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Ballads, Blues, and Alterity

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This dissertation is the result of my own work. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Music Degree Committee.



Contents

Introduction 'The Beauty of the Dead'	1
(1)	10
'Dancing Puppets' Nationalism, Social Darwinism, and the Transatlantic Invention of Folksong	
A Short History of the Ballad from Thomas Percy to Francis James Child—'The Natural Musical Idiom of a National Will': Cecil J. Sharp and Folksong Discourse in Britain—'Rendered in Their Own Native Element': John A. Lomax and Folksong Discourse in the US—Conclusion: 'A Fraud, A Delusion, A Myth'	
(2)	86
'His Rough, Stubborn Muse' Industrial Balladry, Class, and the Politics of Realism	
'The American Example': A. L. Lloyd, Ewan MacColl, and the Rearticulation of Folksong—'Noise with A Purpose': Postwar Affluence, British Leftism, and the BBC Radio Ballads—'The Dignity of Labour': Social Realism, Gendered Bodies, and the Art of Stalinism—Conclusion: 'Dictatorship of the Heart'	
(3)	162
'Found True and Unspoiled' Blues, Performance, and the Mythology of Racial Display	
Negotiating Essentialism, Identity, and Legacies of the Black Atlantic—'The Deepest Strains of Negro Music': Nostalgia, Imagination, and Authenticity in Blues Discourse—'A Living History of the Blues': Reading Granada's TV Specials as Theatres of Representation—Conclusion: 'Black in Relation'	
Conclusion 'Regeneration of the Imaginary'	239
Bibliography	248

Myth has always been obscure and enlightening at one and the same time: always using the devices of familiarity and straightforward dismissal to avoid the labor of conceptualization.

~ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities.

~ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

Every fiction is supported by a social jargon, a sociolect, with which it identifies: fiction is that degree of consistency a language attains when it has *jelled* exceptionally and finds a sacerdotal class (priests, intellectuals, artists) to speak it generally and to circulate it...Each jargon (each fiction) fights for hegemony; if power is on its side, it spreads everywhere in the general and daily occurrences of social life, it becomes *doxa*, nature.

~ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

Introduction |

'The Beauty of the Dead'

The Munich air disaster of February 1958—in which over half the passengers on a flight carrying the Manchester United football team home from a European Cup fixture in Belgrade were killed—may seem an unlikely place to begin a dissertation on ballads and blues.¹ Coinciding with the burgeoning transatlantic folk revival, however, the event fired the bardic imagination of aspiring songwriters, as editor of *Sing* magazine Eric Winter reported in the *Manchester Guardian*:

[The] tragedy has found a strange echo in a public-house in London, where a group of young people who call themselves the Ballads and Blues movement meet every Sunday evening. Since the accident three new songs have appeared...these ballads are different in mood and character—perhaps as different as the players themselves—but all three fall within the folk tradition.²

It is telling that these balladeers exalted and aestheticised the Munich crash: somewhat paradoxically, death itself was central to folk revival ideology. A body can only be revived if it is no longer living. As Greil Marcus states in his romanticised depiction of Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, the artists valorised by revivalists 'sound as if they're already dead'.³ The irony was that many

¹ See <<http://munich58.co.uk>> [accessed 05.01.15].

² Eric Winter, "'The Flowers of Manchester'", *The Manchester Guardian*, 3 March 1958, 5. 1958 was a crucial year for the postwar folk revival in the US; see Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³ Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (London: Picador, 1997), 114. Likewise, Marcus fantasied that '[Dock] Boggs's music accepted death, sympathized with its mission, embraced its seductions, and traveled with its wiles' (154). On Smith's *Anthology*, see Katherine Skinner, "'Must Be Born Again': Resurrecting the *Anthology of American Folk Music*",

were still alive at the moment of revival itself—uncanny spectres of the imagined past. Presided over by radical playwright and singer Ewan MacColl, the Ballads and Blues club affords us a glimpse into this postwar subculture:

Every Sunday evening the upper room of the Princess Louise in High Holborn is packed to overflowing with refugees from the skiffle craze...The youngsters—few members of the audience are over thirty—crowd in, drawn by the magic of names. Nowhere else in London, or in Britain for that matter, can you pay three and six and hear Ewan MacColl, Fitzroy Coleman, Dominic Behan, Rory McEwan, and A. L. Lloyd, who is not only an eminent folklorist and musicologist but an accomplished performer whose slightly didactic approach to his material has earned him the nickname ‘The Dean’...The programmes are called ‘Hootennanies’; the word was imported from America and contains some of the elements of sing-song, ceilidh, festival, and eisteddfod. An evening at the Louise introduces the audience to a collection of songs and ballads new and traditional...It is [also] possible to buy folk-song records—most of them on a comparatively unknown label, Topic—broadsheets (including ‘The Munich Tragedy’ and ‘Manchester Mourns’), and copies of Britain’s only song magazine ‘Sing’, which specialises in traditional and topical material from the fields covered by Ballads and Blues.⁴

This urban folk crusade had arisen dialectically in the wake of rock’n’roll—venerating traditional as well as topical song alongside similar material from across the Atlantic. MacColl was about to embark on a series of ‘radio ballads’ documenting British industrial life from railways and fishermen to coal miners and construction of the M1 motorway. Winter concluded that ‘folk-song’ was thus ‘no longer the exclusive province of cycling parsons and genteel schoolmistresses’.⁵

Toward the end of his contemporaneous novel *Absolute Beginners*, Colin MacInnes provides a satiric counterpoint to Winter’s rather earnest vignette:

Popular Music 25/1 (2006): 57–75 and John Street, ‘Invisible Republics and Secret Histories: A Politics of Music’, *Cultural Values* 4/3 (2000): 298–313.

⁴ Winter, “‘The Flowers of Manchester’”. On the ‘hootenanny’ craze, see Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). The ‘Ballads and Blues’ concept began as a series of radio broadcasts in spring 1953, scripted by MacColl; see Ben Harker, *Class Act: The Cultural and Political Life of Ewan MacColl* (London: Pluto, 2007) and Ewan MacColl, *Journeyman: An Autobiography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1990). The programmes featured an impressive roster of performers—including Lloyd, Humphrey Lyttelton, Isla Cameron, Seamus Ennis, Jean Ritchie, Big Bill Broonzy, and Alan Lomax. A loose ‘Ballads and Blues’ ensemble coalesced on the back of the programmes.

⁵ Winter, “‘The Flowers of Manchester’”. See Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (1993; Leeds: No Masters Co-Operative, 2010) and John Francmanis, ‘National Music to National Redeemer: The Consolidation of a “Folk-Song” Construct in Edwardian England’, *Popular Music* 21/1 (2002): 41–66.

My object in going was therefore not artistic, but because I thought I might catch a character called Ron Todd. This Ron Todd is a Marxist, and closely connected with the ballads-and-blues movement, which seeks to prove that all folk music is an art of protest, which, fair enough, and also—or, at any rate, Ron Todd seeks to—that this art is somehow latched on to the achievements of the USSR, i.e. Mississippi jail songs are in praise of sputniks.⁶

Despising commercial appropriation of ‘authentic’ music while appearing ‘scruffy and disapproving, in the correct ballad-and-blues manner’, Ron Todd is censured by MacInnes’s hip protagonist for his attraction to esoteric material: ‘you don’t think up enough songs of your own. Songs about the scene, I mean, about us and now. Most of your stuff is ancient English, or modern American, or weirdie minority songs from pokey corners. But what about *our* little fable?’ (implicitly, teenage experience unfiltered by escapist or stubbornly anachronistic ephemera).⁷ MacInnes was correct to align the ballads and blues phenomenon with a divisive political sensibility: many key figures were or had been staunch members of the Communist Party of Great Britain; Topic Records and *Sing* magazine, moreover, were both Party affiliates.⁸ The exaggerated partition between folk and Mod aesthetics, however, was a fictional device. Indeed, fans were able and willing to flit between the two milieux, notwithstanding inconsistencies, as Dave Allen has noted:

On Saturday nights at the Mod club I would dance in my smart clothes to Joe Tex, Smokey Robinson or a live performance by the Action. On Monday evenings at the folk club I would sit silently in my Levis and jumper, perhaps joining in a chorus of ‘Last Thing on my Mind’ or ‘Wild Rover’ and occasionally playing a blues song or two. Despite these differences, what united the two experiences was that I was making or hearing music that was always distinct from mainstream pop, with its connotations of artifice and the marketplace.⁹

⁶ Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (1959; London: Alison & Busby, 2011), 174. On this point, see also George McKay, ‘Just a Closer Walk with Thee: New Orleans-Style Jazz and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1950s Britain’, *Popular Music* 22/3 (2003): 261–81.

⁷ MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, 176, 178. See also See Richard S. Grayson, ‘Mods, Rockers and Juvenile Delinquency in 1964: The Government Response’, *Contemporary British History* 12/1 (1998): 19–47 and Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). I discuss Mod culture and hipness in chapter 3.

⁸ See James Eaden & David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain Since 1920* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002); *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of British Communism*, ed. Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, & Kevin Morgan (London: Pluto, 1995); and *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain*, ed. Andy Croft (London: Pluto, 1998). I discuss this aspect of the postwar revival in chapter 2.

⁹ Dave Allen, ‘Feelin’ Bad this Morning: Why the *British Blues?*’, *Popular Music* 26/1 (2007), 151. Simon Frith elaborates on this point in “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community”, *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159–68.

Indeed, the defining attribute of all revivalist ideology was a reaction to what was perceived as blind conformity, irrevocable cultural decay, and suffocating mass-mediated commodities—in short, to the inexorable encroachment of modernity and unchecked global capitalism.¹⁰ Ballads and blues were thus united by their status as *cultural artefacts inscribed with the symbolic power to resist*.

This thesis interrogates such reiterative processes of inscription in a transatlantic context from the Edwardian heyday of British folksong collecting through Marxist rearticulations of the concept during the 1950s to white fantasies of African American blackness during the 1960s. An interwoven transatlantic history of folk and blues music during this period has not been attempted before, making my account the first of its kind.¹¹ **Chapter 1** delves back into the eighteenth century to elucidate subsequent ideologies, tracing the convoluted process through which popular balladry was reified and essentialised as peasant ‘folksong’. Beginning with Thomas Percy’s *Reliques* and the monumental work of Francis James Child, I pursue a genealogy of hitherto neglected dissent surrounding the prevailing ideas of Cecil J. Sharp and John A. Lomax—demonstrating how folksong was imbricated in complex ways with nationalist anxieties, primitivism, and modernity. I conclude by arguing that folksong was invented tradition *within* elite culture itself and thus never part of the popular domain—a concept deeply indebted to Social Darwinism (a nexus of ideas entirely overlooked by the extant literature). **Chapter 2** turns to the 1950s, exploring both how and why Marxist folklorists translated prior pastoral tropes onto explicitly masculine industrial settings shot through with proletarian nostalgia. I argue that A. L. Lloyd was instrumental in absorbing functionalist ideas from the US and applying them to British culture, laying the epistemological foundation for urban folk revivalism. In order to demonstrate such ideas in practice, I pursue close readings of Ewan MacColl’s radio ballads—situating them in a new relation to debates concerning postwar affluence, the changing landscape of gender and class, traditions of social realism, and the nascent New Left. The aesthetics of realism on the Left, I show, have been fundamentally misunderstood in the literature. **Chapter 3** confronts racial ideology in the blues revival of the 1960s. I begin by considering the

¹⁰ In many ways, revivalist ideology thus mirrored Frankfurt School critiques of mass culture; see Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947; London: Verso, 1997).

¹¹ At the time of writing this was true. Ronald D. Cohen and Rachel Clare Donaldson, however, have since published *Roots of the Revival: American and British Folk Music in the 1950s* (University of Illinois Press, 2014), which, although covering the period up to and including the 1950s, does not tackle aesthetics, Social Darwinism, the radio ballads, nor the 1960s blues revival, as I do.

constitution of race itself in the context of an Atlantic intercultural through blackface minstrelsy and perceptions of the Southern US—showing how white stereotypes were reciprocally absorbed by African American entertainers. I then chart folk blues discourse through a series of highly influential texts that generated racializing horizons of expectation for the genre. Demonstrating the outcome of such writing, I pursue close readings of two largely neglected tour performances in Britain—exploring legacies of colonial display alongside resistant acts of ‘signifyin(g)’. Linking the hip valorisation of black difference to Mod culture, I conclude with a revisionist reading of race by arguing that revivalist stagings of blues transformed imagined history *into* racial nature, creating ‘black masks’ that African American artists were obliged to wear for the benefit of a white audience.

I argue that folk music (whether Arcadian, industrial, or nominally black) *does not exist as such outside the discursive ideologies of revivalism*. In other words, the cultural practice of those baptised as ‘the folk’ only ever existed in the imagination of those with the authority to foreclose: although vernacular music cultures flourished, what is now branded intuitively as ‘folksong’ is a deeply unsound reflection of historical experience. With such falsification in mind, I pay particular attention to representations of alterity through song—the ‘re’ of *representation* signifying contingent interventions and asymmetries of power that cry out for deconstructive historicisation. Edward W. Said has proposed that such ‘representations—their production, circulation, history, and interpretation—are the very element of culture’.¹² Moreover, as Philip V. Bohlman argues, acts of musical representation are involved in articulating the unequal distribution of power between Self and Other.¹³ Representations are produced within (and, as I argue in the conclusion, *by*) certain discursive strategies, creating the potential for a dialogic theatre of fantasy and typecast. As ‘the major figure of ideology’, Roland Barthes proposed, such stereotyping ‘shifts the invented ornament to the canonical, constraining form of the signified’.¹⁴ Folk and blues revivalism is therefore a gesture shot through with political significance: as Said notes, ‘the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging’ constitutes the relationship between culture and

¹² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 66. The concept of representation has been central to the discipline of cultural studies: see, for example, Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

¹³ Philip V. Bohlman, ‘Music as Representation’, *Journal of Musicological Research* 24/3–4 (2005), 224.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 40, 43.

imperialism.¹⁵ Indeed, narrative hegemony is crucial to the functioning of folkloric paradigms: an idealised Otherness was necessarily reliant on a sanctioned, ‘normative’ order from which difference itself could be constructed as contrapuntal ‘knowledge’.¹⁶ In their introduction to *Western Music and its Others*, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh thus highlight the need to ask ‘is there some special way that, because of its lack of denotation, and compared with the visual and literary arts, music hides the traces of its appropriations, hybridities, and representations, so that they come over time to be *naturalized and aestheticized*?’¹⁷ In the realm of ballads and blues, the answer lies in the affirmative: traces of overt expropriation, selectivity, and hybridity have been smoothed over by the seeming self-evidence and ideological innocence of music as a representational medium. In order to address this problem, it will be necessary to look closely at individual performances, multimedia interactions, and the ways in which such music—as well as the marginalised people who made it or used it—have been spoken about, together with the ways in which they too might ‘speak’ through such highly mediated sources.¹⁸ Said has asserted that the task facing an engaged cultural theory is ‘not to accept the politics of identity as given, but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom, and with what components’.¹⁹ This dissertation is a unique attempt to apply such postcolonial critique to musical ethnography of the twentieth century.

In many ways, the ideology of revivalism (what, in the conclusion, I refer to as the ‘folkloric imagination’) bears striking resemblance to the essentialising discourse of Orientalism traced by Said. As with fantasies of the Islamic Orient, folk culture has no ontological stability—it is a ‘supreme fiction’ intended only for the benefit of a Western metropolitan elite.²⁰ The development and maintenance of cultural power, Said argued, requires ‘the existence [or invention] of another different and competing

¹⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii.

¹⁶ Like Said, I follow Foucault in tracing such power relations via the constitution of knowledge. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1976; London: Penguin, 1998). I develop this argument in the conclusion.

¹⁷ Georgina Born & David Hesmondhalgh, ‘Introduction: On Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music’, in: *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born & David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 45.

¹⁸ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). I return to this issue directly in chapter 3, although the question hovers throughout.

¹⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 380.

²⁰ Edward W. Said, ‘Preface (2003)’, in: *Orientalism* (1978; London: Penguin, 2003), xii. As a useful corrective to superficial engagements with Said, see Matthew Head, ‘Musicology on Safari: Orientalism and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory’, *Music Analysis* 22/1–2 (2003): 211–230.

alter ego': the construction of identity thus 'involves establishing opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us"'.²¹ Difference thus *becomes recast as identity itself*: the characteristics of these Others are brought into being, and their actions constrained, by an ideology of difference. I follow Richard Middleton in using the term 'low Other' to refer to such groupings and confluences of alterity—never suggesting that lowness or Otherness is inherent, but that it has been constructed and reiteratively enacted through material culture, performance, and established patterns of discourse.²² Folklore, as with the Orient in Said's reading, is a tautological idea 'that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence' despite its manifest inaccuracy.²³ Analogous to folk collectors, Orientalists saw themselves as heroically 'rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness' that only they could expertly distinguish.²⁴ From the beginning of speculation about Eastern Others, Said argues, 'the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself' to the West: as with the hermeneutic project of folklorists, 'evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work'.²⁵ Like the subjects of Orientalism, people submitted to *being made into* folk Others: folklore was not merely a fantasy, but, I show, an *institutionalised system of power and knowledge animating 'the folk'*. Such Otherness, however, was never entirely negative. Indeed, as Said argued, European culture gained in strength 'by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self'.²⁶ We must be careful not to assume that lowness is an exclusively pejorative characteristic: rather, Western elites have seen their most cherished ideals and desired rejuvenations embodied in projections of alterity. In Middleton's words, such 'approved' low Others have often been 'defined as a defense against a threatening usurper'—vulgar, popular, untamed,

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 332. On the level of discourse, as Derrida has argued, processes of signification rely on this play of 'différance'—both through an unending deferral (indefinite postponement) of meaning and due to the sign containing within itself a relational trace of Otherness. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997).

²² See Richard Middleton, 'Musical Belongings: Western Music and its Low-Other', in: *Western Music and its Others*, ed. Born & Hesmondhalgh. Middleton notes that music is often seen to naturally 'belong' to (exotic, archaic) low Others; he stresses that 'it is the development of elaborate alienating meaning systems in the Western musical culture that makes possible the depiction and annexation of these others' and an associated mythology of origination and possession (59–60).

²³ Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

unwanted, revolutionary, commercial, or disruptive.²⁷ The low Other is thus not a coherent or static entity, but a heterogeneous illusion ever malleable to new circumstances—yet always already on the terms of a dominant culture. Through such mediations, Middleton concludes, low Others become trapped in a ‘permanent condition of negotiation’ with fantasies of presumed difference.²⁸

Michel de Certeau proposed that such gestures of burlesque are ‘a measure of the people’s defeat; their culture is all the more “curious” the less they are to be feared’.²⁹ In his brilliant but neglected essay ‘The Beauty of the Dead’, he argues that acts of repression necessarily precede any knowledge of popular culture: ‘only after its danger has been eliminated did it become an object of interest’—removed from the reach of the people and reserved only for experts.³⁰ Such talismanic objects were believed to be forever on the verge of disappearing: folklorists thus went about ‘preserving ruins’, seeing in their objects ‘the tranquillity of something preceding history, the horizon of nature, or paradise lost’.³¹ Through the discipline of folklore, I demonstrate, imagined peasants were cast as ‘domestic savages’ in a representational tradition that began in the Enlightenment and reached its apogee and (pseudo)scientific validation with nineteenth-century ideologies of Social Darwinism.³² Native low Others caught under this trap of subordination were initially required to be distant not in geographical locale, but in *evolutionary time*—primitives surviving precariously in the present. Such idealisation, de Certeau argues, ‘is made all the easier if it takes the form of a monologue’ or (in Said’s words) a ‘one-way exchange’.³³ De Certeau highlights the insidious political effacement latent behind ostensibly innocent veneration of Others cast as ‘natural, true, naïve, spontaneous, and childlike’: such images manifest ‘the demand for a social renewal that would put the

²⁷ Middleton, ‘Musical Belongings’, 62.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁹ Michel de Certeau, ‘The Beauty of the Dead: Nisard’ [written in collaboration with Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel], in: *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 120.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120. See also Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983; New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). I take up this theme in the Conclusion.

³² See Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of ‘Folk Music’ and ‘Art Music’: Emerging Concepts from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Gregory Claeys, ‘The “Survival of the Fittest” and the Origins of Social Darwinism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61/2 (2000): 223–40. I take up these themes in chapter 1.

³³ de Certeau, ‘The Beauty of the Dead’, 122; Said, *Orientalism*, 160.

peasant back in the worker’—transforming a threatening urban mass into prodigal sons ‘bedecked with the allurements of exoticism’ that would no longer pose a threat to socio-economic hierarchy.³⁴ In the final analysis, he continues, the folk function as noble savages caught in a camouflaged violence oscillating ‘between voyeurism and pedagogy’—pointing toward ‘the reservation and the museum’.³⁵ Predicated on a quixotic search for pure origins, Folklore’s ‘theoretical construction’, he concludes, is ‘based upon precisely what it claims to prove’: its contradictory terms ‘define less the content of a popular culture than the historian’s gaze itself’.³⁶

In response to this long history of caricature, I examine what de Certeau terms ‘a geography of the *forgotten*’ through discourse, performance, and identity—unsettling resistant asymmetries of power, rescuing the nuances of that enigmatic thing ‘popular culture’ from the infantilising chimera of folklore, and seeking out real voices where only silent puppets seem to be present.³⁷ In so doing, I take up Said’s call ‘to complicate and / or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation and collective passion’.³⁸ For this revisionist history not to become merely a deferred gesture of cultural imperialism, its political stance must rest upon what Said refers to as the ‘profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external domination’.³⁹ The critical history of folk and blues that I pursue throughout this dissertation historicises the beauty of the dead—demanding to know precisely *how* and *why* such ideas were so powerful—while exhuming a ground of dialogue through the mediated traces that remain.

³⁴ de Certeau, ‘The Beauty of the Dead’, 124–25. This conclusion applies more to the Edwardian revival than it does to the postwar milieu that sought to rearticulate the folk concept along Marxist lines—ironically, however, vestiges of older ideologies remained, as I argue in chapter 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 125. On the convoluted history of ‘noble savagery’, see Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁶ de Certeau, ‘The Beauty of the Dead’, 127–29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 131. See Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “The Popular”’, *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) and Holt N. Parker, ‘Toward a Definition of Popular Culture’, *History and Theory* 50 (2011): 147–70.

³⁸ Said, ‘Preface (2003)’, in: *Orientalism*, xvii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

'Dancing Puppets'**Nationalism, Social Darwinism, and the Transatlantic Invention of Folksong**

I remember, when quite a boy, buying for my mother of a pedlar, as he sang in the street, the old ballad 'Just Before the Battle, Mother'. This was her favourite song because, I think, her mother's favourite boy, after having fought in many battles, had deserted and fled and was never more heard of. I have sung this song to her many times, never without bringing tears to her eyes; her last request to me as she lay on her death bed (she died 14th March, 1857) was to sing it to her again. It was this occasion—the occasion that comes but once in a lifetime—in which my prospective loss was measured by the depth of a mother's requited love, that I proved most fully the resources of my natural hobby as an outlet for expressions of the tenderest sentiments. I feel as sure as that I am myself awaited by death, that as she lay there, her hand in mine, with this her favourite song in her ear, nothing I could say or do, nor that anyone else could say or do could have better pleased or satisfied her last moments.¹

These words were written in 1911 by Henry Burstow, 'celebrated bellringer and songsinger' of Horsham, West Sussex. The youngest of nine children, Burstow had grown up in poverty the son of clay tobacco-pipe makers; having earned a living as an artisan shoemaker, in his old age he had narrowly escaped the workhouse through a charitable pension provided by local donations.² A mildly eccentric character also known for model-making, painting, knowledge of local history, radical sympathies, and vociferous anti-clericalism, Burstow was an intelligent man committed to Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution and keen for debate with the clergy. The twin pastimes of

¹ Henry Burstow [with William Albery], *Reminiscences of Horsham: Recollections of Henry Burstow, the Celebrated Bellringer and Songsinger* (1911; Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1975), 108–09. Albery was a saddle-maker, calligrapher, and local historian who recorded Burstow's recollections but eschewed any personal credit. The book was originally published, through Albery's efforts, by the Free Christian (Unitarian) Church and all income went to Burstow himself.

² Biographical information is taken from A. E. Green & Tony Wales, 'Foreword' in *Ibid.*

bellringing and singing proved to be his greatest pleasures—the latter, as he described it, ‘my chief mental delight, a delight that has been my companion day after day in my journey from infancy through every stage of life to my now extreme old age’.³ He explains how he acquired this vast repertoire of songs:

Besides those I learnt from my father, I also learnt several from my mother, and a great many more from various other people; my brother-in-law, Joe Hopkins, one of the old Horsham stone diggers; Harry Vaughan, bootmaker, who lived in the Causeway; Gaff Batchelor, tailor, Bishopric; Bob Boxall, labourer, Bishopric; Bill Strudwick, sailor, Bishopric; Jim Shoubridge, ex-soldier, Birshopric; Hoggy Mitchell, labourer, Bishopric; Richard Collins, the parish clerk, the Causeway; Michael Turner, bootmaker, Warnham; Tim Shoubridge, labourer, Bishopric; Jim Manvell, bricklayer, Queen Street...Others again I learnt of ‘Country Wills’ in the taprooms and parlours of public houses in the Towns and Villages round, where song singing was always regularly indulged in during the evenings all the year round, and where the words of many songs have been taught and learnt, exchanged or sold, for perhaps a pint of beer. The remainder I learnt from ballad sheets I bought as they were being hawked about at the fairs, and at other times from other printed matter.⁴

In addition, he notes, some ballads were newly composed to commemorate specific occasions.⁵ Burstow’s depiction of vernacular song in Britain during the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is invaluable and was the first such account to be published under a singer’s name.⁶ What inferences are we able to draw from his brief sketch? First, that ballads were intimately entwined with personal experience and identity, employed throughout a person’s life at significant moments to articulate or echo emotion. Second, that singers learned their repertoires by indiscriminate means reliant upon commercially available printed matter—manifesting complex interactions between material object, musical memory, and contingent performance that necessitated a high degree of literacy (Burstow, for example, kept a written list of the 420 songs he sang). And third, that the circulation of ballads involved a broad and dynamic social network encompassing friends and acquaintances from a variety of occupations ranging from manual labourers and itinerant pedlars to craftsmen and the parish clerk. Most striking, however, is the absence of any reference to ‘folksong’.

³ Burstow, *Reminiscences of Horsham*, 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107–08. See also Vic Gammon, “‘Not Appreciated in Worthing?’ Class Expression and Popular Song Texts in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Britain”, *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 5–24.

⁵ See Burstow, *Reminiscences of Horsham*, 25, 55, 64.

⁶ Green & Wales, ‘Foreword’, xxxiii.

A similarly revealing and equally rare glimpse into rural song culture in the early twentieth century was provided by Fred Kitchen during his 1940 autobiography *Brother to the Ox*. Born in Edwinstowe, Nottinghamshire in 1891, he had moved with his family to the West Riding of Yorkshire where they lived as tenant farmers on an aristocratic estate; at the age of thirteen, after his father's early death, he left school to begin work as a farm labourer. Recalling a schoolmistress, he wrote:

One thing I shall always be grateful for is that she taught me to love and reverence good literature. Although I have never made much success of life...[it] has been made rich because when ploughing up a nest of field-mice I could recite Robert Burns's *Ode to a Field-mouse*. I have always been fond of poetry, and could recite off-hand much of Burns, Keats, Shelly's *Skylark*, and many of the great poets. I know that farm lads are not credited with much wisdom, but perhaps the general opinion is wrong, for who knows what a farm lad is turning over in his mind as he walks along his furrow? The chaplain, too, encouraged my love of reading, and lent me several boys' books from his library.⁷

Kitchen described singing 'old English' or Irish songs in the company of his fellow labourers, generally offering 'some well-known school song' himself:

We spent most of our nights in the stable until nine o'clock, when we had a basin of bread-and-milk, and so to bed. Sometimes other farm lads dropped in for an hour, and other times we walked across to their stables...Usually one of them would bring a melodeon, and he was considered a poor gawk who couldn't knock a tune out of a mouth-organ or give a song to pass away the evening. We had rare times in the 'fotherham', seated on the corn-bin or on a truss of hay. Tom fra' Bennett's would strike off with, 'Oh, never go into a sentry-box, to be wrapt in a soldier's cloak', while someone played away on the melodeon. He was a merry sort of lad, was Tom, and his songs always had a spicy flavour. Harry Bates, Farmer Wood's man, always sang sentimental ballads. Harry was a Lincolnshire chap, and their singing, I always noticed, was of a more serious vein than the rollicking Yorkies...He knew no end of good songs—as did most of the farm lads—but his were mostly about 'soldiers sighing for their native land', and 'heart-broken lovers', and that sort of stuff, so that as a rule we liked to get Tom singing first. They were all good singers, and good musicians too, and it must not be supposed, because they were farm men and lads, they were just caterwauling.⁸

⁷ Fred Kitchen, *Brother to the Ox: The Autobiography of a Farm Labourer* (1940; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 11. Later in the book, Kitchen recalls having read 'most of George Eliot's works, several Dickens, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*' (151).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

Although Kitchen came to discriminate between the ‘latest pantomime songs’ popular with an aspirational younger generation and the increasingly unfashionable ‘meat and poetry of our old songs’, his aesthetic distinctions (like Burstow) never involved an Arcadian concept of ‘the folk’.⁹ Indeed, he was at pains to portray the frequently demeaning and unflattering nature of rural life: ‘artists have drawn some pleasing pictures of the shepherd leading his flock on the grassy uplands, or gazing pensively at a setting sun, but we have no picture of the shepherd in the muddy turnip field...or the lad bending down to clean the troughs, receiving a gallant charge in the rear from a too-playful tup; or when snow and sleet swirls round their ears’.¹⁰

Returning to Burstow, the final section of *Reminiscences of Horsham*, however, registered an unprecedented encounter with the extrinsic documentary interests of the nascent Folk-Song Society:

In 1892–3 I lent my list of songs to Miss Lucy E. Broadwood (later Hon. Secretary and Editor to the Folk Song Society), and sang to her a large number of them, which she noted. Miss Broadwood left her home, “Lyne”, near Horsham, in 1893, and some eleven years later suggested to Dr. Vaughan Williams, a country neighbour, that he should come to see me. I sang to him such songs as he asked for, all of which he took down; some of them he recorded by his phonograph. This was the first time I had seen or heard one of these marvellous machines, and I was amazed beyond expression to hear my own songs thus repeated in my own voice. Many of these songs have been printed in the journal of the Folk Song Society...Some of them have been published, with the tunes harmonised, by Miss Broadwood, and can now be bought in cheap book form...Since the publication of my songs in the above-mentioned books other collectors have called and noted songs from me with a view to the publication of them.¹¹

Burstow’s language hinted at the class distinctions and value system of the proliferating collectors: Broadwood, Vaughan Williams, and others ‘noted’ or ‘recorded’ the particular songs they ‘asked for’ before harmonising and publishing them in a metropolitan context for scholarly or lucrative reward. Employment of the word ‘collector’ is additionally revealing, betraying a focus on expertise, classification, and proprietorial display fundamentally alien to the performance environment within which ballads were initially encountered. The result of such cross-cultural intervention and selective expropriation across social boundaries was a

⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹ Burstow, *Reminiscences of Horsham*, 110.

series of reified and necessarily unrepresentative cultural snapshots with the residual aura of bucolic authenticity—preordained and essentialised reflections of the fluid expressive practice of which they were once an integral part.

Interleaved in Burstow's account of his interactions with collectors is a tentative demarcation of folksong with the following footnote: 'This definition of Folk Song (source unknown) meets with the approval of the Hon. Secretary of the Folk Song Society'.¹² Such a cautious deferral suggested that Burstow was not confident in advancing a definition of the very thing he was supposed to embody:

I am glad to know that in these ways have been preserved the words and tunes of nearly all those songs of mine *that come within the objects of the Society*, viz.: those that are 'traditional survivals of songs expressive of the thoughts and emotions of untaught people passing between mind and mind from more or less remote periods to the present time'.¹³

As depicted in his own words, however, Burstow's milieu did not consist of such 'untaught people'. Furthermore, the idea that songs passed 'between mind and mind' in a sort of organic literary osmosis is absurd: as Burstow and Kitchen both noted, ballad singing involved an intricate negotiation between active learning, socially embedded performance, personal taste, memory, and tangible printed matter. Ironically (for collectors obsessed with orality), Burstow's repertoire bore an uncannily close resemblance to contemporaneous broadsheets: the vast majority of his titles in fact appeared in catalogues for printers H. P. Such, William Fortey, and Pearson of Manchester.¹⁴ Similarly problematic was the trace of misguided nineteenth-century attempts to translate evolutionary paradigms onto expressive culture and social groupings through models in anthropology and folklore wedded to primitivism and survivals—representing, as Raymond Williams notes, one element within a complex set of responses to industrialisation.¹⁵ Such focus on 'survivals'

¹² *Ibid.* Presumably, the footnote is by Albery.

¹³ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Green & Wales, 'Foreword', xxxii. Compounding this irony, over a quarter of the Sussex songs published in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* were taken down from Burstow.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983; London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 134. See, for example, S. Baring-Gould, *Strange Survivals: Some Chapters in the History of Man* (London: Methuen, 1892). See also Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (1993; Leeds: No Masters Co-Operative, 2010); Gregory Claeys, 'The "Survival of the Fittest" and the Origins of Social Darwinism', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61/2 (2000): 223–40; Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of

further implied that the labouring class—seen as anachronistic living relics—functioned primarily as passive vessels for the accretion of endangered material ripe for recovery by an elite; in the definition quoted by Burstow, songs were even given more autonomy than singers. Likewise, the seemingly innocent notion of ‘tradition’ itself was liable to conceal suspect mythologisations of the past driven by the chauvinistic dictates of nationalism.¹⁶ Working within the confines of such ideologies, collectors not only believed Burstow to be far less interesting than the material he sang, but also that only certain ballads were worthy of attention and preservation. In other words, rather than adopting aesthetic principles derived from the subcultures they aimed to document, folklorists institutionalised and radically delimited access to the very idea of native rural song—in the process, generating an entirely new sensibility unfamiliar to the singers thereby classified.

This chapter explores the convoluted ways in which this practice of ‘balladeering’ was recursively woven into a ‘folksong’ ideology during the first half of the twentieth century, tracing the influence of nationalism and the overlooked impact of Social Darwinism on collectors.¹⁷ The period in question is bounded by significant transatlantic events—beginning in 1898 with the founding (in Britain) of the Folk-Song Society and the posthumous completion (in the US) of Francis James Child’s magnum opus *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, and reaching an impasse in 1954 when a hegemonic definition of the genre (centred on oral transmission, communal evolution, and dislocation from other cultural fields) was established by the International Folk Music Council. In order to trace a path through this dense network, I focus on the activities of two dominant collectors: Cecil J. Sharp (1859–1924) and John A. Lomax (1867–1948). Sharp and Lomax prove to be especially important figures as they played comparable ‘gatekeeping’ roles in relation to public perceptions of folksong. I borrow the concept of gatekeeping from communication scholarship as a heuristic tool to map the influential role of

Wisconsin Press, 1997); and Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of ‘Folk Music’ and ‘Art Music’: Emerging Concepts from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ See Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁷ See Maureen N. McLane, ‘Dating Orality, Thinking Balladry: Of Milkmaids and Minstrels in 1771’, *The Eighteenth Century* 47/2 (2006); McLane characterises balladeering as ‘a broad term encompassing everything from the singing, making, inventing, forging, collecting, editing, printing, and digital recording of ballads’ (313). See also and Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

individuals and institutions in the construction, dissemination, and representation of knowledge. Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos argue that gatekeepers have the power to determine social reality by ‘exercising their own preferences and / or acting as representatives to carry out a set of pre-established policies’, controlling how and what information travels through certain nodal points.¹⁸ Nuancing this perspective, Karine Barzilai-Nahon argues for a dynamic interpretation of interaction that would refer to gatekeepers as relational ‘stakeholders’ who change their tactics depending on context.¹⁹ Extant tropes, expertise, technology, economic factors, and volume of data also combine to affect the form, content, and transmission of knowledge. Barzilai-Nahon thus defines gatekeeping as a process of governing information flow that involves activities such as ‘selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard, and deletion’.²⁰ In addition, she states that a gatekeeper ‘may serve as mediator between groups and communities and as an access controller’.²¹

The methodology of gatekeeping analysis reveals notable parallels with what Benjamin Piekut has recently described as ‘historical ecology’, following the insights of Actor-Network Theory.²² Piekut states that a crucial axiom of this approach is that ‘ideas, aesthetics, or sensibilities do not travel from one place to another telepathically; rather, this stuff is mediated and enacted in the world through specific events and materialities’.²³ Indeed, an ANT stance would chart ‘how networks of actors constitute, or enact, different realities’—where the ontology of an ‘actor’ is not reducible to an autonomous person, but necessarily involves shifting relations with

¹⁸ Pamela J. Shoemaker & Tim P. Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3, 15. I pick up on the idea of a ‘nodal point’ (via Lacanian psychoanalysis) in the concluding chapter.

¹⁹ Karine Barzilai-Nahon, ‘Toward a Theory of Network Gatekeeping: A Framework for Exploring Information Control,’ *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 59/9 (2008), 1494.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1496.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1509.

²² Benjamin Piekut, ‘Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 11/2 (2014), 212. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For all its rhetorical strength, Piekut’s reading of ANT simply amounts to good historical practice and, in many ways, echoes Gary Tomlinson’s idea of a ‘web of culture’; Gary Tomlinson, ‘The Web of Culture: A Context for Musicology’, *19th-Century Music* 7/3 (1984): 350–62. Although I take Piekut’s point that ‘the danger of context is that it accepts and uses as explanations those stabilized contingencies that are themselves the formations that need to be explained’, cultural history relies on a collaborative and intertextual approach to the complexities of the past; in this sense, the danger of ANT would be the scholar-as-solipsist and a narrow music history blind to interdisciplinary insights beyond our immediate remit. See Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006).

²³ Piekut, ‘Actor-Networks in Music History’, 202.

discourse, media, and material objects that allow humans to exist as social beings.²⁴ Such maps of dispersed agency reveal how networks afford certain types of connection, thought, and behaviour while delimiting others, thereby generating illusions of historical clarity or self-evidence. Folk gatekeepers, I will suggest, played a crucial role in constructing resistant systems of knowledge. Piekut suggests that such systems ‘do not hold together because they are true, but *because they hold together* we say that they are true’; this conclusion, however, should be amended to highlight the fact that groupings of ideas or actors do not cohere by themselves but are *actively and repeatedly made to cohere* via discourse, power, and performativity.²⁵ As a way to destabilise narratives of genre that are too often taken for granted, I map (alongside the diachronic investigation of gatekeepers) a critical lineage of contemporaneous voices, since downplayed, that persistently challenged the flawed and contingent orthodoxies of a developing ‘folksong’ consensus.

The idea of mediation crucial both to ANT-derived approaches to historiography and gatekeeping theory is fundamental to conceptualising how the heterogeneous practice of balladry was fashioned into the spuriously neat genre now known as folksong. A Marxist theory of transmission in this sense was first articulated in 1985 by Dave Harker, who set out to examine how vernacular songs had been ‘affected by their passage through time, and through the heads and hands of collectors, antiquarians and folklorists’.²⁶ Harker asserted that the idea of folk culture formed part of the ‘ideological armoury’ of an exploitative elite, proposing that such concepts should therefore be abandoned.²⁷ Harker’s most valuable and lasting contribution is found in this account of historical mediation, drawing attention to the fact that gestures of intercultural transaction are never neutral or transparent but always already imply distortion, dislocation, and asymmetries of power. This view of mediation-as-ideology aligns with Williams’s ‘dualist’ definition: ‘an activity which expresses, either indirectly or deviously and misleadingly (and thus often in a falsely

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁶ Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British ‘folksong’ 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), ix; see also 256–57. Harker had been working in this area for a while: see, for example, ‘Cecil Sharp in Somerset: Some Conclusions’, *Folk Music Journal* 2/3 (1972): 220–40.

²⁷ Harker, *Fakesong*, xii.

reconciling way), a relationship between otherwise separated facts and actions and experiences'.²⁸ The definition that Harker advances is as follows:

[mediation is] not simply the fact that particular people passed on songs they had taken from other sources, in the form of manuscript or of print, but that in the very process of so doing their own assumptions, attitudes, likes and dislikes may well have significantly determined what they looked for, accepted and rejected. Not only that, but these people's access to sources of songs, the fact that they had the time, opportunity, motive and facilities for collecting, and a whole range of other material factors will have come into play.²⁹

Harker demonstrated that class status, education, and occupation revealed manifest connections with the 'aims, methods and theories' of those who set off in search of 'the folk'.³⁰ For Harker, 'no song-book could fail to be, however marginally, a kind of ideological intervention', as 'each mediator occupied a specific position in society' necessarily removed from the cultural milieu they were attempting to represent and commodify.³¹ Collectors, he concluded, deliberately altered what they found 'so as to fit their own class-based preconceptions, prejudices and needs'.³²

Building on Harker's insights, I nevertheless want to move the terms of the debate beyond the somewhat crude historiography of his work (and the reactionary, parochial critiques it has recently drawn) into the more fruitful realm of interdisciplinary ballad scholarship.³³ Although Harker outlined a useful way of approaching cross-cultural transmission, his idea of expropriation alone cannot

²⁸ Williams, *Keywords*, 203.

