have to say is significant. All that came out of the Jelly Roll interview. . . . This was the first oral history, and that’s how it all began on the stage. Jelly Roll invented oral history, you might say.

It was a process he would repeat to greater and lesser degrees with many others, from Woody Guthrie to many whose names are known mostly by archivists and experts.

Postlude: A Dissonant Reframing of Jelly Roll’s Biographer

“At that time Jazz was my worst enemy. Through the forces of radio, it was wiping out the music I cared about – traditional American folk music.”

Alan Lomax, in Szwed 122

Above and elsewhere in this chapter, I have included epigraph quotes from Alan Lomax related to his changing attitude about jazz, Jelly Roll Morton, and the Library of Congress session’s effects on his approach to his work as a folklorist and archivist. For the most part, my depiction of the younger Lomax in this chapter is, for the most part, a generous one. The Lomax

quotes I have included derive mainly from a work Lomax composed in the decade after the Jelly Roll sessions. Indeed, in 1950, twelve years after the Library of Congress sessions, nine years after Morton's death, and after five years of work, Lomax published *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz"*. "I . . . spent five years trying to make my audience and my readers hear him as he talked," he reported (qtd. in Szwed *Alan Lomax* 239). In the book (and perhaps not unlike the WPA books mentioned in the interlude preceding this chapter) Lomax carefully reconstructs Morton's oral/aural narrative into a chronological framework giving it the historical logic of a traditional biographical accounting. Lomax starts in New Orleans in 1903 and moves forward city by city: Chicago, Los Angeles, Nevada, Arizona, Washington, New York and back to Chicago. To this history, Lomax adds information gathered from his interviews in New Orleans and elsewhere with people who knew Morton—old friends, band-mates, and acquaintances, family members, and his ex-wife Anita Gonzalez. In his reconstruction, Lomax takes poetic license in his recasting of Morton's words for print. He smoothens, rearranges, corrects syntax occasionally, and props up Morton's words with his own and with those of the interview participants mentioned above. Alongside the Library of Congress recording and the official transcription included in the box set released by Rounder, the book offers a third interpretation for scholars interested in the content reported on by Morton during the sessions but a very obvious recasting of the content there from its original source material.

In 1950, however, the book was the first taste that a general public had of the Jelly Roll sessions. Again, as was the case for the WPA publications, print granted a large audience access to Jelly Roll's story and was the primary access point for those interested in a more careful study of his life and work. The book was well received. It garnered over a hundred reviews, including

laudatory reviews from Louis Armstrong in the *New York Times* and Carl Sandburg in the *Chicago Sun Times* (Szwed, “Dr. Jazz” 31). Since then, critics and scholars of jazz history have begun to scrutinize Lomax’s approach, both within the book and in the sessions themselves. For example, Howard Reich and William Gaines cast a shadow of near villainy over Lomax in their recent book, *Jelly’s Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton*. They are particularly concerned that Lomax’s authorial agenda would get in the way of Morton’s during the sessions:

Though Morton wanted to talk about music, Lomax grilled Morton about sex, mayhem, and murders in New Orleans, the sensational tales that Morton gave him reluctantly. To keep the bawdiest anecdotes flowing, Lomax repeatedly filled Morton’s glass with whiskey, and as he did, the stories became more colorful, raunchy, and exaggerated. The composer didn’t realize that by giving Lomax the dirt he wanted, he was helping to soil his own reputation for generations to come.

(154)

The biographers point out that while Lomax reports in *Mr. Jelly Roll* that he was incensed by Morton’s report that the pianist had been hoodwinked and insulted by his publishers Walter and Lester Melrose (who had cheated Morton out of royalties and claimed that he “couldn’t write music”) Lomax had taken advantage of Morton in a similar way (Reich and Gaines 236-238). In a letter to his friend Walter Carew, Morton complains “I wonder how Lomax think that I don’t need money to live just the same as anyone else . . . I worked for months doing the [Library of Congress session] and it meant nothing to me fanatically” (qtd. in Reich and Gaines, 236). This report indicates a possibility that there may have been an unfulfilled promise of monetary compensation from Lomax to Morton. Reich and Gaines confirm that suspicion claiming that

though Lomax's successful book *Mister Jelly Roll* was written largely in the first-person "voice" of Jelly Roll and drew on the Library of Congress recordings as the primary source, "Lomax didn't share any of the proceeds with the composer's estate" (236). Perhaps worse, they accuse Lomax of codifying "many of the myths that had long gathered around Morton's name" in *Mr. Jelly Roll*, including an accusation that the book worked to essentialize Morton as a "self-loathing Creole genius who hated his race, lied about his age, and exaggerated his achievements" (237). They claim that these caricatures misrepresent Morton to the public, undermining, I would add, Lomax's original purpose of the Morton project—the defense of Morton's voice and narrative to the story of jazz.

These accusations are, to an extent, true. Lomax did ply Morton with liquor during the Library of Congress sessions and he also kept all the royalties from his book, *Mister Jelly Roll*. The book, in many ways, does paint Morton with unflattering strokes—and certainly there is caricature. Often, however, that caricature emerges from Morton's telling as much as it does from Lomax's rendering. In fact, the years that Lomax worked on the book were spent working to supplement Morton's narrative with other voices, historical and environmental context, as well as his own commentary in order to present a more complex portrait of the man than Morton himself relates in the sessions. While Reich and Gaines's hostility toward Lomax seems directed at a perceived nefarious and unethical methodology, another underlying worry emerges and is expressed as an uneasiness that aural/oral history makes the interlocutor's influence invisible to the audience. Lomax's whiskey bottle, his leading questions, and his off-tape prompts and direction change the "natural" flow of Morton's memory. Reich and Gaines prefer a "truer" representation of Morton, one "unfettered and unfiltered by anyone else's preconceptions" one that they found "particularly his letters" (154). The primacy that Reich and Gaines's lend to

written discourse is revealing of an underlying prejudice towards written over spoken evidence—that invisible influences somehow disappear when producing a written document.

Reich and Gaines's apparent discourse prejudice aptly characterizes a position not uncommon to traditional historians. They are scholars of the paper trail. Their book, *Jelly's Blues*, is built around a recently discovered and recovered memorabilia collection of William Russell, "an eccentric collector" who "had jammed more than a half a century's worth of New Orleans memorabilia" into his small twenty-five by twelve living space (xi). The 65,000-piece collection was centered on Morton and included "historic correspondence, contracts, photos, and other bits and pieces of music history" (xii). In the presentation of their own historiographic method, Reich and Gaines infer that these tangible, written and photographic artifacts make indelible what, in the recordings is ephemeral. They point to "real" events with clear evidence represented through written documents, official records, playbills, and newspaper clippings. Their belief is that Morton is more accurately represented as a primary source when his letters are "unfettered and unfiltered" whereas his recorded interview sessions are compromised by the fettering filtration of another's mediating presence. Reich and Gaines' position raises questions related to the ways that historical discourse is mediated through its various sources, interlocutors, and modes. Marshall McLuhan's famous epithet "The medium is the message" becomes all the more poignant when the medium is understood to be not just the prominent mediating technology carrying the message, but also includes the various mediators around that technology: technicians, producers, composers, editors, Lomaxes.

Throughout the sessions, and as Reich and Gaines correctly point out, the listener cannot ignore the presence of Alan Lomax. And even though Szwed posits that as the sessions progress, Lomax's questions "slowly faded as Morton found his rhythm, and Lomax became his audience"

(Szwed 124). Lomax is always an audience that talks back. He never completely fades into the background. Understanding Lomax's role in the explicit and implicit dialectic on the tapes is important in order to understand the recordings themselves and also shed light on the eventual thesis of Lomax's book. Indeed, the recordings themselves may be seen as the result of two competing (though not opposing) agendas. Morton's, of course, was to argue his case as an original jazzman. Lomax, as you'll remember, was initially interested to "see how much folk music a jazz musician knows" (qtd. in Szwed 9). Throughout the sessions, you can hear as these two communicative purposes come into conflict and conversation with one another, as sometimes the content of Morton's music and stories meets the criteria of both men's "motives" and other times either one or the other. And surely, the agendas of both men may have modulated a bit during the sessions. Morton, for example and as I stated earlier, begins the sessions by immediately playing "Alabama Bound" a song that he regards as evidence of his claim as a jazz originator. The song was also just what Lomax might have hoped to hear. "Alabama Bound" had a rich "folk" history. Early in the sessions, a new exigence emerges for Lomax, a new opportunity in both content and method. After about fifteen minutes of recording, Lomax says, "Jelly Roll, uh, tell us about yourself. Tell us where you were born, who your folks were, and when, and how" (Morton 7). This marks a shift in the dialogue. Lomax recognizes in this shift to a less-direct approach to meeting the goals of his agenda, a potential win-win. Morton has already, in the first several minutes, demonstrated his ability to produce compelling narrative, rich with names, places, and plots. Lomax is interested in Morton's knowledge of folk music or music that sprung from the cultural landscape of his roots in New Orleans and elsewhere. The move to a life-story allows Morton to think of himself in the early contexts where that music might have been an active ingredient but it also moves Morton to the center of his

tale—it gives him control over where the dialogue will move. In the invitation toward the development of this larger biography, Lomax expresses a confidence that such a move will bring Morton’s agenda in productive overlap with his own. In this way, Morton and Lomax come to a sort of mutual-if-unspoken understanding about how the sessions will proceed. From time to time, either party will reassert their original agenda through a leading question or a comment from Morton that if he follows the requested thread, he’ll get off track. But in this give-and-take dialectic, motives are aligned, common ground found, and, as Kenneth Burke would call it, identification achieved. Morton and Lomax’s interaction demonstrate an “acting-together” (*Rhetoric of Motives*, 21) and exemplify the way that Burke’s notion of consubstantiality is a process of negotiated understanding leading to mutually satisfactory ends.

So, Reich and Gaines are correct. Morton and Lomax have different motives and are therefore, by nature, always at odds, always divided. But that doesn’t mean that we should discount the product of their interaction as outside the realm of historical accuracy. Rather, we might see their negotiation and its various products as rhetorically and historically rich. In many ways, the recordings articulate Morton’s representation of his history filtered through the subvoicings of Lomax while Lomax’s book repurposes Morton’s voice and supplements it with others in order to tell a slightly different story. Any historian would argue that understanding Jelly Roll Morton (or Alan Lomax, for that matter) can never be accomplished in the consultation of a single authoritative source. The Library of Congress sessions with Morton are a reminder that rhetorical modes outside of textual representation, in this case aural/oral discourse, provide evidences and insights into historical circumstances that enrich subject understanding, complicate monologic historical narratives, and encourage a more nuanced understanding of history-making itself.

Chapter Four

Alan Lomax on the Radio:

The Folk Sounds of Broadcast Democracy on Columbia's *American School of the Air*

“The mistake is to think that communications will solve the problems of communication, that better wiring will eliminate the ghosts.”

John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 9

“Radio was such an effective documentary medium, a central medium in the 1930s, because it inextricably joined the other two methods of persuasion, direct and vicarious. The listener witnessed firsthand, yet through another's eyes. The relation of listener and speaker was paradoxical, and like all paradoxes unstable and unresolvable. The listener never could get from the speaker just the information he wanted as he wanted it, because to believe entirely he needed it firsthand. The speaker never could give the information he wanted as he wanted to.”

William Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 9

“Radio, more than any other agency, possessed the power not only to assert actively the unifying power of simultaneous experience but to communicate meanings about the nature of that unifying experience. Radio not only responded to the dominant social tensions of its era but, by addressing its audience's situation directly in music, comedy, and narrative drama, made those tensions the subject of its constructed symbolic universe.”

Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*, 11-12

Introduction:

In the previous chapter, I focused on jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton's attempt to revise history through the virtuosic performance of sonic and musical rhetorics. This epideictic *aretē*, I argued, was presented as a mixture of sonic practices, some dynamic—Morton's spoken words and storytelling, his singing, the lyrics and tunes of the songs he played. Others were more embodied—Morton's great musical skill, deep knowledge of jazz and New Orleans at the turn of the 20th century, and his ability to perform them so (seemingly) effortlessly were indicative and performative of particular kind of life-lived and of experiences-had. Together, Morton's dynamic and embodied performances provided Lomax, the Library, and potential listeners with not just

the facts and figures of Morton's New Orleans habitus, or even with a list of new jazz tunes to enjoy and learn, but with a complete jazz mythology presented in the combination of song, story, and skill. In the sessions, Morton positions himself as a professor of jazz and brings together each of these elements to provide a rich education—a standards-and practice-based pedagogy for understanding jazz history in a new way with himself occupying in a central roll in that history.

Given the general cultural upheaval experienced in the US during the 1930s, this same kind of re-education was occurring along various levels throughout the cultural, political, and economic landscape. Indeed, Morton's sonic rhetorics can be understood as emblematic of the refashioning of American culture occurring at large during this period—with thousands of skilled and even virtuosic individuals and agencies seeking to influence the sound and shape of a new “modern” America. As I explored in Chapter One, this refashioning was occurring within a milieu of competing political, cultural, and corporate ideologies with various leaders and movements seeking to repair, assuage, or take advantage of the pervasive uncertainty brought about through the ongoing Depression. In an effort to establish a new, distinctly American culture (one unmoored from European cultural ideals), artists and intellectuals worked to refashion or undermine old notions of cultural and artistic authority. This effort, which was anything but unified in its efforts, led to a burgeoning of cultural, intellectual, political, and artistic production.

A (if not *the*) critical undercurrent guiding these tectonic shifts was the unprecedented rise of leftist political and ideological influence. This move constituted a distinct paradigmatic shift in the United States as up until the 1930s “the left had little influence on the cultures of the United States” (Denning 3). This changed dramatically during the Depression due to a number of contributing factors including (most prominently) widespread economic uncertainty and, in turn,

the rise of organizations and programs to guide Americans to a more secure financial footing. Unions and union collectives like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) began to find prominence in order to make what jobs existed more secure. Under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's influence (and not without significant suspicion and opposition), government programs in the form of New Deal legislation like the Works Progress Administration attempted to demonstrate how liberal government *worked* by putting citizens across the country to work. Educational reform was also an important, but often overlooked, component of these shifts. Influential ideas from philosopher John Dewey and others began in the 1930s to find practical application in school districts interested in promoting activity-based, student-centered learning activities focused, not only on reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also on making students good citizens. Schools, according to Dewey, were an opportunity for not just academic learning, but also models for character building and, by extension, civic democracy: "[E]ducation must be an active endeavor that connects classroom students to the 'real' world" (Bianchi 89). In his well-known treatise on education, *Education and Democracy*, Dewey argued for the importance of cultivating a citizenry steeped in the habits of *artful living*, a philosophic ideal that I return and expound upon in the conclusion to this chapter, but of which participation in the material and cultural arts was an integral part. Dewey believed that an education invested in promoting the idyllic virtues of democracy would find success by emphasizing the cultivation of a distinct set of values, which, in turn, would shape attitudes toward culture, experience, and history.