²⁹ Harker, *Fakesong*, xiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 77.

³³ The critiques I refer to are: C. J. Bearman, 'Who Were the Folk? The Demography of Cecil Sharp's Somerset Folk Singers', *The Historical Journal* 43/3 (2000): 751–75; Bearman, 'Cecil Sharp in Somerset: Some Reflections on the Work of David Harker', *Folklore* 113/1 (2002): 11–34; and David Gregory, 'Fakesong in an Imagined Village? A Critique of the Harker-Boyes Thesis.' *Musique Folklorique Canadienne* 43/3 (2009): 18–26. Bearman challenges the basis of Harker's analyses by focussing on the data used (an ostensible cover for his antipathy toward leftist or deconstructive criticism); although he establishes that some empirical aspects of Harker's work stand in need of revision, Bearman assumes this to be a refutation of his entire project. It is not. More disconcertingly, Bearman defends folksong via recourse to English nationalism, justifying Sharp's bowdlerisation on the grounds of 'principled good taste' and necessity for publication—seemingly unaware that this was Harker's key point of contention. Ironically, Bearman's conclusions actually serve to reinforce the very notion of mediation he wishes to undermine, expanding it to include the idea that not only did Sharp misrepresent what he saw as a 'remnant of the peasantry', he positively invented it by creating a homogenous social category out of the disparate singers he collected from. Gregory, too, misinterprets Harker's viewpoint, offers uninformed complaints about ideology critique, and invests in unsustainable conceptions of authenticity. Both authors display a conservative sentimentality far more unhelpful and far less theoretically nuanced than the Marxism they attack.

account for the ideologies of collectors; I want to argue instead that their most significant errors lay in the *discursive misrepresentation* of subcultures through fallacious theories of ‘folk’ creation, in conjunction with a *material reification* of songs. Moreover, I want to examine *why* folklorists created such essentialising fantasies of native low Others. Underpinning my reading is an approach indebted to genealogical critique. Foucault outlined this particular approach to historiography by advocating a rejection of ‘the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies’.³⁴ Genealogy would instead find no ‘timeless and essential secret, but the secret that [concepts] have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms’.³⁵ Historical beginnings, Foucault argued, should thus not be treated as solemn or lofty but can be revealed instead as ‘derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation’.³⁶ What is found ‘at the historical beginning of things’, he proposed, ‘is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity’.³⁷ This insight is particularly relevant in following folksong through the vicissitudes of ideological discourse. Indeed, Foucault proposed that tracking emergence and descent would identify ‘the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us’.³⁸ Akin to literary deconstruction, genealogy engages in questioning ‘the hazardous play of dominations’ and thus ‘disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself’.³⁹ In sum, Foucault insisted, the purpose of this form of inquiry ‘is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation’.⁴⁰

Sharing in Foucault’s suspicion of historical coherence, Robin D. G. Kelley provides a useful way into discussion on folksong that music history has largely ignored. Evoking Stuart Hall’s seminal ‘Notes on Deconstructing the Popular’, Kelley laid the foundation for what he termed a deconstruction of ‘the folk’ by arguing that

³⁴ Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ (1971), in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 77.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83, 82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

terms such as ‘authentic’, ‘traditional’, ‘popular’, and ‘folk’ should be regarded as ‘socially constructed and contingent’, not as ‘self-evident and self-contained analytic categories’.⁴¹ This stance, he proposed, ‘is a critical first step if we are going to move beyond an idealized, transhistorical notion of “the folk” as bearers of some authentic, preindustrial culture’—and, equally, away from treating descriptive terms as immutable or atemporal signifiers.⁴² Kelley thus made the crucial observation that ‘folk’ and ‘modern’ are ‘both mutually dependent concepts embedded in unstable historically and socially constituted systems of classification’: in other words, what we have inherited as traditional folk culture only exists through the mediation of the modern imagination.⁴³ Indeed, Regina Bendix has argued that the ‘empty and at times dangerous’ search for authenticity is ‘oriented 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’.⁴⁴ Although, as she argues, folkloristic ideals were rhetorically ‘envisioned as pure and free from civilization’s evils’ (fulfilling a dialectical yearning to escape the unrelenting clutches of industrialisation, urbanisation, and mass commerce), the products and cultural practices considered under the folk rubric were never born in isolation from technology or metropolitan elites and were thus constitutively tied up in modernity’s own anxieties and self-perceptions.⁴⁵ Given such imbrication, Hall concludes, ‘there is *no* whole, authentic, autonomous “popular culture” which lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power’.⁴⁶ Kelley’s most compelling insight, therefore, is that folk culture ‘is actually *bricolage*, a cutting, pasting, and incorporating of various cultural forms’—a mutable hybrid generated through asymmetrical dialogue, disguised and cemented by ideology.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “The Folk”’, *American Historical Review* 97/5 (1992), 1408.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1402.

⁴⁴ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 10, 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7. See also Holt N. Parker, ‘Toward a Definition of Popular Culture’, *History and Theory* 50 (2011): 147–70.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “The Popular”’, in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 232.

⁴⁷ Kelley, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “The Folk”’, 1402.

1 | A Short History of the Ballad from Thomas Percy to Francis James Child

The *OED* lists ‘ballad’ as both noun (a song of any kind; a popular narrative song in strophic form celebrating or defaming persons and institutions; a poetic form in short stanzas) and verb (to compose or to be made the subject of a ballad), citing examples of usage that stem from the late fifteenth century and include the mass replication of such material on broadsheets coinciding with the rise of cheap print.⁴⁸ Nick Groom states that ballads ‘were the fabric, the very stuff of sixteenth and seventeenth century popular culture’—a loose designation of widely available material that harboured both politically charged contemporaneous meanings and a deliberately nostalgic aura.⁴⁹ Groom characterises such material in the eighteenth century as ‘a popular, indigent, urban form of no fixed cultural abode: derelict and ephemeral’, ‘carnavalesque and bawdy, grotesque and violent’—a form memorialising mythic or historic events that often provided a scurrilous challenge to polite society, giving voice to the threat of revolutionary unrest.⁵⁰ Ballads also became tied up in debates surrounding the status of literature, eventually finding themselves classified as commercial ‘ephemera’ during the eighteenth century along with pamphlets, newspapers, and topical tracts—a reciprocal classification that played a crucial role in upholding the boundaries of literature by designating its low Other.⁵¹ Authorship was usually elusive, distributed, and fractal, with texts existing in multiple variants or resulting from unchecked collations; in the case of anonymous broadside ballads or small collections in chapbooks and garlands, the only residual traces of provenance were those linked to printers.⁵² Flourishing throughout the early modern period as material objects, broadsides existed as commercial mass-produced, single-sided folio sheets consisting of lyrics intended for performance often decorated with illustrative or stock woodcut tableaux; a well-known popular melody was commonly indicated to carry the stanzas (original notated melodies themselves were very rare).⁵³ Printed in

⁴⁸ ‘Ballad, n.’, ‘Ballad, v.’, *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press
<<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 10/10/14].

⁴⁹ Nick Groom, *The Making of Percy’s Reliques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23, 40.

⁵¹ Paula McDowell, ‘Of Grubs and Other Insects: Constructing the Categories of “Ephemera” and “Literature” in Eighteenth-Century British Writing’, *Book History* 15 (2012): 48–70.

⁵² See Groom, *The Making of Percy’s Reliques*, 16.

⁵³ See James Porter (et al.), ‘Ballad’, *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press,
<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>> [accessed 10/10/14] and Norm Cohen, ‘Broadside’, *Grove*

metropolitan locations, these songs were sung on street corners by sellers plying their trade and disseminated throughout rural communities by travelling hawkers. Adam Fox describes broadsides as ‘one of the formative instruments of the mass media’: produced in vast quantities, they were ‘one of the most ubiquitous and familiar manifestations of the printed word and one that served to transform the nature of edification and entertainment throughout society’.⁵⁴

How these ballad sheets were used by those who purchased them has been recurrently left out of folksong scholarship, particularly in view of its ideological over-emphasis of orality and illiteracy, along with a consequent downplaying of commercial print culture. Indeed, the publication of songs as reified artefacts by Edwardian collectors ironically functioned to conceal the very materiality of the cultures from which they had collected. Moreover, as Cathy Lynn Preston argues, in an early modern context literacy was not simply the ability to read or write, but was manifest in ‘cultural knowledge, however that knowledge is achieved’.⁵⁵ Fox provides a fascinating glimpse into such quotidian modes of production and reception:

Broadsides were habitually pasted up in up cottages, displayed on alehouse walls, and dispersed around public places. They were performed by professional balladeers as well as sung at work and in leisure by all manner of people...Employed for religious instruction and political propaganda, they also provided the staples of fiction and fantasy for the widest audience. From the Tudor period, when they first insinuated themselves into the heart of popular culture, until the late nineteenth century...they remained a powerful and pervasive feature of the English soundscape.⁵⁶

Ballads were also part of a wider public sphere infused with diverse printed matter encompassing ‘the last dying speeches of criminals and the sensational tales of gruesome crimes; epithalamiums written to celebrate the marriages of the rich and famous and elegies penned upon their deaths; songs of unrequited love and personal

Music Online, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>> [accessed 10/10/14]. See also David Atkinson, *The English Traditional Ballad: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). The Bodleian Library (Oxford) holds many English broadsides from the sixteenth century onwards; the collection is available online at <<http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>>.

⁵⁴ Adam Fox, ‘The Emergence of the Scottish Broadside Ballad in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 31/2 (2011), 169. Fox reports that the number of individual broadsides printed in the late sixteenth century alone was several million.

⁵⁵ Cathy Lynn Preston, ‘Introduction’ in *The Other Print Tradition: Essays on Chapbooks, Broadsides, and Related Ephemera*, ed. Cathy Lynn Preston & Michael J. Preston (New York: Garland, 1995), x.

⁵⁶ Fox, ‘The Emergence of the Scottish Broadside Ballad in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries’, 170.

tragedy; stories of historical heroes and satires on the times; news items and political propaganda; pieces of popular piety and sectarian apologetic'.⁵⁷ As vehicles of popular opinion, ballads were thus implicated in a flourishing and competitive marketplace that reached far and deep into provincial areas via networks of itinerant print-sellers. As Oskar Cox Jensen notes, these hawkers circulated a diverse and variable range of cheap material (along with news) to suit fluctuating demands across the entire length of Britain; topical material from London, for example, could be purchased at fairs or 'in rural market towns on the day it was printed, without any formal dealings between established booksellers'.⁵⁸ Moreover, Fox argues, this circulation of vernacular song involved a promiscuous series of migrations and transmissions between manuscript, orality, and commercial print. As the written word penetrated every social stratum from the sixteenth century onwards, Fox proposes, there was 'no necessary antithesis between oral and literate forms'.⁵⁹ Within what he terms the 'fundamentally literate environment' of early modern England no one existed beyond the reach of text; moreover, an inability to read presented 'no barrier to participation in scribal and print culture'.⁶⁰

Following the deconstruction of binary oppositions structuring received polarities of race and gender, for example, the established opposition drawn between 'oral' and 'literate' can thus be destabilised, revealing its historical constitution and internal contradictions. Fox concludes that this binary has concealed 'a dynamic process of reciprocal interaction and mutual infusion' between different domains of inscription.⁶¹ Folksong scholarship has tended to suppress this marked complexity in favour of nostalgic austerities predicated on a paradigm of unmediated oral tradition and the supposedly contaminating effects of popular print. What nineteenth- and early twentieth-century song collectors believed to be ancient communal products of pure, agrarian orality in fact derived from the hybrid and intertextual vernacular

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 175. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). On the ballad's relation to conceptualisations of a public sphere during this period, see: Eric Nebeker, 'The Broadside Ballad and Textual Publics', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 51/1 (2011): 1–19.

⁵⁸ Oskar Cox Jensen, 'The Travels of John Magee: Tracing the Geographies of Britain's Itinerant Print-Sellers, 1789–1815', *Cultural and Social History* 11/2 (2014), 198. Cox Jensen outlines two possible models for how ballad sellers could disseminate their ephemera—either based at an urban location hawking material to the surrounding area or distributing wares via long-distance travels.

⁵⁹ Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

entertainment culture of the early modern period. Indeed, David Atkinson notes the impossibility of ‘distinguishing in any meaningful way the transmission of ballads among singers from the transmission in print’: problems are further compounded by the fact that the history of printed song involves confronting manifold, unstable, and flagrantly dispersed conditions of authorship.⁶² Transmission in both oral and material domains was subject to processes of vernacular adaptation and refashioning in the absence of any singular original ‘work’.⁶³ As McDowell notes, ballad sellers would advertise by singing, tailoring their performances to suit different audiences and even ‘orally altering the words (and especially the titles) of printed ballads to increase sales’.⁶⁴ Atkinson states that such printed material was ‘readily identifiable with the folk songs and ballads that were later collected directly from singers’.⁶⁵ Ballads, he continues, must be seen as fluid, evanescent phenomena:

the textualization of songs into cheap print of the broadside and songster kind belongs to the realm of street rendition or performance, of being carried by pedlars and pasted on walls, of being printed many times over with scant regard for precision and limited respect for ownership of a copyright kind, and of being informally shared and read, perhaps copied, and sung out loud... They can be described as ‘vernacular’, ‘public’, and ‘transient’.⁶⁶

Although he asserts that what collectors saw as folksongs were thus ‘not the products either of an “unlettered” “folk” or of necessarily oral transmission’, Atkinson stops short of the vital inference—to abandon the term entirely to careful historicisation, rather than retaining it as a legitimate generic boundary.⁶⁷

A crucial element of this historicisation involves confronting an aspect of song culture in the eighteenth century not yet touched upon: how and why the allegedly ephemeral urban ballad was eventually canonised as literature and adopted as the instantiation of pastoral sensibility. McDowell traces the ways in which a flexible and

⁶² Atkinson, *The English Traditional Ballad*, 23. See also David Atkinson, ‘The Ballad and its Paradoxes’, *Folklore* 124/2 (2013): 123–38.

⁶³ The ‘work concept’ as a regulative ideal in Western art music has come under historical scrutiny, see: Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶⁴ Paula McDowell, ‘“The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*”: Broadside Ballads in Long Eighteenth-Century Discourse’, *The Eighteenth Century* 47/2 (2006), 157.

⁶⁵ David Atkinson, ‘Folk Songs in Print: Text and Tradition’, *Folk Music Journal* 8/4 (2004), 457.

⁶⁶ Atkinson, ‘Folk Songs in Print’, 471. See also Vic Gammon, *Desire, Drink, and Death in English Folk and Vernacular Song, 1600–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

⁶⁷ Atkinson, ‘Folk Songs in Print’, 467.

democratic broadside culture was reconceptualised by scholars and antiquarians: during this period, she argues, we find ‘the crystallization of a new *confrontational* model of balladry, whereby an earlier, more “authentic” tradition of “minstrel song” is seen as having been displaced by commercial print’—a scheme that would subsequently harden into a scholarly juxtaposition of ‘traditional’ and ‘hack’ balladry.⁶⁸ This nostalgic model of aesthetic degeneration (combined with the positing of a more authentic but ill-defined culture associated with the low Other) in the face of unprecedented social and technological change will become increasingly familiar as it surfaces like the transpositions of a ritornello throughout folksong discourse. For eighteenth-century commentators, this gesture manifested itself in the desire to invent a noble history of ballad composition in contrast to the bawdy, mass-mediated, and politically subversive practices of topical street singers: as McDowell argues, ‘redefining balladry as an appropriate object of genteel study and polite enjoyment meant defining their own learned anthologies away from the “trash” of the commercial press’.⁶⁹ Central in fabricating this Gothic literary pedigree for the ballad was Thomas Percy’s three-volume *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets, Together With Some Few of Later Date* (1765). Percy’s inadvertently popular anthology was originally an antiquarian endeavour to redefine the boundaries of literary value and taste; Groom proposes that it was ‘the seminal, epoch-making work of English Romanticism’—inspiring later ballad collectors and editors ‘to emulate him, or to extend the canon on his principles’.⁷⁰ Seeking out what he saw as the sacred remains of an ancient oral tradition via esoteric manuscript and print sources, Percy made unacknowledged confections and freely recomposed texts. Although such practices drew harsh criticism from contemporaries such as Joseph Ritson, Groom notes that Percy’s interventions existed in parallel with similar attitudes to the editing of Shakespeare’s oeuvre and revealed a desire to articulate a national literary heritage on aesthetic principles—‘animat[ing] the corpses he had meticulously reconstructed, breathing the fire of life into a fabricated body’.⁷¹ McDowell provides a more

⁶⁸ McDowell, “The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*”, 152.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 154. McDowell notes that ballad singing could be a dangerous occupation: sellers were often arrested for distributing libellous or seditious material, for example.

⁷⁰ Groom, *The Making of Percy’s Reliques*, 3, 237. See also Nick Groom, “The Purest English”: Ballads and the English Literary Dialect’, *The Eighteenth Century* 47/2 (2006): 179–202.

⁷¹ Groom, *The Making of Percy’s Reliques*, 60.

negative gloss, pointing out that in the process Percy ‘valorized only *certain types* of ballads’, reframing and depoliticising material to suit his agenda.⁷²

Percy’s precedent caught the imagination of Walter Scott, William Motherwell, and Child; McDowell states that Percy’s theories of ancient minstrelsy contributed to ‘later ballad editors’ conviction that certain *living* practices of ballad singing were surviving traces of feudal oral traditions’.⁷³ Indeed, folksong discourse owes an ideological debt to the practices of antiquarianism: Groom notes that from the time of the English Civil War, ‘antiquarianism wove itself more subtly and deeply into the fabric of national identity, gradually aestheticizing rural life and objectifying the peasant classes, and recording the survival of an elusive past’.⁷⁴ Antiquarians went in search of objects imbued with the aura of antiquity, isolating them from historical contexts to ‘function as signs of their own survival’.⁷⁵ Percy therefore took on the role of song revivalist by inventing spurious myths of national origin and attempting to recover a particular cultural heritage in response to contemporaneous events. One such event was the appearance of poems by the third-century Celtic bard Ossian, apparently preserved through oral tradition. In 1760 James Macpherson published this material as *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language*, followed by the epics, *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763). Percy’s patriotic *Reliques* can be read as a response to the orality and potential Jacobinism of this material, as Dianne Dugaw states: ‘Percy’s notion of minstrelsy established a medieval source for British literary culture that countered Macpherson’s Ossianic bard in being properly “English” and reliably literate’.⁷⁶ Ossian, of course, turned out to be a consummate forgery—an elaborate creation by Macpherson in an attempt to construct a bardic heritage for Scotland. The 1707 Act of Union had spurred such desire for cultural artefacts that could legitimate national identity: in the absence of any obvious candidate for an indigenous Homeric poet, Groom notes, ‘one had to be invented’.⁷⁷ Although Macpherson drew scorn from

⁷² McDowell, “The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*”, 164

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷⁴ Groom, *The Making of Percy’s Reliques*, 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁶ Dianne Dugaw, ‘On the “Darling Songs” of Poets, Scholars, and Singers: An Introduction’, *The Eighteenth Century* 47/2 (2006), 109.

⁷⁷ Nick Groom, ‘Romanticism and Forgery’, *Literature Compass* 4/6 (2007), 1626. On the invention of Scottish national identity during this period, see: Matthew Gelbart, ‘Allan Ramsay, The Idea of “Scottish Music”, and the Beginnings of “National Music” in Europe’, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 9/1 (2012): 81–108 and Fox, ‘The Emergence of the Scottish Broadside Ballad’.

Samuel Johnson, dismissing this fabrication misses the profound effect it had on poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge: as Groom argues, ‘*Ossian* caught the mood for British antiquity and the mystery of the archaic that would rapidly spawn the Gothic novel, medievalism and ultimately the Romantic movement’.⁷⁸ Ossian material was thus valued on aesthetic grounds as a paradigm of imaginative mimesis beyond the question of its provenance. Both sources proved equally influential for Romantic conceptions of subjectivity: Groom proposes that the *Reliques* provided a model whereby poet-singers were ‘central to the cultural and imaginative well-being of society, and guardians of its history and identity’.⁷⁹ Ballads thus represented the weaving together of strands of authenticity predicated upon exoticism, cultural pedigree, and rustic primitivism—becoming, Maureen N. McLane writes, ‘signifiers both of literary historicity and of an apparently obsolete orality’.⁸⁰

Indeed, as McLane notes, the ballad / bardic nexus held the potential to represent ‘the alterity of another primitive culture...and the primitive within one’s own culture’ as well as staging encounters between ‘primitive’ and ‘cultivated’.⁸¹ Referring to the legacy of Ossian, Matthew Gelbart argues that Scotland thus became the proving ground for emerging theories of so-called ‘national’ music:

the European idea of folklore took form at the pivotal moment during the Enlightenment when the ‘noble savage’—so far a foreign phenomenon—was sought within Europe, as a remnant of the rural past preserved within modern Western civilization...the idea of the ‘folk’ posited a primitive Other that was in fact a stratum within European society, and the Scottish Highlanders were the first to be cast in this role.⁸²

Such projects, Gelbart proposes, should be cited within changing conceptions of culture in the eighteenth century in which ‘nature came to be understood as the early stage of a teleological historiography in which primitive Others appear as “natural” foils to modern civilized Europeans’.⁸³ When combined with evolutionary thought,

⁷⁸ Groom, ‘Romanticism and Forgery’, 1627. On the Romantic poets’ relation to conceptions of authenticity in relation to the ballad, see: Scott McEathron, ‘Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54/1 (1999): 1–26 and Maureen N. McLane, ‘Ballads and Bards: British Romantic Orality’, *Modern Philology* 98/3 (2001): 423–43.

⁷⁹ Groom, *The Making of Percy’s Reliques*, 241.

⁸⁰ McLane, ‘Ballads and Bards’, 424.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁸² Gelbart, *The Invention of ‘Folk Music’ and ‘Art Music’*, 11. Gelbart’s passing reference to the ‘noble savage’ in this context should be nuanced with reference to Ter Ellingson’s work in *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 12.

this idea remained rhetorically powerful even at the turn of the twentieth century in works such as Hubert Parry's *The Evolution of the Art of Music* (1896). In a section entitled 'Folk-Music', for example, Parry linked 'unadulterated savages and inhabitants of lonely isolated districts' with 'Orientals' and 'gypsies', arguing that 'such savages are in the same position in relation to music as the remote ancestors of the race before the story of the artistic development of music began'.⁸⁴ Gelbart links such attitudes to universalising perceptions of modality that saw 'primitive' scales (particularly the pentatonic) binding 'folk' to 'ancient' and 'Orient'.⁸⁵ A similar vein of thinking characterised Sharp's approach, in which he connected ancient Greeks to 'the peasant-singers of Scotland and Ireland' and 'the natives of New Guinea, China, Java, Sumatra, and other Eastern nations'; such modes, he argued, 'may be called *natural* scales...folk-music, it must be remembered, is *natural* music...The folk-musician invents non-selfconsciously. He is ignorant of, and therefore unhampered by, the laws which guide and control the art-musician'.⁸⁶ Both Macpherson's bardic fragments and Percy's antiquarian anthology were thus fundamental in generating a network of ideas linking balladry, archaic history, primitive Otherness, and national identity in a powerful discursive formation later inherited by collectors of folksong. Indeed, the way in which Groom describes the mediations of the *Reliques* reveals uncanny parallels with the actions of Sharp and Lomax:

[Percy] appropriated a wildly heterogeneous tradition and attempted to regulate its transmission and reception, and in doing so, to make it appear authentic...The *Reliques* was therefore a 'literation' of popular culture, asserting the printed word and the act of reading over the oral and the heard, transforming popular culture into polite literature by removing it from the public sphere and making it private.⁸⁷

Percy thus became a gatekeeper to the very idea of balladry—filtering elements of vernacular culture while guiding their meaning and circulation.

⁸⁴ Hubert Parry, *The Evolution of the Art of Music* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896), 47.

⁸⁵ See Gelbart, *The Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music'*, 111–52.

⁸⁶ Cecil Sharp, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (London: Simpkin & Co., Novello & Co., 1907), 44; Cecil Sharp, 'Some Characteristics of English Folk-Music', *Folklore* 19/2 (1908), 140, 142. Ironically, many traditional 'scotch' airs were, in fact, written by English composers; such stereotypes were then actively embraced north of the border. See Fox, 'The Emergence of the Scottish Broadside Ballad' and Gelbart, 'Allan Ramsay, The Idea of "Scottish Music", and the Beginnings of "National Music" in Europe'.

⁸⁷ Groom, "'The Purest English'", 183–84.

Both Macpherson's Ossian fragments and Percy's *Reliques* became central to the influential yet misunderstood work of Johann Gottfried Herder. As an intellectual project of the eighteenth century involving both philosophy and poetics, Herder's collections of song must be understood in relation to critique of Enlightenment rationality, early Romanticism, and aesthetics. Indeed, Herder's concept of *Volkslieder* is interwoven in his skepticism surrounding the reductive or abstract rationalism of much Enlightenment thought—argumentation seemingly cut off from engagement with concrete life and history. Herder's response was to elevate the human and the sensory, as Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke note: in Herder's view 'philosophy must become *anthropology* in the etymological sense of the term: the science of the human being within the reach of the human being'.⁸⁸ In short, Herder maintained, reason was experiential and contingent—and thus a product of history itself. Published between 1778–79, Herder's collections of *Volkslieder* stem from this particular conception of *das Volk* as a 'category of origin' concerning humanity in a state closer to nature and brotherhood, more attuned to the senses, and unsullied by imitation of Classical paradigms. As Karl Menges notes, *Volk* represented a 'pre-rational dimension referring back to the beginning of human socialization'.⁸⁹ Their songs, he continues, were a 'manifestation of sensory primacy' that distilled 'a pre-literary, mythical or transcendent quality' grounded in communal humanity.⁹⁰ Although affording jingoistic interpretations relating to language and nation, this *Volk* quality was in truth diverse, transnational, and opposed to the artificiality of modern nation-states—a populist antidote to elitism, imperialism, and alienation. In Herder's words, such songs were '*a living voice of the peoples, indeed of the human race itself scattered across the globe.*'⁹¹ Not merely documents of natural genius, Herder's collections were also instruments of revival—intended, as Stefan Greif argues, to restore to art its original spontaneity, simplicity, and purpose.⁹²

⁸⁸ Hans Adler & Wulf Koepke, 'Introduction' to *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler & Wulf Koepke (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 8. See also Hans Adler, 'Johann Gottfried Herder's Concept of Humanity,' *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 23 (1994): 55–74 and Philip V. Bohlman, 'Herder's Nineteenth Century,' *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 7/1 (2010): 3–21.

⁸⁹ Karl Menges, 'Particular Universals: Herder on National Literature, Popular Literature, and World Literature' in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Adler & Koepke, 197.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹¹ Quoted in Gerhard Sauder, 'Herder's Poetic Works, His Translations, and His Views on Poetry' in *Ibid.*, 324.

⁹² See Stefan Greif, 'Herder's Aesthetics and Poetics' in *Ibid.*

Given this long history of scholarly investment in instrumentalising vernacular culture, McLane characterises Child as ‘a minstrel-curator in a long line thereof’.⁹³ Although drawing on printed broadsides, Child established an ideological distinction between what he saw as traditional (oral, ancient) and vulgar (commercial, ephemeral) ballads.⁹⁴ McDowell notes that his idiosyncratic redefinition of ‘popular’ thus excluded a vast range of vernacular song, disqualifying ‘the sort of topical and journalistic broadside ballads widely sung by the populace...since the sixteenth century’.⁹⁵ Indeed, Child’s ten-volume collection *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1898) served to consolidate and reify a closed canon of 305 sanctioned ‘types’. From Harvard, Child gathered these songs and exchanged ideas through a vast collaborative network of transatlantic correspondence, relying in particular on Scottish antiquarian William Macmath and Danish literary historian Svend Grundtvig.⁹⁶ The project’s aim was to assemble, classify, annotate, and publish all extant ballad texts deemed worthy of preservation, avoiding editorial reconstructions by reproducing all known variants for comparison; the result, in the literary tradition of philology, would be a comprehensive critical edition. Like Percy, Child considered the collection a manifesto for his vision of literary development—valorising ‘ancient’ material and believing manuscript sources lay closest to the oral originals he wished to reinstate. As Mary Ellen Brown argues, ‘the older the text, the more aesthetically pleasing he expected it to be’.⁹⁷ The quandary at the heart of Child’s compendium, however, concerned how this material was chosen: he neither wrote an introduction nor clarified key terms and thus ‘never systematically defined the parameters of the popular ballad’.⁹⁸ Resting on received ideas and implicitly defining the ballad through praxis, Child’s methodology was flawed even by his own criteria: as Brown states, his epistolary appeals for material ‘seldom reached those who were unlettered or insufficiently lettered—those to whom he had explicitly identified as likely possessors of the ballad tradition’: most of his correspondents were ‘self-selected, conversant with the print media, and attuned to certain issues’.⁹⁹ Furthermore, as Brown asserts,

⁹³ McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry*, 13.

⁹⁴ See Roy Palmer, “‘Veritable Dunghills’”: Professor Child and the Broadside’, *Folk Music Journal* 7/2 (1996): 155–66.

⁹⁵ McDowell, “‘The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of Ballad-Making’”, 171.

⁹⁶ See Mary Ellen Brown, *Child’s Unfinished Masterpiece: The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

the collection did not reflect the ballad culture of the time, but rather ‘Child’s well-honed sense of what belonged’ in a respectable publication.¹⁰⁰ This process of selection harboured a more reactionary impetus, as Bendix notes: foregrounding a white Anglo-Saxon ethnic heritage, the project represented ‘an intellectual flight from the multicultural realities of post-Civil War New England’.¹⁰¹

The concept of authenticity haunts Child’s project—a spectre omnipresent yet ungraspable. This ambiguity resulted, conversely, from the use of *inauthenticity* as an exclusionary criterion to classify material not by positive but by negative identification: as Brown notes, songs were hierarchically separated through classification, ‘paving the way for the study of ballad texts in generic isolation’, impinging on our understandings of the past, and ignoring the multifarious ways in which songs were understood by those who sang them.¹⁰² The ballad’s history was thus hijacked by the discourses of antiquarianism, nationalism, and philology. Brown argues that the attraction of these approaches was their ability to offer transparency and silence the raucous complexities of vernacular culture: ‘the beauty of all such totalizing theories is their global supposition, the answering of the unanswerable questions for all times: the ballads are a closed account; they were created in an earlier time and place where society was homogeneous—the folk society of early antiquarian dreams, the premodern haven’.¹⁰³ The historical ambiguities of ballad culture have allowed such theorising to take hold by imaginatively appropriating the lacunae around vernacular objects and practices—in Brown’s words, ‘gaping holes to be filled with speculation on origins and authorship and with definitions’.¹⁰⁴ Through gestures tied to eighteenth-century historiography and cultural politics, the ballad became a fulcrum between the urban heterogeneity of early modern broadside culture and the establishment of a nostalgic and reactionary pastoralism imbued with emerging notions of the native low Other. Issuing a call for a new approach to contemporary ballad scholarship, Brown thus argues that we must be aware of how

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 185. Brown notes, however, that by the culmination of the project, ‘the decisiveness Child had exhibited...had been replaced by uncertainty’ (147). On Child’s intellectual literary legacy in the US, see Rosemary L. Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹⁰¹ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 90.

¹⁰² Mary Ellen Brown, ‘Placed, Replaced, or Misplaced? The Ballads’ Progress’, *The Eighteenth Century* 47/2 (2006), 118.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

‘we have constructed our subject’.¹⁰⁵ Her response to this problematic history—to rigorously question received ideas—is worth quoting in full:

If we are able to reconfigure and separate our object of study from the fanciful and intriguing imagined past, keeping that past by historicizing and deconstructing it, we might resuscitate the ballad as a fluid, dynamic practice more nearly reflecting its lived reality...We might begin by dispensing with the hierarchical divisions, with received notions of orality, with circular definitions that delimit and then define based on the selection made, and expand, extend, and enrich our subject by admitting the gaps in our knowledge, but recognizing continuity and change.¹⁰⁶

My work reflects Brown’s call for a critical historicisation (translated onto folksong discourse of the twentieth century) by paying attention to the ways in which singers and their cultures were reimagined, represented, and reified. In so doing, I follow McLane in exploring further ‘how balladeering, minstrelsy, and other ethno poetic projects made their objects—ballads, of course, but also informants’.¹⁰⁷

2 | ‘The Natural Musical Idiom of a National Will’: Cecil J. Sharp and Folksong Discourse in Britain

In the first issue of the *Journal* of the Folk-Song Society, Honorary Secretary and founding member Kate Lee was granted an extended section entitled ‘Some Experiences of a Folk-Song Collector’. Writing in order ‘to encourage others who might be discouraged...[by] the difficulties with which this work is beset’, she provided personal anecdotes from her own experience.¹⁰⁸ The following excerpt, concerning her interactions with singer Thomas Copper, serves to exemplify what Vic Gammon has referred to as ‘a very odd form of social encounter’:

Tom was sent for and told to call on me in the evening, and he came, dressed up in his best, and shaking with fright. He said he thought he could sing, but when he began he was so frightfully nervous that not a note could he utter, and he gave way to groans, interspersed with

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰⁷ McLane, ‘Dating Orality, Thinking Balladry’, 141.

¹⁰⁸ Kate Lee, ‘Some Experiences of a Folk-Song Collector’, *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 1/1 (1899), 7. See also C. J. Bearman, ‘Kate Lee and the Foundation of the Folk-Song Society’, *Folk Music Journal* 7/5 (1999).

whistling when he got anywhere near the air, and I almost gave up the idea as hopeless after hearing him, although I took down one tune which was fairly good, which, as I afterwards found from Mr. Frank Kidson, was not traditional. However, he told me the names of several songs that had been sung in Wells in times gone by, one especially I remember the name of, which was 'The Wreck of the Princess Royal.' I did not take down this song, because the title had a modern sound, but I afterwards found out that I had made a great mistake.¹⁰⁹

Thomas, along with his elder brother James, had worked as a farm carter in rural Sussex; by the time of Lee's visit in 1897, however, he had become landlord of the Black Horse Inn in Rottingdean.¹¹⁰ As his great-grandnephew later documented, while a publican Thomas had 'formed a team of hand-bell ringers, kept the traditional Mummer's Play alive, and was the host to a gathering of all the old village singers every Saturday night'.¹¹¹ Bob Copper's 1971 account of Lee's interactions with James and Thomas provides a striking counterpoint to that quoted above:

Mrs Kate Lee came to the village to stay at Sir Edward Carson's house up at Bazehill. She had heard of James and Tom singing their old songs down in the Black Horse and, wishing to learn more about them, invited them up to the big house one evening. They put on their Sunday clothes and went along. Any embarrassment they might have felt at being asked to sing in front of a lady in an elegantly furnished drawing-room in stead of at home in the cottage or in the tap room of the 'Black 'un' was soon dispelled by generous helpings from a full bottle of whisky standing in the middle of the table with two cut-glass tumblers and a decanter of water. They sang, they drank and sang again and all the time Mrs Lee was noting down the words and music of their efforts. They kept this up all evening and were not allowed to leave until the bottle on the table was empty and the book on Mrs Lee's lap was full. After several more evenings, proceeding on the same lines as before only with different songs, she returned to London with what was later referred to as a 'copper-ful' of songs.¹¹²

Although the two men were made Honorary Members of the Folk-Song Society for their contributions, the social disparity between collector and singer was blatant,

¹⁰⁹ Vic Gammon, 'Folk Song Collecting in Sussex and Surry, 1843–1914,' *History Workshop Journal* 10 (1980), 65; Lee, 'Some Experiences of a Folk-Song Collector', 9.

¹¹⁰ See Bob Copper, *A Song for Every Season: A Hundred Years of a Sussex Farming Family* (London: Heinemann, 1971), 11. It would be incorrect to read this as an unmediated account of the event: the book is inflected with the same elegiac nostalgia as the Edwardian collectors. In fact, during the 1950s and '60s, the Copper family had featured on BBC radio and in concerts at Cecil Sharp House, the Royal Albert Hall, and the Royal Festival Hall under the auspices of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. As Copper notes: 'we did our damnest to bridge the gap between the tap-room and the concert platform. The pallid ghost of the old singing tradition was living on only in the artificial world of folk song recitals' (189).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

mirrored by the hierarchical polarity of observer and specimen; Lee even recorded how another of her informants—an old woman ‘living in the East of London’—remarked that she ‘hadn’t ever visited a real lady before’.¹¹³

Like her fellow enthusiasts in the nascent Folk-Song Society, Lee entered the field with preconceived (and often ill-formed) ideas on what classified as worthy of collection and yet was not averse to correcting material that had supposedly ‘become perverted’ by singers.¹¹⁴ Lee’s account of meeting the Coppers is a self-portrait of two cultural spheres colliding on unequal terms—highlighted by the fact that only Lee’s narrative appeared in the *Journal*. In other words, we only ever see ‘Tom’ through Lee’s gaze and are only granted access to his songs via the mediation of folkloristic knowledge. The Coppers became a prized symbol of premodern difference as passive (or, at worst, inaccurate) carriers of endangered songs. Rather than showing interest in their cultural ecology, Lee used them to gain access to idiomatic material she desired for personal ends; the singers were thus employed in a similar manner to Percy’s folio, saved from the fires of obsolescence not for their intrinsic worth but for the content they conveyed. Unlike Percy, however, the Folk-Song Society was not simply interested in editing and publishing material but also in composing musical arrangements for the very drawing room setting that the Coppers had found so uncomfortable.¹¹⁵ Reading the two passages against each other exposes the ideologies bound up in collecting. Uprooted from pub and cottage and held captive in an aristocratic country house by an unfamiliar woman of lofty social status, the Coppers were requested to sing in a way fundamentally alien to their customary experience, wearing clothes usually reserved for church. Such an environment may well have played a part in James and Tom’s decision over what kind of songs to offer. As Lucy Broadwood noted in 1905, the self-censorship of singers when it came to perceived

¹¹³ Lee, ‘Some Experiences of a Folk-Song Collector’, 10.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁵ The first general meeting of the Folk-Song Society was held at a Mayfair mansion; see ‘A Folk-Song Function’, *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 40/673 (1899): 168–69. The occasion was reported as follows: ‘Mr. Fuller Maitland then accompanied Mr. Charles Phillips and Mrs. Lee, who sang ‘The Claudy Banks.’ Mrs. Trust followed with ‘Primroses.’ Mr Gregory Hast then sang ‘The Week before Easter,’ accompanied by Mr. Percy Pitt. He was followed by Miss Mary Hulburd, who sang ‘I Wandered by the Brookside,’ to the tune of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ accompanied by Mr. Miller. ‘The Wedding Song’ was next given by Mrs. Lee and Mr. Charles Phillips, who were accompanied by Mr. Fuller Maitland. The last item was ‘Adieu, Sweet Lovely Nancy,’ sung by Mr. Charles Phillips, accompanied by Mr. Miller.’ (*Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 1/1 (1899), 12).

rudeness ‘makes it hard for a woman to collect’.¹¹⁶ Although a transaction plainly necessary to relax the singers, Lee fails to mention using whisky as a crude form of barter with the intention of appropriating songs (it is unclear whether or not the empty bottle was to blame for unsatisfactory renditions). From Sussex, she returned to the orbit of the capital with a cache of exclusive manuscripts, conveying her selected tokens of rural culture from periphery to establishment. What, however, motivated this revived interest in the products of the pastoral low Other?

In his inaugural address as Vice-President of the Society, composer, professor, and figurehead of the English Musical Renaissance Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry provided a vital facet of the answer: the Society, he argued, was ‘engaged upon a wholesome and seasonable enterprise’ to counter the perils of degenerate urban commerce.¹¹⁷ In ‘true folk-songs’, he claimed, there is nothing ‘common or unclean...no sham, no got up glitter, and no vulgarity’: these ‘treasures of humanity’, rather, were ‘written in characters the most evanescent you can imagine, upon the sensitive brain fibres of those who learn them and have but little idea of their value’.¹¹⁸ In arresting language, Parry unveiled an injurious force working against this imagined sub-stratum of the population: ‘there is an enemy at the doors of folk-music which is driving it out, namely, the common popular songs of the day; and this enemy is one of the most repulsive and most insidious’.¹¹⁹ Manifesting what Derek Scott has termed the ‘ideological schism’ that developed at this time to distinguish folksong from music sullied by commercial enterprise, Parry defined popular culture through affiliation with a polluted, proximate lower class:

If one thinks of the outer circumferences of our terribly overgrown towns where the jerry-builder holds sway; where one sees all around the tawdriness of sham jewellery and shoddy clothes, pawnshops and flaming gin-palaces; where stale fish and the miserable piles of Covent Garden refuse which pass for vegetables are offered for food—all such things suggest to one’s mind the boundless regions of sham. It is for the people who live in these unhealthy regions—people who, for the most part, have the most false ideals, or none at all—who are always struggling for existence, who think that the commonest rowdiness is the highest

¹¹⁶ Lucy E. Broadwood, ‘On the Collecting of English Folk-Song’, *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 31 (1904–05), 95, 101.