Accompanying and accelerating these trends was increased movement toward a "mass" American culture brought about through the unifying power and increasing ubiquity of mainstream media. The rise and mass-circulation of print culture in the 18th century began this trend as did the mid-19th century invention of telegraphy and, later, telephone and film

technologies. But the invention and popularization of radio would have a profound and markedly different affect on how the people of the United States understood themselves in relationship to one another. As William Stott observed, “Radio was the ideal medium for putting the audience in another man’s shoes. Unlike the written word, it offered a sense of intimate participation, the immediacy of the human voice and of spot-coverage” (90). Given its mass distribution, radio’s capacity for this faux intimacy—and for mass appeal—was remarkable. Indeed, “Broadcast had to incorporate the form of interpersonal talk into an utterly impersonal medium (Sterne, *Sound Studies Reader* 325). Not incidentally, speech departments in the 1930s and 1940s took it upon themselves to develop and offer courses where radio labs were built and students trained in a variety of techniques for broadcast speaking, but especially what was often called “radio speech”.⁴⁸ The result of these and other efforts toward professionalizing radio speech and performance was that “audiences could have intense affective relationships with radio personalities, even though the broadcast was strictly impersonal in orientation” (325).

These new imagined relationships between listener and speaker and also among the thousands of disparate-yet-together audience members (the so-called “masses”), challenged conventional notions of public and democratic interaction, particularly for those tied to a public-square/town meeting ideal (with its attendant face-to-face dialectic and debate) for citizen interaction and community building. David Kennedy argues that radio “catalyzed the homogenization of American popular culture” and in so doing “assaulted the insularity of local communities” changing their shape and scope forever and promising to “revolutionize politics” (229). Further, he laments that

⁴⁸ Between 1930 and 1940, there were nearly twenty articles published in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* with the word “radio” in the title, ranging from Sherman P. Lawton’s “The Principles of Effective Radio Speaking” in 1930 to H. L. Ewbank’s “Trends in Research in Radio Speech” in 1940.

Radio provided a means to concentrate and exercise power from the top, to bypass and shrink the influence of leaders and institutions that had previously mediated between individuals and local communities on the one side and the national political parties and the national government on the other. . . . The radio created a political environment unimaginably distinct from the give-and-take of the town meeting, which Thomas Jefferson had praised as “the best school of political liberty the world ever saw.” (229)

Kennedy’s thoughts express a common anxiety of mass media’s effect on democracy and citizen engagement. These anxieties notwithstanding, the leaders of the various cultural movements of the 1930s—be they political, commercial, or cultural—would do their best to capitalize on radio’s mass appeal, its potential for mass-influence, and by extension, its power for shaping public opinion. The sound of the radio in the 1930s—it’s music, news, politics, drama, and comedy—is representative of any number of compromises and conquests between these various groups and their sometimes-competing, sometimes-conspiring interests.

This chapter addresses these interests and their attendant movements, from leftist idealism to broadcast capitalism, in order to get a sense for how various attempts toward “mass-influence” were motivated, theorized, and deployed. Put another way, this chapter explores several significant rhetorics of radio broadcasting in the 1930s. Explicit in this exploration will be an accounting for radio’s various *sonic* rhetorics and the powers seeking to control them including the effects (and affects) of broadcasting’s widening dissemination and, conversely, its various (indeed, “mass-“) receptions. My primary concern, however, will be to explain how, in the midst of this milieu, Alan Lomax came to be the host of a nationally broadcasted children’s radio program about folk music with no sponsor, and why such a show is significant given both

the larger commercial broadcasting trends at the time and also as the terminus of Lomax's work during the decade. I trace Lomax's career in the years leading up to the war with attention to his contribution to the Columbia Broadcast System's (CBS) popular radio educational program *American School of the Air* (ASA). Lomax was the host of two different (and consecutive) shows for ASA, *American Folk Song* a program directed towards younger students, and later, *Wellsprings of Music*, a program produced for a more general audience. The development and success of these programs provides insight towards understanding radio's rhetorical impact and educational potential given a vast (and often captive) broadcast audience. How, for example, did Lomax's archive of folksongs for the Library of Congress come to be seen as "educational," and just what exactly was the intended educational outcome of their use? And what happens when songs and vernacular voices recorded in prisons, hollers, roadsides, bars, living rooms, and any number of other "field" locations become, first, part of "mass" communication and later (potentially) popular culture? I show the ways the *American School of the Air*—and especially Lomax's contributions—sonically encapsulated the ferment of leftist idealism, educational reform, and commercialism and how mass media contributed to the reconstitution of what it meant to be an American in the 1930s.

I begin the chapter, then, with a brief accounting of the radio as a subject of scholarly inquiry. This work, especially that of cultural historians and theorists within Communication studies, is integral for understanding the relationship of radio to the cultural development of the United States. The 1930s present a number of key issues important to those working to understand how emerging communication technologies helped shape the developing cultural landscape in the United States, especially the emergence of mass media. Broadcasters at powerful national radio stations were able to imagine and project programming toward a new

collective—a “massive” audience listening disparately but simultaneously. “Mass” as a verbal antecedent of “-media,” “-culture” and especially “-audience” invites a variety of rhetorical analyses and so I explore radio’s various sonic rhetorics as they were being developed, deployed, and received over the air during that time.

As mentioned, this exploration of radio culture in the 1930s is contextualized throughout with a discussion of Lomax’s activities during that time. This includes his continued work with the Library of Congress, his growing notoriety in Washington, and how he came to be affiliated with CBS and with radio broadcasting. This narrative is interwoven with a discussion of the political and ideological climate of the 1930s, including a discussion of the Popular Front movement, educational reform and philosophy, and the struggle against growing corporate broadcasting superstructures in effort to balance the commercialized content of the radio with alternative programing. This will lead to a brief case study addressing the theme, content, and participants of an episode of Lomax’s radio program for Columbia Broadcasting System including those responsible for its development, production, direction, and distribution.

As the penultimate chapter in the dissertation (and the last that continues the Lomax narrative), I hope to be able to sound the meaningful resonance of Alan Lomax’s work as it extended across the 1930s while affiliated with the Library of Congress, from the prisons in 1933 to the airwaves in 1939 and 1940. And while his programs on *American School of the Air* were far from an ideal or even representative presentation of his larger work (which he himself acknowledged), the programs, which were broadcast to millions of students and other listeners, underscore the great value placed on Lomax and his work during the decade. They are also symbolic of the variety of contrasting ideologies mentioned above and expanded upon below:

leftist politics, civic education, and the transformation of vernacular culture into popular, and by extension, national culture.

Singing into the Air

In his influential monograph *Speaking into the Air* (1999), John Durham Peters presents a cultural history of the idea of communication, “one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century” (1). For Peters, communication as an ideal evokes, “a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited” (2). To know and to be known by an *other* completely is communication’s always-unfulfilled promise. Yet, we persist in trying. This ideal of interpersonal understanding has a long history. Peters reminds us that Plato’s *Phaedrus* was perhaps the first instance of communication being “defined in contrast to its perversion (by manipulation, rhetoric, and writing)” (8). Plato’s platform (one that has echoed across the millennia) is that oral communication’s re-mediations disrupt the potential for authentic interpersonal intercourse and increase the possibility for *miscommunication*. Peters underscores communication’s dualism, its lofty ideal of a shared mind and the impossibility of that reality, in a variety of terms: “telepathy” and “solipsism,” “bridge” and “chasm,” “connection” and “disconnection,” each of which express “the dream of instantaneous access and the nightmare of the labyrinth of solitude” (5). Communication understood in these terms becomes about managing the distance between these polarities—to experience relation, understanding, mutuality, interchange, disclosure, with an intended result of intimacy between (and despite) always disparate minds. Communication, Peter’s concludes, is “the project of reconciling self and other” (9). Communications (mind the ‘s’) technologies, from the hieroglyph to virtual reality, extend (as Plato feared) this project from the one-on-one/face-to-face to the

one-on-many/face-to-interface, distributing and democratizing intimacy, extending it to anyone willing, able, and properly equipped to interface with those communications.

Plato’s anxieties about the possible miscommunication—or worse—manipulations possible with the introduction of the interface (and those implications for society’s well-being) remain our problems to solve. As Peters argues, “the scale, systematicity, and punitive effectiveness of mass-communicated symbols raise tough questions for the future of democracy” (11). These tough questions must address the potentials for communication (and by extension, rhetoric) to both “make *or* break political order” and for binding “a far-flung populace together for good *or* ill” (12, my emphases). Peters’s work is particularly useful for a study of 1930s radio due to his deft wrangling of early 20th century philosophers seeking to understand and explore the potentials and pitfalls of “communication” as it was being shaped and reshaped by emerging technology’s new media. Peters draws together five philosophical strands which can be understood as part of the social, political, and intellectual milieu which informed the development of the radio in the 1930s but which also continue to resonate with contemporary questions about media’s influence, dangers, and potential (which is the premise of *Speaking into the Air*).

Drawing from several influential thinkers of the 1920s, Peters offers what he calls “five intertwined visions” of communication, each addressing various communicative nuances on the spectrum between telepathy and solipsism:

1. Communication as the management (and potential manipulation) of mass opinion (Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*; Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*; Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*)

2. Communication as a universal clarity of meaning (Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*),
3. Communication as an “insurmountable barrier” (T. S. Elliot, *The Waste Land*; Franz Kafka, *The Castle*) (14)
4. Communication as the “disclosure of otherness” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*) (19)
5. Communication as the orchestration of practical action (John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems, Experience and Nature*).

While a careful accounting for each of these strands is beyond the scope of this chapter, the echoes of many if not all of the above philosophies are present in the following sections and I expand on a few explicitly. Further, understanding the intellectual climate of the interwar period as containing a multiplicity of sometimes consonant and sometimes dissonant influential thought, is the sophistic framework wherein the various intertwining historical elements I wish to discuss resonate most effectively. The focus of this chapter’s later case study for example is, as I have mentioned, a radio program about folk music and as such may not seem that remarkable. But an educational radio program produced by a politically conscious and left-leaning national government employee (Lomax), for an audience of middle-class suburban white children, prominently featuring the music and cultural histories of African-American and other minority traditions, all under the funding of a huge corporate broadcasting company (CBS) is a remarkable endeavor indeed. Such a program brings together a number of the above communicative strands.

For example, understood through Peters’s purview, Heidegger’s philosophy of “being with” forwards the notion that unless we completely isolate ourselves, the world presents us with

a constant stream of difference—people who are not us. Successful communication is not so much about being understood by others but instead “bearing oneself in such a way that one is open to hearing the other’s otherness” (Peters 16). Lomax’s radio program (not to mention the aim of his larger work) took a similar tack, literally bringing the sounds of “others” to the broadcast audience.

John Dewey, a pragmatist in the tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, was interested in communication’s potential for community-building, of bringing people together towards common goals, interaction, and “participation in the creation of a collective world” (Peters 19). Dewey’s name and philosophies come up often in the literature as influential for those involved in educational broadcasting as it emerged in the 1930s, as he conceived of democracy as an engaged, participatory activity best modeled in the schools. Lomax’s program was no different. The children who listened to his *American Folk Songs* program on *American School of the Air* were encouraged to not just passively listen, but participate—to write and perform their own verses to the songs presented and to write Lomax with their results and also with questions about the folk tradition.

Other strands connect as well. Mass-communication’s potential for propagandizing was celebrated by some on the radical left, such as the afore mentioned Georg Lukacs, whom, as a Marxist theoretician, saw the public opinion-shaping potentials for new communicative media as crucial to the revolutionary process. Revolutions need principle-focused participants and what better way to achieve this goal than in the propaganda of common slogans, songs, and rallying cries (12). Though expressed bluntly here, this kind of thinking wasn’t far from Lomax’s own beliefs. Promoting new American ideals required new American propaganda. The right folk songs—Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land” and not Irving Berlin’s saccharine “God

Bless America,” for example—should be an important component of that vision. In fact, as the US’s involvement in World War II became imminent, Lomax would encourage the various branches of the military to use regional folk music as part of the training programs, a method that would encourage (he thought) both community and patriotism.

Finally, but certainly worth noting, is the recurrent theme of authenticity, or more specifically here, “authentic communication,” and how it manifest itself in the communications of the interwar period. One way this ideal was communicated was in Ogden and Richard’s thesis in *The Meaning of Meaning*. That thesis held that language’s great potential for miscommunication required a new system all together where “authentic” meaning could be communicated accurately. And while Ogden and Richards’s theory has been largely written off (with good reason), authenticity in communication was also a concern of Heidegger who saw communication’s ideal as an engagement between the “authentic selfhood” of two or more individuals, but also return as a dominant preoccupation of media theorists such as Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan who sought to account for radio’s power and prominence by naming the sound of language a more authentically communicative representation of human being than those offered by print and visual media. Ong’s fascination with the sonic worlds of preliterate ancient oral cultures and his belief that such cultures were more connected—both to their communities and to a sense of cosmos—led to a hearty endorsement of radio. Radio’s potential for sonic saturation, he writes, “exploits to the maximum the old oral-aural structures, building up around the hearer the resonances, personalist loyalties, strong social or tribal feelings and responses, and special anxieties [...] characteristic of the old oral-aural world” (*The Presence of the Word* 257-258).⁴⁹ McLuhan was similarly minded, stating in his well-known *Understanding Media* (1964) that radio was “a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten

⁴⁹ See also Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

chords,” a “tribal drum” that promoted a collectivity not unlike “the ancient experience of kinship webs” (263-264). These influential ideas may strike the contemporary reader as hyperbolic (and perhaps even problematic), but are examples of the various ways that radio’s sonic power was being imagined, historicized, and explicitly tied to behavior that harkened to a more natural preliterate, “tribal” (and therefore more community-centered and authentic) humanity.

Radio’s New Communities

When radio became part of the national mainstream in the 1930s, its communicative power was not better or more effective than print was or had been, but it was different. These differences have been characterized in various ways. While Ong and McLuhan expressed them in terms of bodies in communion with one another and the cosmos, others have explored how radio and listening related to and expanded upon the imagination. “Listening to the radio” argues media historian and communication scholar Susan J. Douglas, “was like being a child again, having stories read to you and being expected to have—and use—a vivid imagination” (4). She continues, emphasizing the power of imagination in constructing an authentic self in diverse world:

Unlike other major technologies—automobiles, airplanes, or trains—that move us from one place to another, radio has worked most powerfully inside our heads, helping us create internal maps of the world and our place in it, urging us to construct communities to which we do, or do not, belong. (5)

This impulse to understand radio in terms of what imaginations it evokes is also one of the guiding theoretical principles of one of communication’s most noted scholars of the radio,

Michele Hilmes. In her monograph, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (1997), Hilmes sites Benedict Anderson's influential theory of "imagined communities" as central to understanding radio's "unifying power of simultaneous experience" and what that unifying experience means for listeners (11). This simultaneity of experience was in distinction to mass print media, which, as Anderson explored, had been revolutionary in its ability to draw together audiences who could, by reading the same newspaper, imagine themselves as part of a larger grouping of engaged everyday citizens (Anderson 35).

Radio's simultaneity of experience enhanced the experience of belonging to the print-based imagined communities Anderson theorized and bridged it with other common mediated experiences. Like print, radio was

a system of productive relations driven by that hallmark of twentieth-century capitalism, advertising....[It was] a technology of communications significantly different from print, yet even more capable of negotiating not only the linguistic but the ethnic and cultural diversity brought about by the transformations of the modern age; and like film, a machine for the circulation of narratives and representations that rehearse and justify the structures of order underlying national identity. (Hilmes 12).

Radio promoted an even more focused experience of unity, connection, and of communication (evoking Peters's ideal explored in the previous section) "in its purest sense" (13). Citing an article that appeared in a 1922 issue of *Colliers* by Stanley Frost, Hilmes asserts that "Radio would unite a far-flung and disparate nation doing 'more than any other agency in spreading mutual understanding to all sections of the country, to unifying our thoughts, ideals, and purposes, to making us a strong and well-knit people'" (13). Radio's capacity to bridge huge

physical distances would not only begin to produce, for better or worse, a “homogenization of the American mind,” but would also “bring the public into remote private spaces” and in so doing, introduce the United States, more broadly, to itself (13-14).⁵⁰ In this sense, the new imagined community of the radio simultaneously produced an audience becoming more and more alike, but also becoming more and more aware of its many differences, particularly racial and ethnic difference.

This new connectedness with the other held, in Hilmes words, both a “threat and a promise” (15): “In a society built on structured segmentation and social division as much as on its rhetoric of democratic equality,” she writes, “connectedness posed a danger to the preservation of those physical and geographic divisions supporting social distinctions...” (15). Included within these distinctions were those relating to race and ethnicity. Some early programs, like the wildly popular *Amos & Andy* (which combined minstrel show and vaudeville comedic stylings) maintained and even trafficked in the racial stereotypes of earlier generations. On the other hand, “race music,” a genre developed by commercial record companies to be sold to black customers, was now accessible to anyone with a radio who chose to dial it in, including a growing (and eventually booming) white suburban audience “threatening a cultural miscegenation that made self-appointed moral guardians apoplectic” (Douglas 18). Indeed, according to Susan Douglas, radio as a “passageway between white and black culture,” “simultaneously reinforced and profoundly destabilized white supremacy and racial segregation in the United States” (18). Listening, in many ways, was often an act of both acquiescence and rebellion.

⁵⁰ Note, however, that Hilmes’s work offers a popular, but perhaps too glossy, conception of radio’s reach and power to homogenize American experience. Literary historian Trish Loughran, for example, debunks the myth of print culture’s ability to create national monoculture in her monograph *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870*.

Radio's unique impact on Western culture during the 1930s and 1940s, its capacity for communication in so many modes, its potential for creating and sustaining new communities of the air, as well as its quick rise to cultural centrality brought with it what Jonathan Sterne terms "new sonic cultures" (325). Radio "provided its listeners [with] a 'new mental world' and a 'new type of auditory background for life' structured by new modalities of listening and interaction (325). Given these modes, it is not difficult to understand the multiplicities and even conflicting debates around radio. These dualisms come up again and again in radio scholarship. Individual radio listeners were both isolated and "coupled" intimately with the sounds of the airwaves. Families gathered around dinner tables and living rooms and instead of conversing, sat passively listening to evening dramas or situation comedies. Yet, thousands of those same "passive" listeners sent letters in to actors and even characters on the shows they liked—some unable (or unwilling) to tell the difference between fact and fictional representation (Douglas 134). Radio's keen ambivalences as "both passive and active" and at once "participating and withdrawing," would, according to Sterne, make it a harbinger of (and amplifier for) post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, and other theories built in and through uncertainty and contradiction (325). Not incidentally, and with foundational work by McLuhan, Hilmes, Douglas, and others, Sterne identifies radio studies' potential for interrogating collectivity as one of the possible origins for modern sound studies.

This collectivity was an integral part of radio's contradictory nature as its "collectives" were not the publics of the "sphere" Habermasian bourgeois coffeehouse, nor could they be characterized in quite the same way as newspaper print culture's collective "public" of participants. Indeed, as Sterne points out, and as is apparent in the above discussion, "the

problem of radio's collectivity"—the way it accounts for "relationships among concepts of audience, public, polity, and nation,"—should be central in studies of radio (325).

Airing Authenticity: Alan Lomax on the Radio

By 1935s, over two thirds of American homes had a radio (Russo 155). Broadcasting had matured beyond its experimental and novelty phases of the first two decades of the century and into the realm of everyday experience. Recognized as an important "new media," radio's possibilities began to inspire innovation from citizen, artist, politician, and theoretician alike, each anxious to take advantage of radio's powers of collectivity and coupling. The ubiquity of radio in the 1930s presented a country, now steeped in the ideals and industrialism of Henry Ford, with new opportunities for participating in both commercial mass-production and consumption. But instead of cars or cornflakes on the production line, Americans were recipients of the conveyer-belt presentation of mass culture. The sound of radio broadcasts, fueled by a steady stream of commercial advertising, regulated by the newly organized FCC, and directed at captive audiences across the country became a locus for debate for influential citizens across the country, from business executives to public intellectuals and from artists to radical politicians.

At the center of these debates was a concern for radio and its broadcasters' potential for influence—broadcasting's epideictic power as a disseminator of cultural, political, and consumer values. Some feared that radio would create a monoculture and in so doing preempt the democratic process. Others believed the opposite—that political ideas could not only travel much further, but also that radio's many channels and programs gave listeners freedom to access information and content in new and exciting.⁵¹ These opinions, which came in response to

⁵¹ See the first chapter of Bruce Lenthall's *Radio's America: The Rise of Modern Mass Media* for a fascinating discussion related to this split in opinion over radio's democratic potentials. Lenthall traces these opposing views in

radio's increasingly central place in American lives and its potential for shaping lifestyle, inevitably produced intense debates about the power structures governing radio's production and content. Columbia Broadcasting System's *American School of the Air* might be understood as a compromise between various "collectivities," corporate, governmental, an educational. Alan Lomax's series on the program would introduce a listening audience—most of them school children—to programming and content that he believed to be unique. "It was the first time America had ever heard itself," he would later say, "and it went into all the schools" (Eisenschitz 52). But that programming should also be understood as the product of a number of competing interests.

Whether it was, indeed, the "first time" Americans heard traditional music from "other" American traditions can be debated, but it is true enough that Lomax's programs for *American School of the Air* introduced a musical American folklife to the nation's children and educators in a variety that most had likely not yet encountered—especially when it featured the voices of African Americans. That said, music—including folk music—was a common subject in various educational programming and could be heard alongside other radio programs with educational content in the sciences, history, and the arts. For example, in 1938, the not-yet-famous Edward R. Murrow was working in Europe collecting and recording European folksongs for a similar program for the ASA, and American folksongs were used prominently in music-focused programs several years before Lomax's program aired.

Still, the diversity and depth of Lomax's content and knowledge including his experiences as a field worker and an archivist brought to *American School of the Air* programming a sonic "authenticity" so fetishized during this period. Lomax's ethos granted him

the writings of two figures, culturally conservative economist William Orton and Marxist poet and journalist James Rorty.

wide popular acceptance: He was the “real deal” and so was his program. It helped that he also had at his disposal a growing network of friends and acquaintances like Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger, who (like himself) had begun performing archival material publically and who were willing to contribute to the radio programs. And while it may seem odd that the field recordings themselves were never part of the radio program—only re-appropriations of them—producers (including Lomax) likely would not have even considered their use for on-air programming. Playing recorded music on the radio (let alone field recordings) was not yet a common radio practice. FCC regulations (and often the recording artists themselves) favored the use of live music on the air and it wasn’t until the mid forties that playing recorded music became mainstream practice (M. Fisher 11). For Lomax, it was the songs, and much less the material recordings, that were interesting and important. For contemporary listeners, however, it is with a particularly authentic American irony to note that songs recorded in the black prison yard were being silently repurposed by professional musicians in order to be made more accessible to the audiences inhabiting the country’s white suburban classrooms.

Alan Lomax in Washington and New York

1939 was watershed year for Alan Lomax. His reputation as curator at the Library of Congress had grown, as had his influence in New York where he attended Columbia University for a year in order to work on (but eventually abandon) a Master’s degree in anthropology. In New York, Lomax busied himself with a variety of projects, some self-directed, and other assignments from the Library. With his credential from the Library of Congress, he was brought on as a consultant for the recording divisions of RCA and Columbia. Lomax’s keen knowledge of American roots music was useful to the company for settling copyright disputes about song

origins that might otherwise take several months of correspondence and costly litigation to solve. Alan's access to the commercial archives opened his eyes to the value of what were often known as "race" and "hillbilly" records. His preconceived notions about commercial recordings began to diminish, as he found music in the commercial archives very much like that he and his father had collected during their Southern trips in 1933 and 1934.

Lomax began a systematic search through these archives, recruiting his sister Bess Lomax and his New York friend Pete Seeger to help him find quality recordings. His goal was to "develop a discography of the best American commercial recordings and organize them by artist, biographical information, title, geographical location and type of music, 'so that the basis would be laid for a really intelligent study of American taste'" (Szwed 142). Said Lomax,

My opinion is that the commercial recording companies have done a broader and more interesting job of recording American folk music than the folklorists and that every single item of recorded American rural, race, and popular material that they have in their current lists and plan to release in the future should be in our files. (Cohen 130)

This comment was no small concession for a man who had spent the better part of a decade as a folklorist in the field, but no one before Lomax had taken commercially recorded music as seriously (Szwed 143). Lomax was surprised by the diversity of the recordings including several that exchanged or modulated stereotypical ballad tropes common in much of folk music for protest songs, recorded, "without the constraints or censorship of commercial interests" (143).

Lomax's growing notoriety around the country, particularly in New York and Washington, made such opportunities more and more common. But that growing fame and influence also began to make him target. Like many others working toward a more socially

conscious understanding of art and culture, Lomax became a subject of suspicion for those orchestrating the nascent Red Scare in the United States that would begin in earnest after the War. Often, Lomax confronted both of these realities simultaneously. In the summer of 1939 Lomax was invited to perform at a special concert at the White House. Eleanor Roosevelt was the organizer for the event, which was being held as part of a visit from King George VI and Queen Elizabeth of England. The first lady asked composer and musicologist Charles Seeger to produce the concert and when Seeger couldn't find any real cowboys who could sing the traditional Western songs he wanted at the performance, he asked Lomax to sing them. Lomax agreed and took his preparation for the concert very seriously. He never considered himself a professional musician, and, though he was asked to perform publically more and more often, it always made him uncomfortable. And now he was being asked to perform, not just for the President and First Lady, but for the King and Queen of England.

Lomax's reluctance was tempered by a sense of greater mission: "When the evening arrived," Lomax's biographer reports, "Alan was thinking about all those singers who had asked him to let them send a message to the president or Mrs. Roosevelt, messages he sometimes recorded, sometimes wrote out as letters for them. It was how he saw himself on his best days, as the people's messenger" (Szwed 149). But Lomax's ideological view of himself was in stark contrast with the way that he was treated once he arrived at the White House for the concert. Men in suits kept bumping into him. At first he thought they were just clumsy, but after it kept happening he figured out that they were secret service agents taking covert opportunities to frisk him. "They told me later that some woman who said she was my aunt had warned the FBI that her crazy nephew was going to blow up the building" (149).

Though the woman knew something about Lomax's history most of her claims were outlandish and inconsequential. She knew that Lomax had been arrested while at Harvard for his involvement in a political demonstration organized by a radical leftist organization, but also claimed that during that time Lomax "had lived with a Russian-born Communist," a "Jewess," and that his current wife was a Communist (Szwed 150). She also claimed to have overheard a conversation he had with his father at a wedding confessing his identity as and support of the Communist party. Lomax pushed ahead with his part in the program that night at the White House, but even Eleanor Roosevelt would remember that on stage Alan looked "so frightened he could hardly sing" and that she "hoped fervently that he would not reach for his handkerchief during the performance" (Roosevelt 191).

"Unless I Go Red": Sounding Popular Front and Modernist Culture

Alan Lomax was not a Communist, but he was sympathetic to some of the Party's platforms and ideals. Indeed, Lomax was part of a growing number of citizens in the United States who identified with some ideals on the radical left but not others and therefore did not profess primary allegiance. Communism in the United States, then and now, has been fetishized. Lomax was subject to this fetishizing vis-à-vis government leaders like J. Edgar Hoover—a fever that would reach a particularly shrill pitch after the war and under the influence of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Michael Denning, a cultural historian and expert on the political and cultural climate of 1930s, argues that many contemporary historians have made a similar mistake when considering Communism's place in the American landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. The variety of competing social and political ideologies, movements, and beliefs are often collapsed too easily and codified into the single idea of Communism, when really the

Communist party was only one of many circulating systems of belief organized by a much looser framework often designated as the “Popular Front.” Denning suggests that the “heart of the Popular Front as a social movement lay among those who were non-Communist socialists and independent leftists, working with Communists and with liberals, but marking out a culture that was neither a Party nor a liberal New Deal culture” (5). Such independent Leftists, Alan Lomax, Orson Wells, and Kenneth Burke among them, worked *with* but not for the Party.

David Roediger calls those participating on the periphery the Communist Party “fellow travelers,” (qtd. in Denning 5) but, as Denning points out, the numbers of those on the periphery of the Party were far greater than those within it. Contributors to the Popular Front movement, with its union members, non-Party sympathizers, and others who—while not explicitly communists—were influenced by (and supportive of) some, but not all, Communist activities. Denning’s work on Popular Front ideals is crucial to understanding Lomax and cultural workers of the time as Denning is able to show that the Popular Front was part of a larger cultural shift during the era—a *cultural* front—that, promoted, for the first time, a diverse American populous. The Popular Front was made up of the “new America,” the “depression generation”—which was “the most working-class cohort in American history,” and was also ethnically diverse and as such had created “the multi-racial, multi-ethnic metropolises of modernism” (8).

This modernism, as both an artistic movement and an increasingly public and economic one, might be understood as a vast merging of disparate narratives and a rhapsodic forging of a new “we” in the Constitutional “We the People.” This forging included a “paradoxical synthesis of competing nationalisms—pride in ethnic heritage and identity combined with an assertive Americanism—that might be called ‘ethnic Americanism’” (9). “Under the sign of the ‘people,’” Denning argues,

this Popular Front culture sought to forge ethnic and racial alliances, mediating between Anglo American culture, the culture of the ethnic workers, and African American culture, in part by reclaiming the figure of “America” itself, imagining an Americanism that would provide a usable past for ethnic workers, who were [generally] thought of as foreigners. (9)

Modernism’s new multiplicities of thought, ethnicity, political ideology, and artistic taste stand in paradox, however, to the emerging concept of the “mass”: mass production, mass consumption, mass media, mass culture. Indeed, and echoing Jonathan Sterne’s sentiments expressed above, modernism might be understood in terms of these paradoxes and the tensions between the functionalist utilitarianism of Fordism’s assembly-line production model, the experimental art of the avant-garde, new progressive moral standards, and their accompanying class, gender, and even age struggles for prominence. “Thus,” Denning concludes,

modernism came to be the expression of the dreams, discontents, and cultural contradictions of the disaffected young people of the predominantly Anglo bourgeoisie as they came to grips with the changes in the corporate economy and the changes of proper sexuality and gender roles, with the new imperialism, with the ‘foreign hordes’ of immigrant workers. (28)

Popular Front Radio:

Civic Education/Corporate Administration/Government Regulation—“Uplift and Sell”

At the center of this cultural milieu was the radio—a medium with the power to project, promote, and proliferate all of these multiplicities. Radio’s potential for reaching a mass audience appealed to corporate advertisers and Popular Front adherents alike. The two groups

would find themselves in odd partnership during the 1930s—along with a third bedfellow, the United States government. Regulating legislation (or threat of legislation) would act as a buffer between competing corporate and Popular Front ideals and result in programs developed along a variety of trajectories. Programs like the hugely popular serial *Amos & Andy* were designed carefully (often by the advertisers themselves) to have a mass appeal. But *Amos & Andy* played alongside other programs such as the experimental *Mercury Theater on the Air*, which was produced by a troupe of Popular Front writers and actors led by Orson Wells. On the day before Halloween in 1938, the *Mercury Theater on the Air* broadcast Welles’s *War of the Worlds*, famously fooling many thousands of listeners that the country was experiencing an invasion from Mars. Welles’s reflection on that event is telling of the ways that radio was being challenged by non-corporate producers looking to balance the playing field:

We were fed up with the way in which everything that came over this magic box, the radio, was being swallowed. [Radio in the 1930s] was a voice of authority.