¹¹⁷ Hubert Parry, ‘Inaugural Address’, *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 1/1 (1899), 1. See Meirion Hughes & Robert Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840–1940: Constructing a National Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) and Jeremy Dibble, *C. Hubert H. Parry: His Life and Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

¹¹⁸ Parry, ‘Inaugural Address’, 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* See Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700*.

expression of human emotion; it is for them that the modern popular music is made, and it is made with a commercial intention out of snippets of musical slang. And this product it is which will drive out folk-music if we do not save it.¹²⁰

Parry's chauvinistic hierarchy is naked, with intimations of Miltonic lure: in his scheme, the rabid, counterfeit, and unrefined popular commodities of the overcrowded urban working class function as the antithesis of folk authenticity. As with Child, *inauthenticity* was used as the classificatory device: folksong was imagined as a fragile fortress of cultural treasures under attack from the wrong kind of (uncouth, familiar) low Other, preserved by docile country singers who had no conception of its broader value as a symbol of cultural purity.

Bendix notes that such 'emotional and moral' gestures held the power to establish the validity of burgeoning fields within the discipline of folklore: 'declaring something authentic legitimated the subject' and in turn the cultural politics of the authenticator.¹²¹ Parry's vision of the folk formed an antidote to urban deterioration and industrialised sprawl: in contrast to commodities enjoyed by 'the sordid vulgarity of our great city-populations', he saw folksongs as 'among the purest products of the human mind', growing 'in the hearts of the people before they devoted themselves so assiduously to the making of quick returns'.¹²² Ultimately, Parry valued 'the simple beauty of primitive thought'.¹²³ He advocated self-criticism and even the progressive use of a phonograph in field collecting; this methodology, however, was to be employed in the service of distinguishing 'what is genuine from what is emasculated'.¹²⁴ Not only was popular culture coarse and fraudulent, but also tainted with the anaemic and submissive connotations of effeminacy. In contrast, Parry suggested that folksong equated with native vitality and was thus 'characteristic of the race, of the quiet reticence of our country folk, courageous and content'; as 'a faithful reflection of *ourselves*', he continued, 'we needs must cherish it.'¹²⁵ Indeed, Parry's invective was never aimed at benefiting 'the folk', but rather at using them as a mirror for the values of a bourgeoisie under threat from urban degeneracy. Echoing the

¹²⁰ Derek B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 109; Parry, 'Inaugural Address', 1–2.

¹²¹ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 7.

¹²² Parry, 'Inaugural Address', 3, 2.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis added.

process of cultural hierarchisation that Lawrence Levine has identified occurring simultaneously in the US—a mechanism ‘designed to preserve, nurture, and extend the cultural history and values of a particular group’ in the face of unwelcome developments wrought by modernity—Parry’s statements set the boundaries of national identity and functioned vicariously to defend his own values as seen in the chimerical reflection of a subaltern milieu denied a voice of its own.¹²⁶

Rather than being written off as conservative snobbery, Parry’s address and the notion of folksong itself need to be cited within Edwardian attitudes toward race, nationalism, and demographic change. Parry’s phrasing is characteristic of anxieties specific to his age: along with the rise of modern technologies of transportation, communication, and audio-visual media, the Edwardian period saw widespread fears among the middle and upper classes of social degeneration in the native population coexistent with a weakening of imperial confidence.¹²⁷ Culminating in an organised eugenics movement, Mike Hawkins describes the influential Social Darwinism of this era as a shifting ‘*network* of interlinked ideas’—a loose, janiform, and relatively abstract ‘world view’ that functioned as ‘a powerful *rhetorical* instrument’ wherein biology was seen as both model for social improvement and potential threat to the established class order.¹²⁸ Darwin, however, was not solely responsible for such theories: as Gregory Claeys notes, his discoveries ‘involved remapping, with the assistance of a theory of the biological inheritance of character traits, a pre-existing structure of ideas’ based on Malthusian competition and political economy.¹²⁹ With the death of Queen Victoria, imperial rivalries, and lingering embarrassment over the Boer War, at the turn of the new century Edwardian commentators sensed the culmination of an epoch and were less willing than their Victorian predecessors to confidently equate change with progress.¹³⁰ As Richard Soloway notes, this environment fuelled anxious speculation about the future not only of empire but of the nation itself: theories of natural selection and heredity, he argues, ‘stimulated a great

¹²⁶ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 223; see also 177.

¹²⁷ See Claeys, ‘The “Survival of the Fittest” and the Origins of Social Darwinism’; Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*; Richard Soloway, ‘Counting the Degenerates: The Statistics of Race Deterioration in Edwardian England.’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 17/1 (1982): 137–64; and Richard Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

¹²⁸ Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*, 6, 17.

¹²⁹ Claeys, ‘The “Survival of the Fittest” and the Origins of Social Darwinism’, 228.

¹³⁰ See Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*.

deal of apprehension about the fitness of the mature, highly evolved British race to adapt to the new, complex challenges that unquestionably lay ahead'.¹³¹ Eugenicist desires for selective reproduction were catalysed and given credence by the realisation that the declining birth rate was most acute among the most highly educated and economically prosperous members of society. Claeys notes that when Darwin's ideas were applied to society with regard to fertility, 'it was the poorer and most degraded classes, with the largest families, who seemed most likely to dictate the future course of human evolution'.¹³² This inverse correlation between fecundity and cultural status, Soloway proposes, 'focused public attention upon the highly subjective and emotional question of "race quality" and provoked alarming predictions that Britain... would be swamped by the socially, and, if eugenicists were correct, genetically "unfit"'.¹³³ Predicated on biological essentialism and attracting converts across the political spectrum, eugenics lent a vocabulary and the mantle of scientific integrity to contingent prejudices, principles, and concerns across the Western world—a facet, Soloway concludes, 'of a society and culture in rapid transition'.¹³⁴

In a context pervaded by Social Darwinist discourse, the outlook of Edwardian folksong collectors begins to make sense. Parry's elitist hysteria surrounding lower class industrialised squalor and endemic poverty align precisely with what Soloway describes as 'growing concerns about the enervating results of congested city life on the health, morals, intellect, and procreative vigour of urban inhabitants'.¹³⁵ Indeed, he argues, the 1890s witnessed a belief that the rapid growth of cities combined with rural depopulation was having 'a profound, deleterious effect upon the physical, and, perhaps, heritable characteristics of the populace'; such anxieties would take the form of patriotic physical culture movements by the time of the First World War.¹³⁶ In the wake of Lamarckian ideas and the poor recruitment statistics of soldiers enlisting for the Crimean War, the maladies and 'unhealthy regions' Parry dwelt upon were seen, tragically, as inborn 'symptoms of poverty rather than the causes'.¹³⁷ Parry's worry that urban popular culture with its degenerate 'musical slang' would 'drive out' rural

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³² Claeys, 'The "Survival of the Fittest" and the Origins of Social Darwinism', 236.

¹³³ Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, xxi.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³⁶ Soloway, 'Counting the Degenerates', 138; see also Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History* 41/4 (2006): 595–610.

¹³⁷ Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, 39.

folksong thus mirrored broader racial anxieties in the establishment revolving around the differential decline in fertility between classes. Likewise, the notion that folksong would provide a way to rejuvenate the decadent, declining musical life of the nation shadowed a contemporaneous view that influxes of rural workers might replenish the ailing racial ‘stock’ of cities. For Parry and his fellow Folk-Song Society members, ‘country folk, courageous and content’ were the true representatives of British identity: their primitive songs—reaching far back into the mythical, bardic, bucolic past—provided a way of accessing and securing national self-perception during a period of rapid transformation and uncertainty. Parry was also able to use metaphors central to a Social Darwinist worldview, cast in a positive light, to portray his country singers as ‘primitive’ forebears; Influenced by the work of Herbert Spencer (who coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’), primitivist ideologies supported an already widespread belief that ‘even the most advanced societies contained survivals from previous evolutionary phases’.¹³⁸ Wishing, like Percy, to anchor national identity in a remote but noble epoch forever disappearing over the horizon of history, Parry employed evolutionary discourse to locate folksong and rural singers as the deepest and yet most endangered wellspring of British culture.

The same year as the Eugenics Education Society was founded, Cecil Sharp published a book—stridently adopting a Social Darwinist perspective—that would become the cornerstone of the broader folk revival movement: *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (1907). The ideology of Sharp’s book was latent in a didactic edition of national songs he had published five years before; a contemporaneous review had noted that although the collection was ‘designated “British”, no fewer than sixty-six of the seventy-eight ditties contained herein are English’.¹³⁹ This obsession with the singularity of English cultural heritage was combined with a framework borrowed explicitly from the natural sciences. Lecturing to the Tonic Sol-fa Association in December 1906, he outlined his theory of folk creation and transmission, receiving a brief review in *The Musical Times*:

the lecturer boldly applies the doctrines of evolution to explain the adoption of final forms (if there are any). He thinks that many of the existing tunes began with mere inflection, and that gradually, in the course of generations, they have assumed their existing form. So we have

¹³⁸ Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*, 146.

¹³⁹ ‘Review: *A Book of British Song for Home and School* by Cecil J. Sharp’, *Musical Times* 44/719 (1903): 28.

geometrical increase, constant variation, struggles for existence, and survival of the fittest—the communally made tune, embodying the rhythmic and tonal likings of the race and district. Whatever one’s opinion may be as to this philosophy, there can be no doubt that if we owe the tune to the commune, the present larger commune is in turn deeply indebted to Mr. Sharp for his devotion to the task of noting down.¹⁴⁰

Throughout 1906, Sharp had also been given a platform for his ideas through a vociferous debate in the correspondence pages of the *Morning Post*. Initiated by Miss A. E. Keeton who proposed that England had no surviving folksongs, the debate cast Sharp as a ‘folk-song enthusiast’ eager to rescue such material for an English school of composition and as the basis for educational reform.¹⁴¹ Sharp asserted that ‘we have ignored our national heritage’, advising that ‘it is to our folk-music that we must look for the future of English music’; he encouraged readers, therefore, ‘before it is too late’ to ‘collect our traditional music, to publish it, and to teach it to the young people of the present and succeeding generations’.¹⁴²

Educated at Uppingham and Cambridge (where he had read mathematics), Sharp became music master at Ludgrove School before taking a post as Principal of Hampstead Conservatoire of Music and participating in the musical education of the Royal household.¹⁴³ Not involved in the founding of the Folk-Song Society, he had only begun collecting in 1903 with the aid of Charles Marson.¹⁴⁴ As John Francmanis notes, however, within two months and on the back of personal connections he had embarked on a ‘self-appointed task of lecturing on song collection’, emphasising the urgency of this new undertaking and challenging what he saw as the pedestrian accomplishments of the Society to date.¹⁴⁵ Resting on a series of propositions, his doctrinaire beliefs were reiterated in *English Folk-Song*: ‘that folk-music is generically distinct from ordinary music; that the former is not the composition of the individual and, as such, limited in outlook and appeal, but a communal and racial

¹⁴⁰ ‘Mr. Cecil Sharp on Folk-Songs’, *Musical Times* 47/755 (1906): 43.

¹⁴¹ This debate was reported in *The Musical Times*: see ‘A Folk-Song Discussion’, *Musical Times* 47/766 (1906): 806–09.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 806.

¹⁴³ See Maud Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp: His Life and Work* (1967; London: Faber & Faber, 2008) and ‘Mr. Cecil Sharp’, *The Musical Times* 53/836 (1912), 639–44.

¹⁴⁴ See Derek Schofield, ‘Sowing the Seeds: Cecil Sharp and Charles Marson in Somerset in 1903’, *Folk Music Journal* 8/4 (2004): 484–512 and Richard Sykes, ‘The Evolution of Englishness in the English Folksong Revival, 1890–1914.’ *Folk Music Journal* 6/4 (1993). Schofield suggests that Sharp had begun setting himself up as an expert as early as November 1903. Despite his trenchant critiques of its practice, Sharp would later be elected to the committee of the Folk-Song Society.

¹⁴⁵ John Francmanis, ‘National Music to National Redeemer: The Consolidation of a “Folk-Song” Construct in Edwardian England’, *Popular Music* 21/1 (2002), 3.

product, the expression, in musical idiom, of aims and ideals that are primarily national in character'.¹⁴⁶ Sharp laid out his evolutionary theory as a tripartite scheme: first, he vouched for 'the amazing accuracy of the memories of folk-singers' (continuity); he then affirmed that unconscious 'melodic alterations...spring spontaneously from out the heart of the singer' (variation); and finally, that 'those tune-variations, which appeal to the community, will be perpetuated as against those which attract the individual only' (selection).¹⁴⁷ Crucial to Sharp's delineation was his insistence that this process of competitive selection was oral and carried out instinctively by a particular group on the verge of disappearance:

those special gifts for which a nation is renowned will usually be conspicuous in the output of its lower and unlettered classes...we must [therefore] look to the musical utterances of those of the community who are least affected by extraneous influences; that is, we must search for them amongst the native and aboriginal inhabitants of its remote country districts. Their own music, if they have any, will be the outcome of a purely natural instinct...This spontaneous utterance is called *folk-song*...in contradistinction to the song, popular or otherwise, which has been composed by the educated.¹⁴⁸

Drawing an untenable distinction between merely illiterate and 'non-educated', Sharp characterised the folk as 'common people...whose mental development has been due not to any formal system of training or education, but solely to environment'; they were 'remnants of the peasantry' that had fortuitously 'escaped the infection of modern ideas'.¹⁴⁹ A blind insistence that this music was 'not the deliberate and conscious invention of the individual, but the spontaneous product of the sub-conscious mind of the community' allowed Sharp to dismiss the entire field of material culture outright: 'to search for the originals of folk-songs amongst the printed music of olden days' he brazenly asserted, 'is mere waste of time'.¹⁵⁰

Discussing the editorial practices employed in the publication of songs he had collected, Sharp openly admitted to the role of gatekeeping intermediary:

Over and above this question of word-corruption, there are some folk-songs, which, for other reasons, can only be published after extensive alteration or excision. Some of these...are gross

¹⁴⁶ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, x.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 16, 21, 29.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 3.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Cecil J. Sharp, "'The Folk-Song Fallacy': A Reply", *The English Review* 12 (July, 1912), 549; Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 8, see also 101.

and coarse in sentiment and objectionable in every way...There are also a large number of folk-songs, which transgress the accepted conventions of the present age, and which would shock the susceptibilities of those who rank reticence and reserve amongst the noblest of virtues...This question comes especially to the fore when the most universal and elemental of all subjects is treated, that of love and the relations of man to woman.¹⁵¹

Moreover, he spoke of ‘unsealing the lips’ of ‘peasant singers’ in order to induce them ‘to unlock their treasures at our bidding’: newspaper reception demonstrates explicitly that he even saw his self-appointed task as bringing about ‘transference of the songs and dances from one class to the other’.¹⁵² As Harker argues, however, there were no self-identifying peasants when Sharp was collecting, ‘only *ways of seeing working men and women as “peasants”*’.¹⁵³ Evidently, Sharp was less interested in the ‘truthfulness and exactness’ he advocated in transcription than in how the songs should be framed for the metropolitan milieu that had nominated themselves guardians of a vanishing rural culture.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, Sharp admitted that his principal goal was to change the ‘pessimistic attitude towards the musical prospects of our country’.¹⁵⁵ Folksong—as ‘the natural musical idiom of a national will’—would provide the foundation of a rebuttal to unwanted foreign musical dominance.¹⁵⁶ Sharp saw reactionary proselytisation as the key to effecting this change:

Our system of education is, at present, too cosmopolitan; it is calculated to produce citizens of the world rather than Englishmen...How can this be remedied? By taking care, I would suggest, that every child born of English parents is, in its earliest years, placed in possession of all those things which are the distinctive products of its race...If every child be placed in possession of all these race-products, he will know and understand his country and his countrymen far better than he does at present; and knowing and understanding them he will love them the more, realize that he is united to them by the subtle bond of blood and kinship, and become, in the highest sense of the word, a better citizen, and a truer patriot.¹⁵⁷

The streets were to be flooded with folksong, making them ‘a pleasanter place for those who have sensitive ears’ while ‘civilizing the masses’ by displacing their

¹⁵¹ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 102–03.

¹⁵² Cecil J. Sharp, ‘Folk-Song Collecting’, *The Musical Times* 48/767 (1907), 16; ‘The Stratford-On-Avon Festival’, *The Musical Times* 51/811 (1910), 596.

¹⁵³ Harker, ‘Cecil Sharp in Somerset’, 228.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 135–36.

‘vulgar music’.¹⁵⁸ Like other song collectors before him, Sharp was unwilling to accept that the commercialism and bawdiness of the broadside industry and urban music hall were representative of national spirit and culture; as Gelbart notes, ‘contact with an urban working class made almost all claims about “the folk” even more idealized and carefully separated from modern reality’.¹⁵⁹

Sharp’s zealous opinions drew criticism in equal measure: revealing a markedly nuanced understanding of vernacular culture, Keeton argued that the material she encountered under the banner of folksong had most probably ‘drifted in scraps from our towns, or many of them more probably equally in scraps from the continent’, betraying the ‘absence of any special racial characteristics’ and ‘certain distinctly modern snatches of rhythm and melody’.¹⁶⁰ In addition, she proposed, ‘collections of tunes “edited with pianoforte accompaniments” by academics and antiquaries’ were hardly likely to inspire great compositions.¹⁶¹ Likewise, Arthur Hervey added his doubts as to whether such material could ever form the basis of a national musical sensibility, arguing that the notion of a purely hermetic style was absurd—asking ‘Of what nation...can the same not be said? Are alien influences invariably bad?’¹⁶² Hervey concluded that ‘a special national style cannot be manufactured to order, neither is the existence of what may be termed a national “school” of music at all desirable’ over individual craft and inspiration.¹⁶³ Arthur Somervell, in turn, remarked that ‘it is time to protest against the cheap cant which assumes that no one belongs to the English “folk” unless he is at the ploughtail’—proposing that a far more catholic definition encompassing songs popular with the general public should be employed that would ‘not cut ourselves off from any part of our great heritage’.¹⁶⁴ Sharp’s audacious response (following the binary logic laid down by Parry) was to assert a categorical difference between composed popular or national songs and anonymously organic folksongs, proposing that the latter ‘have been unconsciously evolved by the peasantry’.¹⁶⁵ He continued:

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Gelbart, “‘The Language of Nature’: Music as Historical Crucible for the Methodology of Folkloristics”, *Ethnomusicology* 53/3 (2009), 383.

¹⁶⁰ ‘A Folk-Song Discussion’, *Musical Times* 47/766 (1906), 807.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 808.

The two types are inherently and widely different from one another, not only in the matter of their birth but as art-products as well. They have points of resemblance, no doubt, but these are superficial only, and they should not blind the eyes of the expert to the essential differences, which lie deeper and are fundamental. The two types are as easily differentiated as chalk from cheese, or, to use a more apposite comparison, as the blush rose of the hedgerow from the latest production of the nursery gardener.¹⁶⁶

The collusion of self-confessed ‘expertise’ in identifying deep, ‘essential differences’ between the genealogy of songs recalls the philological practices of Child and was key to Sharp’s project—separating the wild, untamed roses of English national self-perception from the unwanted crudeness and hybridity of popular song.

As with Parry, Sharp’s views only make sense in reference to the discourse and metaphors of Social Darwinism—in particular, within what Hawkins refers to as ‘reform Darwinism’.¹⁶⁷ As an authoritarian Fabian distrustful of the masses, the *evolution* Sharp favoured was embraced in direct ideological opposition to *revolution* as part of gradual change willed via reform and education.¹⁶⁸ Such evolutionary schemes owed a debt to Spencer’s conception of primeval homogeneity: as Rutledge M. Dennis notes, when Spencer applied Darwin’s concept of natural selection to humanity he reasoned that societies were ‘governed by competition and fitness, and evolve from an undifferentiated (homogeneous) and primitive state to one of differentiation (heterogeneity) and progress’.¹⁶⁹ Sharp’s conception of history was imbued with a similarly teleological drive from primitive communality to modern, diverse individuality; within this structure, however, Sharp left room for living relics untouched by modernity that appeared closer to the spirit of embryonic creation he venerated. Aligned with Enlightenment tropes, these ‘peasants’ were seen as being closer to nature and thus more in tune with their (racial, national) being and environment than creative artists or debased commercial hacks: Gelbart argues that this idealised conception of distance from an unselfconscious low Other allowed folklore to become a meaningful epistemology—‘finding “natural” people in the

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ See Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*, 159–68. Although Hawkins concludes that ‘the relationship between Social Darwinism and Fabianism was a complex one defying any straightforward generalisation’, population growth and eugenics were prominent topics of discussion within Fabian circles.

¹⁶⁸ See Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 19. Karpeles notes that Sharp was not a ‘Party man’ but considered himself a ‘Conservative Socialist’; in spite of early radical leanings, he was not sympathetic to women’s suffrage.

¹⁶⁹ Rutledge M. Dennis, ‘Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race’, *Journal of Negro Education* 64/3 (1995), 244.

West, still somehow uncorrupted and unaffected by both the supposed progress and decadence of modern civilization'.¹⁷⁰ Sharp's theories thus indicate far more about his own intellectual background and contingent class anxieties than they do about rural life: in his scheme, survivals (suitably mediated, rearticulated, and expunged) were the ancient, authentic residues of national heritage. As such, 'the folk' thus became instrumental props in the discourse of nationalism. Indeed, as Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling have argued, Sharp's ideological project should be viewed in relation to an era of European cultural nationalism in which anxious reference was made 'to the received images of other nations': national folksong was seen to be the salvation of the English Musical Renaissance—a movement reliant on the creative imagination of a political community.¹⁷¹ Sharp invested in what Benedict Anderson terms the 'subjective antiquity' of such communities by arguing that Englishness formed 'part and parcel of a great tradition that stretches back into the mists of the past in one long, unbroken chain'.¹⁷² Sharp's evolutionary schema was thus a political hypothesis—never a window onto history, but a facet of imaginative public memory in the service of national and racial identity.

As was clear from the 1906 debate, Sharp's dogmatic theories on folksong were not universally accepted and often attracted vehement criticism from contemporaries. Even the Folk-Song Society held opposing views, outlined in their circular entitled 'Hints to Collectors of Folk Music'. Beginning by referring to informants as 'ballad singers' (not 'peasants'), the pamphlet read as follows:

Although folk-music is to be found in all strata of society, the classes from which the most interesting specimens are most readily to be obtained are gardeners, artizans, gamekeepers, shepherds, rustic labourers, gipsies, sailors, fishermen, workers at old-fashioned trades, such as weaving, lace-making and the like, as well as domestic servants of the old school, especially nurses. Inmates of workhouses will also be found to know many old songs, and dwellers in towns may best be able to carry on the work of collecting traditional music by applying to such. In making enquiries among the people it is found advisable in many places to use the word 'ballad' or 'ballet' instead of 'song,' which often suggests some-thing modern. It may be necessary to point out to them that nothing they may have learned at school, or

¹⁷⁰ Gelbart, *The Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music'*, 56.

¹⁷¹ Hughes & Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 117, 89; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁷² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5; Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, viii.

heard at a concert, and so forth, is wanted; and it is important to *give them, if possible, an example of the kind of traditional music and words that the Society wishes to procure.*¹⁷³

Despite seeking only a particular aspect of vernacular repertoire distinct from modern popular music, the Society nevertheless recognised that such songs were not necessarily confined to the hermetic, primitive, ‘racial’ locations favoured by Sharp—instead, a broad urban nexus of low Others were seen to harbour the most interesting ‘traditional’ material. Furthermore, the Society proposed that as ‘the word “ballet” is synonymous with “ballad-sheet” collectors should ask a singer *‘whether he possesses, or knows of anyone who possesses, old song-books or ballad-sheets, as these (more especially the latter) are most valuable in connection with the subject of Folk-songs’.*¹⁷⁴ The institutionally agreed ambitions of the Society were thus more nostalgically antiquarian than explicitly nationalistic, manifesting a flight away from contemporaneous politics into the material culture of the past.

Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson, and J. A. Fuller Maitland (all members of the Society) also adopted different positions to Sharp—agreeing with some aspects of his approach while feeling the need to question others. Indebted to Percy’s suspect historiography, Broadwood proposed that ‘we are trying to save a class of Traditional Ballads that practically defy all research when we come to trace their origin; a class of Ballads that are a strange survival of...roving mediaeval minstrels’.¹⁷⁵ To find these songs, she argued, ‘we must go to the ballad-sheet or broadside’, encouraging respect even for the ‘poor, vulgar, tawdry productions of to-day’s press’ as they represented a direct connection to the past: ‘Go farther back, through the broadsides of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the earliest black-letter ballad-sheets in our museums, and you will find, on *these*, words still sung *to-day*’.¹⁷⁶ Paradoxically, Broadwood retained an unalloyed belief in the orality of ‘illiterate peasants’ and a rhetorical distinction between composed music and ‘old airs’. Like Sharp, she saw these relics as the key to national musical education and messianic expectation: ‘*surely we must build upon the healthy artistic instincts of our people, should we hope for the coming of another Purcell, and should we wish to train our growing*

¹⁷³ ‘Hints to Collectors of Folk Music’, *Folklore* 19/2 (1908), 149. This circular was reproduced, along with a sample ‘Leaflet to Clergy’ written by Lucy Broadwood, as an appendix to Sharp’s paper ‘Some Characteristics of English Folk-Music’ read to the Folklore Society. All emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Broadwood, ‘On the Collecting of English Folk-Song’, 90.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

generations to reject of themselves the enervating slow poison dished up so attractively for them by vulgar caterers in the art, literature, and popular amusements of to-day'.¹⁷⁷ Unmoved by this aspect of Sharp's theory, Kidson's review of *English Folk-Song* voiced restrained concern over the author's 'zealous devotion' to the subject, suggesting through faint praise that his conclusions 'bear upon the face of them an assured conviction as to their soundness'.¹⁷⁸ Kidson questioned the evolutionary theory of communal origins, arguing that 'there remain many puzzling things about folk-song—or rather folk-melody—which are not solved by such obvious reasoning...it being well known that there are many folk-airs noted down hundreds of miles apart which have but little variation'.¹⁷⁹ Likewise, he argued, individually composed melodies, 'having won the affections of the people have really become "communal"'.¹⁸⁰ Most significantly, Kidson raised the point that no succinct definition of folksong had ever been suitably advanced, rejecting the vague notion that such songs simply resulted from lack of musical training or education. Fuller Maitland wrote a similarly derisive review of Sharp's limited though 'professedly scientific treatise' and what he termed the 'strange theory' of ostensibly anonymous, communal authorship—pondering why the versions of songs considered most authoritative happen to be those discovered by Sharp himself; Fuller Maitland concluded by noting that although Sharp deserved credit as a field collector, 'he might well leave to others the work of analysing the treasures he finds'.¹⁸¹

Given that technologies of sound recording and reproduction were available in the form of the phonograph, a key debate at the time revolved around whether (like Sharp) collectors should rely on hand notation and subsequent arrangement for the general public or whether they should aim for a greater degree of 'scientific' accuracy in the transcription of individual singing. In the discussion following Broadwood's paper 'On the Collecting of English Folk-Song', W. H. Cummings proposed that collectors should be careful to notate 'precisely what they hear' with all the nuances and errors: if 'a landscape looks different when seen through glasses of different

¹⁷⁷ Broadwood, 'On the Collecting of English Folk-Song', 97.

¹⁷⁸ Frank Kidson, 'English Folk-Song', *Musical Times* 49/779 (1908), 23. See also John Francmanis, 'The Roving Artist: Frank Kidson, Pioneer Song Collector', *Folk Music Journal* 8/1 (2001): 41–66.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ J. A. Fuller Maitland, 'English Folk-Song', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 January 1908, 26.

colours', he argued, 'it is quite possible that the folk-songs may be very materially changed by the medium through which they pass before they come to us'.¹⁸² Fuller Maitland thought Cummings's suggestion of using a mechanical device 'excellent' and noted that 'if the Folk-Song Society were rich enough we would buy one at once'.¹⁸³ The Society's wish was fulfilled by Percy Grainger who wrote at length in 1908 about his recent experiences of collecting with a phonograph, providing an implicit critique of Sharp's philosophy.¹⁸⁴ Employing a 'Standard' Edison-Bell machine alongside conventional methods of notation, Grainger found that singers were unperturbed by the novel technology and grateful not to be interrupted during performances. The machine, he argued, facilitated notation of fast and complex melodies because recordings could be slowed down and replayed: in the process, 'enticing points became as it were enlarged and graspable where before they had been tantalizingly fleeting and puzzling', almost as if an aural magnifying glass had been used.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, for Grainger, phonography represented the potential for a relative democratisation of enquiry: the phonograph, he stated, 'puts valuable folk-song, sea-chanty, and morris-dance collecting within the reach of all possessed of the needful leisure and enthusiasm'.¹⁸⁶ Having been identified as authentic and recorded, however, such songs were then to be 'handed over for their translation into musical notation to none but collectors and musicians'.¹⁸⁷

The greatest advantage of this methodology, Grainger stated, was an increase not only in the quantity of songs recorded but also in the detail of sonic idiosyncrasy. Machines like the phonograph and gramophone, he argued,

record not merely the tunes and words of fine folk-songs, but give an enduring picture of the live art and traditions of peasant and sailor singing and fiddling; together with a record of the dialects of different districts, and of such entertaining accessories as the vocal quality, singing-habits, and other personal characteristics of singers...much of the attractiveness of the live art lies in the execution as well as in the contents of the songs....any noting down of an

¹⁸² 'Discussion' in: Broadwood, 'On the Collecting of English Folk-Song', 107.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁸⁴ Percy Grainger, 'Collecting with the Phonograph', *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 3/12 (1908): 147–62. See also Michael Yates, 'Percy Grainger and the Impact of the Phonograph', *Folk Music Journal* 4/3 (1982): 265–75; C. J. Bearman, 'Percy Grainger, the Phonograph, and the Folk Song Society', *Music & Letters* 84/3 (2003): 434–55; and Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

¹⁸⁵ Grainger, 'Collecting with the Phonograph', 148.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

individually and creatively gifted man's songs that does not give all possible details of all the different verses of his songs, and, in certain cases, of his different renderings at different times, cannot claim to be a representative picture of such a man's complete art and artistic culture, but only a portion of it; hardly more representative of his whole artistic activity and import than is a piano arrangement of an orchestral score.¹⁸⁸

Recording, he continued, could ultimately throw light on such vital features as pitch, tonality, tempo, articulation, rhythmic irregularity, pauses, ornamentation, melodic variation, syllable stress, and pronunciation. Even if capturing all these details was not always possible at the time with the rudimentary technology available, Grainger laid out a strikingly bold manifesto for a far more inclusive, precise, and sympathetic ethnographic practice than Sharp and other collectors had followed. Technology, he asserted, freed the collector from the biases of cultural expectation by recording 'what our ears and systems of notation are too inaccurate and clumsy to take advantage of', surpassing the restrictions inherent to conventional systems of notation.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, Grainger saw sound recording akin to photography—even desiring a pianola-like contraption that might 'record on paper (as the phonograph does on wax) all sounds played or sung into it' as highly detailed visual traces.¹⁹⁰ Rather than adhering to the practice of distilling songs to an ideal type, Grainger argued that perceived irregularities in performance 'are not mere careless or momentary deviations from a normal, regular form, but radical points of enrichment, inventiveness, and individualism'.¹⁹¹ In other words, ballad singers should be dignified as creative artists rather than being seen as passive vessels or unhelpful obstacles. Likewise, their musical integrity was to be respected: when the phonograph was employed, Grainger argued, it became clear that singers did not sing in the neatly quantised 'ancient' modes theorised by Sharp, but rather in a fluid and flexible tonality.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 150–51.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁹² Grainger cautioned that 'are not we collectors—when our observations are not checked by some unbiased mechanical verdict—rather apt, maybe, to credit to folk-singers a more implicit adherence to one mode at a time than is actually their habit?' (*Ibid.*, 158). The editorial committee, however, felt it incumbent upon themselves to include a caveat: 'the general experience of collectors goes to show that English singers most rarely alter their mode in singing the same song' (*Ibid.*, 159). Anne Gilchrist, in particular, disagreed broadly with Grainger: see Yates, 'Percy Grainger and the Impact of the Phonograph', 266–67 for quotations from her letter to Broadwood on the subject. On Sharp's theory of folk modality, see Sharp, 'Some Characteristics of English Folk-Music'.

Where Sharp had imagined a primitive and homogenous throng, Grainger saw a series of discrete and intriguing individuals—describing, for example, the style of one singer positively as ‘more a triumph of personal characteristics than of abstract beauty’.¹⁹³ Grainger noted that collectors may ‘feel the throb of the communal pulse’ within such singing, but proposed that ‘each single manifestation of it is none the less highly individualistic and circumscribed by the temperamental limitation of each singer’; gifted musicians of ‘exceptional temperament’ stood out in this context ‘as in any other branch of art and life’.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, it was regarding aestheticised abstraction versus ethnographic detail that Sharp’s intentions differed most noticeably from Grainger: aside from his issue with singers’ selfconsciousness and the machine’s technological restrictions, Sharp argued that ‘in transcribing a song, our aim should be to record its artistic effect, not necessarily the exact means by which that effect was produced’.¹⁹⁵ Through the process of collecting, Sharp was thus on a Platonic search for ‘ideal’ songs never actually sung by singers but ostensibly latent behind the very mistakes and irregularities that Grainger found so fascinating. In a letter on the subject, Sharp argued that such ‘ever present’ idiosyncrasies and variations in performance ‘have nothing to do with the song itself, but only with the artistic presentation of it’; he desired instead ‘not an exact, scientifically accurate memorandum’, but what Anne Gilchrist described (during a similar exchange) as the ‘real *truth*’ accessible only to those with the requisite training.¹⁹⁶ Grainger’s aesthetic paradigm was radically different: rather than seeking an urtext, he laid out a methodology where meticulously documented performances could be compared and analysed, acknowledging the ways in which songs were creatively interpreted and inflected by singers. The phonograph hinted at how this hunt for unique aspects of vernacular expression—preserved in all its complex nonconformity—could become an egalitarian venture, given financial means. Most strikingly, this new paradigm would strive to honestly depict ‘live art’ and the ‘whole artistic activity’ rather than expropriating it within a nationalistic ideology. Although records also created reifications of cultural practice and Grainger himself patronisingly described singers

¹⁹³ Percy Grainger, ‘The Impress of Personality in Traditional Singing’, *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 3/12 (1908), 166.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164, 163.

¹⁹⁵ Sharp’s letter to Grainger from which this quotation is taken is reproduced in: Yates, ‘Percy Grainger and the Impact of the Phonograph’, 269.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 269, 267.

as ‘quaint’ and ‘child-like’, his project nevertheless appears thoroughly progressive when contrasted with the restrictive legacy of Sharpian dogma.¹⁹⁷

In addition to criticism from within the Folk-Song Society itself, Sharp drew fire from prominent music critics. Under his nom de plume of Earnest Newman, William Roberts contested Sharp’s position in an acerbic 1912 article entitled ‘The Folk-Song Fallacy’. Armed with a critical and revisionist approach suspicious of grandiloquence, Newman declared that “‘The’ Englishman is a fiction”; moreover, he asserted, ideas like ‘national musical idiom’ had no empirical basis.¹⁹⁸ Unearthing numerous contradictions, he argued that ‘the whole theory of “racial characteristics” in music is flawed to the very centre’ because ‘complex nations’ could never be ‘summed up in this style under a single simple formula’.¹⁹⁹ Citing Kidson’s work, he also noted that ‘patient research proves the foreign *provenance* of many a melody that has always been accepted as unquestionably “national”’.²⁰⁰ Confronting Sharp’s essentialism with refreshing clarity, he argued that

the supposed fixity of type within a given territory is a myth, there being all possible variations of it observable when we study it in detail. Still less can we predicate any such fixity of type among the nations of Western Europe, or such starkness of type-contrast between one nation as a whole and another...The theory that even in a simple community—to say nothing of complex communities like ours—there is any one type of mind or body that can claim to be ‘the’ national type is absurd.²⁰¹

For Newman, no one could be sure ‘that any folk-song that is supposed to express the spirit of a given “community” is really the product of that community’.²⁰² Citing Sharp’s statement that different singers do not perform the same song in the same manner, he asked ‘which, then, is the “communal” form? Which represents “the national character”?’²⁰³ He further warned against sentimentalising ‘the rustic nature of the past’ and the ‘musical incompetence’ of untrained singers, as this was ‘just a revival of the eighteenth-century theory of the divine rightness of the noble

¹⁹⁷ Grainger, ‘The Impress of Personality in Traditional Singing’, 164, 165. Moreover, even Sharp picked up on the fact that Grainger’s collecting exhibited a strong bias toward male singers.

¹⁹⁸ Earnest Newman, ‘The Folk-Song Fallacy’, *The English Review* 11 (May, 1912), 266. See William S. Mann, ‘Newman, Ernest’, *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>> [accessed 29/01/13].

¹⁹⁹ Newman, ‘The Folk-Song Fallacy’, 257, 258.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 263.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 259.

savage'.²⁰⁴ Sharp thought the attack significantly provocative to warrant a reply in the same periodical two months later. He asserted that 'although we cannot define [a national or racial characteristic] we recognise it when we come across it'—an example of ideological self-evidence *par excellence*.²⁰⁵ Sharp urged Newman to 'silence his analytical mind' and try instead 'to *feel* the beauty of the folk-song'.²⁰⁶ Newman, understandably, was not impressed: in a final rejoinder, he noted that Sharp 'simply repeats the old fallacies...with the addition of one or two new ones. He imagines he has proved things when he has merely said them, and that the arguments against a theorem can be refuted by a bold reassertion of it'.²⁰⁷

Sharp achieved significant popular success in spite of these confrontations, as Kidson later noted: 'the part that Mr Cecil Sharp has taken in the advancement of folk-song is well known...his vigorous methods of bringing the subject before the public have caused "folk-song" to become a household word'.²⁰⁸ The hint of derision is palpable, and Kidson's short book—published by Cambridge University Press in 1915 with a section on dance by Mary Neal—was intended as a measured rejoinder to Sharp's increasingly influential ideas. Answering his own call for a succinct definition, Kidson proposed that folk music consisted of songs appealing 'to the bed-rock temperament of the people'.²⁰⁹ He acknowledged, however, that the term was 'so elastic in definition that it has been freely used to indicate types of song and melody that greatly differ from each other' and that it 'conveys a different signification to different people'.²¹⁰ His own classification read as follows:

'folk-song,' or 'people's song,' may be understood to imply, in its broadest sense, as *Volkslied* does to the German, a song and its music which is generally approved by the bulk of the people...a song born of the people and used by the people...it may be generally accepted that 'the people,' in this instance, stands for a stratum of society where education of a literary kind

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 260, 261, 263. Newman's historiography is slightly off: the 'divine rightness' he mentions was more clearly identified with early seventeenth-century conceptualisations of politics, law, and ethnography, whereas received ideas of the 'noble savage' were indebted to nineteenth-century notions of racial superiority. See Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*.

²⁰⁵ Sharp, "'The Folk-Song Fallacy': A Reply", 543.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 546.

²⁰⁷ Earnest Newman, 'The Folk-Song Fallacy: A Rejoinder', *The English Review* 12 (August, 1912), 66.

²⁰⁸ Frank Kidson & Mary Neal, *English Folk-Song and Dance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 47. On the acrimonious debates between Sharp and Neal concerning 'folk dance' revival, see Boyes, *The Imagined Village*; it is telling that Kidson's work was paired with Neal.

²⁰⁹ Kidson & Neal, *English Folk-Song and Dance*, 7.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

is, in a greater or lesser degree, absent...we have no definite knowledge of its original birth, and frequently but a very vague idea as to its period.²¹¹

Indicative of his time, Kidson maintained a distinction between ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ peoples—symptomatic of a European political hegemony intent on justifying the colonial project—but openly challenged Sharp’s concept of unconscious cultural evolution: ‘those who hold this theory appear to assert that a folk-song with its music has had a primal formation at some early and indefinite time...[but] it cannot be altogether denied that the original germ is absolutely different from the folk-song as found existing to-day’.²¹² Indeed, Kidson was familiar with the history of broadsides and their long history of circulation, recognising that such cheap printed matter was ‘inextricably mixed up’ in what was deemed ‘folksong’.²¹³ He affirmed that ‘the question whether, in some instances, [songs] were printed before being handed to the people may be answered in the affirmative’ as a hawker was ‘bound to provide new wares for his patrons, and his trade could not go on without fresh material’.²¹⁴ Anathema to Sharp’s puritan ideal, Kidson concluded that material culture should not to be disregarded as the singer ‘has generally learned his words, or at any rate refreshed his memory, from the broadside copy’.²¹⁵

By 1912, however, Sharp had already become an implacable popular expert on anything ‘folk’, giving around seventy lectures each year; Kidson’s book did little to alter this perception.²¹⁶ Indeed, a reviewer noted in *The Musical Times*, ‘no one has been more distinguished than Mr. Cecil Sharp’ in the revival of songs and dances; he was seen as ‘the greatest authority on both these branches of folk-lore’.²¹⁷ Likewise, his ideological theory of evolution had been embraced uncritically by prominent figures such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, who proceeded to disseminate them further: in a lecture to the Oxford Folk-Music Society in 1911, Vaughan Williams had argued (without even citing Sharp directly) that folksongs ‘represent national characteristics’ as they were the ‘purely oral’ and ‘unconscious utterances of unlettered

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9–10. On the German aspect of the folksong debate, see Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity* and Gelbart, *The Invention of ‘Folk Music’ and ‘Art Music’*.

²¹² Kidson & Neal, *English Folk-Song and Dance*, 13–4.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

²¹⁶ See ‘Mr. Cecil Sharp’, *The Musical Times* 53/836 (1912), 640.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 639; W. G. McN., ‘The Cult of Folk-Song and Dance’, *The Musical Times* 53/835 (1912), 602.

people...unaffected by extraneous influences’—the result of ‘joint authorship...by a process of selection and evolution’ within a community representing the ‘musical race’.²¹⁸ By appealing to those without specialist knowledge of broadside and cheap print history, John Francmanis claims, Sharp found a receptive audience and his quixotic feeling for authenticity, ‘recast as expert intuition’, crystallised into a sacrosanct orthodoxy.²¹⁹ As Georgina Boyes has noted, Sharp’s practice—from 1910 onwards, concerning aestheticised reimaginings of spuriously traditional dance—concerned ‘systematising identical cultural forms’ and controlling their content and dissemination via a network of experts.²²⁰ As motions were made toward broader social equality, Boyes proposes, ‘the revival completed the shifts in its hegemony which set up a male elite...confirmed the exclusion of the working classes from its organisation and policy and institutionalised the most patronising excesses of Edwardian “chivalry”’.²²¹ By the 1930s in Britain, Hughes and Stradling conclude, ‘most of the key posts in the musical establishment were filled by men who strode the narrow path of folk-music with a doctrinal surety’.²²² What passed for folksong after Sharp, Harker argues, was remarkable for its debt to his ideas: ‘he had set the terms of debate even for those who disagreed with many of his particular ideas’.²²³ Leaving a dominant theoretical consensus in his wake, others were thus forced to absorb, attack, or modify aspects of Sharp’s all-encompassing ideology.

3 | ‘Rendered in Their Own Native Element’: John A. Lomax and Folksong Discourse in the US

Sharp’s influence as an authority on the subject of folksong was felt across the Atlantic during his own lifetime. In the late summer 1915 edition of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Charles Peabody mentioned that ‘Professor [sic] Cecil J. Sharp...has been passing several months in America’.²²⁴ Peabody praised his ‘persevering effort, whereby he has been able to “unearth” many folk-dances and

²¹⁸ R. Vaughn Williams, ‘English Folk-Song’, *Musical Times* 52/816 (1911): 101–04.

²¹⁹ Francmanis, ‘National Music to National Redeemer’, 8, 11.

²²⁰ Boyes, *The Imagined Village*, 77.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

²²² Hughes & Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840–1940*, 178.

²²³ Harker, *Fakesong*, 204.

²²⁴ Charles Peabody, ‘The English Folk-Dance Society and Its Work’, *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 28/109 (1915), 316.

melodies of very ancient origin’ and that ‘he has the acumen of the scholar in publication, and the enthusiasm of the teacher in instruction’.²²⁵ The trip had been catalysed by Sharp’s involvement in arranging music (using collected tunes along with idiomatic compositions) and dances for Harley Granville Barker’s celebrated 1914 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, opening at the Savoy Theatre in London and repeated the following year in New York City.²²⁶ Granville Barker was a young visionary director with what James Woodfield describes as a ‘reforming zeal’ to discard Victorian theatrical traditions and transform the practice of staging Shakespeare; Sharp’s ‘Elizabethan airs’ provided a counterpoint to the impressionistic set designs.²²⁷ During this visit, Sharp had also given illustrated lectures to the Colony Club in New York and at the Plaza Hotel as well as instructing classes in other major cities based on the idea that their relevance was due to a shared heritage in the English language—referring to his work as ‘preaching’ and even founding an American branch of the English Folk Dance Society.²²⁸ On his return to the US the following year, Sharp created a pastoral interlude for Percy Mackaye’s *Caliban by the Yellow Sands*—a community ‘masque’ held at Lewisohn Stadium as part of the 1916 Shakespeare celebrations.²²⁹ In 1959 Evelyn K. Wells reminisced about the ‘new world [Sharp’s collecting] opened out for us’ and the ‘cultural roots of America which he laid bare’, recalling ‘the spread of enthusiasm through the country, as the contagion caught on in Buffalo, in Pittsburgh, in Cincinnati and St. Louis and Chicago and Toronto, to say nothing of New York and Boston’.²³⁰

Between 1916 and 1918 Sharp also undertook collecting trips around the eastern US with Maud Karpeles, which he came to see as ‘the coping-stone to what he had done in England’.²³¹ In the remote and seemingly hermetic region of the southern Appalachian Mountains, Karpeles notes, Sharp discovered the ‘England of his dreams’—a racial utopia in which ‘primitive’ people had somehow ‘remained in the eighteenth century’.²³² Interpreted through the discursive lens of Social Darwinism,

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 316.

²²⁶ See Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 121–28.

²²⁷ James Woodfield, *English Theatre in Transition, 1881–1914* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1984), 91, 90. See also Eric Salmon, *Granville Barker: A Secret Life* (London: Heinemann, 1983).

²²⁸ Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 127.

²²⁹ See *Ibid.*, 133.

²³⁰ Evelyn K. Wells, ‘Cecil Sharp in America’, *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 8/4 (1959), 182–84.

²³¹ Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 168.

²³² *Ibid.*, 140, 147.

mountaineers and their culture were regarded as the survival of an exotic low Other preserved at a prior historical phase within Western civilization itself: betraying similar demographic anxieties to Parry, Sharp pronounced that they existed in a state of ‘arrested degeneration’ due to a supposed lack of contact with industrialised modernity.²³³ As the ‘expression of the innate musical culture of a homogeneous community’, Karpeles saw their pentatonic music demonstrating ‘a primordial intensity of expression’; responding to contemporaneous scepticism after lectures on the subject, Sharp had claimed to be merely ‘describing human beings in their natural state’ free from ‘the veneer of civilization’.²³⁴ Indeed, Sharp argued that the local inhabitants had all ‘entered at birth into the full enjoyment of their racial heritage’, in curiously Lamarckian terms: ‘Their language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs are merely racial attributes which have been acquired and accumulated in past centuries and handed down generation by generation, each generation adding its quota to that which it received’.²³⁵ For Sharp, the mountaineers were precious transplanted relics of national identity, ‘just exactly what the English peasant was one hundred or more years ago’.²³⁶ His preconceptions of this primitive lifestyle, however, did not always live up to expectations:

when we got to the top of the ridge we found a large plateau of rolling meadows and fertile land occupied by a thoroughly respectable, church-going, school-attending population, making money at a great rate owing to the advances in food prices, and many of them housed in comfortable frame-dwellings and sporting their own motor-cars...we did get some songs and a few rather good ones, but nothing like the bag we had expected to make.²³⁷

The fact that such songs could easily be ‘traced to English or Lowland-Scottish sources’ and that singers ‘produced written copies’ (referred to as ‘ballets’) suggests a

²³³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 146. Tellingly, Sharp saw these people as a refutation of contemporaneous anxieties concerning the Aryan race: ‘Yesterday we called at a cabin and found such a lovely young fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, fifteen years of age with a buxom seven-months-old baby in her arms. I never saw a jollier, stronger healthier baby or mother in my life; and she must have been married at fourteen, perhaps thirteen! So much for these Eugenic people!’ (quoted in *Ibid.*, 148).

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

²³⁵ Cecil Sharp, ‘Introduction’ to *English Folk songs from the Southern Appalachians* ed. Maud Karpeles (1917; London: Oxford University Press, 1932), xxiv.

²³⁶ Quoted in Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 146. In the introduction to *English Folk songs from the Southern Appalachians*, however, Sharp added that ‘the mountaineer is freer in his manner, more alert, and less inarticulate than his British prototype, and bears no trace of the obsequiousness of manner which, since the Enclosure Acts robbed him of his economic independence’ (xxiii).

²³⁷ Quoted in Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 167.

complex and unacknowledged textuality.²³⁸ Furthermore, Sharp unapologetically sifted the material he had preselected as ‘authentic examples of the beginnings and foundations of English literature and music’ from the fluid and heterogeneous repertoires of singers: ‘very often they misunderstood our requirements and would give us hymns instead of the secular songs and ballads’ desired.²³⁹

The US, of course, had its own native and professionally sanctioned conventions of ballad scholarship stemming from the monumental work of Child. Indeed, it was due to Child’s powerful legacy at Harvard that song scholarship flourished in the US largely independent of the amateur Edwardian revival; as in Britain, however, there existed marked controversy over theories of ‘folk’ creation that would nevertheless yield to racializing and nationalistic ideologies. As noted earlier, Child left a vacancy regarding the definition of the material he so assiduously collected; one of his students, Francis B. Gummere, provided one particularly influential answer saturated with primitivist ideology, homogenising fantasy, and speculative historiography. Gummere articulated a theory of poetic origins through communal creation via the work of Jacob Grimm in his introduction to *Old English Ballads* (1894). Tracing an irreversible paradigm shift from public and impersonal to private and subjective verse—mirrored in a historiographical progression from medieval to modern, and oral to written—Gummere drew attention to a ‘perpetual confusion between poetry of the people and poetry for the people, [i.e.] between a traditional piece of verse and a song written to please the casual crowd of an alley or a concert-hall’.²⁴⁰ For Gummere, authentic ballads were free from sentiment, commerce, ephemeral satire, modern conceptions of ownership, and the hand of individual artistry. As a response to such confusion of essence, he proposed that

we must seek poetry which springs from the people, which belongs to no one poet, which appeals to the ear rather than to the eye...in modified guise it sought a home in the unlettered and homogeneous communities of the later middle ages; and with a form yet more changed, it lingered down to our own century in a number of survivals.²⁴¹

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 168; Sharp, ‘Introduction’, xxviii.

²³⁹ Sharp, ‘Introduction’, xxxiv, xxvi.

²⁴⁰ Francis B. Gummere (ed.), ‘Introduction’ to *Old English Ballads* (1894; Boston: Ginn, 1914), xvi.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

This material allegedly sprang from communities ‘as yet undivided by lettered or unlettered taste’ and thus represented ‘the sentiment neither of individuals nor of a class’—instead, of a singing, dancing, improvising throng.²⁴² For Gummere, true ballads were not merely varied by oral transmission, but spontaneously generated by oral means. The emphasis on ‘survivals’ of primitive communality is shot through with Social Darwinist ideology, as Gummere’s obituary stated: under the influence of such theories, he was one of many ‘smitten with a vision of the possibility of opening and reading the pageant of civilization from its remotest beginnings’.²⁴³

George Lyman Kittredge took up Gummere’s theory ten years later in his introduction to the widely read single volume edition of Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. A central figure in the ballad community who would later become Lomax’s academic mentor, Kittredge was Child’s literary executor and successor at Harvard.²⁴⁴ Kittredge agreed with Gummere that ballads were anonymous, ancient, and impersonal—proposing that they were animated by a strange spirit of autonomy: ‘if it were possible to conceive a tale as *telling itself*, without the instrumentality of a conscious speaker, the ballad would be such a tale...They belonged, in the first instance, to the whole people, at a time when there were no formal divisions of literate and illiterate’.²⁴⁵ Ballads were thus the quintessential ‘folk’ product—undateable relics of an age when oral lore supposedly circulated freely amongst a uniform population, occasionally visible when later written down or printed (‘in a sadly mutilated condition’) and found precariously surviving amongst humble, unlettered communities.²⁴⁶ In contrast to Gummere, however, he saw the creation of this material stemming from acts of insignificant individual authorship:

The product as it comes from the author is handed over to the folk for oral transmission, and thus passes out of his control...Taken collectively, these processes of oral tradition amount to a second act of composition, of an inextricably complicated character, in which many persons

²⁴² *Ibid.*, xvi. Gummere concluded that the ballad was a ‘survival’ from a ‘vanished world of poetry’ in which ‘all was in flux; out of a common store of tradition, by a spontaneous and universal movement, song rose and fell according to the needs of the community’ (xcv–xcvii).

²⁴³ John M. Manly, ‘Francis Barton Gummere, 1855–1919’, *Modern Philology* 17/5 (1919), 61.

²⁴⁴ See Esther K. Birdsall, ‘Some Notes on the Role of George Lyman Kittredge in American Folklore Studies’, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 10/1–2 (1973): 57–66; Roger D. Abrahams, ‘Mr Lomax Meets Professor Kittredge’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 37/2–3 (2000): 99–118; and Brown, *Child’s Unfinished Masterpiece*.

²⁴⁵ George Lyman Kittredge, ‘Introduction’ to *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Kittredge & Helen Child Sargent (London: Harrap, 1904), xii.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

share (some consciously, others without knowing it), which extends over many generations and much geographical space, and which may be as efficient a cause of the ballad in question as the original creative act of the individual author...They may even result in the production of new ballads to which no individual author can lay claim, so completely is the initial act of creative authorship overshadowed by the secondary act of collective composition.²⁴⁷

The resulting songs had ‘no fixed and final form, no sole authentic version’, only a mercurial proliferation of variants.²⁴⁸ Kittredge thus authenticated the communal hypothesis by absorbing it as an *ex post facto* process of ‘folk’ creation. Likewise, he joined Gummere in hypothesising a primeval environment through which groups ‘in a low state of civilization’ might cumulatively fashion songs: tracing the history of the ballad, he argued, ‘would lead us to very simple conditions of society, to the singing and dancing throng, to a period of communal composition’.²⁴⁹

Such ostentatious theorising in the Harvard tradition was ultimately predicated on mere conjecture, as Kittredge admitted: ‘the actual facts with regard to any particular piece in [Child’s *English and Scottish Ballads*] are beyond our knowledge’.²⁵⁰ Changes to this conception of balladry began to surface with Kittredge’s student Phillips Barry—in his later years, ‘the recognized leader of folksong collecting in New England’.²⁵¹ Barry distilled Kittredge’s equivocal explanations into a neat formula, arguing that traditional ballads resulted from a process ‘of individual invention *plus* communal re-creation...the individual invents—composes; the community edits, and recomposes’.²⁵² Citing *English Folk-Song* during the 1909 article in which the phrase ‘communal re-creation’ first appeared, Barry’s work also registered the moment when Sharp’s theories appeared across the Atlantic.²⁵³ Subsequently, we find the use of biological metaphor endemic to Sharp’s worldview: ‘unto its present state’, Barry concluded in 1910, ‘folk-music has

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* These variants, nevertheless, did not include ephemeral and supposedly non-traditional broadsides, which Kittredge fiercely dismissed as ‘debased’, ‘destitute of merit’, and ‘a pitiful specimen of Grub Street versification’ (xxviii).

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xx, xxii.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xxvii. If material sources had been traced (rather than communal fantasies), the story would have been different; see Palmer, “‘Veritable Dunghills’”.

²⁵¹ R. Gerald Alvey, ‘Phillips Barry and Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship’, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 10/1–2 (1973), 70. See also George Herzog, ‘Phillips Barry’, *Journal of American Folklore* 51/202 (1938): 439–41.

²⁵² Phillips Barry, ‘Native Balladry in America’, *Journal of American Folklore* 22/86 (1909), 365.

²⁵³ Phillips Barry, ‘Folk-Music in America’, *Journal of American Folklore* 22/83 (1909), 77.

evolved.²⁵⁴ Echoing nineteenth-century American conceptions of authenticity emphasising the individual, Barry nonetheless differed from Sharp in profound ways.²⁵⁵ In his earliest published articles, Barry made the radical claim that traditional poetry ‘lives on in every part of our broad land, as well in the heart of the populous city as on the lonely hillside’.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, he argued, ‘it matters little where the folk-singer learns his songs’, cautioning that ‘it must not be stated, on the basis of internal evidence alone, that one song, widely current among the folk, is a folk-song, and another is not’.²⁵⁷ Emphasising dynamic and egalitarian praxis, Barry sought to free himself from anxieties concerning classification: ‘how minor a consideration is the mere accident of origin. Folk-song is folk-song, because it *has become* the property of the folk in the widest sense of the word...folk-song is in reality an idea, of which we can get but the process of actualization, traceable as history.’²⁵⁸ Indeed, he claimed that the ‘social aspects’ of folksinging ‘appear wherever a group are gathered together, conserving the elements of the primitive “folk”—congeniality, freedom from care, and light-heartedness—hunters and trappers around a camp-fire, it may be, or railway laborers in a box-car on a wet night’.²⁵⁹ Barry’s vignette pointed toward a new living conception of American balladry identified with explicitly masculine low Others. Indicated by his unprecedented use of quotation marks around the word ‘folk’ itself, moreover, Barry had perhaps begun to suspect that contemporary vernacular culture bore little resemblance to a spuriously mythologised past.

Although aligning with Barry in many respects—including a more democratic notion of who the indigenous ‘folk’ might be—the early work of John Lomax demonstrated a far less nuanced take on ballad theory. Having grown up in rural Bosque County on the verge of the Chisholm Trail and studied English Literature at the University of Texas, Lomax worked in academic administration and subsequently

²⁵⁴ Phillips Barry, ‘The Origin of Folk-Melodies’, *Journal of American Folklore* 23/90 (1910), 440. Emphasis added. Karpeles notes that during his trips to the US, Sharp met Barry, Gummere, Kittredge, C. R. Baskerville, and H. M. Belden in person (Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 138–39).

²⁵⁵ See Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*.

²⁵⁶ Phillips Barry, ‘Traditional Ballads in New England’, *Journal of American Folklore* 18/69 (1905), 123; see also Barry, ‘Folk-Music in America’, 72.

²⁵⁷ Phillips Barry, ‘The Transmission of Folk-Song’, *Journal of American Folklore* 27/103 (1914), 67; Barry, ‘The Origin of Folk-Melodies’, 440.

²⁵⁸ Phillips Barry, ‘Irish Folk-Song’, *Journal of American Folklore* 24/93 (1911), 333.

²⁵⁹ Barry, ‘The Transmission of Folk-Song’, 67.

as an English instructor at Texas A&M.²⁶⁰ Keen for self-improvement, in 1906 he accepted a prestigious Austin Teaching Fellowship for a year of graduate study in comparative literature at Harvard under the tutelage of Kittredge and Barrett Wendell; bearing in mind an inferiority complex provoked by his agricultural background and late start in academia, Nolan Porterfield suggests that Harvard ‘represented everything he wanted: achievement, authority, recognition among the elite’—in short, Lomax ‘went there to be anointed’.²⁶¹ Indeed, Wendell and Kittredge legitimated his long-standing interest in regional American literary production in the form of cowboy songs, shaping his future career and aspirations. From 1907, he began a collecting project throughout the southwest (in a similar manner to Child) through a circular call to newspapers for homespun ballads never yet seen in print—coupled with songs he described as having ‘jotted down on a table in a saloon back room, scrawled on an envelope while squatting about a campfire near a chuck wagon, or caught behind the scenes of a bronco-busting outfit or rodeo’.²⁶² A key moment of encouragement came two years later at a Modern Language Association conference where he read a paper entitled ‘Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border’: the audience were captivated and invitations to lecture on the subject flooded in.²⁶³ Lomax’s project resulted in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, published in 1910 with a letter of approval from former president Theodore Roosevelt commending the material’s national importance and linking such rugged but endangered songs with ‘the conditions of ballad-growth which obtained in medieval England’.²⁶⁴ Wendell’s introduction was hardly less effusive, situating the collection among ‘the nameless poetry which vigorously lives through the centuries’ and drawing comparisons with old English ballads in terms of ‘the wonderful, robust vividness of their artless yet supremely true utterance...the natural vigor of their surgent, unsophisticated human rhythm’ and the feeling that they expressed something ‘straight from the heart of humanity’.²⁶⁵ As Porterfield notes,

²⁶⁰ Biographical information is from Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867–1948* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996) and John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (1941; New York: Macmillan, 1947).

²⁶¹ Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 87. See also Abrahams, ‘Mr Lomax Meets Professor Kittredge’.

²⁶² Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 41.

²⁶³ Lomax’s title deliberately evoked Walter Scott’s famous antiquarian collection *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (published 1802–03).

²⁶⁴ John A. Lomax (ed.), *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1910). At the time, Lomax listed his position as ‘Sheldon Fellow for the Investigation of American Ballads, Harvard University’; Lomax was also secretary of the University of Texas.

²⁶⁵ Barrett Wendell, ‘Introduction’ to *Ibid.*, xiii–xiv.

during this time ‘men who drove cattle for a living still exerted vast pulls on the public imagination, out of all proportion to the realities of cowboy life’.²⁶⁶

Permeated by a romantic essentialism, as Regina Bendix notes, Lomax shared discursively in the ethos of Reconstruction when a new and unifying national identity was sought through reference to the unexplored western frontier.²⁶⁷ For Lomax, the cowboy held the powerful allure of a reckless, elemental pioneer spirit related to the ‘wild, far-away places of the big and still unpeopled west’: he was ‘the animating spirit of the vanishing era...truly a knight of the twentieth century’.²⁶⁸ Lomax was unapologetic in venturing a holistic theory of their cultural practice:

Illiterate people, and people cut off from newspapers and books, isolated and lonely—thrown back on primal resources for entertainment and for the expression of emotion—utter themselves through somewhat the same character of songs as did their forefathers of perhaps a thousand years ago. In some such way have been made and preserved the cowboy songs and other frontier ballads contained in this volume. The songs represent the operation of instinct and tradition...Society, then, was here reduced to its lowest terms. The work of the men, their daily experiences, their thoughts, their interests, were all in common...Songs sprang up naturally, some of them tender and familiar lays of childhood, others original compositions, all genuine, however crude and unpolished. Whatever the most gifted man could produce must bear the criticism of the entire camp, and agree with the ideas of a group of men.²⁶⁹

The impact of both Gummere and Kittredge is plain: the cowboy—unlettered, insulated, and atavistic—was a surviving relic of a communal society in which songs were both individually composed and spontaneously generated. Indeed, Lomax imagined the ranch as a classless utopia in which men ‘lived on terms of practical equality’: as a result, he believed, ‘any song that came from such a group would be the joint product of a number of them’.²⁷⁰ Jerrold Hirsch notes that Lomax thus tried to make cowboys fit the definition of balladry he learned at Harvard: ‘a song telling a story, produced by a homogeneous group, without authorship or date, passed on by word of mouth’.²⁷¹ Similarities with Sharp are also palpable in Lomax’s insistence

²⁶⁶ Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 153.

²⁶⁷ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 119.

²⁶⁸ John A. Lomax, ‘Collector’s Note’ in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, xvii, xxiii.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xvii, xix.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii, xix.

²⁷¹ Jerrold Hirsch, ‘Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies: The Case of John Lomax’, *Journal of American Folklore* 105/416 (1992), 189.

that songs ‘sprung up as had the grass on the plains’—manifesting ‘the ballad instinct of the race, temporarily thrown back to primitive conditions’.²⁷²

Lomax’s view of ballad culture was unmistakably gendered: cowboys were seen as ‘a virile type...very close to primal man’.²⁷³ Likewise, the lives of those included under the folk rubric (including miners, lumbermen, sailors, soldiers, and railroaders) were all ‘spent out in the open’ where ‘the occupation of each calling demanded supreme physical endeavour’: in this context, songs were ‘created by men of vigorous action for an audience of men...away from home and far removed from the restraining influences of polite society’.²⁷⁴ Concerns with such ‘hardy pioneer values’, Roger D. Abrahams has shown, were linked to an elite tradition of east coast anti-modernism concerned with the feminisation of American life.²⁷⁵ In the wake of Victorian ideals ‘equating physical and spiritual health’, folksong collectors (re)connected an upwardly mobile and potentially effete metropolitan population with frontier virtues by ‘setting out to recover the remnants of this age of home-manufacture’.²⁷⁶ Shadowing Barry, Lomax nevertheless expanded the traditional ballad purview to include low Others such as ‘negroes’ and ‘down-and-out classes—the outcast girl, the dope fiend, the convict, the jail-bird, and the tramp’.²⁷⁷ As Porterfield notes, Lomax built his popular reputation as a folklorist from this patriotic ‘interest in the broader fabric of American life, seen through its diverse regional, cultural, and racial minorities’.²⁷⁸ Lomax’s project should thus be seen as a chimerical form of ‘outsider nationalism’—deliberately locating the folk essence of the US in the politics of marginality and frontier independence rather than through survivals of ‘old world’ cultural heritage.²⁷⁹ Indeed, as Bendix notes, there were significant differences in transatlantic views of folklore, mirroring deeper political desires: ‘what for Europe had been the folk was for a time the “common man” in the United States. Like the folk, the common man was constructed as living in the spirit of a spontaneous

²⁷² John A. Lomax, ‘Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border’, *The Sewanee Review* 19/1 (1911), 1, 15.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁷⁴ John A. Lomax, ‘Some Types of American Folk-Song’, *Journal of American Folklore* 28/107 (1915), 3.

²⁷⁵ Abrahams, ‘Mr Lomax Meets Professor Kittredge’, 105.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Lomax, ‘Some Types of American Folk-Song’, 3.

²⁷⁸ Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 1. Notably missing (or present antagonistically), however, were Native Americans; see Jill Terry Rudy, ‘American Folklore Scholarship, *Tales of the North American Indians*, and Relational Communities’, *Journal of American Folklore* 126/499 (2013): 3–30.

²⁷⁹ On a more personal level, it would be easy to read Lomax’s desire to raise the frontier cowboy to national status as mirroring a desire to legitimize his own outsider background.

authenticity; emulating this spirit, in turn, could inspire a truly independent nation'.²⁸⁰ Lomax's patriotism was similarly fired by 'the character of life, and the point of view, of the vigorous, re-blooded, restless Americans, who could no more live contented shut in by four walls than could Beowulf and his clan'.²⁸¹ The figure of the cowboy provided a way of conceptualising this spirit of autonomy, having 'fought back the Indians' and 'played his part in winning the great slice of territory that the United States took away from Mexico': he was 'always on the skirmish line of civilization...fearless, chivalric, elemental.'²⁸² Often overlooked, however, is Lomax's deeply insensitive insistence that frontier cowboys—unlike the 'Indian' adversaries fleetingly mentioned—produced the true 'native American folk songs'.²⁸³ In his memoir, Lomax had reminisced that the ballad collector made contact with 'the real people, the plain people, devoid of tinsel and glamour'; like his British counterparts, he felt that the songs resulting from this way of life must be 'rescued from oblivion' in the face of modernity's inexorable onslaught.²⁸⁴

Ironically, Lomax hoped his published collections would redress the cowboy's distorted image: 'still much misunderstood, he is often slandered, nearly always caricatured, both by the press and by the stage. Perhaps these songs, coming direct from the cowboy's experience, giving vent to his careless and his tender emotions, will afford future generations a truer conception of what he really was than is now possessed by those who know him only through highly colored romances'.²⁸⁵ The unmediated access Lomax asserted was, in practice, a delusion concealing his own ideological proclivities: the heterogeneous sources from which he drew included university students, Harvard professors, the files of a Texan newspaper, manuscripts, and collections of published verse alongside his own fieldwork.²⁸⁶ Furthermore, he announced that 'a careful sifting of this material' had taken place, acknowledging that he had 'violated the ethics of ballad-gatherers...by selecting and putting together what seemed to be the best lines from different versions, all telling the same story' but

²⁸⁰ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 26.

²⁸¹ Lomax, 'Some Types of American Folk-Song', 3.

²⁸² Lomax, 'Collector's Note', xxii. On the question of Native Americans as primitive Others in US discourse, see Rudy, 'American Folklore Scholarship' and Derek B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁸³ Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 77.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, iv; Lomax, 'Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border', 17.

²⁸⁵ Lomax, 'Collector's Note', xxii. See also John A. Lomax (ed.), *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920).

²⁸⁶ See Lomax, 'Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border', 3; 'Some Types of American Folk-Song', 8; 'Introduction', 6.

excusing himself with regard to the book's popular intent.²⁸⁷ Like Sharp, Lomax also remarked that a number of the most characteristic songs were 'totally unfit for public reading' and thus had to be excised; he added that 'some of the strong adjectives and nouns have been softened'.²⁸⁸ However, he continued, there was

a Homeric quality about the cowboy's profanity and vulgarity that pleases rather than repulses. The broad sky under which he slept, the limitless plains over which he rode, the big, open, free life he lived near to Nature's breast, taught him simplicity, calm, directness. He spoke out plains the impulses of his heart. But as yet so-called polite society is not quite willing to hear.²⁸⁹

Abrahams notes that this hunt for native bards chimed with a yearning in US history for an 'American Homer', emerging from the great socio-political experiment, 'who would find the story and the voice by which Americans could imagine themselves as having climbed beyond frontier barbarism and into the ranks of the civilized'.²⁹⁰ Lomax's contribution was to suggest that this distinctive national hero resided in the vernacular culture of that very frontier. Although he claimed that such songs were anonymous, communal, organic, and oral, it soon emerged that authors not only existed but were willing to file lawsuits for the expropriation of material under the guise of folksong: 'Home on the Range', for example, turned out to have been composed by a Kansas doctor and published in 1873.²⁹¹

Although Lomax found scepticism 'especially strong as to the existence of a distinctly cowboy music' at the time, he remained confident that what he collated was in fact 'genuine'.²⁹² As an archetypal 'folk-conservative', his stubborn investment in nostalgic and untenable conceptions of vernacular culture, Hirsch argues, was typical of southern intellectuals who 'created images of their world that gave them a sense of wholeness at the cost of rejecting or denying social change'.²⁹³ Louise Pound, Professor of English at the University of Nebraska and later president of both the American Folklore Society and the Modern language Association, would provide a

²⁸⁷ Lomax, 'Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border', 2; 'Collector's Note', xxiii.

²⁸⁸ Lomax, 'Some Types of American Folk-Song', 3; 'Collector's Note', xxiv.

²⁸⁹ Lomax, 'Collector's Note', xxv.

²⁹⁰ Abrahams, 'Mr Lomax Meets Professor Kittredge', 107.

²⁹¹ See Lomax, 'Collector's Note', xxiv and Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 297.

²⁹² Lomax, 'Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border', 17.

²⁹³ Hirsch, 'Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies', 184. See also Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 195.

unique riposte.²⁹⁴ In a 1913 evaluation of the authenticity Lomax claimed for his cowboy songs, she proffered that ‘currency and diffusion, a sort of permanence, have been gained by a number of the better pieces; but they are pieces not peculiar to the cowboys’.²⁹⁵ Drawing on examples that, she asserted, were ‘no communal cowboy improvisation’, Pound argued that such songs were ‘more likely to have drifted to than from the Southwest’.²⁹⁶ Indeed, she established that ‘The Little Old Sod Shanty’, like ‘so many “Western” songs when their genealogy is followed out, is not an indigenous piece, but an adaptation of an older song having great popularity in its day’.²⁹⁷ As George Herzog noted, later scholarship demonstrated that cowboy songs that had once been ‘hailed as examples of regional American folk creation, communally created, were for the most part sentimental songs whose authors and even printing dates could be traced in the East’.²⁹⁸ Like Barry, Pound granted that such products now belonged to the realm of folksong, but maintained that they did not originate among ‘the folk’ themselves. Reacting against the notion that Lomax’s songs mirrored processes by which much older narrative ballads had been composed, she concluded that ‘among the cowboys of the Southwest are reproduced not the conditions which created the English and Scottish popular ballads but rather, it may be, some of the conditions which preserved them’.²⁹⁹

Pound’s most perceptive attack on Harvard School ideology came in the form of her 1921 monograph *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*. At the outset she warned readers of the work’s ‘polemical tone’, proclaiming that the following assumptions must be abandoned (or at least ‘seriously qualified’): belief in communal authorship and ownership; disbelief in the ‘primitive artist’; reference to ballads ‘as the earliest and most universal poetic form’; belief in a link between narrative song and festal dance; belief in ‘the emergence of traditional ballads from the illiterate’; belief in the ‘special powers of folk-improvisation’; and belief that ballad culture was by definition

²⁹⁴ For biographical information, see: Robert Cochran, *Louise Pound: Scholar, Athlete, Feminist Pioneer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

²⁹⁵ Louise Pound, ‘The Southwestern Cowboy Songs and the English and Scottish Popular Ballads’, *Modern Philology* 11/2 (1913), 199.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ Louise Pound, ‘The Pedigree of a “Western” Song’, *Modern Language Notes* 29/1 (1914), 30.

²⁹⁸ Herzog, ‘Phillips Barry’, 440.

²⁹⁹ Pound, ‘The Southwestern Cowboy Songs and the English and Scottish Popular Ballads’, 207. For more detail, see Louise Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad* (New York: Macmillan, 1921).

dead.³⁰⁰ After reading the book, one instructor wrote to Kittredge lamenting that he was unable to refute its tenets: ‘I felt much as if I had bade adieu to all my lares and penates. I even had a sort of feeling of grudge, in that she seemed not to have left even one minor god free from attack’.³⁰¹ Although premised on the Social Darwinist mythology that ‘savage’ cultures of the present—such as Native American tribes—provided the most direct access to ancient ‘folk’ practices of the medieval peasantry, Pound nevertheless drew remarkably perceptive conclusions concerning ballad authorship and historiography. The spontaneous generation of complex songs by an undifferentiated dancing throng unable to conceptualise individual creativity, she argued, was a ‘fatuously speculative’ hypothesis that had thrown the entire field of literary study out of kilter.³⁰² A careful analysis of vernacular material and its mediation through eighteenth-century thought, Pound suggested, revealed that widely accepted definitions of the ballad were unwarranted; she thus took Gummere to task, proposing that historical evidence supported ‘exactly the reverse’ of his theories.³⁰³ Furthermore, she noted that the idea of oral tradition had exerted an unhelpful ‘monopoly’ in discourse on the Child ballads, especially when combined with an exaggeration of their association with illiteracy.³⁰⁴ Pound remarked that even when ballads were taken down orally from singers, such figures were typically outstanding individuals. Moreover, she argued, ‘the fact that songs have been preserved in remote districts and among the humble, is no proof that they were composed in such places and by such people’; deliberately inverting Gummere’s phrase, she concluded that such material was clearly ‘literature “for” not “by” the people’.³⁰⁵

As collectors tended ‘to restrict their salvage to pieces of the Child type’, Pound noted, they were liable to ignore ‘many related types of song of equal or greater currency among the folk’: indeed, she argued, ‘generalizations concerning folk-song are thrown out of focus and are undependable when but one type of piece is sought out and studied’.³⁰⁶ Pound asserted that Harvard school theories, along with Lomax’s unscrupulous and equivocal portrayals of folk creativity, should be

³⁰⁰ Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*, vii.

³⁰¹ Letter from Mendel G. Frampton to George Lyman Kittredge (February 1922) quoted in Birdsall, ‘Some Notes on the Role of George Lyman Kittredge in American Folklore Studies’, 59–60.

³⁰² Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*, 35, 34.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 46, 82.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 91, 106.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 120, 202.

summarily discarded as they ‘emerged from and belong to a period of criticism which deliberately preferred the vague and the mystical for all problems of literary and linguistic history’; she concluded by querying as ‘to what degree...the scholarly and critical enthusiasm for ballads of the last hundred years, or more, [is] due to this romantic attitude?’³⁰⁷ In an article for *PMLA* Pound summed up her revisionist position, charting how Enlightenment efforts to conceive of humanity *en masse* led toward ‘the bizarre belief in a collective soul which is not to be found in the nature of the souls of the individuals which compose the social group, but which in some mystic sense enwraps the individuals in its all-obscuring fog’.³⁰⁸ She continued:

If history and indeed ethnology betray clearly one fact it is that there is no such ‘mental homogeneity’ among men. As a critical hypothesis the whole communal prepossession has led mainly into misconception and misvaluation; its service (for service of a sort it is) has been to arouse an interest and an industry in its support which have only succeeded in demonstrating its futility. In other words, it is honorably shelved by its own inability to stand the test of substantial evidence...The primitivist seeks to replace human thought by dancing puppets [whereas] the critic of the tradition endeavors to single out, from the midst of puppetdom, creative human intelligences.³⁰⁹

The dancing puppets of folk discourse would not, however, be laid to rest so easily; indeed, Lomax would animate and exemplify a transition in the popular imagination away from conscientious critique toward embodied spectacle—in the process, laying the racializing discursive foundations of the postwar blues revival. Through public engagement and exclusive ties to the Library of Congress’s nascent Archive of American Folk Song, Ronald D. Cohen states, Lomax’s ‘broad sweep almost singlehandedly redefined the meaning of folk music’.³¹⁰ In spite of its profoundly nuanced and disconcerting scholarly insights, Pound’s critique (like those of Grainger and Kidson) would be consigned to historical irrelevance while the illusions of ‘the folk’ remained open to the seductive essentialism of ideologues.

Ousted from academic life by a local political scandal in 1917, Lomax had moved with his family to Chicago to work as a travelling bond salesman before returning to Austin as head of the University of Texas’s alumni association and later

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

³⁰⁸ Louise Pound, ‘The Term “Communal”.’ *PMLA* 39/2 (1924), 444.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 444–46.

³¹⁰ Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 12.

working for the Republic National Bank of Dallas; in 1931, however, after the untimely death of his wife, in financial dire straits, and with failing health, Lomax left the world of commerce and returned to the lecture circuit, rediscovering his bohemian vocation for ballad hunting.³¹¹ The following year, he had negotiated another book contract with Macmillan for an anthology of distinctively national material, secured a small advance, and sent out a circular call for help in locating ‘the best Folk Songs indigenous to this country’; soon after, having visited Washington D.C., he was named Honorary Curator of the Archive of American Folk Song, then headed by Robert Winslow Gordon.³¹² The understanding was that the Library of Congress would fund a transportable electronic recording device and provide expenses in return for copies of all the material Lomax collected (aided by his son Alan); once archived, Lomax would then retain permission to transcribe any material for future publication.³¹³ The result of this grand tour was *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, published in 1934—a expansive, poorly notated, and arbitrarily arranged collection that Porterfield describes as manifesting a ‘cavalier disregard for scholarly detail’.³¹⁴ Analogous to the cowboy compendia, letters soon began to arrive claiming authorship and threatening legal action over uncredited songs.³¹⁵ Moreover, in their introduction, John and Alan Lomax unashamedly pronounced that many songs ‘are composites; that is, we have brought together what seem the best stanzas, or even lines, from widely separated sources’.³¹⁶ Indeed, as one *New York Times* review stated, ‘it is to the public at large that the volume is directed’, not ‘the scholar nor the scientist’.³¹⁷ Due to such flagrant editorial intervention, Benjamin Filene notes, it is more accurate to view the Lomaxes as being ‘creators as much as caretakers of a tradition’.³¹⁸ The folk canon they prescribed through idiosyncratic selection of material to record, publish, and deposit in the Archive, he argues, ‘says as much about their tastes and

³¹¹ See Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*.

³¹² Quoted in *Ibid.*, 295.

³¹³ See *Ibid.*, 306.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

³¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 337–39.

³¹⁶ John A. Lomax & Alan Lomax, ‘Introduction’ to *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), xxviii–xxix.

³¹⁷ Dorothy Scarborough, ‘American Ballads and Folksongs: The Lomax Collection Brings Together Chanteys, Spirituals, Mountain “Lonesomes” and Desperado Ballads’, *New York Times* 11 Nov 1934, 2.

³¹⁸ Benjamin Filene, ‘“Our Singing Country”: John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past’, *American Quarterly* 43/4 (1991), 604.

values as about the “reality” they documented’.³¹⁹ Indeed, the collection ignored Native American culture and European balladry—effectively erasing any unwelcome aspects of the nation’s past. Despite this overtly ideological project, their institutionally endorsed vision of folksong would subsequently exert a powerful influence over how the US would conceptualise its own musical heritage.