Too much so....It was time for someone to take some of the starch....out of some of that authority: hence my broadcast. (Brown 227, qtd in Lenthall 4)

That programs like *Mercury Theater on the Air* existed at all is a testament to the way that the Popular Front influence, buoyed by some governmental support, was able to wrest a small amount of power from growing corporate influence. To be clear, Popular Front programs were rare and existed as part of a compromise for what was called “sustaining” non-commercial programming that came about as a result of the creation of the Communications Act of 1934 which created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). But that small gap created a large enough opening to allow for a variety of programming—experimental work like what

Welles was producing, but also (and especially) educational programming, including the development of long-term programs like CBS's popular *American School of the Air*.

The Communications Act of 1934 came at the conclusion of many years of debate and litigation. Broadcasters wanted more freedom to monetize the air, and in the end, that freedom was largely granted. There was, however an expectation—an implicit sense of responsibility carried by broadcasters—to be “the best possible custodians” of a dual mission within broadcast to mission, to both “uplift and sell” (Hilmes 188). Indeed, “conditions in the regulation of the broadcast industry made a visible commitment to public service and educational programming highly advisable” (140). In both anticipation and response to the Communications Act, both NBC and CBS instituted educational and so-called “cultural” programming starting in the early 1930s. With an aim to “uplift,” cultural programming supplemented the regular schedule of news programs, soap operas, and dramatic and comedic serials. Broadcasters introduced programs that dramatized history, explored and explained classical music, as well as programming aimed at aimed at making public policy and politics more legible to the average citizen. This was, after all, the era of President Roosevelt's famous Fireside Chats, perhaps the most famous example of radio's power to strengthen (and propagandize) the democratic presidential ideals. As Robert McChesney explains,

The commercial broadcasters had to convince the public and public officials that they were firmly committed to high-grade cultural and educational programming . . . establishing a commitment to cultural programming was seen as being of fundamental importance in keeping increased government regulation or even radical reform at bay. Any and all network programs along these lines were heavily publicized by the networks. (115)

The sacrifices of such programs were also noted. In 1934, for example, CBS president William Paley reported that only 30% of its programming was supported by advertising and that the cost of the remaining 70% “was defrayed by revenues from this 30 per cent” (3).

One way that the mission to “uplift” was taken up explicitly was through the development of programs produced specifically for the classroom. The power of radio as an educational tool was widely promoted. For example, in “The Radio Influences of Speech,” one of the many *Quarterly Journal of Speech* articles about radio published during this era, L. B. Tyson writes (somewhat hyperbolically): “It is a well-known fact that radio has become one of the greatest educational mediums in the world today. It is one of the most powerful factors in moulding [*sic*] public opinion. Every word that is uttered over the radio has its effect upon some person’s mind” (221). A variety of opinions emerged with strategies for making the best of that power. In a 1945 text called *Teaching Through Radio* by prominent Cleveland educator and broadcaster William B. Levenson, the author chronicles both his experience and expertise in educational radio. The first chapter contains a section called “How Can Radio Help?” Therein is a list of the virtues of radio education, which also serves as a useful litany for understanding the ways radio was conceived of pedagogically at the time. I have curated a short list of highlights below:

- Radio is timely: “Radio presents and interprets the event while it is still current and before it becomes history, whereas textbooks and even magazines cannot do that.” (6)
- Radio can give pupils a sense of participation: “When a child hears an ‘actuality’ program, such as a presidential inauguration or the opening session of Congress, he has a feeling of participation in the event and history becomes a living and vibrant experience.” (7)

- Radio can be an emotional force in the creation of desirable attitudes: In other words, radio can be a useful teaching method to aid in the accumulation of facts, “but in the whole process of democratic living, attitudes, not facts, are paramount.” (8)
- Radio can be used to develop discrimination.

In modern vernacular, that radio might help develop “discrimination” is a bit disconcerting. As Levenson explains, however, by discrimination he means the “development of good taste and the ability to make intelligent choices...” (8). In Levenson’s view, radio helps develop critical thinking based on a well-developed palate of “good” art, drama, literature, and music. The list includes several other virtues: “Radio can add authority” (in specialized areas, beyond that of the teacher), “Radio can integrate the learner's experience,” “Radio can challenge dogmatic teaching,” “Radio conquers space,” “Radio can help in continuous curriculum revision,” “Radio can ‘up-grade’ teaching skills,” and “Radio can interpret the schools to the community” (9-17). Despite these virtues, he promises (in all caps), “RADIO CANNOT REPLACE TEACHERS” (19).

By the time of this text’s publishing in 1945, educational programming on the radio was at least a decade old and Levenson’s observations are those of a broadcaster’s long experience teaching with the medium. Particularly striking, then, is his section on the shaping of attitudes. Levenson’s description of radio’s epideictic power differentiates between the rote memorization of information and education’s power to transform the learner’s values:

The conveyance of information is a comparatively simple phase of teaching. Far more difficult is the development of desirable attitudes [...] Emotional drives have a powerful influence. Here is where radio can be of great help to the teacher,

for radio has learned to use drama and music, two potent forces for creating emotional impact” (8).

Levenson understood the rhetorical power of both dramatic and musical oral performance, and without reservations, recommends them for use in sonic educational contexts.

The list Levenson offers is both revealing of a particular moment educational history, but also in communication (and media) history itself. His observations are resonant with those that would be made subsequently about television and later the Internet. In fact, Levinson’s description of radio’s power to shape attitudes, taste, and culture, as well as the his observation that radio is “timely” and “participatory” is a foreshadowing of Marshall McLuhan’s theories of radio and other media that would emerge a few decades later in his *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964). Levinson’s pedagogy, however—one steeped in philosophies of civic mindfulness and engaged participation—was also the result of what media theorist Daniel J. Czitrom (1982) calls the “progressive sensibilities” of pragmatist thinkers, theorists, and teachers. This was particularly the case in the work of John Dewey, who was fascinated with the speed, power, and efficiency of media technology, but also with the “nearly mystical qualities” communication technology had for encouraging and enhancing sharing and participation (108).

The influence of Dewey’s educational philosophies could be seen in the various “schools of the air” across the country, including Columbia’s. Indeed, Dewey’s educational influence was broad, but he had interest in “the political and social implications of modern communication” including radio, particularly “the durable tradition in American thought that has ascribed spiritual meaning to new communications technologies” (Czitrom 108). That “spiritual meaning” might

be ascribed again to the idea of communion, or more specifically radio's power to make common and, by extension, to make society. In his *Democracy and Education* (1915), Dewey writes,

Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (5).

This idea of common people having a common experience and sharing common ground through ritual, aesthetics, and modern communication demonstrates the power and potential Dewey saw in the mediated arts. Dewey believed that art was the "paramount expression of communication as shared ritual" (Czitrom 109) and, in oft-quoted line from his 1934 book *Art as Experience*, Dewey wrote that artistic expression offered "the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man" (which hearkens back to John Durham Peters and the myth of perfect communication noted earlier) (110).

What is important here, however, is that Dewey saw in these ideals a potential for what might be understood as an artful democracy—a reconceiving of education that served community by promoting what was "common" and away from an insistence upon the primacy of the individual. For Dewey, and as Czitrom argues, democratic theory that placed the individual at its center "was obsolete, or at least in dire need of repair":

For the machine age had "enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified, and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences" of conjoint behavior, forming "such immense and consolidated unions of action, on an interpersonal rather than a community basis, that the resultant public cannot identify and

distinguish itself.” There was too much public, a public too diffused and scattered. (Dewey qtd. In Czitrom 111)

This argument implies that a diffused and disconnected public needs common artifacts, not as a means of producing same-thinking, but as a starting point—a common rhetoric of understanding—before the tangle of democratic difference emerges. Nathan Crick, a rhetorical scholar and Dewey expert, expands upon these notions, reminding us that the “commonness” of art (rhetoric itself being one of those arts), was central to Dewey’s conception of a new radical democracy, and with a Sophistic bent: “Dewey put great faith in the emancipatory potential of aesthetic experience, but his attitude toward art—as a mode of production—was wholly continuous with the Greek tradition that linked it not just to sculpture and painting, but also to industry, knowledge, and economy” (5). Crick invites us to take seriously the critique that Sophistic rhetoric “makes the weaker argument appear stronger” by embracing that principle as the kernel of radical democracy’s potential. Sophistic rhetoric’s power to disrupt hierarchies—those institutions built upon the “stronger argument”—in order to first notice, then begin to understand, and finally identify with the minority view (with its so-called “weaker” arguments) is part of rhetoric’s promise. As Crick writes,

to make a minority view into one accepted by the majority, one must seize the opportunity to envision new possibilities by making full use of the playfulness of language to break the engrained habits of thought of one’s audience through aesthetic performance that simultaneously critiques, advocates, and creates. (12)

Folk music meets these qualifications almost perfectly. It is quintessentially an exercise in playful language use and when the songs were those from a minority viewpoint, that music had

power to not only offer a new perspective, but to break “engrained habits” and begin forging new ones.

American School of the Air: “Columbia presents . . . FOLK MUSIC OF AMERICA”

When Alan Lomax was offered the opportunity by CBS executive Davidson Taylor to develop a 25-episode series of programs for *American School of the Air*, he was reticent. He was no fan of radio, believing it to be a “waste of time” or, even worse, “a tool with the potential for fascistic manipulation” (Szwed 152). Famously, Lomax’s criticism of the radio didn’t stop short of the scatological: “I thought this was a joke. I didn’t know that anybody could be seriously interested in working on the radio, a pile of crap” (Eisenschitz 52). Lomax’s friend, popular front writer and director Nick Ray, would help convince him of radio’s potential for social commentary and change, partially by encouraging him to listen to the radio documentaries of Norman Corwin. After that, he said he “did a flip,” and that with the help of good scriptwriting and well-developed drama, “I realized that radio was a great art of the time” (52).

American School of the Air was developed in partnership between CBS and the Board of Education of New York City. And while ASA had hosted a number of different kinds of educational programming over the years, Lomax’s program was to be a singularly unique endeavor: “It would be the most costly production radio had ever attempted, with four scriptwriters, ten actors, five producers, three commentators, a fifty-piece symphony orchestra, singers, educational directors, engineers, and announcers” (Szwed 152). Alan’s first series, *American Folk Song* would reach 120,000 classrooms (153). By its second season, when the program name was changed to “Wellsprings of Music” and the target audience broadened, an

estimated fifteen million listeners tuned in, school children and adults alike (165).⁵² “Each week, [Lomax] would present a new musical or social theme: British ballads in America, the gold rush, love songs, lumberjacks, railroads, sailors, the American Negro, the blues” (153). The shows proceeded with Lomax introducing each song with a brief historical vignette or anecdote about his travels after which he or a guest would perform a series of related songs on or around the topic. The music would often be supplemented by a bit of drama, acted out by the visiting guest singers. Each episode also featured a special orchestral reimagining of one or two of the folk tunes presented. Popular front and other popular composers were recruited and paid \$400 for their work. Many participated: Aaron Copland, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Charles Seeger, Roy Harris, Henry Brant, Ross Lee Finney, William Grant Still, Nathaniel Dett and Ferde Grofe among them. This scenario, where the raw material for art was supplied by the “folk” and was then repurposed and refined by a “serious” artist and presented to the public via popular media was, “in the eyes of the high modernists of the times,” the way “culture was supposed to operate” (153).

Despite his conversion, Lomax was still uneasy with the process. He was worried that the radio program would be a way of pandering or selling folk music to an audience who didn’t really appreciate it to begin with. The move to transform folk music into “high art” didn’t sit right with him either. Lomax was initially unimpressed by Aaron Copland, whose uninspired rendering of “John Henry” left Lomax wondering if the composer even understood the power and beauty of folk music. Copland would later catch the spirit of folk transference in his

⁵² These listener projections, reported by John Szwed, call attention to a number of unknowns. Broadcast speculation about potential listeners is just that, speculation. The actual numbers of how many classrooms and students heard the program was likely much lower than the 15 million estimated “projected” listeners. Given radio’s open signal, it’s also impossible to know who else (besides students) was listening into the educational programs. So while the intended audience may have been limited to an imagined somewhat homogenous grouping of schoolchildren and their teachers, the actual audience could have been significantly more heterogeneous.

masterful repurposing of the Library of Congress's recording of the fiddle-tune "Bonaparte's Retreat" (played for the archive by William H. Stepp) which would become the central theme of Copland's "Hoe-Down" in his well-known ballet, *Rodeo*. The question remained, however (and remains today) whether or not such remediation and repurposing was a legitimate pursuit. When thought of within its historical context, it is easy to understand why Lomax was opposed to the notion that folk art needed legitimizing through high-art transformation. In hindsight, however, it is easier to allow the appropriation of vernacular music traditions into "classical" settings as one of many legitimate avenues of the folk process.

Lomax may have had his reservations, but his programs on *American School of the Air* were precisely what the Library of Congress hoped for in terms of publicity for the archival material. The library was thrilled with the hope that "the music it had recorded and collected would be the means of introducing all of America to its many parts and regions, while at the same time communicating the government's interest in the vernacular arts of the country" (Szwed 153). The actual production process of the sessions tempered this vision for the music of the archive. Alan complained that producers of the radio program didn't seem interested in the quality of the folk performances—his own, especially. His lack of confidence in his own abilities as a performer was only assuaged in a negotiation to hire other, more professional musicians. This action, which would introduce the nation to the talents of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lead Belly, Josh White, and Burl Ives (among others), would also further undermine Lomax's desire to bring vernacular voices to the nation. Instead, Lomax settled for an "authentic-enough" approach. He believed the musicians performing folk music on the program could do so in a way that represented the folk ethos most accurately in a way that would be accessible to the students on the other side of the radio broadcast. In fact, the one regular performer who did have

legitimate ties to a so-called “authentic” folk history was Lead Belly, but producers were concerned that his thick Southern accent was too difficult to understand for the broadcast audience. When they recommended a replacement for his spoken parts, Woody Guthrie was incensed and quit the program.