Rather than cowboys, however, the central figures in Lomax’s Depression era reconceptualisation of American folk history were southern African Americans. Lomax had been interested in black culture since his earliest days as a young scholar, believing that insulated communities would shed light on the language of their eighteenth-century captors according to folkloristic theories of survival; as Porterfield notes, Lomax subscribed to the notion that black society in the south, because of its supposed ‘separation and isolation from mainstream culture, was the purest transmitter of American folkways’.³²⁰ In other words, for Lomax, rural African Americans represented the paradigmatic instantiation of primitive, oral, anti-modern cultural integrity. On a trip during summer 1933—travelling in a Ford car over 15,000 miles through the south—Lomax claimed to have ‘visited and interrogated nearly 10,000 Negro convicts in four Southern states: Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee’; in addition, he visited ‘groups of Negroes living in remote communities’, large plantations, and lumber camps, where the population ‘was almost entirely black’.³²¹ Unlike his work on cowboys, Lomax published detailed comments on individual encounters with these African American inmates:

Here was no studied art. The words, the music, the peculiar rhythm, were simple, the natural emotional outpouring of the black man in confinement. The listener found himself swept along with the emotions aroused by this appeal to primitive instinct, and, despite himself, discovered his own body swaying in unison to the urge of Iron-Head’s melodies...[Later,] I saved my microphone from being overturned by the eager, confident, self-important, copper-colored man, as he pushed through the throng of black convicts surrounding me...A well-preserved man, seventy-one years old, unable to read or write...Clear-Rock seemed to have

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 121, 119. On the history of the racializing myth of African American cultural insularity in the south prior to the twentieth century, see Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). On related transformations in the recording industry of the 1920s, see Karl Hagstrom Miller *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³²¹ John A. Lomax, “‘Sinful Songs’ of the Southern Negro”, *Musical Quarterly* 20/2 (1934), 181.

caught in his capacious memory every floating folk-song that had been current among the thousands of black convicts who had been his only companions for fifty years.³²²

In his field diary, Lomax wrote that ‘the simple directness and power of this primitive music, coupled with its descriptions of life where force and other elemental influences are dominating, impress me more deeply every time I hear it’.³²³ Recalling the Renaissance trope of a lost Golden Age alongside patriotic longing for an indigenous American epic poet, Lomax persistently drew parallels with Classical antiquity—proposing that Iron-Head ‘had the quiet dignity and reserve of a Roman’; that Clear-Rock ‘had a store probably equal in continuous length to the *Iliad*’; and that another singing inmate ‘seemed a black Apollo in grace and beauty’.³²⁴

Deliberately seeking ‘songs that in musical phrasing and poetic content are most unlike those of the white race, the least contaminated by white influence or by the modern Negro jazz’, the glimpse Lomax allowed himself into southern African American culture was highly reductive and predetermined—although hardly more paternalistic than many of his contemporaries.³²⁵ Patrick B. Mullen notes that, like other white southern scholars, ‘Lomax thought that industrialization, urbanization, and technological change were destroying the Southern agrarian way of life’, including African American vernacular culture.³²⁶ In Lomax’s mind, racial inferiority and primitive difference were the very factors that allowed African Americans to create such seemingly raw and honest art. Convinced that electronic sound recording could provide unmediated access to such material, he asserted that the aluminium discs brought back to the Library of Congress were ‘in a very true sense, sound-photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own native element, unrestrained, uninfluenced and undirected by anyone’.³²⁷ There is a certain irony in the fact that, as Erika Brady notes, collectors and folklorists of the early twentieth century ‘sought out and recorded the speech and music of cultures and communities the old ways of which were succumbing to the very world whose advent trumpeted from the

³²² *Ibid.*, 177–79.

³²³ John A. Lomax, from diary (August, 1933) quoted in: *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 125.

³²⁴ Lomax, “‘Sinful Songs’ of the Southern Negro”, 177–80. On the Golden Age in reference to ethnography, see Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*.

³²⁵ Lomax, “‘Sinful Songs’ of the Southern Negro”, 181.

³²⁶ Patrick B. Mullen, ‘The Dilemma of Representation in Folklore Studies: The Case of Henry Truvillion and John Lomax.’ *Journal of Folklore Research* 37/2–3 (2000), 157. Mullen notes that Lomax was not above slanting his accounts of African Americans to suit contemporaneous stereotypes of black behaviour and thus aid in the popular dissemination of his books.

³²⁷ Lomax, “‘Sinful Songs’ of the Southern Negro”, 181.

phonograph's great horn'.³²⁸ The modern consumer technology seen as corrupting primitive alterity was employed to preserve—as indexical traces of national history—aspects of that very primitive alterity in reified, repeatable form for metropolitan amusement and edification. The camera metaphor is also revealing, as collectors were in an equivalent position of concealed yet implicit control: listeners heard the ethnographic material (and what was deemed worthy of capturing) through the frame of their auditory gaze. The result was not an equal dialogue, but an asymmetrical collaboration producing an indisputably distorted rendering of the performance encounter. Lomax's opinion that such recordings were 'uninfluenced' was therefore ludicrous: as Brady notes, the presence of cumbersome and expensive recording machines symbolic of elite power 'both determined the form in which information was preserved and significantly altered the balance of the entire fieldwork interaction'—especially when, in one case reported by Lomax, an inmate was forced by the prison warden to provide material against his will.³²⁹

Furthermore, Lomax was clear in stating that he was only interested in secular songs 'of the "worl'ly nigger"' that—according to Social Darwinist ideology—connected blacks 'with their former barbaric life'.³³⁰ By searching out this particular material in the presence of armed guards, Filene argues, the Lomaxes 'did not consider how their identity as outsiders might influence the ways in which black Southerners responded to them'.³³¹ Hirsch notes that Lomax therefore cared little 'about the way people who sang the songs thought about their world, of the function song and lore played in the life of their culture'.³³² Instead, he was drawn to segregated prisons as exemplifications of a homogeneous social environment that he believed would produce nothing but authentic communal expression:

Because they still sing in unison with their work, because of this almost complete isolation and loneliness, because of the absence of "free-world" conventions in prison life, the Negro continues to create what we may rightly call folk-songs. They are not written out; they are orally handed down; they undergo inevitable changes in the process; they are seemingly endless; they vary with the singer and with each singing.³³³

³²⁸ Brady, *A Spiral Way*, 2.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7; see Lomax, "'Sinful Songs" of the Southern Negro', 183.

³³⁰ Lomax, "'Sinful Songs" of the Southern Negro', 182.

³³¹ Filene, "'Our Singing Country"', 617.

³³² Hirsch, 'Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies', 194.

³³³ Lomax, "'Sinful Songs" of the Southern Negro', 184.

Once again, Lomax was projecting the Harvard school definition of balladry onto a contemporaneous context. Akin to medieval peasants, Appalachian mountaineers, and wild western cowboys, incarcerated African Americans seemed to manifest a paragon of naïve simplicity and instinctive natural creativity: ‘the Negro is fond of singing. He is endowed by nature with a strong sense of rhythm. His songs burst from him, when in his own environment, as naturally and as freely as those of a bird amid its native trees.’³³⁴ As Hirsch points out, white supremacism underlay the fact that ‘although Lomax thought the cowboy acquired this natural art in the free open air’ amid an expansionist sensibility, similarly organic behaviour was only found in African Americans ‘in prisons, levee camps, and other plantation-like situations’.³³⁵ For Lomax, such images formed part of a broader romanticised opposition to modernity—a reaction against newspapers, books, radio, telephone, black education, popular culture, and ‘machine civilization’.³³⁶ African Americans were thus more valuable to him as reactionary exemplifications of Social Darwinist theory than they were as human beings with a complex and hybrid diasporic history. In consequence, Porterfield concludes, Lomax had by the late 1930s ‘acquired a national reputation as an authority on folksong, his academic credentials notwithstanding’.³³⁷

The most conspicuous illustration of the contradictions Lomax encountered in his attempt to portray southern African Americans as folk Others is found in his troubled relationship with the songster Huddie Ledbetter, better known by his prison sobriquet Lead Belly. Born in 1888, Ledbetter was first recorded by the Lomaxes while serving time for ‘assault with intent to murder’ in Louisiana’s Angola State Penitentiary.³³⁸ After release due to a reduced sentence, Ledbetter became Lomax’s personal ‘body servant’, driver, and cultural intermediary—making coffee, cleaning

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Hirsch, ‘Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies’, 192.

³³⁶ Lomax & Lomax, ‘Introduction’ to *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, xxvi.

³³⁷ Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 413.

³³⁸ See Charles Wolfe & Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (1992; New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 99. Wolfe and Lornell write that ‘many of the best-known stories about Leadbelly are simply wrong, aggrandized, or oversimplified’ (*Ibid.*, 265); their book, however, invests in some of the very same myths of folk primitivism that Lomax created—referring, for example, to ‘homogeneous folk culture’ and ‘authentic black folk music’ (*Ibid.*, 6, 167). Ledbetter grew up near Caddo Lake and, after a number of years at school, worked picking cotton before earning a local reputation as a skilled entertainer at parties, dances, and around the red light district of Shreveport. Having escaped from a chain gang after a minor run-in with the law for carrying a pistol, Ledbetter assumed the alias ‘Walter Boyd’; he was convicted of the murder of Will Stafford in 1917 but was pardoned by Governor Pat Neff. Ledbetter got into another confrontation in 1930, for which he was sent to Angola.

his car, running his baths, and indicating to inmates the material Lomax desired.³³⁹ In return, Lomax clothed and fed Ledbetter, keeping strict control of the money they made during lecture tours and requiring that Ledbetter keep his convict clothes ‘for exhibition purposes...thought he always hated to wear them’.³⁴⁰ When brought to New York City in late 1934, Filene notes, ‘a barrage of publicity promoting him as the living embodiment of America’s folk-song tradition’ was launched.³⁴¹ Given that the press persistently dwelt upon Ledbetter’s exoticism and misconduct—referring to him as a ‘Murderous Minstrel’, ‘Homicidal Harmonizer’, and ‘Virtuoso of Knife and Guitar’—Porterfield suggests his sensational reception drew on tropes parallel to the 1933 film *King Kong*, in which ‘a savage being, primitive and violent, is discovered by a white man, put in bondage, transported to Manhattan, and put on display’.³⁴² Such exhibitions involved Ledbetter singing among ‘white men in evening clothes and beautifully dressed women’, as Lomax noted: on New Year’s eve, ‘Lead Belly sang and plucked his twelve-stringed “box” for a group coming from Columbia University and New York University. Present besides were publishers, writers, artists, editors, [and] reporters.’³⁴³ From the start, Lomax saw lucrative as well scholarly potential in his black ward, writing to his future (second) wife Ruby Terrill: ‘he sung us one song which I shall copyright as soon as I go to Washington and try to market in sheet music form’.³⁴⁴ Rather than a neat and simple edition of verse, however, Lomax’s collecting had resulted in him becoming the manager of a live performer; unlike a book, Ledbetter could talk back, respond to the situations in which he found himself, and even disobey or disappear altogether if he so wished. In short, Lomax found Ledbetter harder to manipulate than an anthology—a problem exacerbated by Lomax’s wish for him to fit an unsustainable definition of authenticity. After parting company, Lomax would later complain that he ‘suffered intense mortification and humiliation at [his] failure to influence Lead Belly’.³⁴⁵ Lomax seemed unaware that

³³⁹ See John A. Lomax & Alan Lomax (eds), *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 36.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ Filene, “‘Our Singing Country’”, 603.

³⁴² Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 347. Wolfe and Lornell also suggest parallels with the 1932 film *I Am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, starring Paul Muni; see *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 1.

³⁴³ Lomax & Lomax (eds), *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 48.

³⁴⁴ Letter to Ruby Terrill from John A. Lomax (July 1933), quoted in Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 300.

³⁴⁵ Lomax & Lomax (eds), *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 62.

Ledbetter faced far greater humiliation from the financial paternalism and anachronistic, racializing representations he was repeatedly subject to.



Figure 1.1: Cartoon from Hope Ridings Miller, 'Folk Song Curator Relates Saga of Search for Ditties', *The Washington Post*, 20 December 1936, 4.

The most influential source in establishing Ledbetter's reputation was a profile in the *New York Herald Tribune* published shortly after he arrived, with the subtitle 'sweet singer of the swamplands here to do a few tunes between homicides'.³⁴⁶ Shadowing earlier folksong discourse emphasising material over cultural practice, Ledbetter was described in anthropomorphic terms as 'a walking, singing, fighting album of Negro ballads', yet he was also a potent force whose voice 'causes brown-skinned woman to swoon and produces a violently inverse effect upon their husbands and lovers'.³⁴⁷ The article essentialised and exoticised Ledbetter's past, casting him in the role of grateful and obedient captive: 'for [the Lomaxes] the Negro minstrel bears an undying affection which led him...to pledge to them his life and services till death should part them'.³⁴⁸ Betraying Social Darwinist ideology, Ledbetter was cast as 'a "natural", who had no idea of money, law or ethics and who was possessed of virtually no self-restraint'.³⁴⁹ Similar views appeared in the *New York Times*, where Lomax's 'altruistic' quest for folksong was praised along with his books, which were seen as 'a recountment of sordid, semi-savage emotions'.³⁵⁰ Ledbetter himself was portrayed as 'primitive in his mind and heart...concerned with thoughts of bodily enjoyment'; focused on the blind pursuit of base pleasure, the products of his 'half-articulate, groping mind' were seen as the antithesis of the spiritual.³⁵¹ The article excused any exploitation on the grounds of Ledbetter's talent and the 'curious-minded and sensation-loving audiences' who might find his 'guileless crudity' and 'musically monotonous' songs beguiling.³⁵² Such mythology was confirmed through a clumsy

³⁴⁶ 'Lomax Arrives with Lead Belly, Negro Minstrel', *New York Herald Tribune*, January 3 1935, quoted in: Wolfe & Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 139.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 141–42.

³⁵⁰ 'The "King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players"', *New York Times*, December 27 1936, 7.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.* The 'comfortable bankroll' mentioned, however, was a tragic misreading of Ledbetter's management contract, which stipulated that he only receive one third of the earnings from

re-enactment of Lomax and Ledbetter's initial meetings for a nationwide *March of Time* newsreel, scripted by Alan.³⁵³ Insinuations of servitude and racial subjugation were evident in Ledbetter's recurrent admission of being 'your man'; indeed, Alan acted as invisible puppet master, moving Ledbetter's lips in the linguistic tradition of blackface caricature. At times, such modes of representation drew overtly on nineteenth-century minstrel stereotype—as can be seen in illustrations for the *Washington Post* (Figure 1.2). What William G. Roy terms the 'idyllic fantasy of the untarnished other' was played out on the terms of a white establishment, as institutional structures of the period rewarded southern blacks when they acted in the expected guise of 'the folk'.³⁵⁴ In Robert Cantwell's formulation, Lomax thus followed in a tradition of 'cultural brokerage' among 'minstrel show and circus entrepreneurs who understood that the commodification of indigenous song and dance involves their transportation, with fanfare, across cultural frontiers'; enacting the role of interlocutor, 'his message was superiority, mastery, command.'³⁵⁵

Lomax began his 1936 collaborative biography *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* by asserting that Ledbetter 'had a career of violence the record of which is a black epic of horrors'; he noted that such criminality had nevertheless secured an audience for him in New York, where 'the term "bad nigger"' only added to his attraction'.³⁵⁶ Ledbetter's principal fascination for Lomax, however, seemed to reside in his projected status as the cultural relic of a disappearing 'Negro minstrel class';

his appearances (the other two thirds divided between John and Alan Lomax). Ledbetter would eventually break free of this contract and re-enter the New York folk music scene via a network of influential Leftists. See Robbie Lieberman, *'My Song is My Weapon': People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–50* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*.

³⁵³ See Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 354. The *March of Time* newsreel is available online at: <http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,30862122001_1918195,00.html> [accessed 31/10/14]. The film opens with Ledbetter, amid black actors in prison garb, singing 'Irene' while Lomax records him. The following scene, set in a respectable Texan hotel, finds Ledbetter dressed in overalls bounding upstairs with his twelve-string guitar and knocking at Lomax's door; he is called in and Lomax looks up to ask the purpose of this unanticipated visit. Ledbetter responds: 'I came here to be your man. I got to work for you the rest of my life!' After some dialogue, Ledbetter pleads with Lomax: 'please boss, take me with you. You'll never have to tie your shoe strings any more.' Lomax agrees and Ledbetter appears jubilant—clapping, nodding, and shouting 'thank you, sir, boss, thank you! I'll drive you all over the United States and I'll sing all songs for you! You be my big boss and I'll be your man!' Ledbetter is then seen wearing a sharp suit while serenading Martha Promise. Finally, a commanding voiceover states that 'hailed by the Library of Congress' Music Division as its greatest folksong find in twenty-five years, Lead Belly's songs go into the archives of the great national institution along with the original copy of the Declaration of Independence'.

³⁵⁴ Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, 110.

³⁵⁵ Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 73–5.

³⁵⁶ Lomax & Lomax (eds), *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, x, 49.

although Lomax was forced to confess (given the work of George Herzog) that the majority of Ledbetter's repertoire had already appeared in print and represented an interracial mix of popular material, he attempted to salvage folk authenticity through the idea that Ledbetter had changed every song 'because he wanted [them] to become distinctively his own'.³⁵⁷ Lomax had thus come to see Ledbetter's genius manifest in his interpretations and improvisations upon prior material:

We present this set of songs, therefore, not as folk songs entirely, but as a cross-section of Afro-American songs that have influenced and have been influenced by popular music; and we present this singer, not as a folk singer handing on a tradition faithfully, but as a folk artist who contributes to the tradition, and as a musician of a sort important in the growth of American popular music. We give at once the colorful, personal background of Negro 'sinful songs' and the 'life and works' of an artist who happened to be born with a black skin and with Negro barrel-house life, convict life and folk-lore for his artistic material.³⁵⁸

This passage is indicative of a crucial and progressive shift in Lomax's thinking—from prior concern with untainted communal compositions to the *process* by which songs imbricated in commerce were actively transformed by singers; in other words (belatedly shadowing Pound's rebuke), a shift from *artefacts* to *people*. The spectre of reification, however, loomed large—transferred to the realm of the racialized body. Ledbetter now appeared to be a conventional (read: white) artist in a convict's 'black skin', suggested by Lomax's comment that 'young Mozart was no more absorbed in music than young, black Huddie Ledbetter'.³⁵⁹ Ledbetter's racial marginality was indeed inseparable from his success, and Lomax drew on familiar tropes to articulate such difference: 'He crouched over his guitar as he played, as his fingers made the incredibly swift, skilful runs...his eyes were tight-shut so that between his eyebrows there appeared deep furrows of concentration curving back like devil's horns...the words and music leapt out of his brooding relaxation, his whole being focused in a song'.³⁶⁰ Ledbetter thus channelled the archetypal trickster—friend of Blind Lemon Jefferson; virtuoso devil at the southern crossroads; precursor to Robert Johnson; subversively signifyin(g) monkey; Esu-Elegbara incarnate.³⁶¹

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xi, xii.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁶¹ Lomax recalls that Kittredge's first response to Ledbetter was to say 'he's a demon' (*Ibid.*, 62). Ledbetter played in a duo with Jefferson for a number of years. On Esu-Elegbara and Yoruba



Figure 1.2: Huddie Ledbetter wearing a sharecropper outfit for exhibition purposes, from *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936)

Despite Lomax’s protestations that he had always ‘laughed with [his] Negro friends—never at them’, his stance ultimately did little to advance the cause of African American self-definition: his seemingly benevolent emphasis on folk creativity was predicated upon primitivism, nostalgia, and segregation.³⁶² Spurred by ballad theory and concerned simply with exhibiting the black (as) low Other, Lomax found it impossible to see Ledbetter as anything but an infantilised or Mephistophelian embodiment of racial difference. Understandably, the vast majority of African Americans rejected Lomax’s brand of racializing display, as he wrote in 1936: ‘I’d like to protest again to the educated and the semi-educated Negroes of the South. Almost universally they opposed my project of collecting the folk lore and folk songs on the ground that “we have got beyond that”...Tuskegee and other Negro colleges politely refused to allow me to talk to their students’.³⁶³ In contrast to the radical contemporaneous work of Lawrence Gellert—who deliberately solicited material featuring expressions of protest against racial subjugation—the Lomaxes’ cultural mediations show them to have been more interested in a conception of

mythology, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Ayana Smith, ‘Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster’, *Popular Music* 24/2 (2005): 179–91. See also George Lipsitz, ‘Remembering Robert Johnson: Romance and Reality’, *Popular Music and Society* 21/4 (1997): 39–50.

³⁶² Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 98.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 299.

blackness that gladly accepted a subordinate status.³⁶⁴ Such ideas were made explicit in the frontispiece photograph to *Negro Folk Songs* (Figure 1.3), where Ledbetter posed barefoot in bib dungarees and neckerchief on a stack of agricultural sacks flanked by wooden barrels. Such methods of staging black southern artists in rural ‘down home’ tableaux would set a precedent for the postwar blues revival.

Ledbetter, however, was anything but the unalloyed and unlettered figure that Lomax had initially envisioned: he could read and write, wore sharp suits, and was a consummate performer able to respond to audience demand and expectation.³⁶⁵ As Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell note, Ledbetter’s former life as a versatile songster and skilled string band ‘musicianer’ meant that his repertoire encompassed published popular hits, religious songs, vaudeville songs, recorded blues, ragtime, and jazz alongside original compositions.³⁶⁶ Moreover, he seemed to savour performative mystique, often giving conflicting accounts of his past and consciously inhabiting black self-stereotypes to appease Lomax’s condescending ire.³⁶⁷ By attempting to enfold him into a northern metropolitan culture, the Lomaxes had thus trapped Ledbetter in a classic double bind: depicted as both exotic outsider and common man, Filene notes, they exaggerated ‘both his marginality and his similarity to their ideal picture of America’.³⁶⁸ Through this process the Lomaxes created a powerful ‘cult of authenticity’—a web of signifying criteria that defined folksong not just as a written or recorded artefact, but idiomatically via the style and bodies of performers themselves.³⁶⁹ John and Alan Lomax initiated this decisive shift in folk discourse—away from an undifferentiated ancient throng toward the exhibition of embodied eccentricities found in individual, living performers.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁴ Steven Garabedian, ‘Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, “Negro Songs of Protest,” and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s’, *American Quarterly* 57/1 (2005), 186.

³⁶⁵ See Filene, “‘Our Singing Country’”.

³⁶⁶ See Wolfe & Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*.

³⁶⁷ See, for example, *Ibid.*, 129 and Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 345.

³⁶⁸ Filene, “‘Our Singing Country’”, 616.

³⁶⁹ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 49. Alan Lomax would spend the majority of the 1950s in Britain as an influential figure in the post-war revival: see David Gregory, ‘Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC and the Folk-Song Revival in England, 1950–58’, *Folk Music Journal* 8/2 (2002): 136–69; Tom Western, “‘The Age of the Golden Ear’: *The Columbia World Library* and Sounding out Post-war Field Recording”, *Twentieth-Century Music* 11/2 (2014): 275–300; and John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

³⁷⁰ Reviving the stalled careers of esoteric rural musicians by bringing them to events such as the Newport Folk Festival, for example, would become central to the aesthetics of the 1960s scene.

4 | Conclusion: 'A Fraud, A Delusion, A Myth'

In a paper read to the Folk-lore Society in London during the early 1890s, Joseph Jacobs arrived at a radical conclusion. Pointing to a 'curious omission' at the heart of discussions concerning how 'sayings and doings of the Folk should be arranged and classified', he proposed that 'in dealing with Folk-lore, much was said of the Lore, almost nothing was said of the Folk'.³⁷¹ He continued by arguing that such traditions were evidently not shared by all, that 'important variations' existed, and that 'even for purposes of universal custom we have to split up that mysterious entity, the Folk, into various segments of mutually conflicting opinions' in order to account for its 'many-headed' diversity.³⁷² Jacobs pushed the argument further still:

When we come to realise what we mean by saying a custom, a tale, a myth arose from the Folk, I fear we must come to the conclusion that the said Folk is a fraud, a delusion, a myth...The Folk is simply a name for our ignorance: we do not know to whom a proverb, a tale, a custom, a myth owes its origin, so we say it originated among the Folk...The Folk is a publishing syndicate that exploits the productions of that voluminous author, Anon.³⁷³

The fact that this polemic had no significant effect on regulative twentieth-century attitudes toward folksong on either side of the Atlantic suggests that dominant ideological forces were at work directing the contour of discourse and filling in such lacunae with conjectural fantasy. Revivalist ideology was reliant on this very lack of specificity: merely as a source of restorative Otherness, Boyes suggests, the folk offered 'a powerfully attractive rationale for their acceptance as fact'.³⁷⁴ Deconstructing folksong by tracing its contingencies has thus left us with what Foucault described as an 'unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers'—not the inviolable identity of clear origins or assured essence, but dissension and disparity, imagined poisons and invented antidotes.³⁷⁵ In other words, the idea of folksong is *a series of contingencies masquerading as a universal*.

³⁷¹ Joseph Jacobs, 'The Folk', *Folklore* 4/2 (1893), 233.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 234, 236.

³⁷⁴ Boyes, *The Imagined Village*, 17.

³⁷⁵ Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 82.

Combined with obsolete aspects of the Harvard ballad consensus, Social Darwinist theories eventually found their way as anonymous axioms into the disciplinary heart of folksong study. At the seventh conference of the International Folk Music Council in 1954, a plenary session discussed a definition proposed by Maud Karpeles.³⁷⁶ A more concise rubric was then drafted by a commission and voted on, with the result that ‘the Congress agreed that this definition be accepted. (Voting by country, 11 votes were given in favour, 1 against and 3 abstentions)’:

Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives. The term can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community. The term does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over ready-made by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character.³⁷⁷

The legacy Sharp bequeathed to folksong’s discursive formation is inscribed throughout: it is the unwritten survival of a purely oral tradition; it results from communal evolution (via continuity, variation, and selection); and it is produced and reformulated within the confines of a hermetic milieu dislocated from popular and art musics, and supposedly untouched by the hybridising ravages of modernity. Although this definition seemingly reformulated folk as a process rather than a genre, it relied upon wholly untenable and deeply anachronistic historiographical assumptions. As Gelbart notes, such definitions were doomed to tautological incoherence as the classifications they invoke are not ‘timeless, objective truths’ but constructions actively brought into existence through mutual dependence and dialectical

³⁷⁶ Maud Karpeles, ‘Definition of Folk Music’, *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 7 (1955), 6–7.

³⁷⁷ ‘Resolutions: Definition of Folk Music / Folk Music in Education’, *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 7 (1955), 23. Sharp’s influence was also felt in the resolution on ‘Folk Music in Education’ passed unanimously during the same IFMC conference, flagrantly asserting that appointed specialists should be utilised in the ‘selection’ and ‘control of...diffusion by popular methods’ (*Ibid.*, 4); The process of gatekeeping could hardly be better exemplified.

opposition.³⁷⁸ The reified triumvirate of ‘folk’, ‘popular’, and ‘art’ is an illusion that has denied the untidy historicity of each term as well as their mutable, relational subsistence; more problematically, such aesthetic taxonomies involve projecting criteria onto erstwhile contexts that would not recognise them.

The work of Sharp, Lomax, and the ideals enshrined in the IFMC definition follow what Rosemary L. Zumwalt has identified as the ‘literary’ tradition in folklore scholarship, in which the products of social marginality were studied ‘apart from the people and their culture’.³⁷⁹ Concurrent with expropriations of vernacular material, ‘literary’ collectors of the early twentieth century systematically misrepresented the cultural milieux they encountered by extracting songs as reified texts no longer wedded to their original patterns of meaning and use—transporting selected material from margin to metropolis and, in the process, creating an essentialised portrait of vernacular culture. Using anthropological terminology, this process was a paradigm of ‘etic’ research—pursued by outsiders of higher social status unwilling to see informants on their own terms or accept the integrity of cultural practices when they conflicted with preordained assumptions. Indeed, as was demonstrated with reference to Henry Burstow, those identified as ‘folk’ singers neither used nor identified with the term itself; even Karpeles admitted that ‘the traditional singer...does not distinguish between folk songs and other songs in his repertory’.³⁸⁰ Though seen as a crucial source of ‘folksong’, Burstow was not the unschooled ‘peasant’ that discourse made him out to be. As Boyes notes, such ascriptions robbed singers of their cultural significance while shifting it ‘to an undocumented area of the past, accessible only to specialists’.³⁸¹ Ironically, Gammon adds, the only people ever to have performed a ‘pure’ repertoire were therefore metropolitan revivalists themselves.³⁸² Charles Keil recognised as much when he claimed in 1978 that ‘there never were any “folk”, except in the minds of the bourgeoisie’: through ‘an act of magical naming’, he asserted, ‘all the peasantries and technologically primitive peoples of the world can be turned into “folk”’.³⁸³ Keil’s short diatribe against the aestheticised appropriation of

³⁷⁸ Gelbart, *The Invention of ‘Folk Music’ and ‘Art Music’*, 4.

³⁷⁹ Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship*, 9. Zumwalt draws a distinction between the legacies of Child (Harvard, literature) and Boas (Columbia, anthropology) in US folklore research.

³⁸⁰ Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, 39.

³⁸¹ Boyes, *The Imagined Village*, 14.

³⁸² Gammon, “Not Appreciated in Worthing?”, 21.

³⁸³ Charles Keil, ‘Who Needs “the Folk”?’’, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 15/3 (1978), 263.

American folklorist Richard M. Dorson wrote a thoroughly unconvincing reply; see Richard M. Dorson, ‘We All Need the Folk’, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 15/3 (1978): 267–69.

vernacular custom under the aegis of folklore cuts to the heart of the matter: ‘tightly rehearsed whirling couples in matching costumes’, he wrote, ‘are certainly a lot more impressive than a bunch of shit-kicking villagers...a way must be found to turn folklorists and folk back into people’.³⁸⁴ Dancing puppets, as Pound argued so convincingly, should be seen for what they are—creations born of ideological fantasy and animated by the dictates of primitivist conjecture.

This appraisal, however, should not represent the end point of critique, but merely the initial ground upon which a more thorough historicisation of folksong needs to rest—the more pressing question being *why* did such fantasies arise and persist in particular contexts amid certain groups? As Bendix urges, the question ‘what is authenticity’ must be supplemented by ‘who needs authenticity and why?’³⁸⁵ Folkloristic belief has yielded existential meaning and formed new social realities, in turn establishing the basis of postwar revival scenes and the broader aesthetics of rock. Indeed, Simon Frith has proposed that the importance of such myths is that *they are myths*: our task is therefore one of understanding why imagined constructions appear necessary and compelling.³⁸⁶ It is not coincidental that folk theories appeared during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth: this *fin de siècle* moment, as Eric Hobsbawm and David Cannadine argue, was a ‘golden age of “invented traditions”’ that saw nationalistic fictions ‘spring up with particular assiduity’.³⁸⁷ In Britain, this process was central to the performance of Imperial state control; in the US, similar developments related to constructions of independent national identity in the wake of the Civil War and during the Great Depression. Functioning to legitimise and naturalise power relations, such inventions were underpinned by the insidious metaphors of a Social Darwinist worldview. Hobsbawm suggests that the dramatic social and political transformations of this period ‘called for new devices to ensure or express social cohesion and identity’; deliberate creation of cultural mythology thus ‘succeeded mainly in proportion to its

³⁸⁴ Keil, ‘Who Needs “the Folk”?’ , 264.

³⁸⁵ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 21.

³⁸⁶ Simon Frith, “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community”, *Popular Music* 1 (1981), 168.

³⁸⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914’ and David Cannadine, ‘The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the “Invention of Tradition”, c. 1820–1977’ in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm & Ranger, 138, 263. Hobsbawm defined an invented tradition as ‘a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’—a continuity that is ‘largely fictitious’ (Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’ in *Ibid.*, 1, 2).

success in broadcasting on a wavelength to which the public was ready to tune in'.³⁸⁸ Such gestures were reactions to moments of rapid social change or technological innovation, attempting 'to structure at least some parts of social life...as unchanging and invariant'.³⁸⁹ The songs of an imagined 'folk'—whether in the semblance of peasants, hillbillies, cowboys, or African Americans—provided an ideal way to imagine such isolated pockets of cultural invariance as signifiers of class or racialized alterity more intimately in touch with a nation's (desired) cultural roots. Ironically, employing Holt N. Parker's formulation of popular as 'unauthorized' culture, *folksong has never been part of the popular domain*: the fact that it has undergone such levels of selective mediation and invention reveal it to have been a constitutive strand in the textile of elite culture.³⁹⁰ Likewise, in spite of its anti-modern slant, *folksong is a thoroughly modern concept*: as McLane has suggested, the invention of tradition 'may be one definition of modernity itself'.³⁹¹

Hobsbawm's caution that 'we should not be misled by a curious, but understandable, paradox' surrounding patriotism can be translated onto folksong: 'modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel...and the opposite of "constructed"'.³⁹² Analogously, the ideology of folksong involved the creative forgery of historical continuity and unsullied origins where only a hybrid and heterogeneous nexus of cultural praxis once existed. As a reactionary concept generated from within modernity, folksong was used as a crucial site to articulate ideas substantiated by evolutionary metaphors as a means to *resist* mass culture, urbanisation, and thus modernity itself. Such theories reveal far more about collectors than about the cultures their work represented. Williams thus argues that we must exercise 'the sharpest scepticism' against sentimental accounts of a national past or superficial juxtapositions of rural and urban locales.³⁹³ For Williams, a Golden Age of primitive, communal solidity is 'a myth functioning as a memory'.³⁹⁴ Indeed, entry into public memory has depended on the active work of cultural 'middlemen' such as Sharp and Lomax.³⁹⁵ This chapter has shown how these two men determined

³⁸⁸ Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions', 263.

³⁸⁹ Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', 2.

³⁹⁰ See Parker, 'Toward a Definition of Popular Culture'.

³⁹¹ McLane, *Balladeering*, 77.

³⁹² Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', 14.

³⁹³ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011), 9.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁹⁵ The term is used by Filene; see *Romancing the Folk*, 5.

perceptions of Western transatlantic heritage, acting as gatekeepers to the idea and practice of folksong and thus to conceptualisations of national (and racial) identity. Their positions as mediators were secured and reinforced through lecturing, social contacts, publication of anthologies, and ties to institutions such as the Library of Congress and the English Folk Dance and Song Society. Both Sharp and Lomax, however, were also disciplinary outsiders—popular disseminators rather than academics or antiquarians. Through the simplicity they offered, they afforded certain ideologies, leaving more nuanced voices (such as Grainger, Kidson, and Pound) forgotten in their wake. Indeed, the pathways they constructed and reinforced allowed ideas to flow more easily in some directions than in others, particularly so when aligned with broader political desires or anxieties. Ultimately, *folklorists acted as gates through which 'folk' culture had to pass in order to be recognised as such*: occupying positions of control over discourse and material reproduction, they exercised a consequent hegemony over the representation of difference.

'His Rough, Stubborn Muse'**Industrial Balladry, Class, and the Politics of Realism**

Tek them blokes as spout on boxes outside the factory sometimes. I like to hear 'em talk about Russia, about farms and power-stations they've got, because it's interestin', but when they say that when they get in government everybody's got to share and share alike, then that's another thing. I ain't a communist, I tell you.

~ Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958)

Following the Second World War, Georgina Boyes notes that 'control of the reproduction of Folk culture passed beyond the institutions of [Cecil] Sharp's form of the movement'.¹ She cautions, however, that this new revival milieu remained 'a prisoner of its pre-war past, constantly regurgitating relict ideologies'; indeed, she writes, 'the cultural thesis Sharp created to necessitate a Revival proved monumentally durable—outlasting most attempts at innovation'.² Likewise, Dave Harker proposes that similarities between Sharp and later writers such as A. L. Lloyd are more significant than their differences: 'by sticking to the concept of "folksong"', Harker argues, 'Lloyd had to reconcile theory with the fact that the "folk" had changed', perpetuating an obsolete consensus that affected the integrity of his radical politics.³ The theoretical realignment that Lloyd wrought would become the defining

¹ Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (1993; Leeds: No Masters Co-Operative, 2010), 196.

² *Ibid.*, 200.

³ Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'folksong' 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), 243.

aspect of postwar revivalism—creating an explicitly masculine vision of folksong that respectfully built upon and yet stridently dismissed Edwardian ideology. This innovation was the idea of working-class industrial balladry. Around mid-century, Lloyd and Ewan MacColl were active in translating the specious concept of pastoral authenticity onto contexts defined by mechanised physical labour, paradoxically revealing both attraction and aversion to industrialised modernity. What Harker and Boyes neglect in their accounts is *how* and *why* these radical British Leftists created heroic and highly gendered eulogies for native working-class low Others during the 1950s. In this chapter, I provide an answer to such questions by looking at the ways in which a distinctive ‘romantic socialist’ trend in British literature was directed by Marxist folklorists toward intransigent ‘industrial realist’ aesthetics. Identifying links between William Morris and George Orwell, Anna Vaninskaya argues that romantic socialism united ‘a curious mixture of traditionalism and social critique’ by blending nostalgia for rural life and the national past with a janiform utopian / dystopian outlook ‘characterized by an intense aversion to elitism, hierarchical state centralization, and worship of the Machine’.⁴ Lloyd and MacColl shared in this quixotic radicalism but crucially grafted the city, heavy industry, and mechanisation onto the spaces formerly reserved for craft and agrarian paradigms. In consequence, as Owen Holland states, MacColl’s output harboured a tendency to instrumentalise the aesthetic to didactic ends, ‘subordinating form to political function’.⁵ Indeed, the fact that MacColl was fanatically invested in a prescriptive reading of class enmity led toward the abandonment of dialogue or reflexivity in his artistic praxis and an untenable emphasis on subcultural purism.

Lloyd and MacColl’s contentious heuristics were derived from a Marxism filtered through the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB); in turn, they were given a platform through Party affiliates the Workers’ Music Association (WMA), publishers Lawrence & Wishart, Topic Records, and *Sing* magazine. As Andy Croft

⁴ Anna Vaninskaya, ‘Janus-Faced Fictions: Socialism as Utopia and Dystopia in William Morris and George Orwell’, *Utopian Studies* 14/2 (2003), 93, 84. See, for example, May Morris (ed.), *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937; London: Penguin, 2001). Tellingly, Vaninskaya cites A. L. Morton and E. P. Thompson in this tradition—both key influences on Lloyd’s historiography.

⁵ Owen Holland, ‘Remembering Ewan MacColl: the Agency of Writing and the Creation of a Participatory Popular Culture’, *New Theatre Quarterly* 28/1 (2012), 81.

notes, the Party's political climate was 'at ease with the impulse to write'.⁶ However, as James Eaden and David Renton argue, the ideological shifts urged by Moscow on the Soviet-subsidised CPGB 'were not based on an assessment of what might be in the interests of British communists or the working-class movement that they aspired to lead'.⁷ Lloyd and MacColl nevertheless remained loyal to crucial aspects of CPGB policy, resisting mass culture and parliamentary reformism by clinging onto class-against-class hostility generated in the wake of revolutionary optimism. The BBC 'radio ballads'—long audio montages of documentary recordings from which MacColl wrote and interleaved songs in a 'folk' pastiche—provide a way to trace how such ideology manifested itself in practice. Moreover, as Joanna Bourke notes, radio 'acquainted people throughout Britain with how other people in the country lived'.⁸ MacColl's radio ballads thus warrant attention for the ways in which the radical Left constructed particular representations of working class life. Indeed, as David Cannadine has proposed, class itself is a 'history of *ideas* about society' rather than an objective description and thus demands critique as a series of rhetorical devices veiling protean social experience.⁹ Although Ben Harker reads the programmes as 'a sophisticated rearguard defense' of cultural policies advocated by the CPGB and accordingly 'a riposte to New Left positions', I show (with reference to polemics in the *New Left Review*) that this heterodox milieu eagerly embraced the radio ballads as paradigms of democratic art that might resist the perils of a cooperate music industry.¹⁰ In a recent study, Peter Cox naïvely suggests that the programmes 'deliberately let working people have their say, rather than speaking for them'.¹¹ I conclude, however, that this view could hardly be less tenable: not only did MacColl freely elaborate upon recorded interviews through the mediation of songwriting, he selected, filtered, and shaped initial material to suit a political ideology coloured by misogyny, nostalgia, and a disdain for capitalist imperialism.

⁶ Andy Croft, 'Authors Take Sides: Writers and the Communist Party, 1920–56' in *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of British Communism*, ed. Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, & Kevin Morgan (London: Pluto, 1995), 88.

⁷ James Eaden & David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain Since 1920* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), xi.

⁸ Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 187.

⁹ David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), 171.

¹⁰ Ben Harker, 'Class Composition: *The Ballad of John Axon*, Cultural Debate and the Late 1950s British Left,' *Science & Society* 73/3 (2009), 344.

¹¹ Peter Cox, *Set into Song: Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker, Peggy Seeger and the Radio Ballads* (Cambridge: Labatie Books, 2008), 87.

This chapter falls into three sections: first, a genealogy of postwar folk discourse mapping the spectral presence of Edwardian ideology within the emergence of a markedly new fetishisation of urban industrial culture indebted to egalitarian ideas from the US; second, a close reading of two early radio ballads by MacColl that proved to be catalysts for the burgeoning revival—on the themes of railways and mining—in reference to postwar Tory economics and anxieties surrounding popular culture specific to the New Left; and third, a section pursuing a critique of how gender, social change, and working-class identity were interwoven in postwar Britain, arguing that industrial balladry should be seen within the context of social realism (distinct from, although related to, the complex aesthetic project of Stalinist *socialist realism*). I conclude by suggesting that Lloyd and MacColl’s output from this period is a form of ‘political kitsch’ manifesting a drive to construct essentialised visions of native working-class culture as a bulwark against the perceived threats of feminism, Americanised mass culture, and the illusion of classless affluence.

1 | ‘The American Example’: A. L. Lloyd, Ewan MacColl, and the Rearticulation of Folksong

Given the powerful legacy of Edwardian ideas concerning a vanishing southern ‘peasantry’, the most striking shift in British folksong discourse of the postwar period was from the idea of ballads as primitive bucolic artefacts to paradigms of industrial urbanity, partisan class struggle, and contemporaneous political engagement. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more thorough inversion of Sharp’s ideals under the same designation. As we have seen from chapter 1, however, US discourse already held the seeds of an alternative conceptualisation of folksong stemming from the work of Phillips Barry, Louise Pound, and John Lomax. In this section, I establish how Lloyd played a crucial role in this epistemological renewal, demonstrating that he drew enthusiastically on a new generation of ‘functionalist’ American folklore scholarship and translated its democratic insights onto British urban contexts. Such a transition shadows and yet destabilises what Raymond Williams has described as the ideological pull of rural symbolism ‘toward old ways, human ways, natural ways’ in contrast to ideas of the city that conventionally lean ‘towards progress, modernisation,

development'.¹² Through British discourse indebted to communism, this abstract juxtaposition was complicated as older forms of agrarian nostalgia were rearticulated and then projected back onto working-class industrial contexts, generating the very same misreadings of vernacular culture perpetrated by the Edwardian revival.

Born in 1908 to a working-class south London family, Albert Lancaster Lloyd was a radical autodidact who had worked on sheep farms in Australia, as a literary translator, a journalist for *Picture Post*, and on an Antarctic whaling ship.¹³ Having enlisted in the army, Lloyd produced his first significant foray into folksong theory in 1944—a slim volume entitled *The Singing Englishman* that aligned itself with the tenets of a 'romantic socialism'. Founded eight years earlier and presided over by composer Alan Bush, the WMA published the book as part of their Keynote Series.¹⁴ At the time, the organisation's 'aims and objectives' were stated as follows:

1. To present to the people their rich musical inheritance.
2. To utilise fully the stimulating power of music to inspire the people.
3. To provide recreation and entertainment for war-workers and members of the forces.
4. To stimulate the composition of music appropriate to our time.
5. To foster and further the art of music on the principle that true art can move the people to work for the betterment of society.¹⁵

Finally, they sought to emphasise 'the need to promote music-making of a character which encourages vigorous and decisive action against Fascism'.¹⁶ Indeed, the WMA had commissioned Lloyd to write what he later described as 'a brief social-historical introduction' to folksong in order to translate ideas stemming from the environment of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, as Lloyd himself recalled:

¹² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011), 297.

¹³ For biographical information, see: Dave Arthur, *Bert: The Life and Times of A. L. Lloyd* (London: Pluto, 2012).

¹⁴ Other titles in the series were *Twenty Soviet Composers* by Rena Moisenko, *Background of the Blues* by Iain Lang, and *Music and Society* by Elie Siegmeister. Vice-Presidents of the WMA were listed as: Granville Bantock, Lennox Berkeley, Benjamin Britten, Rutland Boughton, Erik Chisholm, Christian Darnton, Edward J. Dent, Hans Eisler, Alois Haba, John Ireland, Alexander Jemnitz, Joseph Lewis, Elizabeth Maconchy, Alan Rawsthorne, and Vladimir Vogel. Looking back from the late 1960s, Lloyd confessed that the book was 'put together mainly in barrack-rooms, away from reference-works, in between tank-gunnery courses' but was 'the only one of its sort' available at the time; A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967), 5–6.

¹⁵ A. L. Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman: An Introduction to Folksong* (London: Workers' Music Association, 1944), 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In America, late in the Depression and early in the War years, traditional song and its topical imitations were coming into vogue, particularly among young radicals, as a consequence of the stresses of the time, and the rumble of newly-found or newly-made “people’s songs” was rolling towards us across the Atlantic. The Workers’ Music Association...sensed that similar enthusiasm might spread in England, and they were eager to help in the re-discovery of our own lower-class traditions.¹⁷

The Singing Englishman, however, did little to achieve this aim—if anything, undermining the very basis of revival the WMA had wished for by consigning folksong squarely to a prior historical epoch.

A review in the *Musical Times* proposed that ‘here was English folk-song from a new angle...[told] in the light of a Marxian social history’.¹⁸ The *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* dismissed this ‘sociological angle’, as the worth of folksong supposedly rested on its ‘intrinsic merit...[as] the expression of the permanent and unchanging qualities of mankind’.¹⁹ For Lloyd, in contrast, folksongs were ‘songs of the common people...the peak of cultural achievement of the English lower classes’: rather than amorphous symbols of national or ‘racial’ identity, he painted the folk as an exploited population brought into being under capitalism.²⁰ Lloyd sought music produced by ‘men as a community, a class even, not as solitary individuals isolated like weathercocks on a steeple of genius’.²¹ Earlier notions of communal composition lurked in this methodology—reformulated from a homogenising fantasy into a socialist ideal. Through bad analogy, Lloyd followed previous theorists in dwelling on the imagined capacity of ‘primitive’ society to embody such modes of authorship: ‘where you don’t have private enterprise, communal art is no more unlikely than communal ploughing’.²² In the book, a confluence of agricultural enclosure, urbanisation, and Industrial Revolution were seen to bring a penumbra of alienation: ‘between them they broke up the village

¹⁷ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 5. See also Robbie Lieberman, *‘My Song is My Weapon’: People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–50* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Richard A. Reuss, [with JoAnne C. Reuss], *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–57* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2000); and Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

¹⁸ F. H., ‘The Singing Englishman’, *Musical Times*, 85/1216 (1944), 183.

¹⁹ M. K., ‘The Singing Englishman’, *Journal of the EFDSS*, 4/5 (1944), 207–8. It seems fairly likely that ‘M. K.’ here is Maud Karpeles.

²⁰ Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman*, 2–3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4. Lloyd’s model was thus a conscious inversion of the equally ideological notion of individual autonomy hailed in Western art music; see Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²² Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman*, 12.

communities as a maelstrom breaks up a picturesque but wormeaten ship...the old idyllic concord of the village community was gone, and in its place was class war of the most unmistakable kind'.²³ Recalling Hubert Parry's eugenic anxieties, in this atmosphere 'the brave hardy tough songs of a former time no longer pleased, and a crop of new ones, decadent and sad and sickly enough to suit an overworked and undernourished slum proletariat was coming up to take their place'.²⁴ Lloyd concluded that folksong was thus 'the product of a social system that has come to an end': the most 'deadly' factor in the 'regression' of such cultural practice, he suggested, was 'the development of industrial technique'.²⁵ The advent of modernity 'meant that the songs died away very quickly': at the present moment, he asserted, 'we have no great body of fine folksong that is bound close to our social life and the times we live in and the way we go about our work'.²⁶

A year after his first book, Lloyd edited a commonly overlooked collection for the British market entitled *Corn on the Cob: Popular and Traditional Poetry of the U.S.A.* This small volume represented the beginnings of a profound turn in Lloyd's thinking on folklore deeply influenced by American ideas. Amongst others, Lloyd's printed sources included Lawrence Gellert's *Negro Songs of Protest* (1926), Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag* (1927), and John and Alan Lomax's *American Ballads and Folksongs* (1934).²⁷ Iconographic cover illustrations manifested the same outsider romanticism that had fuelled the Lomaxes' collecting projects throughout the south and west: a cowboy in ten-gallon hat pursuing a Native American on horseback, a vagrant frontiersman, a 'gold dust' saloon, a black chain-gang convict, a Conestoga wagon, a billowing locomotive with cowcatcher, and a Mississippi paddle steamer. Lloyd prefaced his collection with Sandburg's vivid exaltation of folk creativity:

[Folksong] has been sung at horses and mules from a million wagons. It has a thousand verses if all were gathered...And as a song, it smells of hay mown up over barn dance floors, steps

²³ *Ibid.*, 41, 45. This section in particular bears the influence of A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), which was available at the time through the Left Book Club. Boyes notes that Morton and Lloyd knew each other: in 1939 Morton had taken Lloyd to a live recording of pub singing broadcast by the BBC as *Saturday Night at the Eel's Foot*. See Georgina Boyes, 'The Singing Englishman: An Introduction and Commentary', *Musical Traditions* 134 (2004), <http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/tse_int.htm> [accessed 04/06/14].

²⁴ Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman*, 45–6.

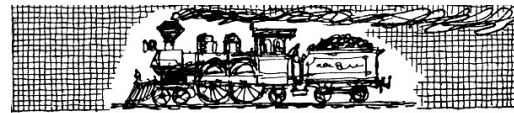
²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 60, 68.

²⁷ A. L. Lloyd (ed.), *Corn on the Cob: Popular and Traditional Poetry of the U.S.A.* (London: Fore, 1945), 63–66.

around like an apple-faced farmhand, has the whiff of a river breeze when the catfish are biting, and rolls along like a good wagon slicked up with new axelgrease on all four wheels. It is as American as Andrew Jackson, Johnny Appleseed and Corn on the Cob.²⁸

Sandburg’s own preface had offered a new paradigm of vernacular song that plainly appealed to Lloyd’s developing sensibilities: ‘a wide procession marches through these pages...puppets wriggle from their yesterdays and testify. Curses, prayers, jigs and jokes, mix here out of the blue mist of the past...It is as ancient as the medieval European ballads brought to the Appalachian Mountains; it is as modern as skyscrapers, the Volstead Act, and the latest oil-well gusher’.²⁹ Furthermore, Sandburg stressed that his collection was a book of ‘singable songs’ that belonged ‘on the piano, or on the back porch, or at the summer cottage, or at the camp’—a pragmatic resource for reimagining (bourgeois) national identity.³⁰



Corn on the Cob



Popular and Traditional Poetry of the U.S.A.



Selected by A. L. LLOYD



Figure 2.1: *Corn on the Cob: Popular and Traditional Poetry of the U.S.A.* (1945)

Akin to Sharp and Lomax, Lloyd asserted that the songs with ‘the most “folk” in them’ were ‘the mountain ballads and the negro songs’, as ‘the more isolated the region, the more chance the old songs had of survival’.³¹ For the first time, however, Lloyd began to acknowledge the possibility of transplanting this framework into a contemporary context. Tellingly, Lloyd proposed that ‘it is the preponderance of work songs, of songs sung at work or about work, which gives the American folk tradition its special character’.³² The source of this material was linked to a racializing portrayal of African Americans that functioned as an antidote to ‘the parlours of respectable homes’: true work songs, he argued, were ‘the property of the negro

²⁸ Carl Sandburg (ed.), *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927), 94. The passage is from the introduction to the song ‘Turkey in the Straw’, which Sandburg goes on to say is ‘the classical American rural tune’.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Lloyd (ed.), *Corn on the Cob*, 7, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

labourer’, as were ‘songs of the city underworld’ that represented ‘a more realistic side quite unconcerned with moral judgements’.³³ What Lloyd seemed to draw from the novel focus on urban contexts was that folksong could become a dynamic and radical phenomenon encoding (exclusively male) working experience, providing a response to repressive politics: ‘American folk poetry is still thriving...every day new songs are made up and quickly assimilated into the national tradition—songs not only of boy meets girl, but also of boy builds railroads and dams, and goes on strike or on relief or moves out of dusty country, or flies ’planes and fights Fascists’.³⁴ Toward the end of his introduction to *Corn on the Cob*, Lloyd stated this position explicitly, directly contradicting his stance in *The Singing Englishman*:

traditional poetry and traditional music have been the property of the country, and cultured poetry and cultured music have been the property of the towns. But nowadays in America this no longer applies...Till recently it always seemed there was a clash between what was cultured and what was traditional, and it was reckoned that culture would win and the traditional would die out. Now it is not so clear, and it really looks as though there may be a blending of the two kinds. Each has something the other needs.³⁵

What he appeared to be prophesying was nothing less than a revival facilitated by modern mass media and the interpenetration of rural and urban milieux.

If Lloyd remained tentative with regard to such ideas in *Corn on the Cob*, by the following year he had completed an unmitigated reversal inspired by the work of Benjamin A. Botkin, then President of the American Folklore Society and in charge of the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song.³⁶ In 1946, Botkin’s anthology *The American People: In their Stories, Legends, Tall Tales, Traditions, Ballads and Songs* had become available in Britain—an abridged edition of his 1944 magnum opus *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads and Traditions of the People*. Lloyd not only read the book, but also underwent a conversion experience

³³ *Ibid.*, 12, 14. Underlying this conception was Lloyd’s tendentious view of the blues as a non-commercial paradigm of poverty, sadness, and unmediated realism; more problematically, he used racialized models of caricature to polarise verse into religious songs of ‘the “good nigger,” a docile labourer’ and those associated with ‘the “bad nigger” who sang the protest songs’ and was inclined toward criminality (*Ibid.*, 13). I deal more fully with these issues in the next chapter.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16. Under the heading ‘Songs of Modern Times’, for example, Lloyd included ‘Round and Round Hitler’s Grave’ by the Almanac Singers. See Allan M. Winkler, *To Everything There is A Season’: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁵ Lloyd (ed), *Corn on the Cob*, 16–17.

³⁶ See Lawrence Rodgers & Jerrold Hirsch (eds.), *America’s Folklorist: B. A. Botkin and American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010). Botkin had studied with Pound.

in the process. One striking phrase arguably provided the impetus for all his later work: ‘the industrial folk tales and songs in this book are evidence enough that machinery does not destroy folklore’.³⁷ Botkin thus gave equal weight to what he described as a ‘folklore of the present’, regarding it as ‘a functional activity of the group singing or playing for self-gratification or for power, to attain the ends of social adjustment and human freedom, by lightening labour, filling leisure, recording events, voicing praise or protest’.³⁸ Like Sandburg—who had provided the foreword for *A Treasury of American Folklore*—Botkin recognised ‘the existence of an urban as well as a rural folk music’ and characterised such activity as a ‘hybrid...of “folk”, “art”, and “popular” idioms’; the folk singer was simply ‘a people’s artist, who sings from the heart and to the hearts of the people’.³⁹ Ignoring the problems of mediation, Botkin’s stance on historiography was remarkably similar to Lloyd’s aspiration to write a Marxist history from below: US folksong, he argued, provided material for a narrative ‘in which for the first time the people speak and are allowed to tell their own story, in their own way’.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Botkin proposed that folklore ‘is something that cannot be contained in a definition but that grows upon one with folklore experience’: ultimately, he continued, it involved things ‘patterned by common experience; varied by individual repetition, inventive or forgetful; and cherished because somehow characteristic or expressive’.⁴¹ Folklore, he concluded, was merely ‘the scholar’s word for something as simple and natural as singing songs and spinning yarns’.⁴² This tautological, expansive, and cunningly evasive definition lent credibility to the role of expert arbitration while opening folklore out toward almost any cultural form or practice baptised as such by those with the institutional authority to do so. Indeed, such strategic silences were ideologically motivated equivocations upon which the romance of folklore necessarily rested.

Botkin had been involved in the Federal Writers’ Project—one of many ameliorative New Deal initiatives employing destitute artists, intellectuals, musicians, and authors for public works during the Great Depression.⁴³ In this period, as

³⁷ B. A. Botkin (ed.), *The American People: In Their Stories, Legends, Tall Tales, Traditions, Ballads and Songs* (London: Pilot Press, 1946), 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 291.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ See Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935–1943* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) and Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture:*

Benjamin Filene outlines, the Roosevelt administration had assimilated a Leftist celebration of the proletariat as a new form of resilient patriotic heritage: ‘the folk’ were cast in romantic nationalist terms as ‘embodiments of America’s strength through diversity’.⁴⁴ Indeed, Botkin’s later work echoed the process of what Jerre Mangione has termed ‘native self-discovery’ during the 1930s through unprecedented cultural attention to urban labouring classes and the dispossessed.⁴⁵ Underpinning this new ethos was a paradigm shift away from theories relating to Social Darwinism, antiquarianism, and primitive survivals toward more functional, documentary ideals. As Filene notes, this pragmatism ‘allowed folklore a political potential’ that could move the discipline ‘beyond its associations with the past and actively and powerfully address the needs of the present’.⁴⁶ Manifest in the increasing influence of figures such as Alan Lomax, the new approach focussed on dynamic, heterogeneous aspects of contemporary culture, challenging previous ideology by redefining folklore as an active social tool. Listing Alan’s name before his father’s, the 1941 preface to *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs*, for example, stated that the purpose of the book was to reflect and disseminate the voices of ‘people who are making new songs today’.⁴⁷ The definition of folksong in the book was ‘not quibbled about’, yet directed the project toward songs that ‘have been strongly rooted in [a singer’s] life and have functioned as enzymes to assist in the digestion of hardship, solitude, violence, hunger, and the honest comradeship of democracy’.⁴⁸ Although their careers would differ markedly, Botkin shared in Alan Lomax’s perspective. Indeed, as Jerrold Hirsch and Lawrence Rodgers propose, Botkin consciously broke down disciplinary boundaries by embracing a ‘democratic, egalitarian, and pluralistic vision of American culture’.⁴⁹ His most salient legacy was thus to reject ‘privileged hierarchies regarding what constituted acceptable objects of

The Politics of Identity in New Deal America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Mangione notes that during the revolutionary radicalism of this period, the ideal of ‘art-for-art’s sake’ was ‘replaced by that of the barricade’ (*The Dream and the Deal*, 31). Botkin had already established a national reputation as an academically trained folklorist before joining the Federal Writers’ Project; material from the Project was included in *A Treasury of American Folklore*.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 133.

⁴⁵ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 50.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁷ Alan Lomax & John A. Lomax (eds.), *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1941; Mineola: Dover, 2000), xxi, xxii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxviii, xxv.

⁴⁹ Jerrold Hirsch & Lawrence Rodgers, ‘Introduction’ in *America’s Folklorist: B. A. Botkin and American Culture*, ed. Rodgers & Hirsch, 2.

study' by suggesting rapprochements between modernity and folklore.⁵⁰ As Hirsch outlines, *A Treasury of American Folklore* synthesised 'functionalist anthropology, the study of American popular literature, the search in the interwar years for indigenous American traditions, and earlier challenges not only to what constituted the folklorist's object of study but also to the role of the folklorist'.⁵¹

Lloyd wrote a rave review of *The American People* for the radical British journal *Our Time*, edited by the poet Edgell Rickword.⁵² The essay opened in polemical tone with Lloyd attacking 'those who have made of folklore a quaint parsonage affair, or something to be wrapped up in a lot of dark anthropological hoo-ha'.⁵³ Sharp's viewpoint was dismissed as 'nonsensical', along with other 'antiquarian boys, who don't know great A from a bull's foot about the folk culture of their own day and age' but 'have evolved a myopic and snobbish theory that all the ancient orders of folklore (the Child ballads, for instance) are a kind of aristocracy, and all the newer orders are something less than dust'.⁵⁴ Lloyd anticipated criticism from a fictional sceptic dubbed Comrade Cleverdick who believed that folklore was inconceivable in an industrialised capitalist society. The riposte was articulated via American scholars who 'came quickly to discover [that]...the proper study of folklore is the study of working people, now as much as any time; for industrialism doesn't destroy either a folk or their lore'.⁵⁵ In the anthology alongside legendary folk heroes, Lloyd wrote, readers could find 'the big mythical men of our own times, the products (are you listening, Comrade Cleverdick?) of an industrial folklore in a society that's as capitalist as can be'.⁵⁶ Following Botkin's model, Lloyd tried to imagine what an equivalent assortment entitled *The English People* might look like, but concluded that it would be too difficult to produce as 'the ground for such a collection is ill-prepared': 'nobody, to my knowledge, has been around the mines and the mills and among the fettleers and the professional footballers, collecting the stories and sayings which must certainly abound in such jobs'.⁵⁷ Without admitting to the fact that he had

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵¹ Jerrold Hirsch, 'The "Ben Botkin Bulldozer": Toward a Reassessment of *A Treasury of American Folklore*' in Rodgers & Hirsch (eds.), *America's Folklorist*, 56, 69.

⁵² See John Lucas, 'Edgell Rickword: Man of Letters', *The Sewanee Review* 102/1 (1994): 112–21.

⁵³ A. L. Lloyd, 'This "Folk" Business', *Our Time* 6/2 (1946), 44–45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

once ardently endorsed Comrade Cleverdick's position, Lloyd ended the review with a vignette in direct contradiction to what he had written just two years before. In 1944, Lloyd argued that hawkers who 'once filled the city streets with music' had finally been 'killed by the department stores, by Woolworths'; in 1946, he now suggested that 'if some people would put their anthropological books away for a moment, and take a walk round Woolworth's, say, they might learn a bit more about folkways than they'd bargained for'.⁵⁸ The lineage is clear and yet has not been spelled out in the literature to date: prior to the influence of Eastern European musicologists such as Raina Katsarova and Constantin Brailoiu, Lloyd drastically altered his views on folklore through direct reference to scholarship from the US.⁵⁹

Lloyd's renewed focus manifested itself most notably in the production of two collections during the early 1950s: *Come All Ye Bold Miners: Ballads and Songs of the Coalfields* and the companion volume *Coaldust Ballads* (featuring selected choral arrangements). The anthologies coincided with the mining industry's contribution to the 1951 Festival of Britain through a competition arranged by Lloyd to 'collect coalfield songs before they disappeared'.⁶⁰ The Festival was a series of national exhibitions intended to be both a public celebration of Britain's victory in the Second World War and an assertion of recuperation. As such, Becky E. Conekin notes, it laid out 'a social democratic agenda for a new and modern Britain', aiming to construct a 'cultured citizenry' through representations of the nation's past and a modern future reliant on planning.⁶¹ Alongside an intellectualised nostalgia for older forms of working-class culture, Lloyd's collections implied a critique of exploitation and resistant inequality: socio-economic marginality was the very token of miners' authenticity as potential producers of industrial folksong. By means of a newsreel and notices in *Mining Review* and *Coal* magazines, miners had been invited to contribute 'any songs they knew, of the life, work, pastimes, disasters and unions struggles in the coalfields'.⁶² The project was not quite as successful as anticipated: Lloyd reported

⁵⁸ Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman*, 68; Lloyd, 'This "Folk" Business', 46.

⁵⁹ See Arthur, *Bert*, 153. Arthur notes that Lloyd's language skills and strong links to communist organisations such as the WMA and the International Youth Festival Movement meant that he visited Russia, East Germany, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary during the early 1950s; he would later translate Brailoiu's *Problems of Ethnomusicology* (1984) from the French edition.

⁶⁰ A. L. Lloyd (ed.), *Come All Ye Bold Miners: Ballads and Songs of the Coalfields* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952), 9.

⁶¹ Becky E. Conekin, *'The Autobiography of a Nation': The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 4.

⁶² Lloyd (ed.), *Come All Ye Bold Miners*, 9.

that ‘not all the songs submitted were what we understood as folk-songs’.⁶³ Indeed, earlier folksong ideology continued to animate Lloyd’s decision to categorise miners’ heterogeneous material—clearly indicative of their aesthetic preferences—into authentic, unpublished songs and apparently worthless ‘parodies, literary recitations, parlour ballads’, and music-hall songs.⁶⁴ Lloyd, for instance, dismissed popular material as displaying ‘moth-eaten stereotypes’ and ‘blubbing self-pity’ despite forming the central aspect of vernacular song culture in mining communities.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Lloyd’s sources revealed a predominance of authored material culled from prior publications alongside texts from poets such as Hamish Henderson and Thomas Armstrong, comedians, printers, a journalist, and a ballad opera by D. G. Bridson; Lloyd even included a song written entirely by playwright, actor, and ‘bard of the communist left’ Ewan MacColl, who had recently begun recording for Topic Records and had never worked down a mine.⁶⁶

In his introduction to *Come All Ye Bold Miners* Lloyd noted that many songs in the collection were indeed ‘the work of humble professional song-writers’.⁶⁷ His criteria for authenticity were thus far less coherent than he was willing to admit, resting to a large degree on aesthetic fantasy and imposed political bias. Lloyd

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 106. For a more honest and empirical portrait of northern mining culture during this period, see Dennis, Norman, Fernando Henriques, & Clifford Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life: An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956).

⁶⁶ Ben Harker, *Class Act: The Cultural and Political Life of Ewan MacColl* (London: Pluto, 2007), 104. MacColl’s song, titled ‘The Plodder Seam’, read as follows:

The Plodder Seam is a wicked seam,
 It’s worse than the Trencherbone.
 It’s hot and there’s three foot of shale between
 The coal and rocky stone.
 You can smell the smoke from the fires of hell
 Deep under Ashton town.
 Oh, the Plodder Seam is a wicked seam,
 It’s a mile and a quarter down.

Thirteen hundred tons a day
 Are taken from that mine.
 There’s a ton of dirt for a ton of coal,
 And a gallon of sweat and grime.
 We crawl behind the cutters and
 We scabble for the coal.
 Oh, I’d rather sweep the streets than have
 To burrow like a mole.

The Plodder mine (also known as the Ravine) and the Trencherbone were seams in the south Lancashire coalfield; the Plodder produced poor quality coal and was prone to combustion.

⁶⁷ Lloyd (ed.), *Come All Ye Bold Miners*, 16.

believed that ‘the best songs’ resulted from ‘anonymous colliers with no apparent facility or practice in the making of songs’, exemplified in the following passage:

It goes to the heart, the thought of the pitman stirred by the drama of some strike or disaster, who sits by candle-light with a blunt pen in his fist, staring at a piece of paper on which he has written the opening phrase: ‘Come all ye bold miners...’, and who wrestles by scratch and score with his rough, stubborn muse, till day dawns and the pit buzzer blows, and another ballad has come bawling or timorous into the world.⁶⁸

Betraying the influence of the paradigm shift within US discourse, he argued that many such songs had ‘a direct *functional* quality which goes far beyond mere diversion’.⁶⁹ What Lloyd appears to have desired was less to document a complex vernacular subculture than to engender an invented national tradition. As Gerald Porter notes, Lloyd’s project was not one of recovery but rather ‘the creation of a new and militant song repertoire’ for revivalists themselves.⁷⁰ In the postlapsarian world of heavy industry, Lloyd saw the miner emerge as an archetypal working-class hero—‘a wary man, sharp-witted and blunt of tongue, strong set against rebuff, and little inclined to lick the boots of any master’.⁷¹ Miners of the Tyne coalfields became puppets made to dance to the tune of Lloyd’s essentialising vision:

the pitmen exulted in the new age. The blackness of it was their element, the smoke of the forges seemed a natural part of their landscape. For them, the great stirring of industrial life, with its stresses and struggles, its new techniques and fresh horizons, its battles against nature below ground and against the militia at the pit-heads, meant a change but not a break in tradition; and they accepted it, and gave voice to it out of their coal-stained mouths.⁷²

Lloyd had come a long way from believing that folksong was a relic of the rural past. Heavily skewed toward ideals of masculinity, the ‘folk’ quality manifest in such communities, however, was linked to familiar conceptions of isolated and hermetic cultural difference along with a familiar romanticisation of the low Other: ‘the miners have always tended to be men apart. The fact that they worked underground away

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11; emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Gerald Porter, “‘The World’s Ill-Divided’”: The Communist Party and Progressive Song’ in *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain*, ed. Andy Croft (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 183.

⁷¹ Lloyd (ed.), *Come All Ye Bold Miners*, 12.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 14.

from the light of the sun, and their ragged, soot-faced appearance...caused them to be looked on as a peculiar, uncouth race, dirty, savage, prodigal and drunken'.⁷³

Shortly after *Come All Ye Bold Miners*, MacColl edited a miniature collection of songs for the WMA entitled *The Shuttle and Cage: Industrial Folk-Ballads*. An LP of the same name appeared in 1957, followed by *Second Shift: Industrial Ballads* in 1958, both on Topic sung by MacColl with banjo and guitar accompaniment from Peggy Seeger.⁷⁴ Motivated by a complex fusion of class shame and class consciousness, Ben Harker argues, MacColl (previously Jimmie Miller) was in the habit of refashioning his biography and painting his childhood 'as a slum pastoral'.⁷⁵ Born in Salford to Scottish parents, MacColl would later claim Scottish birth and affect accents ranging 'from working-class Salford to lowland Scots to BBC English depending on the company'.⁷⁶ Having formed his staunch political views during the mass unemployment of the 1930s—later describing the Communist Party as his university—MacColl had become involved in agitprop theatre with Joan Littlewood and had worked sporadically for the BBC, an institution he both ridiculed and yet depended upon.⁷⁷ As Harker notes, however, the 1950s represented a turbulent period for British communism and MacColl's relationship to the Party. MacColl tended to read the early days of the Cold War through the class radicalism of his youth: 'on one side was the decadent bourgeoisie of America, with its corrosive imperialistic culture; on the other, the progressive cultures of the international proletariat, with the Soviet Union in the vanguard'.⁷⁸ Along with a change in the leadership of the CPGB, in the wake of the brutal subjugation by Soviet troops of a democratic uprising in Hungary in 1956 and Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinist personality cult, MacColl had grown frustrated with what Harker describes as 'creeping revisionism' and a turn away from revolutionary ideals.⁷⁹ As Peggy Seeger notes, 'politics was the constant,

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁴ For a discography of Topic Records, see Michael Brocken, *The British Folk Revival, 1944–2002* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 146–216.

⁷⁵ Harker, *Class Act*, 5, 10. Harker notes that MacColl's 1945 name change was partly due to his desire to escape an army court martial for desertion and partly to realign his cultural heritage. On the myths surrounding working-class community, see Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*.

⁷⁶ Harker, *Class Act*, 85.

⁷⁷ Ewan MacColl, *Journeyman: An Autobiography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1990), 386. MacColl had established a radical agit-prop troupe entitled 'Red Megaphones' in 1931 that reformed as 'Theatre of Action' in 1934, 'Theatre Union' in 1936, and subsequently 'Theatre Workshop' in 1945. See Baz Kershaw, *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Volume 3, Since 1895* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷⁸ Harker, *Class Act*, 122–3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

central core of his life...he had a world-view into which everything fitted'.⁸⁰ Fuelled by contrary 'hatred of the upper class, of capitalism, of the system', Seeger proposes, MacColl's partisan beliefs animated his desire to wage 'guerrilla warfare in a culture where the musical dictatorship seem[ed] to be unassailable'.⁸¹

In his preface to *The Shuttle and Cage*, MacColl's strident tone was evident (drawing admonition from the *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, whose reviewer complained that the collection was 'militantly presented'):

There are no nightingales in these songs, no flowers—and the sun is rarely mentioned; their themes are work, poverty, hunger and exploitation. They should be sung to the accompaniment of pneumatic drills and swinging hammers, they should be bawled above the hum of turbines and the clatter of looms for they are songs of toil, anthems of the industrial age...If you have spent your life striving desperately to make ends meet; if you have worked yourself to a standstill and still been unable to feed the kids properly, then you will know why these songs were made. If you have worked in a hot pit, wearing nothing but your boots and felt that the air you were breathing was liquid fire, then you will know why these songs were made. If you have crouched day after day in a twelve-inch seam of coal with four inches of water in it, and hacked with a small pick until every muscle in your body shrieked in protest—then you will know why these songs were made.⁸²

MacColl characterised such material as 'folklore of the industrial worker', which was 'still a largely unexplored field' that could, if properly surveyed, 'enrich our traditional music'.⁸³ Although Harker argues that MacColl defined his ideas 'against what he saw as earlier folklorists' construction of folk music as a rosy, reassuring window on to a vanished rural past', for radical activists in the field of workers' culture, industrial song was simultaneously validated as the inheritor of elements from prior folk epistemology.⁸⁴ There may have been neither flora nor fauna in the collection, but there were still 'folk'—translated from former pastoral innocence to the furnaces of mechanised toil under capitalism. Now wedded to a critique of commodity production, Edwardian legacies haunted MacColl's outlook just as it did

⁸⁰ Peggy Seeger, 'Introduction' to *Ibid*, 4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸² E. V. de B., 'Personal Choice by Ewan MacColl; *The Shuttle and Cage* by Ewan MacColl', *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 7 (1955), 77; MacColl, 'Preface' to *The Shuttle and Cage* [unpaged].

⁸³ MacColl, 'Preface'.

⁸⁴ Harker, *Class Act*, 106.

Lloyd's: 'few of these songs have ever appeared in print before, for they were not made with an eye to quick sales—or to catch the song-plugger's ear'.⁸⁵

Moreover, out of the twenty-one songs in the collection, MacColl had written the lyrics of four; one was by Robert Burns; and others were culled from *Come All Ye Bold Miners*. Alongside an intertextual exchange of material, Lloyd and MacColl regularly performed together at union meetings and recorded collaborations for Topic.⁸⁶ This 'singing Marxist double act' were also members of the loose 'Ballads and Blues' ensemble that had congregated as a result of the eponymous 1953 radio series first aired on the BBC Home Service in which MacColl had hoped to demonstrate that 'Britain possessed a body of songs that were just as vigorous, as tough and as down-to-earth as anything from the USA'.⁸⁷

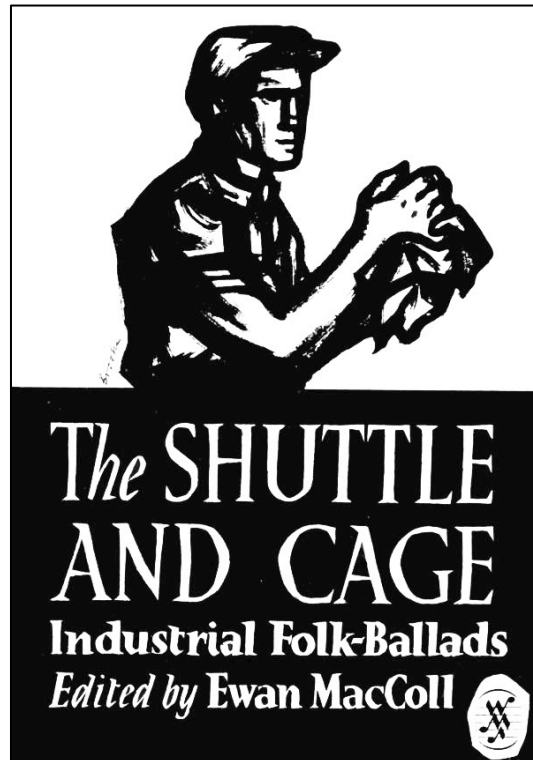


Figure 2.2: *The Shuttle and Cage: Industrial Folk-Ballads* (1954)

Alan Lomax was instrumental in this scene, having introduced Lloyd and MacColl at the exact moment when Lloyd began work on industrial folklore; in turn, Lomax contributed songs to *The Shuttle and Cage*, participated in the *Ballad and Blues* radio series, and formed a skiffle group called The Ramblers in 1956.⁸⁸ This American bearing of industrial folksong was noted at the time: a review of *Come All Ye Bold Miners* and *The Shuttle and Cage* in the US journal *Western Folklore* argued that such ballads 'follow[ed] the same pattern as

⁸⁵ MacColl, 'Preface'.

⁸⁶ See Harker, *Class Act*, 109.

⁸⁷ Harker, *Class Act*, 109; MacColl, *Journeyman*, 275.

⁸⁸ See Harker, *Class Act*, 105, 107, and 114. Harker notes that Lomax had intended for The Ramblers (which also included Lloyd on an informal basis) to be a British equivalent of The Weavers. A rehearsal of the group was the occasion when MacColl was first introduced to Peggy Seeger. Academic literature on skiffle is unfortunately sparse. See Mike Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 1998); Roberta F. Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Gillian Mitchell, 'From "Rock" to "Beat": Towards a Reappraisal of British Popular Music, 1958–1962', *Popular Music and Society* 36/2 (2013): 194–215.

American industrial song'.⁸⁹ Reviewing *The Shuttle and Cage* LP in *Sing*, Eric Winter also wrote that the material was 'accompanied in a folk style which is inescapably American', but that there was 'no clash between the British songs and the American playing'—an aesthetic MacColl and Seeger would utilise in the radio ballads.⁹⁰ Such exchanges went against the CPGB's 1952 call to 'develop the cultural struggle as part of the political struggle' for peace, independence, and socialism by increasing 'activity against the Americanisation of Britain's cultural life'.⁹¹ In other words, American mass culture—interpreted under a broader capitalist agenda—was seen by Marxists as a threat to indigenous tradition. Andy Croft notes that a number of activists thus saw socialism 'as a weapon in the fight for an enriched and democratic human culture'.⁹² Ironically, both the novel influence of American folklore theory and American vernacular song helped sustain Lloyd and MacColl's British communist principles amid this Cold War atmosphere of vociferously *anti*-American sentiment driven by contempt for US cultural and economic imperialism.

A crucial catalyst in the transatlantic dialogue of postwar revivalism, Alan Lomax spent the majority of the 1950s in Britain as part of an ambitious fieldwork project involving collection of material for the *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*.⁹³ In the process, Tom Western notes, Lomax attempted to employ the apparatus of the culture industry and mass media against itself, using the project to covertly enshrine his own values.⁹⁴ MacColl remembered being enraptured by Lomax's singing of 'songs recorded in the coal towns of West Virginia and Kentucky...chants and hollers learned in the prison camps of Texas and

⁸⁹ John Greenway, 'Come All Ye Bold Miners, Coaldust Ballads, Singing Englishmen, and The Singing Englishman by A. L. Lloyd; *The Shuttle and the Cage* by Ewan MacColl', *Western Folklore* 14/4 (1955), 249.

⁹⁰ Eric Winter, 'Anglo-American Co-Operation', *Sing* 4/4–5 (1957), 51.

⁹¹ 1952 CPGB Congress Resolution quoted in: Croft, 'Authors Take Sides', 92. Porter states that MacColl left the Party in 1953 claiming disagreements over the value and role of progressive song ("The World's Ill-Divided", 172); Harker suggests a more cautious approach to the subject given MacColl's own revisionism combined with the lack of available evidence, concluding that MacColl probably let his membership expire sometime during the early 1960s (*Class Act*, 296).

⁹² Andy Croft, 'Introduction' to *A Weapon in the Struggle*, ed. Croft, 1.

⁹³ See David Gregory, 'Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC and the Folk-Song Revival in England, 1950–58', *Folk Music Journal* 8/2 (2002): 136–69; John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Penguin, 2010); and Ronald D. Cohen (ed.), *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934–1997* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Lomax had been recently blacklisted in the right-wing tract *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*; while in Europe, Lomax undertook collecting trips to southwest England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, and Italy.

⁹⁴ Tom Western, "'The Age of the Golden Ear": The Columbia World Library and Sounding out Post-war Field Recording', *Twentieth-Century Music* 11/2 (2014): 275–300.

Florida...blues from Mississippi and Tennessee...lowdown ballads from Louisiana'.⁹⁵ To MacColl, Lomax represented a vital connection to exotic forms of egalitarian authenticity. He confessed to spending 'more and more time listening to Alan's enormous collection of tapes...arguing, discussing, learning and trying to acquire [his] world-view'.⁹⁶ During a correspondence in 1950, MacColl had praised Lomax's recently published biography *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and 'Inventor of Jazz'*, proposing that he had 'produced a work of art...the first great work of Socialist Realism'.⁹⁷ MacColl's laudatory comments hint at an underlying political falsification inherent in the collaboration: indeed, as Katy Martin argues, 'forceful manipulations' distorted Morton's already self-mythologising story in order to make it fit ideological biases surrounding 'the racialized, oppressed organic musician whose suffering gives rise to a redeeming creative genius'.⁹⁸ For Lomax, early jazz was thus absorbed into the folds of an extant folksong schema: 'for more than half a century', he wrote, 'players and orchestras have learned from each other by ear and then made their own transformation of the rhythmic and harmonic material. Only recently have written arrangements intervened and then almost always the music has suffered'.⁹⁹ Disseminating his ideas via the BBC, Lomax functioned as a key channel for US influences that would precipitate the skiffle craze.¹⁰⁰ For MacColl, such aesthetics represented the 'unique and extraordinary awakening' of a youth culture that rejected 'the smooth-voiced crooners of their parents...[and] the führers of Tin Pan Alley' in favour of social 'misfits' such as Lead Belly.¹⁰¹ MacColl thus embraced Lomax's conception of folk revivalism as a resistance to commercial domination involving a transatlantic miscellany of material. In the process, Lloyd and MacColl were active in translating discourses of *racialized*

⁹⁵ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 311.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 270, 271.

⁹⁷ Cited in Szwed, *Alan Lomax*, 244. The complexities of realist aesthetics during this period will be explored later on in this chapter in relation to the BBC radio ballads.

⁹⁸ Katy Martin, 'The Preoccupations of Mr. Lomax, Inventor of the "Inventor of Jazz"', *Popular Music and Society* 36/1 (2013), 30, 32. Martin goes on to note that in the book, 'a lack of emotional suffering comes to explain both the effects and, *ex post facto*, the cause of jazz music's corruption'; for Lomax, Delta blues remained the paradigm of racialized authenticity (37).

⁹⁹ Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and 'Inventor of Jazz'* (1950; London: Cassell & company, 1952), 289.

¹⁰⁰ Lomax was involved in broadcasting several series on BBC radio and television during the 1950s, including *Adventure in Folk Song*, *Patterns in American Folk Song*, *The Art of the Negro*, and *Song Hunter: Alan Lomax*; see Gregory, 'Lomax in London'.

¹⁰¹ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 274.

marginality endemic to the US into discourses of *class-based* antagonism that made sense through the polarising lens of CPGB policy.