Despite these reservations, bumps, and departures *American Folk Songs* was quite successful. So much so, in fact, that the National Association of Music Education (NAME) began including folk music in recommended curricula for public school teaching. NAME even awarded one episode (which featured Woody Guthrie) best Music Education Program (Szwed 165). In *Pix*, CBS’s press release publication, Lomax was quoted as saying that the purpose of his program was “to show that America has an authentic music lore which should be as important and exciting to students as the works of great masters” (155).

Quips like this notwithstanding, if there was tension between the competing ideologies of Lomax, the CBS producers, and the participating musicians that performed on the shows, they remained off-air. Indeed, the programs themselves created an illusion of fluidity between the folk and the expert or master-musician and students and teachers were encouraged to participate within that interrelationship. Teaching materials were prepared by Lomax and CBS to supplement the program with lesson plans and assignments. Students were encouraged to make up their own verses to the folk songs, thus furthering the folk process. They were also encouraged to send in folk songs that they knew. Dozens of these letters survive in the Folklife archive.

African American Music on the Radio

In a letter to a colleague written late in August 1939, Alan Lomax described the purpose of his program on *American School of the Air* as “aimed at stimulating the interest of children in . . . very simple and straightforward presentations of American folk music and folklore” (Lomax, Letter to Richard Allen). And so it was. *Folk Music of America* relied on a very simple formula. Each episode began with a short introduction from ASA announcer Niles Welch, who would give that week’s episode some context and description before segueing into Lomax’s prepared content. Students listening would sometimes be entreated to join in, sing along, and participate in various ways. From there, Lomax introduces that week’s topic in greater detail before moving to a prepared dialogue. Those dialogues, each of them scripted and rehearsed for dramatic impact, further contextualize the music by inserting it into a narrative. Listeners could then be transported on board a fishing vessel in the Nantucket Sound in an episode on sea shanties, into a Tennessee holler to dance along to a fiddle tune, or out to the playground in an episode on children’s game songs. Each episode featured renditions of songs from the Library of Congress’s archive performed live, but then also had special arrangements of selected songs performed by the CBS orchestra.

Like all *American School of the Air* programs, “Folk Music of America” was thirty minutes long and aired on CBS at 9:15 A.M (Bryson 19). The first several episodes were produced with only Lomax behind the microphone and he had to handle everything: the stories, the instruction, and the singing. As might be expected, he was not yet acclimated to the realities of radio broadcasting and his performance left much to be desired. In a letter from Harold Spivacke, Chief of the Division of Music at the Library of Congress (and Lomax’s boss), Spivacke criticizes nearly every aspect of the first show: Lomax’s guitar playing (“I suggest that

you ask the orchestra guitarist to accompany you”), his nervous speaking (“you were a bit breathless”) and his inability to keep up with his script (“you must remember to practice a thing and repeat it a hundred times or more if necessary”) (Spivacke, letter to Alan Lomax). In subsequent episodes, Lomax became more comfortable, but also recruited a troupe of musicians to help him present the material. As noted above, those performers included Lomax’s friends and associates, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Lead Belly among them. With Lomax’s help, CBS also recruited the Golden Gate Quartet, a well-known African American singing troupe, and also blues guitarist Josh White and singer Burl Ives whom (with Seeger, Guthrie, Lead Belly) would become key contributors to the various narratives and dramatics worked into the program.

The teaching in the programs was usually implicit, with Lomax pausing only occasionally (if ever) to invite the students listening to participate or with any specific instruction to the audience. Explicit instructions generally came from the program’s announcer Niles Welch at the beginning of the program. In the following analysis I examine the content of one representative episode of the program in order to better understand the educational agenda of *Folk Songs of America*. I’m interested especially in how the program might be understood as a part of the larger tapestry of the socio-historical movements and ideologies explored in the previous discussion. The episode that I explore is titled “Negro Work Songs” and appeared as part of a three-episode series exploring the “songs of the Negro.” I have chosen this episode because it draws directly on field recordings collected by Alan Lomax and his father John A. Lomax during their 1933 trips to Southern African-American prisons. In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I worked to show the complex relationships between the Lomaxes, the men they recorded, and the United States vis-à-vis the Library of Congress (as well as the Lomaxes’ various publications that followed). As noted earlier, the use of these field recordings on the

radio was precisely the kind of use that the Library had in mind for the archival music. But that African-American work songs were imagined as having pedagogical value for the largely white middleclass audience (of children, no less) raises a number of questions and is worth further analysis. The bulk of the remaining chapter will be an examination of the episode and work to determine the various rhetorics at play on Lomax's program.

“Work Songs of the American Negro”

“There are only two important kinds of work songs in the United States:” Niles Welch declares at the opening of the February 20, 1940 episode of *Folk Music of America*, “the sea shanties and the work songs of the American Negro.” He continues, at length:

Both serve the same purpose. to make a hard job easier and pleasanter through the melody and particularly the rhythm of music. They are the natural expression of natively musical people to whom singing is as much a part of their lives as eating and drinking.

Today, for our American School of the Air program on Negro Work Songs, Alan Lomax has as his guests the Golden Gate Quartet of Charlotte, North Carolina, and the famous Negro singer Huddie Ledbetter. In Negro work gangs throughout the South, each laborer is given a nickname by his comrades; and Hudie's nickname of “Lead Belly” has become familiar to lovers of folk music all over the country.

Alan and his father, John A. Lomax discovered Lead Belly in the southwestern Louisiana, and from his singing and guitar-playing they compiled the most important collection of southern work songs yet published.

Now in today's broadcast we're going to take you on a trip from Virginia down through South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi and then up through Tennessee, Arkansas and Texas....following a gang of Negro laborers at their jobs of road-building, cutting timber, hoeing the fields, and piling up the levees along the muddy rivers of the South. And there are two songs we want you to join the quartet in singing on the choruses. The first is "Stewball", and your part, you'll remember, goes like this:

(LEAD BELLY AND QUARTET SING CHORUS OF "STEWBALL")

WELCH: Then, the last song on today's program is "The Gray Goose" and we want you to join the quartet on all the refrains Lead Belly sings:

LEAD BELLY: (SINGS) ONE SUNDAY MORNIN'

WELCH: And you sing:

QUARTET: LAWD, LAWD, LAWD

(A. Lomax, "Negro Work Songs" transcript 1-2)⁵³

In this first segment, Welch introduces the program, the participants, and the theme of the episode. He also gives the listening audience a participatory task—to sing along during two of the songs. We also begin to get a sense for the program's pedagogical and rhetorical underpinnings. Students of *American Folk Songs* are to be introduced to a particular facet of "folk life" and then invited to participate in that experience sonically. In this way, student listeners are able to have a breadth of proxy experiences: as seamen, African American laborers

⁵³ In the excerpts of the transcript I have transcribed here and below, I have been careful to maintain the format and casing of the text as it appears in the script, archived in the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Words spoken as part of the drama presented in the script appear in upper-case, while the introduction from Niles Welch as well as Alan Lomax's initial framing are written with regular casing. While at the Library of Congress, I also listened to an archived recording of this and other episodes of *American Folk Songs* on reel-to-reel tapes. Acquiring the recordings for off-site use was not possible due to questions of copyright, which the national archives do not hold.

(as is presented here), lumberjacks, cowboys, balladeers, and square-dance callers, among others. Each subject is, no doubt, a vernacular trope and the songs reflect a codification of the traditional practice represented. Some attempt at nuance is attempted, however. “Work Songs” is one of three episodes focusing on African American vernacular tradition, with accompanying episodes on railroad work songs and gospel music.

The program proceeds with a handoff to “folk music expert from the Library of Congress” Alan Lomax (A. Lomax, “Negro Work Songs” 3). His opening remarks exemplify the pedagogical approach of the program:

Africa is the continent of work songs. Early explorers always report that their porters sang as they carried loads through the jungles or paddled their dugout canoes up the river. The natives sing while they are grinding grain, the blacksmith while he hammers his iron, the farmer as he clears his land. These people brought to this continent as laborers, naturally kept singing as they worked. Their employers soon found out that the Negroes did more work when they were singing. (3)

There is much to unpack here. Indeed, it is difficult to listen to this depiction with twenty-first century ears and not hear its blatant and even egregious misrepresentations. Schoolroom listeners were entreated to imagine, with help from Lomax’s opening monologue, an African monoculture of singing workers who, once under the “employ” of their American captors, continued singing—“naturally”! However, the larger purpose of this opening paragraph speaks to the possibility of a more progressive purpose than the mere propagation of racist African-American stereotypes. The depiction of a world, for example, where Africans were industrious and productive before being “brought to this continent as laborers” runs counter to narratives

justifying their enslavement that may have still been in circulation in the early 20th century (Though, even this narrative may just substitute an old argument for African enslavement with a new one: Black Africans are a hardworking but dependent race and require the “guidance” of masters.) The depiction of African Americans on Lomax’s program would have also been competing directly with concurrent popular broadcasts like *Amos & Andy*, a program that, as noted earlier, trafficked in the comedic stylings of the blackface minstrel show.

Lomax and the other writers of *American Folk Songs* had fifteen minutes to communicate something about African-American folklife that moved beyond these popular stereotypes. The replacing of old tropes with new slightly less racist ones is difficult to champion as a productive method of social progress, but it is, perhaps, the most important legacy of the program and of *American School of the Air*. Though there is much to critique in Lomax’s production, that critique is leavened when the program is contextualized within a larger timeframe of racial progress in the United States. Generationally speaking, the seeds sown in these radio programs may have contributed in productive ways to the shaping the ideas and beliefs of the listening students. Children listening in the late 1930s and early 1940s would grow to become the adults working, voting, and raising children of their own a generation later when civil rights had moved from a radical ideal of the 1930s to a popular movement of the 1960s.

To its credit, *Folksongs of America*’s episode on African-American work songs finds its focus and does eventually acknowledge that those working for United States “employers” were actually slaves and that their singing was an accompaniment to the grueling nature of their work: “Singing seemed to enable them to endure the unbelievably long hours under the hot sun of the South. Sometimes a greatly talented singing leader was employed to do nothing but sing, so that the work would go faster. A sort of musical speed-up system” (A. Lomax, “Negro Work Songs”

4). Lomax goes on to describe the ways that work songs persisted after abolition and suggests that African-American labor was integral to the redevelopment of the South. Their song, Lomax infers, was at the heart of the work that went into clearing land, picking cotton, and building the roads, levees, and railroads that would bring the South into sync with the rest of the country. But also key to his description is the emphasis on the difficulty, pain, and even sorrow of that work. “They had the blues,” he announces, “and they sang them away on the job. Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia to Texas they were throwin’ them hammers” (4).

This introduction to the first song, “Nine Pound Hammer,” is accompanied by a dialogue between members of the Golden Gate Quartet, acting in roles as laborers (and reproduced here as it appears in the transcript, in all caps, with a different voice picking up at every line break):

SAY MAN HOW HEAVY IS THE HAMMERS ON THIS JOB? IT’S A NINE
POUND HAMMER AN’ YOU GOT TO BE A MAN TO DRIVE IT.

WELL BOY IF YOU WANT A MAN I’M A MAN FROM MONGT MEN. BUT
I DON’T LIKE NO NINE POUND HAMMERS.

THAT’S ALL WE GOT IN VIRGINIA ON THESE ROUND JOBS IS NINE
POUND HAMMERS.

AN WE GOT A BOSS THAT’LL MAKE YOU EITHER DRIVE THIS
HAMMER OR LEAVE.

AN CORN BREAD ON MOLASSES IS WHAT MAKES US MULES SO
STRONG AROUND HERE.

YEAH A MAN CAN’T THROWN NO NINE POUND HAMMER ON NO EGG
SANDWICH.

LOOK OUT HERE COME DE BOSS – MAN, LETS GET ON ‘WAY FROM
HERE.

BIZ [direction for on-air sound effects]: (SOUND OF HAMMER BEGINS)

COME UP WID A LITTLE SUMPIN TO EASE MY TROUBLED MIND SO I
CAN THROW THIS HAMMER, LITTLE BUDDY. (A. Lomax, “Negro Work
Songs” 4-5)

The Quartet then begins singing “Nine Pound Hammer,” a song that explicitly expresses the discomfort and dissatisfaction of day labor. Lyrics include phrases like, “Take this hammer . . . carry it to the captain . . . tell him I’m gone” interspersed with the rhythmic “Yow!” of the hammer strike. After the song concludes, the laborers continue their dialog:

MY HOME AIN’T HERE, IT’S FURTHER ON DOWN THE LINE.

NORTH CAROLINA, VIRGINIA, GEORGIA, ALL THEM STATES AIN’T
NOTHIN’ TO ME, IT’S JUST THE SAME OL’ SOUP WARMED OVER ALL
THE TIME. [...]

SAME OL’ HOT BROILIN’ SUN

SAME OL’ MAN OU THERE KEEPIN’ US ROLLIN’ DOWN THE LINE.

SAME OL’ LOW WAGES.

SAME OL’ NINE POUND HAMMER ALL DAY LONG DRIVE FROM SUN-
UP TO SUNDOWN.

NOW DOWN HERE IN OL’ SOUTH CAROLINA THE MENS BE SINGIN AN
OL’ SLAVERY-TIME SONG. (A. Lomax, “Negro Work Songs” 6-7)

The narrative here, written for the broadcast by Alan Lomax, depicts a Southern dialect in the African-American Vernacular English Lomax had become accustomed to writing out as part of

his several publications. Interestingly, the men of the Golden Gate Quartet had to be coached by Lead Belly on how to sing prison songs and speak in a similar “country” dialect (Szwed 163). Lomax’s insistence on a Southern AAVE dialect, present in both the song and the discussion (and other songs) that follows it, are indicative of the kind of shift that Lomax was seeking to promote related to African-American vernacular experience in the National imagination. This shift might be understood as update of the easy-going or easily-confounded simpleton caricature of minstrelsy and *Amos & Andy* (as a sonic cue in the AAVE) to a more nuanced depiction of the underpaid, overworked, and undervalued African-American labor force. In any case, it is a notable example of the way radio programs might contribute to Levenson’s above-noted shift in “attitude” activated here by Lomax through his program.

This same theme continues in the next segment. The work has changed from hammering to saw work, and Lead Belly sings the stanzas of a song known by various titles, but later recorded by Lead Belly as “Ain’t Gonna Ring Dem Yallow Woman’s Do’ Bells.” Sung to the rhythm of pulling a saw back and forth through lumber, “Ain’t Gonna Ring” also has a stunning depiction of an incarcerated or otherwise imprisoned African-American man:

TAKE THESE STRIPES, STRIPES FROM ‘ROUND MY SHOULDER
 TAKE THESE CHAINS, CHAINS FROM ROUND MY LEG
 LAWD, THESE STRIPES, STRIPES THEY SHO’ DON’T WORRY ME
 BUT THESE CHAINS, CHAINS ‘BOUT TO KILL ME DEAD (A. Lomax,
 “Negro Work Songs” 9)

The rest of the song depicts the quick sentencing of the singer for the crime of ringing an Asian woman’s doorbell. It is difficult to predict how this depiction of human suffering at the hands of an unsympathetic (implicitly white) justice system would play in a classroom. The several mixed

messages it sends about racial prejudice, including a reference to a lighter skinned “yellow” African-American woman (which is an abbreviated form of the offensive designator “high yellow”) alongside what seems to be an appeal to empathy for the transgressor), may have been confusing to children and teachers listening over the air. More likely, however, the song would have been taken in stride, with the central message again pointing to the injustice experienced by African Americans. From the perspective of those working on the production of the program, a song such as “Ain’t Gonna Ring,” which was part of Lead Belly’s frequently-performed repertoire, may have been chosen due to its depiction of a different kind of work (sawing). But its central blues message, so pervasive as to be enshrined and circulated widely in the rhythms of a work song, is remarkable.