Central to folk revivalist culture in 1950s Britain and to the participatory and eclectic aesthetics of skiffle was the magazine *Sing*, published by young communists as a transatlantic mirror to its US ‘big brother’ *Sing Out!*.¹⁰² Appearing in summer 1954 with a cover illustration emphasising utopian aspirations linked to the peace movement, Eric Winter’s editorial asserted that there was a pressing need for the distribution of topical material ‘produced in the course of man’s struggle for a better life’, the ‘tap roots’ of which was traditional folksong.¹⁰³ A new edition of Sharp’s *English Folk Song* occasioned a review taking stock of the Edwardian revival in the light of this ‘recent folk music renaissance’.¹⁰⁴ Hylda Sims noted that, despite his achievements, Sharp’s work on folksong betrayed a ‘lack of understanding of its nature, inspirations, and the “folk” who make it’.¹⁰⁵ Sims argued that if lack of musical training was a central criterion, then there was ‘no reason to suppose that singers are solely rural characters’ and that folksong could only be found in such contexts.¹⁰⁶ Sharp’s chief failing, she concluded, lay in his imposition of aestheticised material onto the population rather than viewing such material as a potential vehicle for popular expression. By 1955, *Sing* saw its mission as mobilising exactly this kind of popular dissent: Johnny Ambrose’s editorial argued that the magazine should be an international forum ‘in which may be discussed all forms of cultural action in the peace and progressive movement’.¹⁰⁷ By 1957, John Hasted claimed that ‘we are now on the crest of the skiffle wave’.¹⁰⁸ Small amateur groups of mixed instrumentation (guitar, banjo, mandolin, DIY bass, washboard, harmonica, clarinet) were encouraged that would ‘make no distinction between a rock’n’roll number and a folk song’;

¹⁰² John Hasted, ‘A Singer’s Notebook’, *Sing* 1/1 (1954), 11. A letter from Irwin Silber, editor of *Sing Out!*, was reproduced in the next issue, stating that ‘we are looking forward to more material which reflects the democratic musical heritage of the people of Great Britain and Ireland as well as continued new topical songs’.

¹⁰³ Eric Winter, ‘Something to Sing About’, *Sing* 1/1 (1954), 2. On nuclear disarmament and the peace movement, see: Holger Nehring, ‘National Internationalists: British and West German Protests against Nuclear Weapons, the Politics of Transnational Communications and the Social History of the Cold War, 1957–1964’, *Contemporary European History* 14/4 (2005): 559–82 and George McKay, ‘Just a Closer Walk with Thee: New Orleans-Style Jazz and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1950s Britain’, *Popular Music* 22/3 (2003): 261–81.

¹⁰⁴ Hylda Sims, ‘Cecil Sharp in 1954’, *Sing* 1/4 (1954), 74.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Johnny Ambrose, ‘International People’s Artists: A Project for Cultural Action’, *Sing* 2/1 (1955), 2.

¹⁰⁸ John Hasted, ‘A Singer’s Notebook’, *Sing* 4/1 (1957), 13.

forecasting the schisms of the 1960s between purists and populists, Hasted urged that ‘we should not set folk music on a sort of pedestal’.¹⁰⁹ Toward the end of the decade, the skiffle wave had broken and sent swathes of young adherents toward the mass transatlantic interest in folksong articulated in opposition to aspects of mass culture itself; as Lloyd and Vaughan Williams’ observed in their introduction to *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (1959), ‘the ceilidh, the folk-singing party, is becoming a part of urban social life, and the voice of the revival folk-singer makes itself heard in youth hostels, city pubs, skiffle cellars, even in jazz clubs’.¹¹⁰

Lloyd reflected on this moment in *Folk Song in England* (1967), noting that widespread postwar interest in folksong, although ‘nourished by the former revival’, had not been imposed from above: ‘it is to the enthusiasts of this second revival, for the most part young people searching for something more sustaining than the mumbled withdrawals or frantic despair of the pops, that this book is chiefly addressed’.¹¹¹ Tracing ‘the continuity of folk song’ from rural to urban-industrial, the book revealed a contradictory set of assumptions and a fundamental ambivalence in the definition of its subject matter.¹¹² Lloyd rebuked Sharp’s ‘ideology of primitive romanticism’ and the failed attempts of bourgeois enthusiasts to bridge a ‘social chasm’ through collecting material from ‘noble rustic savages’.¹¹³ Furthermore, he acknowledged early broadsides, individual authorship, and ‘the busy traffic of words and tunes between town and country’ as well as between ‘different social classes’; likewise (referencing Phillips Barry), he argued that ‘the creation of folk song is no more “natural” than the creation of art music and poetry’.¹¹⁴ Identifying the problem of classification, he stressed that ‘our folk singers do not always utter their songs in a way that suits the folklorists’ labels’.¹¹⁵ Lloyd even suggested that ‘the quest for pure “authentic” folk song may lead the scholar into a remote landscape with a mirage on

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ R. Vaughn Williams & A. L. Lloyd (eds.), *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (London: Penguin, 1959), 7. Around this time Lloyd also wrote the text for a children’s book set in Victorian London entitled *The Golden City*, illustrated by Pearl Binder; each chapter also included the words and melody of a ballad woven into the story itself. Lloyd’s nostalgic revivalism was evident in the descriptions of a blind street singer (who seemed to recall MacColl’s performance idiosyncrasies), accompanied by a vagrant boy: ‘Mr Sim would take Toby’s hand in one of his. He would cup the other hand over his ear. Then he would lift his blind face and sing slow and full as if he were calling for a boat across a wide ferry. Toby thought it was the best music in the world.’

¹¹¹ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 5.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 14, 19, 21.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34, 54, 72.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

every horizon, a chimera in each shadow'.¹¹⁶ The obstinate *idea* of folksong itself, however, did not disappear with the conceptual apparatus that Lloyd wished to dismantle: 'the folk' and the gaze that had created their ontology remained integral—merely transplanted onto new urban settings. As such, Lloyd had retained the very concept motivating the errors he wished to correct. Indeed, folksong was now redefined as the signifier of authentic proletarian self-identity:

in England folk song is the musical and poetic expression of the fantasy of the lower classes—and by no means exclusively the country workers. In the main the songs are evolved by labouring people to suit their ways and conditions of life, and they reflect the aspirations that rise from those ways and conditions. In the process of creating this fund of song, economic conditions are more decisive than any relative distance from formal culture.¹¹⁷

Lloyd identified this material as the product of a class with 'common international traits'.¹¹⁸ Such a grouping, however, existed in a precise analogue to how Edwardian revivalists and Harvard ballad scholars had theorised folk culture.

Lloyd's Marxist orientation outraged one contemporaneous reviewer in *Folk Music Journal*. Francis Collinson was shocked to find his 'idyllic' field 'used for the exploitation, or exposition at least, of class distinction and class prejudice; and the representing of England as a land of struggle of worker against employer and master against man'.¹¹⁹ Collinson complained about the author's 'banner-carrying concern for the under-dog and the under-privileged' along with 'the tiresome (and one would have thought outmoded) panoply of Socialist / Communist jargon'.¹²⁰ The reactionary conservatism of Collinson's review is astonishing and was symptomatic of an alternative dogma in the British folklore establishment—an ideology in which

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

¹¹⁹ Francis Collinson, 'Folk Song in England by A. L. Lloyd', *Folk Music Journal* 1/4 (1968), 270. Collinson was a historian associated with the School of Scottish Studies; see Ailie Munro, 'The Role of the School of Scottish Studies in the Folk Music Revival', *Folk Music Journal* 6/2 (1991): 132–68. In his book Lloyd employed a definition of working-class culture taken from E. P. Thompson's pivotal *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) to argue that folksongs 'arise from the common experience of labouring people and express the identity of interest of those people, very often in opposition to the interests of the masters' (*Folk Song in England*, 179). Thompson had defined class in oppositional terms as a relationship structured by production. Joan W. Scott notes that in Thompson's teleological narrative focused on manual labour, class consciousness was coded as masculine. See Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Rev. edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). This pattern of gendered representation will be explored later in this chapter. Lloyd had already absorbed a gendered conception of labour before reading Thompson's book.

¹²⁰ Collinson, 'Folk Song in England by A. L. Lloyd', 272, 270.

concepts such as class or capital were banished in favour of a conservative utopia blissfully free from economic or social inequality. Although depicted as ‘gerrymandered, sweeping in scope, [and] occasionally eccentric’, a number of reviewers, however, praised Lloyd’s discussion of songs against ‘the background of the social conditions which engendered them’, finding him ‘too good a scholar...to be rigidly doctrinaire’ in politics.¹²¹ Given his acknowledgement of literacy, print, and a ‘two-way traffic between oral and written music, between country and town, between Britain and Europe’, Frank Howes noted that Lloyd was ‘nearer to Frank Kidson’ than to Sharp.¹²² Reviewers unanimously agreed that Lloyd’s strength lay principally in his chapter on industrial songs of the north, ‘ground he has made his own’.¹²³ Lloyd proposed that as rural song ‘crumbled away, a new lyric of the industrial towns arose...reflecting the life and aspirations of a raw class in the making’; having changed his position on the adverse effects of modernisation, he now suggested that such songs ‘far from being destroyed by the industrial revolution [were] actually created by its conditions’.¹²⁴ In essence, he asserted, ‘the *creation* of folk music and poetry has...passed almost entirely into the hands and mouths of industrial workers’.¹²⁵ Though Lloyd found a lack of revolutionary vigour in these songs, he detected a shift away from ‘stylised landscape as a backcloth for some emotional fantasy’, toward a more pragmatic, collective, and materialist desire to ‘set out the facts of working men’s lives in all their nudity and to appeal that something be done to set wrongs right’.¹²⁶ Railing against academic folklorists—memorably castigated as ‘card-indexers of the human soul’—Lloyd nevertheless absorbed their emphasis on the entropic nature of folklore and on homogeneous creation: ‘whether we call their creations folk song or something else (but what else?), hardly matters. The main thing is that they are created and sung by men who are identical with their audience in standing, in occupation, in attitude to life, and in daily experience.’¹²⁷

¹²¹ Linda L. Danielson, ‘Folk Song in England by A. L. Lloyd’, *Western Folklore* 31/1 (1972), 61; M. D.-S., ‘Folk Song in England by A. L. Lloyd’, *Music & Letters* 49/3 (1968), 248; Frank Howes, ‘Folk song, English...’, *The Musical Times* 109/1500 (1968), 141.

¹²² Howes, ‘Folk song, English...’, 141.

¹²³ M. D.-S., ‘Folk Song in England by A. L. Lloyd’, 250; see also Danielson, ‘Folk Song in England by A. L. Lloyd’, 62.

¹²⁴ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 316, 317.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 368, 367.

Bearing in mind that numerous songs placed in this category were written by professional songwriters (including MacColl), the authenticity Lloyd advocated was shaped far more strongly by ideological rhetoric than the kind of direct communal familiarity he held up as an ideal. One reviewer noticed this form of imaginative curation, concluding that ‘the picture of the North-West contained in the earlier part of the chapter is rose-coloured’.¹²⁸ Despite suggesting that ‘the term “folk song” is losing its meaning’ due to globalisation, Lloyd transposed Edwardian creeds into a new context with their epistemological framework intact: the ‘benevolent ghosts of the fine oral culture of the past’, he maintained, ‘are still strongly present’ amid the mining communities and mills of northern England.¹²⁹ The notion of ‘collecting’ material from such communities also persisted, along with the attendant problems of reification and mediation discussed in chapter 1. Although Vic Gammon characterises *Folk Song in England* as ‘the intellectual achievement of the second folk revival’, he notes that Lloyd’s passion, creative adjustment of material, and implicit values ‘seriously impinged on his work as a social and cultural historian’.¹³⁰ Indeed, Lloyd fabricated material (subsequently accepted as genuine) to fit his invented vision of folk culture, erasing his own authorial influence in the process. As Stephen D. Winick has demonstrated, Lloyd had constructed the popular version of the ballad ‘Reynardine’ from fragments, ‘filling it out with broadside stanzas’ and creating emendations to make it conform to a particular ideal.¹³¹ As Dave Harker has noted, Lloyd effectively ‘collaps[ed] what he knew of workers’ culture and history back into the conceptual trammels of the Sharpian consensus’: his selective appropriations of industrial culture, Harker suggests, were ‘just as culturally imperialist as Sharp’s, and just as authoritarian’.¹³² In spite of harbouring this legacy of recalcitrant British thought, however, Lloyd’s work unmistakably registered and responded to the ecumenical influence of scholarship from the US. Towards the end of *Folk Song in England*, Lloyd argued that postwar popular culture in Britain—in contrast to the

¹²⁸ M. D.-S., ‘*Folk Song in England* by A. L. Lloyd’, 250.

¹²⁹ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 409, 318.

¹³⁰ Vic Gammon, ‘One Hundred Years of the Folk-Song Society’ in *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation*, ed. Ian Russell & David Atkinson (Elphinstone Institute: University of Aberdeen, 2004), 22; Vic Gammon, ‘A. L. Lloyd and History: A Reconsideration of Aspects of *Folk Song in England* and Some of his Other Writings’ in *Singer, Song and Scholar*, ed. Ian Russell (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986), 148.

¹³¹ Stephen D. Winick, ‘A. L. Lloyd and Reynardine: Authenticity and Authorship in the Afterlife of a British Broadside Ballad’, *Folklore* 115 (2004), 288–89.

¹³² Harker, *Fakesong*, 248, 252.

lineage bequeathed by Edwardian ideology—had ‘followed the American folk song revival that began in the 1930s’; he concluded by declaring that MacColl’s efforts had borne fruit ‘only as the American example became clear’.¹³³

2 | ‘Noise with a Purpose’: Postwar Affluence, British Leftism, and the BBC Radio Ballads

Although Lloyd stated that the postwar revival had a ‘deep effect on ballad-makers in our industrial areas’, its most salient outcome was a pioneering series of ‘radio ballads’ broadcast on the BBC Home Service between 1958 and 1964, produced by MacColl, Peggy Seeger, and Charles Parker.¹³⁴ Focusing on two early programmes from this series, I want to explore how representations of working-class life were cast as symbolic witnesses in contemporaneous debates surrounding the rise of seemingly ‘classless’ and Americanised mass culture during the 1950s. As Stuart Laing notes, the radio ballads emphasised ‘work as the primary determinant both of lifestyle and ways of seeing the world—a contradiction of the conventional wisdom concerning the changes wrought by affluence’.¹³⁵ As such, they became caught up in New Left polemics concerning democracy, popular culture, and working-class identity. At the heart of Lloyd’s conception of balladry was the notion that such songs could be ‘the poetic illustration of a community’s heroic ideal, and a means of forming and sustaining a way of life based on that ideal’.¹³⁶ Lloyd argued that artistic licence was sanctioned in ballads, allowing the songs to present ‘heroic values and actions in high relief by means of hyperbole’: through this process, he concluded, the ‘reflection of social reality’ was thus often deliberately blurred.¹³⁷ Indeed, Lloyd proposed, the aim of the ballad was ‘to impose an illusion on reality, in order to get the better of it’.¹³⁸ The radio ballads thus provide an ideal way to approach this insinuation that folksong creates calculated distortions reliant upon hyperbole—especially given that (in stark

¹³³ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 394, 395.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 396.

¹³⁵ Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life, 1957–1964* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 165.

¹³⁶ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 141.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

contrast to Lloyd's ideal of community) the songs of the radio ballads were written by a committed radical keen to resist broader aspects of cultural change.

A number of factors initiated this novel form of radio documentary. First, a small portable tape machine by EMI had recently become available in Britain allowing audio material to be recorded informally on location. Second, Parker had recently come across a recording of Millard Lampell and Earl Robinson's 1942 cantata *The Lonesome Train*.¹³⁹ Robert Cantwell describes the work's hybrid content as 'the interplay of a chorus, a handful of narrator-singers, and the dramatic voices of Abraham Lincoln, various ordinary men and women, and a wounded Civil War soldier' that conjured up 'an American landscape across which Lincoln's somber funeral train passes from city to city'.¹⁴⁰ Wedded to the progressive ideals unmistakably present in Lampell's fashioning of Lincoln into 'the image of an American folk hero', Cantwell proposes that Robinson's score was similarly crucial in conveying its message through 'the drive of the five-string banjo, palette colors of a kind of auditory mural of American folklife'.¹⁴¹ Along with Robinson's more famous *Ballad for Americans*, Paul Long argues, such material 'offered a template for a democratic culture'.¹⁴² In addition, Parker was impressed by the radical innovations of the British 'Free Cinema' movement and its focus on popular culture: Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson's 1956 film *Momma Don't Allow*, for example, had documented a London club evening with the Chris Barber Jazz Band featuring skiffle star Lonnie Donegan.¹⁴³ Associated with the 'Angry Young Men' and considered an early part of the British New Wave, Free Cinema was the name given to a prominent series of screenings at London's National Film Theatre between 1956–59, driven principally by critic and director Lindsay Anderson.¹⁴⁴ Dedicated to documenting aspects of working-class life from an alternative and non-commercial angle, Sarah Street argues, the filmmakers were 'imbued with a critical spirit of amateurism...in a tradition of

¹³⁹ See Paul Long, 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain: The Work of Charles Parker', *The Radio Journal* 2/3 (2004), 135. See also Cox, *Set into Song*; Alun Howkins, 'History and the Radio Ballads', *Oral History* 28/2 (2000): 89–93; and Harker, 'Class Composition'.

¹⁴⁰ Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 108. See also Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 33.

¹⁴¹ Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 109.

¹⁴² Long, 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain', 135.

¹⁴³ See Harker, *Class Act*, 130. Harker notes that later radio ballads grew out of MacColl's involvement in documentary film for Tynes Tees television and the National Coal Board's Film Unit.

¹⁴⁴ See 'Free Cinema Manifestos (UK, 1956–59)' in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 149 and Christophe Dupin, *Free Cinema* (British Film Institute, 2006).

benevolent middle-class humanism’ that looked back to the 1930s while tackling challenging new subjects; material was shot on location in black and white, often using 16mm film.¹⁴⁵ Sean Martin thus proposes that ‘in showing ordinary people in ordinary settings, Free Cinema was the documentary embodiment of what would come to be known—sometimes disparagingly—as “kitchen sink” realism’.¹⁴⁶ By 1957, the Free Cinema committee saw itself as combating ‘a British cinema still obstinately class-bound; still rejecting the stimulus of contemporary life, as well as the responsibility to criticise; still reflecting a metropolitan, southern English culture, which excludes the rich diversity of tradition and personality which is the whole of Britain’.¹⁴⁷ With deliberately limited means, they asserted, ‘you can make poetry’ from a commitment to previously marginalised, quotidian subjects.¹⁴⁸ This polemic precisely foreshadowed the aesthetics of the radio ballads—the vital exception being that Free Cinema was unburdened by folkloric epistemology.

For MacColl, documentary radio was an artistic form that might provide answers to ‘the question of whether traditional folk-song was capable of reflecting twentieth-century, industrial society’.¹⁴⁹ Ben Harker argues that the ballads thus represented a key manifestation of MacColl’s political philosophy, fusing what he saw as ‘the spontaneous creativity of working-class speech, time-honoured storytelling traditions and modern technology’ to create ballads for mass media out of the living residues of an environment that had once generated folksong.¹⁵⁰ The underpinnings of each programme involved extensive field interviews—termed ‘actuality’—that were then heavily edited into dramatic frameworks; MacColl further used this material as the basis for lyrics written in an anachronistic imitation of ‘folk’ style (coupled with traditional melodies or elaborate stylistic pastiches) that vicariously inhabited the world they wished to depict. MacColl later described conceiving of these songs as an extension of, or a commentary on, a specific piece of actuality, ‘or as a simple frame’ for collected excerpts.¹⁵¹ In the process of refashioning material collected from railwaymen, construction workers, fishermen,

¹⁴⁵ Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), 76. Minimal funding was provided by the Experimental Film Fund of the BFI; later, Ford would become involved.

¹⁴⁶ Sean Martin, *New Waves in Cinema* (Harpending: Kamera, 2013), 96.

¹⁴⁷ The Committee for Free Cinema, ‘Look at Britain! Free Cinema 3 (1957)’ in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, ed. MacKenzie, 150.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 327.

¹⁵⁰ Harker, *Class Act*, 133.

¹⁵¹ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 313.

and miners into songs, Harker notes, MacColl tended to display ‘the unease of a working-class intellectual’ removed from the labouring environment that he held up as an ideal.¹⁵² As with Lloyd, the Edwardian romanticisation of pastoral Others had merely been transferred onto a new context. Mirroring Parker’s veneration of *The Lonesome Train*, however, MacColl drew on a wide range of transatlantic musical influences. Although by the mid-1960s both MacColl and Seeger would become associated with a rigorous purism, at this time their palette was unashamedly eclectic: the music of the early radio ballads, MacColl noted, ‘was rhythmically and harmonically orientated towards the American tradition’.¹⁵³ Like skiffle aesthetics, Harker proposes, the programmes thus animated a ‘simultaneous engagement with glamorous Americana *and* a rejection of slick commercialism’.¹⁵⁴

Central to this bohemian catholicity was Peggy Seeger herself, half-sister of Pete, born to musicologist Charles Seeger and composer Ruth Crawford; educated at a prestigious New England college, she had travelled through Europe during the mid-1950s before reaching England and being sought by Alan Lomax to join the Ramblers.¹⁵⁵ In *Sing*, Seeger noted that the American revival from which she emerged ‘included practically every kind of song and instrument’; she compared her own aesthetic to ‘a house of varying and sometimes contradictory architectural styles...with complete fidelity to none’—built, however, upon the foundations of family usage and material from the Archive of American Folksong.¹⁵⁶ Parker also inhabited a different cultural sphere from both Lloyd and MacColl. The son of a railway clerk, Parker had joined the Royal Naval Reserve and served aboard submarines during the Second World War, winning a Distinguished Service Cross for his actions.¹⁵⁷ Returning from service, Parker took up a place at the University of Cambridge to read history before starting a job at the BBC, where he worked for the

¹⁵² Harker, *Class Act*, 152.

¹⁵³ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 313.

¹⁵⁴ Harker, ‘Class Composition’, 346.

¹⁵⁵ See MacColl, *Journeyman*, 277–80; Harker, *Class Act*, 114–19 and 132; and Cox, *Set into Song*, 28–35. Introduced in London by Lomax in 1956, MacColl (then married with a young son) and Seeger (then 20 years his junior) would famously fall in love and remain together until MacColl’s death in 1989. MacColl describes Seeger’s contribution to the radio ballads as follows: ‘In addition to writing musical arrangements, conducting the recording of the music and playing and singing...she took part in the recording of actuality in the field, transcribed all the recordings, joined with me in choosing and timing actuality sequences, collaborated in creating the script and helped decide which passages of actuality needed a musical commentary’ (MacColl, *Journeyman*, 315).

¹⁵⁶ Peggy Seeger, ‘Self-Portrait’, *Sing* 4/6 (1958), 67.

¹⁵⁷ See Cox, *Set into Song*, 19–27 and Long, ‘British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain’, 134.

North American Service and subsequently as a Senior Features Producer for the Midlands Region. An eccentric and ambitious perfectionist, Parker was also devoutly patriotic and a committed Christian whose middle-class politics leaned to the right. However, as Long notes, during the course of the radio ballads Parker's outlook began to show 'all the traits of the romantic convert' to the radical Left.¹⁵⁸ Eschewing conventional, patronising broadcasting protocol and espousing the legitimacy and even the superiority of native vernacular speech, Long argues, Parker's approach 'questioned the circumscribed role of the BBC in British life' as well as established conventions in historiography and education.¹⁵⁹ Like Sharp and MacColl, Parker saw his project as necessarily didactic—in Long's words, 'to return people "back" to their authentic traditions that could be opposed to the synthetic, Americanised versions conveyed by the mass media'.¹⁶⁰ Parker's stance, however, was based on an ostensibly paradoxical fidelity to key aspects of US culture itself: his initial attraction to folklore had occurred in the early 1940s through contact with American airmen who he had heard singing what he thought of as traditional songs.¹⁶¹

First broadcast on 2 July 1958, *The Ballad of John Axon* featured an eclectic array of music revolving around the burgeoning transatlantic nexus of folksong, trad. jazz, and skiffle. Indeed, 1958 was the year Capitol Records released the Kingston Trio's hugely popular version of the nineteenth-century Appalachian murder ballad 'Tom Dooley'. Cantwell suggests that this represented a key moment when songs bearing the mantle of folk authenticity 'reemerged into the light of popular culture...with all the vitality of a cultural symbol eager for rediscovery'.¹⁶² Parker saw the novel amalgam of musical styles in parallel to an unprecedented use of raw actuality in the broadcast: he admitted in the *Radio Times* to taking liberties with conventions by 'dispensing with acted dialogue or formal narration' and 'blending jazz and the organum, austere English ballad with banjo, guitar, harmonica'.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ Long, 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain', 140. In 1965, for example, Parker would join a Marxist study group in Birmingham lead by George Thomson (145).

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 138, 134.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁶¹ See Cox, *Set into Song*, 26.

¹⁶² Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 8.

¹⁶³ Charles Parker, 'The Ballad of John Axon', *The Radio Times*, 27 June 1958, 33. MacColl described the programme's genesis as follows: 'When we began working on *The Ballad of John Axon*, we didn't intend to depart from the pattern of the normal radio-feature programme. We would record Axon's widow and some of the men with whom he had worked and then, using the recordings as a guide, I would write a dramatic reconstruction of the events, which would eventually be performed by actors and musicians. It didn't work out like that...I played through those tapes for several hours a day

Seeger's banjo was joined by double bass, trumpet, trombone, harmonica, clarinet, concertina, violin, guitar, and drum kit; amongst others, the chorus of singers included Lloyd, Isla Cameron, and Fitzroy Coleman.¹⁶⁴ The ballad opened with MacColl stridently declaiming—in Received Pronunciation that betrayed his theatrical training—a powerfully austere stanza that bookended the programme:

John Axon was a railwayman, to steam trains born and bred;
He was an engine driver at Edgeley loco shed.
For forty years he followed and served the iron way;
He lost his life upon the track one February day.

A BBC voice then read from a Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation accident report before announcing 'the real life story of a railwayman told by the men who knew him and worked with him...set into song by Ewan MacColl'. Actuality (including the voices of Axon's widow and colleagues) was then interspersed fluidly with sound effects and songs to create a series of dramatic montages based around the life and leisure of Manchester's railway workers. Parker argued that 'this story of an ordinary Englishman of our own times' recalled Greek tragedies and contained 'heroism and humanity enough to fire a hundred songs'.¹⁶⁵ Given such raw power, MacColl recalls, 'the Axon story would have to be told by the railwaymen themselves and not by actors imitating railwaymen', as had been the case for previous radio documentaries.¹⁶⁶ The exception, of course, would be MacColl himself.

for a fortnight, running some of the more striking statements over and over again. Their impact was tremendous; the flat, deliberate northern voices evoking the past, paying laconic tribute to a dead comrade...As I listened it became obvious that on these tapes we had captured a remarkable picture of a way of life, a picture in words charged with the special kind of vitality and excitement which derives from involvement in a work-process.' (MacColl, *Journeyman*, 312–13).

¹⁶⁴ At the end of the programme, credits and personnel were as listed as follows: 'The Ballad of John Axon was the work of Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker. The lyrics were written by Ewan MacColl, who also, with the exception of two songs set to traditional airs, composed the music and himself sang the part of narrator. The instrumental arranging and musical direction was by Peggy Seeger, who also played the banjo. The vocalists were A. L. Lloyd, Isla Cameron, Stan Kelly, Dick Loveless, Charles Mayo and Colin Dunn, and the instrumentalists were Jim Bray, bass; Terry Brown, trumpet; Bob Clark, fiddle; John Cole, harmonica; Fitzroy Coleman, guitar, who also sang the West Indian fireman calypso; Bryan Daly, guitar; Alf Edwards, English concertina; Billy Loch, drums; Bobby Mickleburgh, trombone; and Bruce Turner, clarinet.' See also Cox, *Set into Song*, 201–18; Cox notes that Dominic Behan sung but was not credited.

¹⁶⁵ Parker, 'The Ballad of John Axon'.

¹⁶⁶ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 313.

Born in Stockport in 1900, John Axon had worked his way up to the position of steam-locomotive driver for British Rail by 1948.¹⁶⁷ Nine years later, on the morning of Saturday 9 February, he was in charge of a freight train from Buxton to Warrington Arpley hauling thirty-three loaded trucks weighing 775 tons with the aid of a bank engine. Shortly before a controlled descent down a 1 in 58 gradient toward Chapel-en-le-Frith a sudden fracture occurred in the brake pipe, filling the front cab with high-pressure steam, destroying the braking system. Axon was severely burnt but, with the aid of his fireman Ron Scanlon, was able to apply the brakes on the coal-car; this, however, was not enough to halt the train before the approaching incline. Ordering Scanlon to jump free from the engine and attempt to apply brakes on the wagons and alert the guard before they gathered speed, Axon remained on the footplate to warn upcoming signalman. Points ahead were changed, avoiding derailment and allowing the train to move onto the main line where it could have been brought under control. Instead, travelling at 55 miles-per-hour, Axon's train collided with a thirty-seven-truck freight service heading for Edgeley, killing Axon and the guard of the Edgeley train, John Creamer. Along with the station's signal box, 68 wagons were destroyed leaving a vast pile of wreckage. As Philip Carter notes, the official accident report 'recorded that Axon could have saved his life by abandoning his train but had stayed "to give warning" to the signalman; in doing so Axon "set an outstanding example of devotion to duty"'.¹⁶⁸ For his selfless courage and bravery Axon was posthumously awarded the George Cross, the highest accolade for civilian gallantry; his widow Gladys collected the medal on his behalf at Buckingham Palace.¹⁶⁹ The story caught Parker's attention and just six months after the accident he had secured Gladys Axon's consent to make a radio documentary about the tragedy; his attraction to the narrative was driven by its dramatic similarities to American railroad songs such as 'The Ballad of Casey Jones'.¹⁷⁰

MacColl's writing verged on stylised musical theatre, recalling prior work on ballad operas and his recent role as the Street Singer in the 1956 British premiere of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera*.¹⁷¹ In the programme, he inhabited

¹⁶⁷ Information in this paragraph from: Philip Carter, 'Axon, John (1900–1957)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2010 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/101106>> [accessed 25/06/14].

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in: *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ See Harker, *Class Act*, 131.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* See also Long, 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain', 136.

¹⁷¹ See Harker, *Class Act*, 117.

various personae distilling vignettes of working-class life that viewed labour as the primary factor in shaping lived experience:

When you've done your time at the loco shed and had your share of trouble,
On the open plate you're the driver's mate and you're married to a lousy shovel.

Linking songs to the actuality, MacColl's recitative lapsed into technicalities that sat uncomfortably with presentation of affective states and narrative teleology:

Under the large injector steam valve
There's a length of one and one-eight piping.
It connects with a driver's brake valve.
The connecting point is a joint of brass.

Some stanzas, however, flowed more easily in a pastiche of the ballad form:

John Axon he cried to his fireman—jump!
It is the only thing you can do,
While I hang on the side and I'll take a little ride,
For I've got to see the journey through, brave boy,
I've got to see the journey through.

Through such evocative mediation, Axon was eulogised as a tragic hero:

By his deeds you shall know him; by the work of his hand;
By the friends who will mourn him; by the love that he bore;
By the gift of his courage and the life that he gave.

The programme also included MacColl's song 'The Manchester Rambler' that resonated with Gladys' stories of how she and John had met and begun courting. Written in 1932, it had celebrated that year's Mass Trespass over Kinder Scout in Derbyshire's Peak District in which MacColl was involved as a member of the Young Communist League.¹⁷² During the 1930s, hiking was a popular pastime of northern working-class youth—a defiantly political gesture due to landowning classes reserving vast areas of the British countryside for blood sports.

¹⁷² See *Ibid.*, 29–35 and Ben Harker, "'The Manchester Rambler': Ewan MacColl and the 1932 Mass Trespass", *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005): 219–28.

The Ballad of John Axon received particular attention in *The Manchester Guardian*. A preview column drew listeners' attention to 'a new and unusual type of broadcast—the first full "ballad opera" about a man of our times'; with its 'varying and urgent' use of music 'based on folksong and jazz', their radio correspondent found the programme 'extraordinarily moving and dramatic...as much a precedent, in its way, as some of the very early "classics" among radio features'.¹⁷³ A review the following day entitled 'A Modern Ballad Opera and a Folk Hero' read as follows:

The great danger of 'experimental' radio is that the experimenters may be so proudly intrigued with their new technique that the result for the audience is all elaborate means and no end. After the first ten minutes of 'The Ballad of John Axon' last night one had one's doubts: too much seemed to be happening in too short a time. But as the story of John Axon's last run with the 11:15 from Buxton gathered speed and rattled on to its tremendous catastrophe the pulse caught up with the pounding rhythm and the mind caught on to what Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker had been driving at—something like the experience a drowning man is supposed to undergo in his last minutes...The other aim of the writers of this programme was to honour a hero of the people and the tradition of service out of which his heroism grew, and to do this in something like the idiom of the people, though a series of ballads and a curiously effective sort of recitative with folky overtones linked by scraps of reminiscence and engine-shed lore...This sort of ballad opera technique passed the test of 'experimental' radio by proving to be a powerfully effective way of telling the story.¹⁷⁴

The review concluded by praising the directness of MacColl's songs and Seeger's arrangements of 'a weird folky combination of instruments', but suggested that it was in the fragments of actuality that the poetic 'idiom of the people' lay.¹⁷⁵ Paul Ferris offered an analysis in *The Observer*, arguing that before *The Ballad of John Axon* experimental radio techniques, while exciting, had been let down by their subject matter—the problem being that 'there was no integration' between form and content.¹⁷⁶ Juxtaposed with 'a play of startling banality' on the Third Programme, Ferris proposed that during the ballad 'a technique and a subject got married, and nothing in radio kaleidoscopy...will ever be the same again'.¹⁷⁷ He stated that 'this

¹⁷³ "'The Ballad of John Axon": Broadcast Recalls Heroism', *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 July 1958, 8.

¹⁷⁴ W. L. W., 'Radio Notes: A Modern Ballad Opera and a Folk Hero', *The Manchester Guardian*, 3 July 1958, 3.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Paul Ferris, 'Noise with a Purpose', *The Observer*, 6 July 1958, 14.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

was noise with a purpose...sharp and strange and powerful'.¹⁷⁸ Ironically, however, Ferris concluded that MacColl's songs were 'enriched' by the adjacent actuality rather than the other way around (as had been MacColl's intention).¹⁷⁹

Eric Winter, editor of *Sing*, also wrote a substantial review for *The Manchester Guardian*. Winter described MacColl and Parker's 'radio drama' as 'a folksong epic' that skilfully exploited its medium while drawing on deeper precedent: 'certainly', he continued, 'the story of Axon's bravery and the posthumous George Cross he was awarded had in it the stuff of which heroic ballads are made' and could provide the 'raw material from which folk-songs of the next generation will be refined'.¹⁸⁰ Winter noted that the dramatic recreation of Axon's story through song had 'caught and stirred the imagination of the Ballads and Blues audiences in London', causing 'a significant change' in attitude and repertoire:

The refugees from skiffle have listened to, participated in, and accepted a much more serious type of programme which draws more and more on British traditional material. The autumn season has seen the importation of fine traditional singers such as Sam Lerner, Bob and Ron Cooper, and the unsurpassable Harry Cox. Their songs and their singing reflect the growing prestige of British artists and a new awareness of the value of the folksongs to which we are all heirs. There has, for that matter, been an extension of activity in the folksong world. Folksong Unlimited has opened up at the Enterprise, a pub in Long Acre, the Hootenannies are now running a series in Glasgow, and Malcolm Nixon, impresario behind the throne, promises Ballads and Blues concerts in Manchester, Liverpool, and Cambridge among other places. The association is also invading universities and colleges.¹⁸¹

Winter highlighted a particular aspect of the revival scene routinely overlooked—MacColl's belief in 'the affinity between folk music and jazz'.¹⁸² The Ballads and Blues association, for example, co-sponsored concerts with the National Jazz Federation featuring 'unusual combinations of artists and a certain emphasis on experiment and innovation' unified by a deliberate lack of 'commercial flavour'.¹⁸³ Indeed, as Kevin Morgan notes, the British Left cherished nostalgic conceptions of jazz as 'an authentic people's music uncontaminated by either state, commerce or the academy': small, amateur ensembles were seen as the antidote to mass entertainment,

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Eric Winter, 'Ballads and Bravery', *The Manchester Guardian*, 16 October 1958, 7.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

empty virtuosity, and the decadent fluency of swing.¹⁸⁴ *The Ballad of John Axon* thus appears to have been—in an analogous way to the Kinston Trio’s ‘Tom Dooley’—one of the principal catalysts for a broad popular revival and an indicator of both the confluence of revivalist jazz and folksong as well as the transition away from skiffle into new ground already trailblazed by Lloyd and MacColl.

Alongside the political and aesthetic similarities between *The Ballad of John Axon* and the contemporaneous Free Cinema movement, a 1959 short film screened during ‘Free Cinema Six’ dealt with precisely the same subject matter. Shot in black and white, Michael Grigsby’s *Enginemen* also revolved around railway workers in a Manchester locomotive shed (at Newton Heath); Grigsby was part of a young collective of aspiring filmmakers working around Manchester, dubbed Unit Five Seven.¹⁸⁵ The Free Cinema Committee summed up their aims for the future of British film at this final screening, advocating ‘independent, creative film-making in a world where the pressure of conformism and commercialism are becoming more powerful every day’ and praising Unit Five Seven as a paradigm of documentary work that was ‘poetic, social and humane’.¹⁸⁶ Grigsby’s film was reviewed favourably in *The Guardian*, where its aspirations were described as ‘a new sort of social realism’.¹⁸⁷ Eschewing any clear authoritative commentary, *Enginemen* relied on an impressionistic overlay of documentary footage and recorded sound to capture the multifarious viewpoints of working-class men. Low camera angles and periods of brooding silence emphasised the elemental weight of the steam engines while highlighting both the physical toil and the camaraderie of life on the railways. One particularly effective sequence overlaid fragments of conversations and music with shots of a bustling canteen in which workers discussed everything from US politics to the benefits of colour-light signals and the impending effects of modernisation. Indeed, both *The Ballad of John Axon* and *Enginemen* were made at a crucial juncture in the history of the railway. A 1954 report by the British Transport Commission

¹⁸⁴ Kevin Morgan, ‘King Street Blues: Jazz and the Left in Britain in the 1930s–1940s’ in *A Weapon in the Struggle*, ed. Croft, 133. On the broader history of jazz in Britain, see also Catherine Parsonage, ‘A Critical Reassessment of the Reception of Early Jazz in Britain’, *Popular Music* 22/3 (2003): 315–36 and Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*.

¹⁸⁵ See Jamie Sexton, ‘Grigsby, Michael’ in Ian Aitken (ed.), *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 338–39 and the accompanying booklet to Dupin, *Free Cinema*.

¹⁸⁶ Lindsay Anderson, John Fletcher, Walter Lassally, Karel Reisz, ‘Free Cinema 6: The Last Free Cinema (1959)’ in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, ed. MacKenzie, 150–52.

¹⁸⁷ ‘First Film on a Shoestring: Enginemen to See Work About Them’, *The Guardian* 3 March 1960, 19. I explore the aesthetics of social realism in the next section.

entitled *Modernisation and Re-Equipment of British Railways* had argued resolutely for automation, improvements to signalling, remodelling of freight services, and the replacement of all steam engines by electric or diesel rolling stock.¹⁸⁸ Whereas the footage of *Enginemen* revealed this variety of perspectives—ranging from regret for the imminent passing of an era where steam locomotives had to be coaxed and handled with loving respect to an embrace of new diesel engines that would require less manual skill to operate but might provide a better service—*The Ballad of John Axon* revelled in an enforced nostalgia by choosing not to confront the changing nature of labouring experience on British railways. In so doing, it cast its protagonists in a seemingly unchanging present that clung to an increasingly outmoded past. Moreover, *Enginemen*'s quotidian, anti-narrative stance contrasted sharply with *The Ballad of John Axon*'s investment in heroic teleology.

Similar radio programmes followed *The Ballad of John Axon* at roughly the rate of one per year. *Song of a Road* (broadcast 5 November 1959) focussed on the construction process and working conditions along the new London to Yorkshire motorway, the M1.¹⁸⁹ The following verse sums up MacColl's view of the project, juxtaposing management with the physical discomfort of workers:

The consulting engineer's the man who formulates the plan;
The contractor gets it moving and he does the best he can;
But the labourer's the bloke who gets the blisters on his hand:
He's the one who keeps the muck a-moving.

A review in *The Observer* proposed that although a programme extolling 'the glory and excitement of working chaps with diggers and dumpers might be thought to be very old-fashioned', MacColl's songs had tapped into 'the sources of real legend'.¹⁹⁰ Ferris concluded his review by stating that the radio ballads were 'certainly the most exciting pieces of pure radio you can find nowadays'.¹⁹¹ Next came *Singing the Fishing* (broadcast 16 August 1960), billed as 'a tribute to the fishing communities of

¹⁸⁸ British Transport Commission, *Modernisation and Re-Equipment of British Railways* (London: Curwen, 1955), Railways Archive
<<http://www.railwaysarchive.co.uk/docsummary.php?docID=23>> [accessed 19/11/14].

¹⁸⁹ See Harker, *Class Act*, 141–43 and Cox, *Set into Song*, 72–85.