The episode also introduces audiences to songs, such as “Stewball” and “Rock Island Line,” that would go on to have lasting popularity. While these songs present a less-explicit emphasis on African-American suffering, they too were first recorded by the Lomaxes during the Southern prison visits and are good examples of work songs about lighter subjects. Both also may have offered several entry points for further classroom conversation. “Stewball,” for example, is a song appropriated from an Irish song about a popular racehorse named “Skewball.” It was recorded by the Lomaxes in 1933 in a Mississippi State penitentiary and is featured as hoeing song on *American Folk Songs*. Notably, “Stewball” also receives an orchestral rendering in the episode and given the three versions of the song (Irish, African-American, and orchestral), a classroom discussion about what constitutes an “American” song would be fruitful.

“Rock Island Line,” as I mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, was a railroad song that would eventually become a huge hit in the United States. As its later popular success shows, “Rock Island Line” is the “catchiest” song featured on this episode of *American Folk*

Songs. The song is introduced as the end-point and distributor for lumber cut by day laborers and/or prisoners. The Rock Island Line is a “mighty good road” and the “road to ride,” but also serves as an example of genre mixing: Most obviously, “Rock Island Line” is an introduction to railroad songs (and Lomax would devote a whole future episode to others), but it also contains lyrics you might expect in a gospel tune (“Jesus died to save our sins, glory to God we gonna meet him again”), and also a game song (“A, B, C, double X Y Z, cats in the cupboard, but it don’t see me”) (16). The accompanying teaching manual encourages teachers to invite their students to add lyrics—refrains or new verses—to the featured songs. With its open genre potential, “Rock Island Line” would have been a perfect song for students to experiment with.

After concluding “Rock Island Line” a member of the Golden Gate Quartet offers a short monologue that moves back to a more somber tone and describes the loneliness and unrelenting nature of work in the fields. The monologue reflects on the song “Ol’ Hannah” (or “Go Down, Old Hannah” as my earlier analysis in Chapter Two references the song):

WHEN A MAN’S ON THE ROAD, HE CAN’T DEPEND ON NOBODY. HE
CAN HAVE HIM A BUDDY, BUT HE GOT TO WATCH HIS BUDDY.
THAT’S WHAT MAKE THE OL’ ROAD SO LONESOME. DOWN’T HAVE
NOBODY BUT YO’SE’F TO DEPEND ON. YET AN’ STILL WHEREVER HE
GO, TRAVELER THROUGH GEORGIA, THROUGH ALABAMA, WALKIN’
TIES IN LOUISIANA, THROWIN’ HIS PICK IN TENNESSEE, HE GONNA
FIN’ ONE FRIEND TO MEET HIM EVERY MORNIN’ WHEN HE RISE. I
MEAN, OL’ HANNAH, I MEAN THE SUN. (A. Lomax, “Negro Work Songs”
17)

The sun is the only reliable companion but is also a nuisance who, after “boilin’” and “beamin’” all day seems to stop at about three o’clock, “just stop an’ punish you.” Such is the sentiment expressed in the song’s lyrics: “Go down, old Hannah. Won’t you rise no more?” This treatment of loneliness is juxtaposed with the final, and perhaps most poignant, segment of the work songs episode, an exposition of the song “Grey Goose” and a recollection of the “Ol’ Slavy’y Days.” In those days (paraphrasing the script), slaves woke at four in the morning and worked until eight or nine at night. That work, be it plowing, hauling corn, chopping cotton, driving cows, or feeding pigs, was back-breaking: “You gotta be hard men to make it” (18). “And if you had anything to say about it, you better not say it. You better say it low an’ easy. You better make a joke about it. You better laugh about it” (18). This is the introduction to the song “Grey Goose”—a metaphor for the unbreakable persistence of slave life—and by extension, a powerful symbol of both hidden power and hope, even in the worst of circumstances:

NOW PEOPLE IN THE OLDEN TIMES MADE UP A SONG ABOUT THIS.
 THEY MADE UP A SONG ABOUT THEMSELVES AND SUNG IT ABOUT
 A GREY GOOSE. THE OL’ GREY GOOSE, YOU COULDN’T STOP.
 DAY SHOT THAT GRET GOOSE AN’ PICKED HIM FOR SIX WEEKS.
 AN’ THAT DIDN’ STOP HIM.
 THEY COOKED HIM FOR SIX WEEKS.
 AN’ THAT DIDN’ STOP HIM.
 THEY CUT HIM, THEY THREW HIM TO THE HOGS, THEY PUT HIM UP
 AGAINST THE CIRCULAR SAW.
 AN’ THAT OL’ GREY GOOSE STILL LAUGHGIN’ AT ‘EM.
 HOW DID ALL THAT HAPPEN, MAN?

WELL LET'S GIT TO HOPIN' HERE AN' I'LL TELL YOU JUST ZACKLY
HOW IT WAS. (Lomax, "Negro Work Songs" 19)

"Grey Goose" is a comic song about an invincible magical bird. Saw blades break, hog teeth crack, guns explode, and no knife is sharp enough to kill the goose. Children are to sing along with the refrain, "Lawd, Lawd, Lawd," even as they root for the goose to escape its next dangerous captor. Not unlike other popular trickster characters African-American (and more broadly, African) literature and folk traditions such as the Br'er Rabbit stories, the symbology of the Grey Goose invites listeners to consider both the injustice and absurdity of African-American captivity. Kathleen Glenister Roberts writes that while there is ongoing debate around the purpose and precise nature of meaning attached to Br'er Rabbit and other folk heroes often connected to African and African-American identity, "one thing is certain: . . . Tricksters propel, without hesitation, the right of the individual to question inequalities in society" (176). Like Br'er Rabbit, the Grey Goose's seeming invincibility "captures the audience's imagination because [it] never closes off the option of freedom; [it] espouses the rhetoric of possibility and perhaps even inspires it in his listeners" (176). It is impossible to know whether students made these connections as they sang Grey Goose's refrain ("Lawd, Lawd, Lawd"). Likely not. But, the rhetoric of possibility noted by Roberts was certainly present. Middle-class children listening to and singing along with the songs of an adjacent culture, but one with such strong implicit ties to their own freedom, is a striking example of Burke's often-cited theory of identification. I conclude this chapter below with a short exploration of the possibilities of identification, including how contemporary scholars have theorized the notion, but also how similar notions were an integral part of the most influential thinkers (Burke among them) within the cultural and intellectual milieu described above.

Conclusion: Democracy's Folk Possibilities for Identification through Rhetorical Listening

In their book, *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*, Ann George and Jack Selzer trace (but do not belabor) the development of Burke's theory of identification through its nascent stages and as embedded within and respondent to the intellectual context of his 1930s environs. In ways that Shades of that theory, as I mention in Chapter One, can be traced through *Permanence and Change* but first becomes an explicit part of his published work in the 1937 work *Attitudes Toward History*. Significant to this chapter and also to the larger dissertation, Burke's introduction to identification in that text comes during a discussion of epic poetry. "The epic is designed," argues Burke,

under primitive conditions, to make men "at home in" those conditions. It "accepts" the rigors of war (the basis of the tribe's success) by magnifying the role of the warlike hero. Such magnification serves two purposes: It lends dignity to the necessities of existence, "advertising" courage and individual sacrifice for group advantage—and it enables the humble man to share the worth of the hero by the process of "identification." The hero, real or legendary, thus risks himself and dies that others may be *vicariously* heroic The process of identification [...] dignifies any sense of persecution that may possess the individual, who may also feel himself marked for disaster. This sense of a flaw serves happily to promote an openness to realistic admonition—the invitation to seek the flaw in oneself promotes in the end the attitude of *resignation*. (44-45)

This definition of identification as it begins to emerge in Burke's late 1930s work as a meditation on the usefulness of poetic ideals and heroic figures resonates well with how a song like "Grey Goose" or "Nine Pound Hammer" might work to help reconstitute public opinion. The

promotion of African-American figures and symbols as subjects for heroic emulation—as folk metaphors for courage, perseverance, and hard work in the face of near impossible obstacles—might *resign* listeners of *American Folk Songs* to a reconstituted belief about African Americans as a larger group. In other words, exposure to and identification with the poetic materials of *folk life* can lead to new attitudes toward the real lives of those they represent.

Of course, Burke's theory develops beyond identification as a tool for interpreting poetry and toward a more complete reexamination of rhetoric's power for encouraging understanding, cooperation, unification, and the "acting-together" possible when people experience mutual "consubstantiality."⁵⁴ All of these, Burke, admits, are ideals—*division* is the default human condition. Identification retains its folksy earnestness "precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (*Rhetoric of Motives* 22). Symbolic discourse, best expressed by Burke in poetic masterpieces, is useful in its power to create a "common substance of meaning" in the face of constant divisiveness: "The Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take" and ultimately, "the War" (23). For Burke, and towards the argument I have sought to make in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, the promise of rhetoric is its potential for the co-creation of something "common" and it is the commonness of African-American folk music, not its political sophistication, that gave it power. Identification precedes persuasion (56).

Krista Radcliffe draws the notion of identification and the problem of race relations together with the challenge to *listen* in her monograph *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005). Rhetorical listening, as Radcliffe defines it, is a "stance of openness"

⁵⁴ His gestures toward the poetic remain, however. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke introduces identification within a discussion of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.

that advances the pursuit of understanding as part of the ongoing negotiation of difference (1). Rhetorical listening is a regimen to be employed during moments of “cross-cultural conduct” (17) and as such might be understood as identification in action. Radcliffe is particularly concerned with learning to “hear people’s intersecting identifications with gender and race” (17) and as such, is also about avoiding the impulse to displace listening—to not hear or ignore difference. Together with Nathan Crick’s claim that “the unique function of rhetoric in a democracy is to express and advance minority viewpoints in exigent circumstances such that they have the opportunity to transform public opinion” (12), Radcliffe would have us make a greater effort to become accustomed to listening to those expressions—especially if we find ourselves within the majority, or (expanding upon Burke here) experiencing what she calls “troubled identifications,” or “those identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance” (47).

Race relations in the 1930s were certainly a mesh of troubled identifications. Rhetorical listening, Radcliffe teaches, does not collapse difference, neither does it seek to ignore the substance of what is troubling about those differences. Instead, listening as a rhetoric of attentive care makes the troubling aspects of dis-identification (injustices, inequality, power and privilege differentials) more audible and thus opens up new possibilities for understanding and discourse... possibly—no guarantees (66, 68). Rhetorical listening, for Radcliffe, is about humbly learning to recognize “interdependency among subjects” and out of that interdependency, building new avenues for accountability (73). Rhetorical listening, then, brings a profound ethics to Burke’s notion of identification and Dewey’s radical democracy, reminding us of what is at stake when we seek to teach about and work through differences.

A pedagogy that included listening to the radio program *American Folk Songs* on *American School of the Air* was a pedagogy attuned for rhetorical listening. Tuning in to the program was an opportunity for identification that did not ask anyone for votes, money, or immediate societal change. Instead, episodes like “Worksongs of the American Negro,” invited students and other listeners merely to consider the experience of the other, to imagine a community different from their own and, if possible, identify aspects of that experience worth deeper consideration. *American Folk Songs* was about learning to listen to difference, and, if you were so inclined, to sing along.

Alan Lomax, a Coda

Alan Lomax’s work for the Library of Congress would extend briefly into 1940s, but soon after the United States officially joined the war effort in 1941 Lomax found himself being investigated by the FBI, under suspicion, once again, for Communist activities. He denied affiliation, but when Lomax’s boss and supporter Archibald MacLeish was reappointed from the Library of Congress to a new position in the Office of War Information (OWI), Lomax resigned his position as Assistant in Charge of the Archive of Folk Song. Soon after, the FBI cleared his name of any suspicion and he went back to work for MacLeish at the OWI where his work involved building programs that would improve wartime morale and nationalism. As ever, Lomax was enthusiastic about this work and even joined the Army in 1944 where he served in stateside training camps before being discharged in 1946.

After his official association with the United States government ended, Alan Lomax efforts as a folklorist and an educator persisted. He spent several more years doing fieldwork in the US and on the radio teaching people to listen to and appreciate the traditional music of the

Americas. He even won a Guggenheim Fellowship to aid him in that work. Eventually however, Red Scare pressure mounted again and Lomax, along with many of his friends including Pete Seeger, Orson Wells, and Aaron Copland were blacklisted. Lomax left the country in September of 1950 and spent much of the next decade overseas. While in Europe, however, he continued his work as a folklorist and made thousands of recordings that would become treasures to a number of countries and their national archives.

Lomax returned to the United States in 1959 and continued his work for almost four more decades, drawing on new technologies to promote, developing new theories to understand, and always doing his best to champion vernacular and traditional music. In 1983, Lomax founded the Association for Cultural Equity on the Fine Arts Campus of New York City's Hunter College. Cultural equity, he argued, was "the right of every culture to have equal time on the air and equal time in the classroom" (Pareles). This philosophy motivated Lomax's work until his death on July 19, 2002. The *New York Times* published a tribute a few days later that summed Lomax's method: "He did whatever was necessary to preserve traditional music and take it to a wider audience . . . Bob Dylan once described him as a 'missionary'" (Pareles). Dylan's descriptor is poignant as Alan Lomax, more than anything else perhaps, was a folk music evangelist.

Conclusion

Rhetorical Folkness: Reanimating Ong in the Pursuit of Digital Humanity

“I Can Feel it Coming in the Air Tonight”

I conclude this dissertation with a somewhat off-topic confession, but one that will help to draw some connections between my work exploring the sonic rhetorics of the Lomax archive and the sonic rhetorics of such archives as we move toward increasingly digital futures. The confession is two-fold, actually, and starts with the odd admission that I am a big fan of Genesis drummer-turned pop superstar Phil Collins. The other, as I return to in a moment, is the confession that I am also a fan of Walter J. Ong. Both of these once-iconic figures have, with good reason, gone out of style.

Recently, while searching YouTube for interesting Phil Collins tunes, I stumbled upon a version of “In the Air Tonight” sung by the choral group Choir! Choir! Choir!.⁵⁵ Choir! is an ad-hoc ensemble that meets in a bar in Toronto once a week to sing pop music. The group was formed by Daveed Goldman and Nobu Adilman and modeled after an Argentinean peña, which, as Goldman explains, “is just a place where people can go and hang out, even at 3 o'clock in the morning, and sit at tables with their guitars, drinking red wine or Coca-Cola, and stay up all night singing Salteño folk songs” (Meyers, “Choirstarters”). Goldman and Adilman’s choir operates on a completely volunteer, no-audition basis. Folks just show up and sing. Adilman directs the group and Goldman accompanies on guitar. Together, they arrange the harmonies and make the song selections, which range from A-ha’s classic “Take On Me” to Robyn’s more contemporary “Dancing on My Own.” In a recent NPR story on the group, Adilman relates that the choir started with just twenty participants, but quickly grew to a group of over a hundred singers. In

⁵⁵ Generally, I refer to the group as Choir! hereafter for brevity. Find Choir! Choir! Choir! on their website www.choirchoirchoir.com.

the NPR piece, Choir! members speak of the ways that the group became a thriving and meaningful community for its participants—a kind of musical refuge—and how the group filled a gap in their social lives. Since its formation and success, Goldman and Adilman now frequently take Choir! into the larger community where they perform in hospitals, for veterans and other groups. In addition to community outreach, the group worked up a slightly revised version of Sting’s “Russians” in response to Vladimir Putin’s homophobic comments about LGBTQ athletes participating in the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. They also have several songs (such as a version of Alice Cooper’s “Liar!”) dedicated to disgraced Toronto mayor, Rob Ford.

In my initial YouTube encounters with Choir! I was moved by their ability to project a spirit of participation, care, and celebration of shared cultural experience. That spirit reminded me of the work of another favorite artist of mine, Pete Seeger. For over seventy years, Seeger was an ambassador of vernacular music, an amplifier of marginalized voices, and an untiring advocate for cooperation—for coming together in both song and labor to remember history and plan for the future. Choir!’s undertaking resonates with Seeger’s values. They are a diverse group and not particularly virtuosic, but when you hear them it is clear they have spent time and care rehearsing their songs. Aside from our shared love for Phil Collins, I was surprised by my strong emotional response to the group’s performances. I never cared much for Gordon Lightfoot’s “If You Could Read My Mind,” for instance, or thought to juxtapose it with “Basket Case” by Green Day, but re-presented in this context, those tunes took on a new and vibrant quality, a kind of sonic vernacular newness. In a strange but unmistakable way, the group’s YouTube Channel has become a spontaneous digital archive of twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture, one that many of us are still very much ensconced within. More than a playlist on iTunes or a mix CD you might give to a friend, the embodied nature of community

singing stored and shared on the public network of YouTube is affecting, drawing me in as a proxy participant. I spent time not just listening to the group but *singing along*. In fact, I was inspired to try it out myself. Soon after discovering Choir! I brought a guitar and a pile of lyrics sheets to a friend's party and, without much prompting, had twenty people singing "In the Air Tonight" on a porch in Champaign, Illinois. It turns out I'm not the only one with a secret.

Choir! Choir! Choir! embodies an overlap between popular culture, sound as orality, and the archive that is only beginning to be imagined and activated, let alone theorized within our contemporary digital culture. My sense, however, is that Alan Lomax would be pleased. The Toronto-based project is a powerful example of what might be called *digital humanity*—a kind of vernacular residuum resulting from the same digital affordances, technologies, and methodologies now being utilized and studied by the emerging institutional formation called the Digital Humanities. Ungoverned by any institution or discipline, "digital humanity" describes the myriad ways humans are linked together digitally through the common cultural experiences, tools, networks, and technological ambience of the electronic age.

Lomax's material archive is significant, but even as it is being digitized in spaces like the Association for Cultural Equity, there is need to acknowledge the ways that YouTube and other digital technologies contribute to new and vibrant archival spaces. Doing so will help us plan for the scholarly future of digital sound studies by tracing "deep histories of digital sound technologies and their predecessors" and also to "critically evaluate how technology continues to shape auditory culture" (Lingold, Mueller, and Trettien 4). As in the introduction, this conclusion revisits concepts from ancient and contemporary rhetoric to theorize and historicize this notion of digital humanity for the future of digital sound studies, and also for rhetoric. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, the rhetorical tradition has been underutilized as a tool for

understanding sound thus far in the larger field of sound studies—an oversight I believe is (at least in part) tied to the disavowal of rhetoric vis-à-vis media scholar Walter J. Ong. In fact, Ong is mostly absent from the preceding work due his diminishing ethos. But as I work toward a conclusion and think about the future of rhetoric and sound studies in particular, an accounting for Ong seems more and more necessary.

It is indisputable that Walter J. Ong anticipated the current media landscape, including the circumstances I have designated above as “digital humanity,” and tied these contemporary mediated realities to both sound studies and rhetoric. Further, a concept like “digital humanity” is plausible only because its evidence is everywhere. Everyday lives are becoming more and more reliant upon digital tools for not just connecting and relating to one another, but in the rhetorical practice of preservation and propagation of cultural values and systems of civic belief. Digital humanity is part and parcel to this emergent vernacular digital culture and can be understood and made useful for scholars of sound in terms first conceptualized by ancient rhetoricians, but re-theorized by Ong. Given the legitimacy of Ong’s fall from scholarly approval, I tread carefully if deliberately through that critique in order to articulate a future of digital sound studies that is open to both rhetoric and a remixed and reanimated Ong. The history of rhetoric is itself tied to sonic ways of value- and knowledge-making, but the future of sound studies—particularly at its cutting, vernacular and digital edge—can be better understood when rhetoric is included as part of the field’s conceptual Pro Tools. I conclude then with a call for Ong’s reanimation—zombie-like, if needs be. He remains an important figure and may help forge a tenuous bridge between rhetoric and sound studies: our common zombie.

Reanimating Walter J. Ong

Once known as a preeminent sound theorist whose “version of the ‘great divide’ between orality and literacy [for a time] dominated the approach to literacy” (Street 153), Walter J. Ong now occupies a tenuous position within the field of literacy studies and now also sound studies literature. As alluded to, Ong has become a kind of Phil Collins figure: both had hits in the 1980s—and while many of us know and can sing along to both, it is becoming harder and harder to admit it in public.

Ong was associated with Marshall McLuhan and the influential Toronto School of communication theory, and emphasized key epistemological differences between orality and literacy, arguing for the need to “reawaken the oral [and sounded] character of language” within the scholarly world (*Orality and Literacy* 6). He taught that an emphasis on visual, literate (and by extension, logical, empirical, and positivistic) epistemologies led to a diminished understanding of oral/aural types of knowledge. Ong argued that the sound of the voice is an essential feature to understanding humanity and that “the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings’ feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word” (73). These claims won the theorist wide acclaim as a theoretical innovator and, for a time, helped to bring sound into the scholarly vogue. However, critics have since maligned Ong as part of a larger grouping of misguided “phonocentrists” who mistake voice and sound for a metaphysical and mythic presence. As one of these critics, Jonathan Sterne describes Ong’s position as theocentric and as part of an “audiovisual litany” that seeks to privilege sound over visuality in a kind of hierarchy of the senses. For Sterne (2003), Ong’s championing of orality is merely “a restatement of the longstanding spirit/letter distinction in Christian spiritualism” (16). Sterne’s perspective is

persuasive and his voice coupled with other prominent critics (see Derrida, 1982; Street, 1995) has led to Ong and his work falling out of scholarly fashion.

Seeking to “recover” Ong or to rationalize his spiritualism would be futile. He was, after all, *Father Ong*—a Jesuit priest—and was generally careful in his scholarship to acknowledge his particular positioning and gesture toward its more universal applications. Instead, in much the same way that Choir! brought Phil Collins into a new sonic space, it is more useful to work to reanimate and redress Ong’s intellectual contributions within a secular, rhetorical paradigm with attention to how Ong connected his theories of sound to a more technologically diverse understanding of human flourishing—to digital humanity. Indeed, Ong’s work is important for the ways that he understood and began to theorize contemporary society as a hybrid of the traditional and the technological and what that hybridity might have to teach us about human value making as we move deeper into the digital age.

Thinking Conjuncturally: Epideictic Rhetoric, Folkness, and Ong’s Secondary Orality

I have already used the term “digital humanity” to gesture toward the idea that humans utilize technology to generate new knowledge, tools, and networks for understanding the world and other people, but the notion that these behaviors lead to the disruption, modification, and even creation of new systems of value has ancient origins. As explored in the introduction, Aristotle conceptualized the deep, humanistic work of belief formation and propagation as a species of rhetoric he called *epideiktikon*, or “epideictic,” and used to describe the value-making oratory inherent to ceremonial, ritualistic, and poetic discourse. “Epideictic” remains common parlance in rhetorical criticism, but there are many synonyms across the disciplines. Echoing

Aristotle, recall from my introduction musicologist Charles Seeger and his use of the word “folkness” as the

funded treasury of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward life and death, work and play, love, courtship and marriage, health and hearth, children and animals, prosperity and adversity—a veritable code of individual and collective behavior belonging to the people as a whole. (3)

While this definition hails from a particularly poignant moment of folk revival, I contend that it points to a more-or-less universal idea about how humans build systems of value and public memory together in vernacular, or everyday, discursive spaces. Neither epideictic nor folkness is inherently sonic, but both have a close historical relationship with sounded and rhythmic expression, which can also be found commonly at the vernacular level, particularly when paired with rhetorics of remembering. Sound’s rhetorical folkness is alive and well within our digital culture making. It is at the heart of Choir! Choir! Choir!’s ethos, for example—but can also be found in any user-generated or open-source community where memory keeping and making has become a public, digital affair due to the increasing ubiquity of electronic affordances.

In his recent collection, *The Sound Studies Reader* (2013), Jonathan Sterne asserts that a primary goal for the future of sound studies should be to “think conjuncturally about sound and culture” (3). I have been working here, as I have throughout this dissertation, to draw connections between disciplines and terms in order to map these potential conjunctures. Ong also works conjuncturally, making the connection between value-making, rhythmic sound, memory, and technology explicit in his recurring notion of “orality.” Orality was derived from the system of thought known as “media ecology,” a central philosophical tenant of the Toronto School. Media ecology’s trajectory holds that technological mediation is central to understanding the

development of human consciousness and has traversed four major “ages”: the tribal, literate, print, and electronic. Working mainly within the trajectory of Western cultural history, Ong’s work deals, in large part, with the transition between each age, and updates “tribal” with his term “oral.”⁵⁶ Ong is fascinated by the liminal moments between each age—with the profound transference that occurs as one dominant mode of communication gives way to the next. One can get a sense for Ong’s *modus operandi* in the title of what is arguably his most intellectually enduring work, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (1958). In *Ramus*, Ong chronicles the cultural impact of the sixteenth century printing press, which included a shift from the dominance of speech and dialogue in the public sphere and led, through new emphases on method and “reason,” to the cultural circumstances that directly preceded the Enlightenment.

Each age, as Ong imagines them, is marked by a kind of technological law of diminishing returns. In the sixteenth century, a literate (but still quite oral) culture transitions into an age when the practitioners of intellectual progress become consumed by an exploration of visual ways of knowing and understanding. Scholars in this age concerned themselves with “the ‘structure’ of our intellectual activity—a notion which cannot be conceived of except by analogy with some sort of spatial diagram . . . and [no longer] concern[s] itself with ‘tone’ or other aural-type phenomena (*Ramus* 107). Ong’s anxiety was that in the wake of progress, traditional ways of knowing and remembering would be designated obsolete, left behind to languish, and eventually forgotten. For Ong, the historical trajectory starting with pre-literate culture through the age of print always included a steady march away from “aural-type phenomena” and towards ways of knowing structured by visual-type methodologies and the abstract thinking made

⁵⁶ Ong’s veers from this Western focus at various moments within *Orality and Literacy*. He mentions several anthropological studies outside of the Western paradigm, what, what, and what among them.

possible by the affordances of literacy. This was the case, at least, until the mid-twentieth century. Ong develops the notion of “secondary orality” as a way of describing the state of human consciousness in the then-emerging electronic age where the visual’s dominance was beginning to wane. The electronic age is one imbued with a “high-technology ambience” where “a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print” (*Orality and Literacy* 11). Secondary orality is “new” because technological advance brings sound back into prominence within communication technologies in a way not emphasized since the days of ancient or “primary” orality.

Primary and secondary orality are the bookends of media ecology’s historical trajectory. Ong’s writings on secondary orality, however, were somewhat limited. Given this openness in the canon, Ong scholar and rhetorician Abigail Lambke argues that “secondary orality should be read as incomplete, suggestive, and germinal” (203) (and this, perhaps, is the right approach to working with Ong in general!). Lambke points us toward two particularly cogent elements within Ong’s cursory beginnings that help to get a handle on the definition of this slippery term. First, Ong writes that “new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas” (*Orality and Literacy* 136). Next, secondary orality also “promotes spontaneity because through analytical reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing. We plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous” (137). Rendered this way, secondary orality reminds us that humanity, as we currently experience it, is a mix of both traditional and progressive paradigms and can not be otherwise. Digital humanity, then, reveals itself within this symbiosis of the past, present, and future as our technologies present

opportunities to participate in, preserve, and be “conspicuously spontaneous” in our various digitally enhanced social interactions. Recall again the ways that Toronto’s Choir! Choir! Choir!’s embodies each of these elements. Participants gather together in planned spontaneity to sing. Their performances are recorded, archived on YouTube, and thereby distributed to the world where we can then participate with and even emulate them in our own communities.

But YouTube isn’t the only avenue where technological advance is creating new communities of participatory sonic culture. For example, the Berlin-based online audio distribution platform SoundCloud has become a hub for musical collaboration, sample sharing, and new-artist promotion and has a reported 40 million registered users and five times that many listeners (Jefferson). Also, smartphone platforms such as Instagram, Vine, and Snapchat, which allow for the quick and simple distribution of vernacular sound and video to a large audience, also meet these criteria. Vine in particular has become so popular and ubiquitous (more than 70 million users) as to produce its own “stars”—fascinating evidence of a vibrant community drawing upon both traditional (celebrity culture) and emerging paradigms of interaction (“followers,” “revines,” and “likes”).

Memory, Archives, and a Step Beyond Secondary Orality

In many ways, Ong relies on his audience to intuit their sense of what secondary orality entails by following along carefully with his development of primary orality. Whether primary or secondary, “[o]rality is orality in some ultimate sense,” Ong quips in his trademark essentialism, and we are left to assemble the pieces on our own (*Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* 284). Ong’s interest in the sonic experience of orality was often tied to a deeper human interest in technologies of remembering. And while Ong had an implicit preoccupation with spiritual

remembrance (or not forgetting God), we need not be spiritualists to find some insight and value in the importance of memory and its connection to sonic activity. Archives, for example, offer an important site for understanding the negotiation, interplay, and overlap between memory and data, a dichotomy that fits more or less analogously beside the notions of orality and literacy, tradition and progression, folkness and technology—all ideas that I have been engaging here. Orality, if tied to our understanding of the archive, loses much of the acrimony the concept receives from Ong's critics. After all, even before digital or material archives, humans used (and continue to use) their memories as archives to preserve important cultural knowledge and also as a way of carefully organizing the memorized elements of an eloquent oral performance. Ong developed orality's relationship to human memory's potential as an archive along two disparate but related trajectories, one with anthropological ends, and the other rhetorical. Each, however, were concerned with what he and other media ecologists call "oral-formulaic composition," or the use of rhythmic formulae as a way of preserving memory, knowledge, and culture.

Ong was intrigued by the literary-turned-anthropological work of Milman Parry and his student Albert Lord. Parry is known for his pioneering work in Homeric oral poetry where he demonstrated convincingly the formulaic nature of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which, though eventually written down and deemed "literature," hailed from a much earlier oral tradition. That the Homeric poetry survived in such vivid detail was "due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition" (*Orality and Literacy* 21)—mnemonic formulas that Homer and other expert rhapsodists could memorize and then carefully stitch together with their minds in sequential chunks. Albert Lord took Parry's work into the former Yugoslavia where he studied Yugoslav narrative poets who could not read and found the same kinds of formulaic devices at work there that Parry had found in Homer (59). Ong jumped to some problematic conclusions

using this research, conclusions that seemed to suggest that literacy develops with clean evolutionary determinism across all cultures, in predictable patterns, and always toward alphabetic literacy. This paradigm has come under significant critical scrutiny, the sharpest of which is from ethnographer Brian V. Street (1995) who sees much of Ong's work as methodologically deductive, based in assumptions about cultures he knows little about, empirically weak, and theoretically deterministic. In a like manner, this (pseudo-) anthropological line of thinking does not do much to advance the development of secondary orality.

Anthropological wanderings aside, oral formulas as “knowledge storage and retrieval devices” have a rich history within the rhetorical tradition (*Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* 285). Ong recognizes this and connects the orality of ancient rhetorical theory to the secondary orality of his twentieth century moment. Like the above example, the rhetorical tradition also has its roots in ancient poetic traditions where the formulaic and rhythmic memory-aids, fashioned as oral mnemonic devices, passed as oral tradition from the Homeric epoch into later antiquity. The use and memorization of poetic figures, commonplaces, as well as the use of carefully curated *topoi* or topics, are well-documented practices in both the teaching and performance of rhetoric in ancient Athens. Writing about the methods of ancient teachers of rhetoric known as the sophists, George Kennedy relates that even “as the composition of oral poetry and the oratory in it was built up with blocks of memorized material adapted to a variety of situations, so sophistic oratory was to a considerable extent a pastiche, or piecing together of commonplaces, long and short” (28). Aristotle cataloged many of these “formulary materials” (as Ong called them) in his *Rhetoric* written in the fourth century BCE and was followed in this practice by Roman orator/teachers Cicero and Quintilian in the first century of the Common Era.

Writing at the end of the 1960s, Ong points to the folk revival—to folkness!—as a site of secondary orality where this same kind of oral-formulaic discourse of public memory reemerges. For Ong, the appeal of folk song “derives from the overwhelming persuasion of its devotees that it is of great antiquity (often it is not) and connects with their past” (*Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* 298). In the United States, folk “revival” in the early and mid twentieth century revolved around the search and archiving of vernacular artifacts that reverberated with the cultural memory cataloged in Charles Seeger’s earlier definition, but also with that longing for authenticity that has been such an important theme in this dissertation. Since that time, “folklife” archives have become an important part of countless communities and are housed (often with digital components) in libraries and universities across the US with the preeminent example at the Library of Congress. Ong, however, pushes past the idea of folklife as something that should only be engaged within a careful cataloged archive and toward a more dynamic folkness of innovation, satire, improvisation, and play that begins to emerge when figures and commonplaces begin to decay and/or become hopelessly cliché.⁵⁷

Certainly over the last half-century we have circulated at least once or twice through what now appears to be the revolving cycle of secondary orality: from the earnest seeking of authenticity, through satire and irony, to innovation and play and then back again. Here again, Phil Collins becomes a useful lodestar for understanding this process. Other closeted fans will remember that before his solo career took off, Collins performed as part of the progressive rock group Genesis who were known for their innovative musicianship and frequently political themes. As a solo artist, however, his popularity reached its peak during a brief period of (now

⁵⁷ Ong points humorously to the then-contemporary duo Simon and Garfunkel whose music, he argues, is rife with play on “worn rhetorical clichés,” blatant informality within formal musical settings, “total irony” and “total casualness”—all as playful innovations replacing tired formulaic commonplaces. Recall, for example, the comically mundane line “Citizens for Boysenberry Jam” from their 1968 song “Punky’s Dilemma.”

cringe-inciting) earnestness during the 1980s. Since then, however, Collins has remained in the popular sphere, in karaoke bars and among community sing groups like Choir!, to be sure, but also as samples in the work of hip hop DJs and MCs. In fact, my favorite song “In the Air Tonight” has been sampled by such artists as DMX (“I Can Feel It”), Lil’ Kim (“In the Air Tonite”), Nas (“One Mic”) and even the legendary 2Pac (“Staring Through My Rearview”)⁵⁸. Collins’s work takes on new life as a DJ’s sample. When juxtaposed with hip hop lyrics and themes, the song functions as a common cultural touch-point—a backbeat—useful in response to (and even subtle commentary on) evolving exigent issues. “In the Air Tonight,” carries with it the broad cultural marker (or commonplace) of emotional intensity, which can be taken up, reworked, and deployed in the praise and blame—the *epideictic* critique—of shared values within and across US popular culture. 2Pac’s lyrics, “I wonder when the world stopped caring last night / Two kids shot while the whole block staring,” rapped over the iconic keyboard and drums of “In the Air Tonight” are indisputable as poignant oratory and an example of what contemporary *epideictic* rhetoric sounds like. Collins work, then, is part of a revolving cycle of rhetorical folkness: from innovative art, to tired cliché, and back to art—but in new keys and accompanied by new voices.

The folkness of digital humanity, which exists, perhaps, as a step *beyond* secondary orality, takes advantage of a technologically hybrid culture where knowledge/retrieval systems (or “external memory” as we are now wont to call it) have become ubiquitous. In other words, it is when evidence of the kind of technical literacy and rhetorical fluency central to the DJs expertise (mash-up/remix) can be observed across media and in digital discourse of the everyday. This notion of digital humanity invites a new and emergent folkness that embraces, circulates,

⁵⁸ The useful site whosampled.com helped me discover this information. According to their search engine, “In the Air Tonight” has been sampled in 43 hip hop songs to date.

and rearticulates each of these stages *ad infinitum*, blurring the lines between tradition and progression forever. Harkening back to both Aristotle and Lambke's insights, while the ever-changing folkness of digital humanity presents unprecedented opportunities for participation and spontaneity—from open-source software builds to open-audition community choirs—this new openness also requires new ways of understanding the dissonance of this potential cacophony of competing voices and values. It is here that rhetoric's concepts and theories, starting with *epideictic* and blossoming outward, can be utilized in order to provide both perspective and conciliatory resonance to these issues as well as those within conversations around digital sound studies more broadly. In the final section, then, I return to Jonathan Sterne's important critique of Ong and model a final time how the insights of rhetoric and its scholars might contribute to difficult questions at the intersections of the various fields interested in sound.

Revisiting Plato's Paradox

As mentioned earlier, Sterne describes Ong and, by extension, the Toronto School as theocentric and chronicles their position on orality as part of an "audiovisual litany" that privileges sound over visuality (rather than giving them equal prominence in the sensorium). For Sterne (2003), the notion of orality provides a mere "restatement of the longstanding spirit/letter distinction in Christian spiritualism. The spirit is living and life-giving—it leads to salvation. The letter is dead and inert—it leads to damnation" (16). This attitude, as Sterne points out, is found in the writings of Augustine and the Gospel of John, all of which he sees as derivative of Platonist anxieties about both writing and speech. Sterne's critique is not just of Ong, then, but of a whole critical tradition embedded within an ongoing debate about the normative function of language within society, a debate that begins with Plato. My discussion of secondary orality

above responds to this critique: whatever his spiritualist leanings, Ong seems quite aware that wisdom exists outside of the primary orality paradigm. As I have sought to show, secondary orality is itself built upon the paradox of competing so-called aural- and visual-type media—a paradox reverberant of an ancient platonic epistemological conundrum.

Like many, Plato was suspicious of technology's rapid advance. Though he was a gifted writer himself, he worried that writing was damaging to memory. This opinion was complicated by a mistrust of Greek oral traditions. Poetry, Plato argues in the final book of his *Republic*, cripples the mind, “[i]t is a kind of disease” requiring an antidote consisting of “knowledge ‘of what things really are’” (4). Eric Havelock argues that Plato's critique is levied not just on poetry per se—or at least not on poetry as we currently imagine it—but upon *poetics*: the oral, mythopoetic cultural norms of speech and discourse that undergirded traditional Greek society. Susan Jarratt (1991) summarizes Havelock's argument: “Plato condemned *mythos*, meaning the poetic transfer of crucial cultural information, because of its hypnotic effects, arguing that it fostered an uncritical absorption of the dominant ideology. Instead, Plato recommended the hard mental work of dialectical thinking as an objective process” (xxii). Plato's concerns, understood in this way, are actually not altogether unlike Sterne's: both orality and mythopoetics represent the potentially damaging habits of a false tradition. Plato's critique of writing takes a similar if slightly different cadence. Said Plato in the *Phaedrus*: “If men learn [to write], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks” (275a-b). Plato goes on remark that writing will inhibit the process of wisdom, replacing it with a mere “reminder” or reference to what “true” wisdom consists of.

Harkening back to my earlier discussion, memory is implicated in each of these Platonic anxieties. In the first case, poetry, or more precisely, the mythopoetic and rhythmic vernacular discourse of oral tradition (folkness), is the disease of rigorous rational thought and by extension prosperous society. For Plato, poetry's conservative, constitutive nature has fascistic potential if relied upon to inform structures of governance. Mythopoeia refashions memory and by extension history toward a simple mythic narrative reinforced through rhythmic (and therefore memorable) orality. On the other hand, writing (or more broadly, technological mediation) undermines memory and, by extension, the potential for greater wisdom by eliminating the motive for the pursuit of excellence or the disciplined mind/body exercise of remembering and treasuring up of the virtuosic knowledge that gives way to wisdom. Plato's paradox, of course, is that these ideals are presented as mutually exclusive of the other when they are not. There is no way to separate a kind of "pure" memory from mythopoetic influence, nor are the ideals of the wise free of the culturally situated (and saturated) rhetorics of tradition and belief.

Part of Sterne's critique of the Toronto School in general and Ong in particular is Sterne's perception that Ong, in his persistence to develop a theory of language based around the preeminence of sound and orality, is seeking wisdom from the wrong source. But, even Plato seemed to know better than that. Developing scholarship (post-Havelock *and* Ong) in pre-Platonic and sophistic rhetorical history theorize Plato's paradox in ways I think are resonant with *both* Ong and Sterne's ideas. For example, the work of Christopher Johnstone charts notions of what constituted wisdom within ancient Greek culture through a mythopoetic consciousness and toward a more "naturalistic" rational one. Importantly, for Johnstone, there is never such a thing as "existence only in sound." As he argues, developing Greek notions of

“rational cosmology” and natural philosophy retained important links to myth and poetic language, and the "transition from *mythos* to *logos*" [...] signaled not so much a break with the past as the emergence of a new form of consciousness that coexisted with and was infused by a mythopoetic mind set as old as humanity itself. (5-6)

Like Johnstone, Sterne insists that orality does not cleanly give way to literacy ushering in a new dawn of “external memory” transmission through writing. But a closer look at Ong’s work reveals that beyond his speculative and spiritual idealism around orality, he didn’t think so either. In fact, in his writing on secondary orality, he seems very much within the extended trajectory of Johnstone’s model coalescing both *mythos* and *logos* within cultural development.

Consider, in conclusion, how Ong’s view on technology, which always exists as a demonstration of the hybridity of oral and literate ways of thinking, speaks to this hypothesis:

Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can be uplifting. Writing heightens consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many ways essential for full human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. Thus writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does.

Technologies are artificial, but—paradox again—artificiality is natural to human being.

Technology, properly interiorized does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it.

The modern orchestra, for example is the result of high technology. (*Orality and Literacy* 82-83)

Technological phenomena such as YouTube, SoundCloud, and the DJ sample exist along a continuum of mediated experience that includes activities that look and sound like Ong’s

descriptions of primary and secondary orality. One need not subscribe to Ong's spiritual ideals to find something transcendent and human about the activities implied by these terms, their various permutations, and the ways that they relate across that continuum. On the other hand, subscribing to and expanding upon Ong's frequent use of *rhetoric* to account for the complexity of oral and aural experience has immense potential. This conclusion has been about drawing that potential out, connecting rhetorical terms firmly to sonic experiences, and about beginning to theorize the folkness of digital humanity. Sterne's popular critique of Ong's orality and "oral culture" is important but need not invalidate Ong's contributions to his various fields, nor should it disrupt the rhythm or impact of sonic experience in both ancient and contemporary culture. Instead it encourages a reorientation of how we understand Ong's orality in relationship to sound studies and creates new avenues for future sound and rhetoric studies. The rhetorical tradition provides a myriad theories, trajectories, and terminologies to complicate and nuance our understanding of sonic practice. Accordingly, sonic rhetoric's rhythms resound in our memories and through the various technologies of the archive: orality, rhapsody, and melody mediated materially on paper, vinyl, magnetic tape, and in the burgeoning code and algorithms of the digital.

Appendix

Songs in the order of their appearance in Chapter 2

1. “The Angels Dropped their Wings and Gone on to Heaven.” Sung by group of Negro convicts. Tennessee state penitentiary. Nashville, TN. AFS 00179 B02. John A. Lomax, August 1933. **1.TheAngelsDroopedtheirWings.mp3**
2. “Levee Camp Holler.” Sung by John Gibson (Black Samson). Tennessee state penitentiary. Nashville, TN. AFS 00179 B03. John A. Lomax, August 1933. **2.LeveeCampHoller.mp3**
3. “Good God A’Mighty.” Sung by group of Negro convicts with ax-cutting. State penitentiary, Huntsville, TX. AFS 00179 B03. John A. and Alan Lomax, November, 1934. **3.GoodGodAlmighty.mp3**
4. “Run Nigger Run.” Sung by Mose Platt (Clear Rock). Central state farm, Sugarland, TX. AFS 00196 A01. John A. and Alan Lomax, December, 1933. **4.RunNiggerRun.mp3**
5. “Ol’ Rattler.” Piano rendering from sheet music. Thanks to Michelle Ross for her piano performance in this recording. Made in Clemson, South Carolina on March 23, 2014. **5.OlRattlerPianoRendering.mp3**
6. “Ol’ Rattler.” Sung by Mose Platt (Clear Rock). Central state farm, Sugarland, TX. AFS 00208 B01. John A. and Alan Lomax, April 1934. **6.OlRattler.mp3**
7. “Shorty George.” Sung by James Baker (Iron Head). Central state farm, Sugarland, TX. AFS 00202 A02. John A. Lomax, February, 1934. **7.ShortyGeorge.mp3**
8. “Go Down, Hannah.” Sung by James Baker (Iron Head), Will Crosby, R. D. Allen, and Mose Platt (Clear Rock). Central state farm, Sugarland, TX. AFS 00195 A02. John A. and Alan Lomax, December 1933. **8.GoDownOldHannah.mp3**

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