¹⁹⁰ Paul Ferris, 'Legend in Concrete', *The Observer*, 8 November 1959, 15. Tellingly, Ferris proposed that 'if Joan Littlewood [MacColl's former partner and collaborator] were still working for radio, this would be her kind of programme'.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

East Anglia and of the Moray Firth, whose livelihood has been the herring'. The programme chronicled changes from sail power to steam and finally diesel and sonar, drawing heavily on the vibrant testimony of Sam Larner and Ronnie Balls.¹⁹² MacColl's lyrics cast these protagonists in a typically valiant light:

Our ships are small and the sea is deep
And many a fisher lad lies asleep
 In the salt sea water.
But still there's a hungry world to feed,
So we go where the shoals of herring breed
 In the salt sea water.

Singing the Fishing won the coveted Prix Italia in 1960 and contained MacColl's popular pastiche 'Shoals of Herring', later mistaken for a traditional song.¹⁹³ Praising MacColl and Parker's non-commercial documentation of working-class culture, Ferris noted in *The Observer* that by this stage the radio ballads' style was 'firmly established: humanist, unselfconscious, inevitably a trifle Left'.¹⁹⁴

Given Lloyd and MacColl's earlier work on mining songs allied to the CPGB, the radio ballad that best revealed their political ideology was *The Big Hewer* (broadcast 18 August 1961), which explored working life in the coalfields of south Wales, the Midlands, Durham, and Northumberland. During *Folk Song in England*, Lloyd had asserted that 'some of the deepest elements of folklore reside among miners': like earlier theorists, he saw this characteristic arising out of the 'intensely communal' nature of isolated groups—in this case, 'bound together by shared dangers'.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, Lloyd saw mining culture as the hermetic and tenacious fulcrum between a golden age of agrarian song creation and modern, urban environments: 'the raging industrialization that, with the large-scale capitalization of agriculture, shattered the old rural folk traditions, caused no break in the continuity of pitmen's culture...pit life grew more intense, relations between master and man became spikier, but the miners were in their element'.¹⁹⁶ As stated at the outset of *The Big*

¹⁹² See Harker, *Class Act*, 147–50 and Cox, *Set into Song*, 96–107.

¹⁹³ See Porter, "'The World's Ill-Divided'", 185.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Ferris, 'Herring Scales', *The Observer*, 21 August 1960, 25.

¹⁹⁵ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 331.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

Hewer, the eponymous figure was ‘a legend’ and, as Lloyd outlines, a means to personify and make sense of the mysteries of the mine itself:

If this superhuman worker has a hundred names and faces his feats are described in much the same terms in South Wales, the Midlands, the North-east. At birth he was six feet tall and weighed eighteen stone. He was a huge eater and a prodigious toiler who would impatiently throw aside his blunted tools and drill with his nose and cut coal with his teeth while holding up the roof with one hand. When the ground settles in the mine, South Wales colliers say: ‘Big Isaac’s working again’. In Durham when the timbers groan, they say: ‘Bob Towers is talking to us’. This fabulous worker survives only in tales, not in songs.¹⁹⁷

It would thus be MacColl’s self-imposed task to set a collier legend into song. Reflecting on this writing process, MacColl later stated that ‘in actuality could be found the subject matter for songs, usages, turns of expression, rhythms, pulses, idioms, all the elements out of which songs can be fashioned’—in short, the kind of language that could ‘transform an individual response into a universal one’.¹⁹⁸ Embracing a social role to which he had little claim, MacColl submitted to acting the part of pitman bard fashioned by Lloyd: ‘down in the mine with nothing to hear but the pit sounds—the drop of water, the creak of timber, the ring of the pick and the rattle of the tubs—the collier would wrestle with his muse to produce a song that might move, hearten or instruct other people just like himself’.¹⁹⁹

MacColl justified such a brazen fantasy by reading his own background and lack of formal education analogously to the miners he encountered, contrasting his ease and sagacity in such circumstances with Parker’s evident discomfort.²⁰⁰ MacColl suggests that the experience was transformative for Parker, who subsequently took to listening more than he spoke during interviews. MacColl continued:

We dragged ourselves along impossibly narrow passages into the hellish places, where solitary miners lie on their sides and jab with short-bladed picks at the eighteen-inch coal-

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 335–36. Robert Colls proposed a connection between the Big Hewer trope and the archetypal figure of ‘Bob Cranky’ in popular mining songs of the northeast during the nineteenth century; see Robert Colls, *The Collier’s Rant: Song and Culture in the Industrial Village* (London: Croom Helm, 1977). In a well-argued critique of Colls, however, Dave Harker makes the case that the potent Cranky figure was actually a way for petit-bourgeois outsiders to depict and deliberately essentialise mining culture through a kind of jealous caricature: Bob Cranky, he suggests, ‘represented all that would-be sophisticated young men in the major towns felt about pitmen, especially in relation to women’; see Dave Harker, ‘The Original Bob Cranky?’ *Folk Music Journal* 5/1 (1985), 70.

¹⁹⁸ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 328.

¹⁹⁹ Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 363.

²⁰⁰ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 329.

face. We sat nursing hot mugs of tea in pithead canteens while miners, still in their pit-dirt, answered our questions; we talked in kitchens with men who hacked words out of their ruined chests, in pubs where men drank their beer out of personalised mugs with quotations of Marx and William Morris engraved on the rims. At the end of our field-recording stint, we had taped between eighty and a hundred reels of mining ‘crack’, the conversation of men who can make words ring like hammer blows on a face of anthracite; who, when they talk, enrich the bloodstream of the national vocabulary with transfusions of pitmatic—the bold, bitter, ribald, beautiful talk of miners...I found nothing surprising in their ability to express themselves.²⁰¹

These fieldwork vignettes expose MacColl’s essentialising perception of the lifestyle he was attempting to depict from within—the distance from such work itself fundamental to creating his own emotional attraction. In parallel to Lloyd, MacColl viewed mining culture as the prime locus of working-class authenticity, qualifying his pragmatic remoteness from their manual work via reference to a shared level of discourse. Such opinions were further influenced by the problem of being directed to the community’s most outspoken raconteurs.²⁰²

Parker wrote a lengthy preview in *The Radio Times*, arguing that the Big Hewer myth perfectly suited the way he perceived the miners he had met:

When first I saw the miner underground, I knew that only the epic could do justice to him as a subject—the epic in the true sense of that much abused word; for the sight of him underground in his helmet, with his blackened face and his insistent humanity in that most inhuman of environments—the coal seam—makes him an awesome figure, and the very proximity of the roof seems to give him a superhuman stature.²⁰³

Parker’s words hint at a disjunction between the way miners themselves saw the myth and the way the radio ballad would employ it as a politicised allegory—reading ordinary workers through the lens of the legend, rather than taking miners’ experiences on their own terms. The figure of the Big Hewer was thus indicative of a fundamental and perhaps insurmountable variance in acuity between labourers and BBC researchers: miners never portrayed themselves as ‘Big Hewers’, yet that was precisely how MacColl and Parker would choose to represent them in the programme.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 328–29. See also Harker, *Class Act*, 150–52.

²⁰² See Cox, *Set into Song*, 110.

²⁰³ Charles Parker, ‘The Big Hewer’, *The Radio Times*, 10 August 1961, 51.

This ‘superhuman quality’ was conjured up, Parker claimed, when miners ‘began to talk about their work and their way of life’.²⁰⁴ He continued:

Searching for some central theme to give form and radio substance to this quality we found one almost ready-made in the legend of ‘The Big Hewer’, a part-mythological, part-historical figure constantly recurring in miners’ stories from the Tyne to the Vale of Neath, half-remembered, half-invented, wholly true as an expression of this industry, or so it seemed to us, and in the programme we have taken this figure and made the sounds of the pit speak for him—the uncanny whiplash of the steel ropes of the winding-gear speaking for his sinews, the deep pulse of the pump for his heart, the surge of the cages in the shaft and the constant flow of coal for his very blood.²⁰⁵

The ballad, Parker wrote, would guide listeners ‘through the experiences of every miner as a boy’ while documenting ‘progress from the old hand-hewing days to a modern mechanised face’ as new seams were opened up and developed.²⁰⁶

The fabled figure of Temple, the Big Hewer (or Jackie Torr, Isaac Lewis, and Bob Towers) furnished MacColl with material matching his view of the ballad form:

Out of the dirt and darkness I was born; go down!
Out of the hard black coalface I was torn; go down!
Kicked on the world and the earth split open,
Crawled through a crack where the rock was broken,
Burrowed a hole, away in the coal; go down!

Other songs were more lyrical, focussing on routine aspects of working-class life:

Schooldays over, come on then John, time to be getting your pit boots on;
On with your shirt and moleskin trousers, time you was on your way;
Time you was learning the pitman’s job and earning the pitman’s pay.

Some contained technicalities of the occupation, but used rhyme and metrical stress more effectively than in *The Ballad of John Axon* to create flow:

There are hewers and there are putters and there are brushers;
There are bratticemen and cutters;
There are hauliers and creeper lads and rappers;

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

There are drawers, there are benchmen, there are strappers.²⁰⁷

MacColl was also keen to underscore economic hardship and militancy:

Times were bad and labour cheap.
Women on the waste pits scrabbling for coal;
Cutters on the coalface; colliers on the dole.
If you don't fight then you don't eat.

In spite of intentions, such songs, were complicit in enforcing heroic archetypes that aestheticised and thus masked both the brutal realities of working-class life and the light-hearted repartee of mining communities.

Peter Cox notes that Parker and MacColl played a first cut of *The Big Hewer* to a group of miners 'and were taken aback to be told it lacked humour'; without time to amend the entire programme, their response was to hastily edit together and insert a section featuring jokes, tall tales (along with a trombone rasp awkwardly denoting comic denouement), and a forcibly jovial song that sat uncomfortably with the dry style of humour favoured by miners themselves.²⁰⁸ Indeed, from the actuality in this new section it was clear that the *Big Hewer*, rather than being a solemn and austere ideal, was in fact a vehicle for facetious humour: 'He had a good remedy for a bad roof, Isaac Lewis. He told the manager that he had a remedy: leave the coal under it'. By ghettoising the miners' comedic insights in this way, *The Big Hewer* divested other actuality of irony, reinforcing representations of an earnest lifestyle in line with MacColl's austere ideal. Dave Harker criticised such editing, describing the radio ballads as programmes in which Parker and MacColl 'romanticized, over-elaborated, indulged stylistic whims, and generally intellectualized and mediated the taped material'.²⁰⁹ Focussing on *The Big Hewer*, he noted that as a result of their privileged position, Parker and MacColl were able to shape documentary recordings 'into their own preconceptions about working-class life'.²¹⁰ Indeed, the programme foisted a particular reading of the *Big Hewer* upon the mining communities depicted, ignoring 'the culturally and economically determined reasons for the production of the

²⁰⁷ For an explication of these terms, see Dennis, Henriques, & Slaughter in *Coal is Our Life* and Harker, 'The Original Bob Cranky?'

²⁰⁸ Cox, *Set into Song*, 114.

²⁰⁹ Harker, *One for the Money*, 182.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

myth'.²¹¹ In so doing, Harker argued, 'it never seems to have occurred to Parker and MacColl that the mythical figure might have been a *deliberate* and *grotesque caricature* of the self-exploitative worker', hidden in complex layers of meaning:

To 'insiders' who shared the Big Hewer mentality, doubtless it would serve as a symbol of pride and virility. To other insiders—those who could see past the prowess and the pay packet—the myth would be both a self-mocking caricature, and an ideological stick with which to satirize men who, effectively, undercut piece-work rates, and so worked against the men's common interest and their union organization...To 'outsiders', not excluding Parker and MacColl, likely the Big Hewer would be used as a symbol of masculine prowess (and so, by implication, a challenge), and also as a defensive screen to ward off criticism of what has been a degrading and dangerous job.²¹²

In essence, Harker concluded, MacColl had produced 'a hymn to the horrors and the degradation of pitwork', a blindly positive and unintentional 'parody of the pitmen's *self-parody*'.²¹³ Ben Harker echoes this critique, proposing that the dominant effect of the programme was overstatement: 'rather than getting to the bottom of coalfield folklore, *The Big Hewer* simply reproduced it'.²¹⁴ MacColl's errors were symptomatic of his status as a Marxist intellectual: in a contemporaneous anthropological study of a Yorkshire mining town, the authors reported that 'miners constantly say that no non-miner can appreciate the nature of pitwork'.²¹⁵ Moreover, the study argued, miners did not tend to think 'in abstract terms of social and economic relations...but in a more concrete way' about the pragmatic conflicts of daily wage labour and trade union bureaucracy in a local community.²¹⁶ Indeed, they concluded, miners 'talk far, far more about class distinction than they do about class struggle'.²¹⁷

Tellingly, in a preview for *The Times*, Parker stated that he was proud to be introducing 'an entirely new concept of the coalminer' through the programme: 'I feel sure we have achieved a startling expression of the rich culture of the coalminer—a quality which in the whole he does not acknowledge himself'.²¹⁸ As with Edwardian folk revivalists, Parker felt that he alone was able to detect such latent authenticity in

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 184–85.

²¹⁴ Harker, *Class Act*, 152.

²¹⁵ Dennis, Henriques, & Slaughter in *Coal is Our Life*, 73.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

²¹⁸ 'Change in Style of Documentaries', *The Times*, 2 August 1961, 5.

this marginal lifestyle—one that was seemingly in need of his intervention in order to recognise its own worth. As Robert Colls proposed, the intricacies of mining life were rarely visible to eyes untutored in the right kind of cultural rapport: without it, he argued, ‘significant aspects of the miner’s village were as ghosts to be walked through’.²¹⁹ Analogously, the recording of actuality bears striking resemblance to the process of song collecting practiced by Sharp and Lomax: Parker and MacColl are open to charges of expropriation, distortion, reification, and selective mediation. As Dave Harker has noted, Parker and MacColl’s attitude toward the people they recorded was ‘almost entirely instrumental’.²²⁰ Contemporaneous reviews, however, were generally positive—one proposing that *The Big Hewer* was ‘a declaration of the human dignity that is continually eroded by what we normally call “progress”’...a recreation of the miner’s *mystique*’ in which testimony was assembled into ‘a mosaic given shape by MacColl’s songs without losing any of its tough vitality, its sensitiveness, passion, and compassion’.²²¹ Paul Ferris, however, sensed a subtle development in the aesthetics of the series: whereas previous radio ballads had been ‘careful to avoid...any enshrinement of the railwaymen, the fishermen or the road-builders’, he argued, *The Big Hewer* showed ‘uneasy signs of over-awareness’.²²² Outlining a passage from what he termed the ‘unselfconscious heroism...overheard, not stated’ of prior radio ballads to miners in *The Big Hewer* sounding as if they were deliberately ‘talking for the record’, Ferris objected to the increasingly staged quality of MacColl and Parker’s representation of working-class life—indicative of the way mining humour and irony had almost totally passed them by.²²³

Rebroadcast in late January 1962, *The Big Hewer* garnered a substantial and highly perceptive review in *The Times*. Suggesting that ‘radio’s status as an expressive medium has dwindled to a position somewhere beneath that of the telephone’, the uncredited correspondent drew attention to a resistant lineage of poetic documentaries and ‘experimental enthusiasm’ dating back to the work of Bridson in the 1930s, proposing that Parker, MacColl, and Seeger’s work was ‘among the few landmarks of postwar radio’.²²⁴ The author saw the programmes’ aesthetics arising

²¹⁹ Colls, *The Collier’s Rant*, 17. There is some irony in Coll’s comment, given Harker’s perceptive critique of his ‘Bob Cranky Thesis’ (see footnote 202 above).

²²⁰ Harker, *One for the Money*, 182–83.

²²¹ ‘World of the Miner’, *The Times*, 19 August 1961, 10.

²²² Paul Ferris, ‘The Birmingham Ballads’, *The Observer* 27 August 1961, 17.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ ‘Poetic Documentary with Worker-Heroes’, *The Times*, 27 January 1962, 4.

out of MacColl's earlier radio collaborations with Joan Littlewood and their Theatre Workshop days: 'they share a passionate interest in folk song, coupled with a belief in making direct contact with the people: not people, but *the* people (i.e. the economically essential workers)—an ideological distinction that marks off their work from the general sociology of today and sometimes gives it an over-simplified "thirty-ish" air'.²²⁵ The review went on to juxtapose the media of television and radio, reasoning that 'television is reflecting public opinion by surveying society from a position of strict realism' because 'a medium that reduces the human figure to the size of a doll is not well adapted to creating heroes'; in contrast, radio was 'a medium in which heroes flourish [as] it gives unfettered scope to audience imagination and moves naturally in worlds of legend and magic'.²²⁶ The ambiguous quality of radio was thus seen to create the necessarily incomplete canvas upon which a dialogic interplay with the content could take place—generating the potential for imagination free from the constraints of visual imagery. This very aspect was also seen as the radio ballad's Achilles' heel: 'it is in their extensive reliance on music that the Parker-MacColl programmes come closest to distorting their material...doubts begin to creep in when it has the effect not of heightening the atmosphere but simply of inflating it'.²²⁷ Referencing *The Big Hewer*, the review concluded that when 'recorded statements by miners are taken up by MacColl as pretexts for a big-gestured ballad', contrast between the actuality and the songs 'is similar to that between a real working man, and a civic statue to the dignity of labour in the social-realist style'.²²⁸ This conclusion warrants a critical exploration of realism, which I take up in the next section; first, however, I want to position MacColl's work in a contemporaneous network of ideas and anxieties specific to the British New Left.

As the 1950s progressed, Britain was widely considered to have become a society of newly affluent consumers who, in the words of Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, had 'never had it so good'.²²⁹ Growth in ownership of cars, televisions, and domestic items matched rising wages, full employment, and the appearance of a teenage subculture with significant disposable income; in short, British society appeared to have thrown off the shackles of poverty and wartime austerity to enter a

²²⁵ *Ibid.* The 'thirty-ish air' is in reference to the political climate of the 1930s.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ See Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life*, 11. Macmillan's phrase was from a speech delivered to fellow conservatives at a rally at Bedford in July 1957.

period of unprecedented economic stability that could provide high standards of living and form the basis of a true meritocracy.²³⁰ In the wake of comprehensive welfare reform and the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, Stuart Laing argues, the decade seemed to represent ‘not merely the post-war rewards of peace and prosperity, but potentially the epochal moment of British revival’.²³¹ It was no coincidence that during this period the Conservative Party won three successive general election victories, governing from 1951 through to 1964; indeed, the rhetoric of affluence is best seen as a manifestation of Rightist propaganda designed to support the credibility of a conservative government against political alternatives. As Laing notes, behind this ideological image of prosperity ‘lay considerable weight of detailed social description suggesting the progressive disappearance of the working class’.²³² In Richard Hoggart’s phrasing, a ‘bloodless revolution’ appeared to have taken place, erasing older cultural differences and producing a ‘classless’ society united only by the practices of modern mass consumption.²³³ In this context, the imagery of the Labour Party seemed hopelessly obsolete—associated with nationalisation, rationing, and welfare, the relic of a once stratified society. Although certain aspects of working-class life had improved in the postwar period, Selina Todd states, even the gains of the 1940s were conditional on workers ‘accepting an older power relationship that left control of workplaces, and the lion’s share of the country’s wealth, in the hands of the few’; peacetime itself was thus ‘riven by class’.²³⁴ Moreover, myths of meritocracy and classless affluence concealed structural inequalities and growing social divisions. As Todd shows, the 1950s were a decade of insecurity for many people as the achievement of a consumer ideal was reliant on overtime work and personal debt: in spite of an overall increase in earnings, gaps in income between classes actually widened. Indeed, she argues, ‘many men found it hard to keep their families in the style that prosperity seemed to demand’; economic growth relied upon these unskilled workers and yet they were ultimately losers in the idyll of affluence, reaping few of its material rewards.²³⁵ As the *Daily Worker*

²³⁰ See Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910–2010* (London: John Murray, 2014).

²³¹ Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life*, 9.

²³² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³³ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (1957; London: Penguin, 2009), 3.

²³⁴ Todd, *The People*, 169.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

asserted in 1958, ‘the British people cannot stand by and watch this economic sabotage’ carried out by ‘monopolists and their Tory Government’.²³⁶

In light of the manifest social changes that were taking place under the banner of Conservative propaganda, the rise of mass consumption during the 1950s became a focal point for debate: as Todd notes, a number of committed Leftists ‘feared that affluence was eroding working-class identity’.²³⁷ As the 1959 Labour defeat was seen to indicate the party’s demise as a viable opposition and thus to require a fundamental re-examination of its political outlook, challenge to the myths of prosperity came predominantly from elsewhere.²³⁸ As Laing notes, a group of radical activists and intellectuals coalescing around the early *New Left Review* ‘constituted a clear attempt to by-pass both the Labour Party’s loss of nerve and direction and the archaic dogmatism of the Communist Party by stressing the indissoluble links between the “cultural” and the “political” as spheres of analysis and action’.²³⁹ CPGB exiles from the turmoil of 1956 and older creeds were nonetheless present among a critical, heterodox milieu that, as Michael Kenny argues, ‘played a key role as an alternative to virulent anti-communism, defining a space between the polarities of political debate in the Cold War’.²⁴⁰ In his evangelising editorial for the first issue of *New Left Review* in January 1960, Stuart Hall stated that ‘we are convinced that politics, too narrowly conceived, has been a main cause of the decline of socialism in this country’: the ‘humanist strengths of socialism’, he continued, ‘must be developed in cultural and social terms, as well as in economic and political’ in order to attract young people, unify a fragmented movement, and engage a broader spectrum of support.²⁴¹ What was needed, Hall urged, was a critical language ‘sufficiently close to life’ with which to discuss popular culture, as it was ‘directly relevant to the imaginative resistance of people who have to live within capitalism’.²⁴² As a ‘movement of ideas’ aligned with CND, Hall hoped that the New Left would bring

²³⁶ ‘Editorial: A Prosperous and Happy 1958’, *Daily Worker*, 1 January 1958, 1. Concerned with disarmament, decolonisation, and socio-economic equality, the paper had been established ‘to carry forward the Socialist aims of the British Labour, trade union, and Co-operative movements’ (‘Editorial: Our Birthday Pledge to You’, *Daily Worker*, 2 January 1960, 1).

²³⁷ Todd, *The People*, 254.

²³⁸ See Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life*, 6.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 222. *New Left Review* represented the merging of *Universities & Left Review* with *The New Reasoner* under the editorship of Stuart Hall. See also John Akomfrah, *The Stuart Hall Project: Revolution, Politics, Culture, and the New Left Experience* (British Film Institute, 2013).

²⁴⁰ Michael Kenny, ‘Communism and the New Left’ in *Opening the Books*, ed. Andrews, Fishman, & Morgan, 197.

²⁴¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Editorial’, *New Left Review* 1 (1960), 1.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

about ‘a genuine dialogue between intellectual and industrial workers’: the ‘distant wariness’ between these two groups, he asserted, ‘*must* be broken down’.²⁴³ Hall thus saw the New Left’s vocation as providing education as a platform for solidarity and action in response to the ‘frozen monoliths of the Labour Movement’.²⁴⁴ The ‘last refuge of scoundrels today’, he concluded, was found in ‘the cry that we must stick to our differences in the interest of Party Unity’.²⁴⁵ Through this new perspective, Hall ultimately sought reconciliation between theoretical refinement and ‘the clarion call to moral principle, taken up in an unashamed way’.²⁴⁶

MacColl’s stubborn political stance did not align with the more nuanced outlook of the New Left as conceived by Hall: indeed, MacColl represented the loyal ‘clarion call’ of partisan difference and the very ‘frozen monoliths’ of old Labour from the 1930s against which a younger generation were reacting. Mid-century radicals interested in folksong, however, were just as keen to pursue a language ‘close to life’ and articulate ‘imaginative resistance’ to capitalism in aesthetic terms. Indeed, the heterodox New Left enthusiastically embraced aspects of MacColl’s ideology and the early radio ballads received attention in the first issue of *New Left Review* through a review by Bill Holdsworth. Predicated on a nostalgia for pre-modern industry articulated via William Morris, Holdsworth’s article began by eulogising ‘the romance of creating, even though it be by using a pick and shovel’; working-class men who gladly used such tools in the open air were thus ‘the main defence against the encroachment of the machine into the art of labour’—an activity that supposedly formed ‘the roots of our native culture’.²⁴⁷ Holdsworth continued:

[through recordings of industrial balladry] Ewan MacColl is making a great contribution in the fight against the mass pop-culture...he has brought alive the personal drama of our own day and age. When every channel of our senses are flooded with sickly sentiment wrapped up in a commercialised sex packet, it is rare to find any expression of truth and reality getting through. Yet it does. More so during the short lived period of skiffle (Oh, I do wish those Denmark Street hounds had left the kids alone.)²⁴⁸

On hearing *The Ballad of John Axon*, Holdsworth had been thrilled by the ‘rendering

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2, 1.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*,

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Bill Holdsworth, ‘Songs of the People’, *New Left Review* 1 (1960), 48.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

of a contemporary event breaking through the thick mud of mass pop culture on the mass media itself'.²⁴⁹ As with Alan Lomax, MacColl's work seemed to hold the potential for a subversion of mass culture from within. Holdsworth, a union official, concluded by encouraging material written about the people 'attacked in the Tory Press...as the bloody lazy working class': such songs, he argued, should be sung by activists as 'the bed-rock of a socialist-people's culture'.²⁵⁰

Following a few pages later, Brian Groombridge and Paddy Whannel took up the theme in an article (punning playfully on *Hamlet*) entitled 'Something Rotten in Denmark Street'. An 'astringent tone' was encouraged in discussion of popular music that would 'avoid both the tyrannical asceticism of the communist states...and the slap-happy, standardless euphoris of fan publicity'.²⁵¹ Groombridge and Whannel argued that most mass consumed popular song was 'bad music' (even when judged by its own standards) and that its promotion involved a 'fundamental but typical abuse of the means of communication in contemporary society'.²⁵² Although valuable as a locus of non-conformism, their key complaint was that popular records by figures such as Tommy Steele and Billy Fury 'overtly sell an invitation to escapism' reliant on artistic banality, commercial manipulation, exploitation, and sonic vulgarity: 'noise of an unbelievable ugliness is wrung from saxophones and guitars with sadistic cruelty and finally processed in the laboratory. Lyrics are given the same treatment and help to create a teenage world sealed off from unpleasant reality'.²⁵³ Evidently, the ghost of Frankfurt School critique was alive and well amid the British New Left.²⁵⁴ As damning as this indictment was, however, the authors did not dismiss popular entertainment entirely, but hoped that audiences might learn how to discern 'genuine talents' through a process of discrimination that would then be 'nourished and sustained by the media'.²⁵⁵ Given the structure of the music industry, they

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁵¹ Brian Groombridge & Paddy Whannel, 'Something Rotten in Denmark Street', *New Left Review* 1 (1960), 52.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 53, 52. See also Gillian Mitchell, 'A Very "British" Introduction to Rock 'n' Roll: Tommy Steele and the Advent of Rock 'n' Roll Music in Britain, 1956–1960', *Contemporary British History* 25/2 (2011): 205–25.

²⁵⁴ Such arguments recall Theodor W. Adorno's infamous critique of mass culture in the essay 'On Popular Music' (1941). See Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For responses to Adorno, see: Max Paddison, 'The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music', *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 201–18 and Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).

²⁵⁵ Groombridge & Whannel, 'Something Rotten in Denmark Street', 53.

acknowledged that this process would be difficult, but maintained nonetheless that it was important ‘not to share the streamlined young operators’ estimate of the consumers as so many suckers’.²⁵⁶ Ultimately, Groombridge and Whannel shared Hall’s faith that culture was central to forming a humanist resistance to the mechanisms of faceless capital. Bad songs, they concluded, are those that ‘narrow our sympathies, blunt our sensibilities and trivialize our feelings’: integrity in engagement with mass culture was therefore ‘essential to democracy’.²⁵⁷

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the radio ballads—as exemplars of popular song that positively engaged with native working-class life and provided an alternative to what were seen as vapid mass-mediated commodities—played a key role as exemplars in partisan New Left thought on British popular culture. Some radicals saw MacColl’s work as the very means of achieving a critical, democratic socialism through the mass media itself. Whereas many pop songs were seen as banal, superficial, and escapist, the radio ballads provided a vivid, detailed, and serious foil: they could potentially *expand* sympathies, *sharpen* sensibilities, and *elevate* emotions. Although keen to break down barriers between intellectuals and labourers, however, MacColl’s failing lay in a lack of genuine *dialogue* with industrial workers’ culture. Indeed, the radio ballads were anything but dialogic: they were involved instead in generating distorted depictions of working-class life through the filter of MacColl’s strident ideology. Despite giving workers a literal voice on air, the radio ballads employed their subjects as puppets to validate the political sensibilities of those with the power to represent. In his classic autobiographical account of northern working-class life published in 1957, *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart diagnosed such errors as being typical of a ‘middle-class Marxist’s view’:

He pities the betrayed and debased worker, whose faults he sees as almost entirely the result of the grinding system which controls him. He admires the remnants of the noble savage, and has a nostalgia for those ‘best of all’ kinds of art, rural folk-art or genuinely popular urban art, and a special enthusiasm for such scraps of them as he thinks he can detect today. He pities and admires the Jude-the-Obscure aspect of working-people. Usually, he succeeds in part-pitying and part-patronizing working-class people beyond any semblance of reality.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 54. On this point more broadly, see Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (1989; Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

²⁵⁷ Groombridge & Whannel, ‘Something Rotten in Denmark Street’, 54.

²⁵⁸ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 6. Originally, Hoggart had wanted the book to be titled ‘The Abuses of Literacy’—a title that would have made more sense in relation to his views. On the

Although couched in abstract terms, Hoggart's impeachment of such 'positive over-expectation' is uncannily apposite for both Lloyd and MacColl during this period—self-taught working-class artists who had effectively lost touch with foundational aspects of the very culture they claimed as their own.²⁵⁹

Hoggart's view of the working class was diametrically opposed to MacColl's heightened abstractions, stressing that 'we need to avoid any suggestion of a sense of heroism in the people...who actually live this kind of life'.²⁶⁰ In contrast to the stern and earnest archetypes resulting from the radio ballads, Hoggart suggested that the real 'working-class hero' was in fact a comic wit, 'the cheerful, not the romantic, hero'—precisely the aspect MacColl had succeeded in overlooking.²⁶¹ In Hoggart's view, working-class people were 'generally suspicious of principles before practice...non-political and non-metaphysical in their outlook': the core of their culture was instead 'a sense of the personal, the concrete, the local'.²⁶² Although largely 'unquixotic' as a social grouping, he nevertheless recognised the existence of trade union activists and those who sought adult education, but noted that such people were typically a minority.²⁶³ Hoggart, however, shared the very same anxieties as MacColl over what he saw as the possible loss of a distinctive working-class culture in the face of 'classless' mass commerce and low standards in popular literature. The 'shiny barbarism' of this ersatz mass art represented, for Hoggart, 'reading cut off from any serious suggestion of responsibility and commitment...a pallid half-light of the emotions where nothing shocks or startles or sets on edge, and nothing challenges, or gives joy or evokes sorrow'.²⁶⁴ Echoed later in *New Left Review*, mass commodities were seen as hollow, homogenising, irresponsible, materialistic, Americanised, and escapist—and thus a moral threat to political engagement. Raymond Williams, however, took a more positive view, offering a reading of the

complex history of the 'noble savage' trope in Western discourse, see Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁵⁹ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 4. Hoggart describes a similar effect in relation to meritocratic education: 'he has left his class, at least in spirit, by being in certain ways unusual; and he is still unusual in another class, too tense and over-wound' (272). People finding themselves in such liminal situations, he concludes, may well have joined the Communist Party or the Left Book Club.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 77, 86, 22. Hoggart's views thus aligned with the conclusions drawn by Dennis, Henriques, & Slaughter in *Coal is Our Life*.

²⁶³ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 113, 289.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 170, 206, 211.

problem one year after Hoggart’s book. For Williams, the issue was one of attitude and human agency within potentially exploitative mass-mediated processes that too often pursued *transmission* over didactic *communication*.²⁶⁵ At the heart of such relationships lay a history of elitist, anti-democratic suspicion of the labouring population as a dangerous revolutionary mob—now transposed onto the practices of mass consumption. Williams argued that ‘there are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses’; in such contexts the masses were thus always amorphous low Others.²⁶⁶ This perception, Williams asserts, needed to be rejected both from ‘above’ and as a reactionary proletarianism cast against erroneous perceptions of a static bourgeois culture: ‘the manufacture of an artificial “working-class culture”, in opposition to this common tradition, is merely foolish’.²⁶⁷ Indeed, he concluded, although ‘the clenched fist is a necessary symbol, the clenching ought never to be such that the hand cannot open, and the fingers extend, to discover and give voice to the newly forming reality’.²⁶⁸ This metaphor is prescient as a reproach to MacColl’s embattled political stance—opposed to the ecological growth Williams encouraged and thus unwilling to offer open debate or resolution.

3 | ‘The Dignity of Labour’: Social Realism, Gendered Bodies, and the Art of Stalinism

In his biography of MacColl, Ben Harker misquotes a review of *The Big Hewer*, accidentally replacing ‘social-realist’ with ‘socialist realist’.²⁶⁹ Inadvertently, Harker thus brings into question the intention of the article itself: employing the reviewer’s words, what would a ‘civic statue to the *dignity* of labour’ look like in a social realist style (especially when opposed to the experiences of ‘a real working man’)? Given MacColl’s political affiliations, might this very implausibility point toward the

²⁶⁵ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958; Nottingham: Spokesman, 2013), 314. Williams’ position was opposed to Hoggart: he argued that ‘there is an evident danger of delusion, to the highly literate person, if he supposes that he can judge the quality of general living by primary reference to the reading artifacts. He will, in particular, be driven to this delusion if he retains, even in its most benevolent form, the concept of the majority of other people as “masses”’ (308–09).

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 300. Williams, for example, cautioned that ‘it is foolish to interpret individuals in rigid class terms, because class is a collective mode and not a person’ (326).

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 335.

²⁶⁹ Harker, *Class Act*, 152.

reviewer's intention of branding the early radio ballads instantiations of communist—and more specifically, Stalinist—propaganda? In 1955, MacColl had even published a song entitled 'Ballad of Stalin' in *Sing*.²⁷⁰ Turning a blind eye to revolutionary terror and the horrors of gulag, the final stanza read as follows:

Joe Stalin was a mighty man and he had a mighty plan;
He harnessed nature to the plough to work for the good of man;
He's hammered out the future, the forgerman he has been
And he's made the workers' state the best the world has ever seen.

MacColl was thus symptomatic of the CPGB as a 'living contradiction'—condemning imperialism and structural inequality, yet uncritically supportive of the Soviet Union itself.²⁷¹ As Croft notes, the Party harboured irreconcilable desires 'to be at the same time both a part of British society and apart from it, a place of retreat from the world and a route back into it'.²⁷² Bearing this aspect of MacColl's political stance in mind, Dave Harker argued that *The Big Hewer* manifested a "socialist-realist" prescription—a conclusion echoed by Alun Howkins, who proposes that the radio ballads 'smacked...of the cruder kinds of socialist realism at best and Stalinism at worst'.²⁷³ Ben Harker's assessment of *The Ballad of John Axon* also follows this line of critique, suggesting that 'in its assumptions and aesthetic strategies [the programme] was a late exercise in the genre of socialist realism'.²⁷⁴

What all discussions of the radio ballads and industrial folksong to date neglect, however, is the vital importance of concomitant ideas in postwar British culture surrounding *social* realism—explicitly defined against and yet oddly bound up in intricate ways with the mercurial orthodoxy of the Soviet Union. Remarkably, the term 'social realism' itself finds no mention in the work of Dave Harker, Ben Harker, Dave Arthur, Paul Long, Peter Cox, or Michael Brocken and is indicative of the poor quality of historiographical work on the British folk revival in general; the one exception being Georgina Boyes, who nonetheless chooses to focus attention on the 1930s and the Second World War.²⁷⁵ Perhaps this neglect is less surprising given

²⁷⁰ Ewan MacColl, 'Ballad of Stalin', *Sing* 1/5 (1955), 92–3.

²⁷¹ Eaden & Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain*, 84.

²⁷² Croft, 'Authors Take Sides', 91.

²⁷³ Harker, *One for the Money*, 184; Howkins, 'History and the Radio Ballads', 92.

²⁷⁴ Harker, 'Class Composition', 348. Nevertheless, he continues, it 'is not reducible to a socialist realist formula' (349).

²⁷⁵ See Boyes, *The Imagined Village*, 134–45 and 181–87.

realism's wider eclipse within poststructuralist paradigms. In a recent revisionist volume on the subject, Matthew Beaumont argues that realism has often been 'crudely caricatured' and dismissed for seeming to be philosophically innocent, ideologically deceptive, and overly ambitious in its approach to mimesis.²⁷⁶ Rachel Bowlby adds that due to its awkward position between romanticism and modernism, realism has most often functioned merely as the critical foil to other more self-consciously radical movements. Nevertheless, she continues, realism encouraged the dialectical defamiliarisation of prior trends and thus extended processes of representation (as well as the milieux available for such acts) 'in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds'.²⁷⁷ Without wishing to reclaim the radio ballads as exceptionally self-reflexive works of social critique—my own reading will tend to align with the more positive coordinates of the poststructuralist evaluation criticised by Beaumont—it is instructive to view them within a more nuanced interdisciplinary context in relation to the aesthetic strategies of social realism.

In *Keywords*, Williams traces the convoluted meanings of realism back to its association with absolute universals or Platonic essences—ironically, revealing links to the Idealist thought to which it would later be juxtaposed. Although this use gradually faded, elements persist in the distinction frequently drawn between superficial appearance and a 'reality' located behind it, establishing a 'shifting double sense' or 'almost endless play' in the term itself.²⁷⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, he writes, realism had accrued four discernable meanings: first, used in opposition to nominalism; second, to designate the physical, material world independent of mind or spirit; third, in contrast to sentimentalism or the imaginary; and lastly, 'as a term to describe a method or an attitude in art and literature—at first an exceptional accuracy of representation, later a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist', opposed to romanticism and the mythic.²⁷⁹ Paradoxically, realism was also used to characterise movements attempting to depict, emphasise, or promote what were seen as underlying political or psychological forces—Soviet socialist

²⁷⁶ Matthew Beaumont, 'Introduction: Reclaiming Realism' in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 2, 8.

²⁷⁷ Rachel Bowlby, 'Foreword' in *Ibid.*, xvi.

²⁷⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983; London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 254.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

realism providing one such example. Williams notes that the most common critique of the realist project has tended to concern an identification of the disjunction between mode or substance employed for the purpose of representation and the subject reproduced through this process, creating ‘at worst a falsification making us take the forms of representation as *real*’ and at best an artistic convention to which we have become accustomed—‘a pseudo-objective *version* of reality (a version that will be found to depend, finally, on a particular phase of history or on a particular set of relationships between men and between men and things)’.²⁸⁰ The most naïve readings of realism—such as Cox’s view that the radio ballads are transparent, cited at the very beginning of this chapter—thus contain the ideological danger that contingent conventions or the representations generated through creative praxis are interpreted as unmediated windows onto the worlds they depict.

Social realism in art can be seen to have emerged in the US with what John Gladstone has termed the ‘generation of 1876’: forged in the crucible of Civil War, this young group of radicals ‘produced the first paintings that reflected the rise of the factory system and industrial transfiguration’.²⁸¹ With ‘no glorification of the Protestant work ethic...no smiling faces’, Gladstone argues that such paintings were the first to show ‘the latent power of the new industrial working class’, courting ‘fears of anarchism and revolution’ in the establishment.²⁸² Treating their lowly subjects ‘respectfully and sympathetically’, this ensemble began to cast the working class figure ‘as a new type of democratic hero’.²⁸³ Their scenes, however, were rarely copied from life: instead, the artists ‘had to devise a vocabulary adequate to resolve the tensions between realism and symbolism’.²⁸⁴ Such tensions would continue to haunt the project of realism throughout the twentieth century as artists fought both to uphold the dignity of manual labourers while simultaneously depicting the results of socio-economic destitution and exploitation: urban squalor, unemployment, and physical torment. During the Depression era, such aesthetics came to the fore as an officially endorsed hegemony in the US. With the Roosevelt administration came New Deal initiatives emphasising, as Jonathan Harris notes, ‘democratic realism’ and

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 257. I explore issues of representation more fully in the next chapter.

²⁸¹ John Gladstone, ‘Social Realism in American Art: The Generation of 1876’, *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20 (1994), 113.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 128, 131, 129.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

a ‘projected social utopia’, both populist and patriotic.²⁸⁵ The selection criteria for inclusion in these heavily regulated schemes demonstrated a bias against abstraction: through the discourse of this period, Harris concludes, a ‘notion of the essentially American became...a terminological equivalent of a specific concept of philosophical and aesthetic realism’.²⁸⁶ David Shapiro notes that New Deal painters ‘attempted to use art to protest and dramatize injustice to the working class’ brought about by an inhumane, unequal, and materialistic system.²⁸⁷ In a context where social disparity was interpreted as an ideological struggle between the forces of capital and labour, paintings by artists such as Philip Evergood, William Gropper, and Jacob Lawrence were intended as ‘a demand for justice and an exhibition of the misery of unemployment, the fortitude of workers, the corruption of the ruling class’.²⁸⁸ Indulgent gestures of self-expression were relegated in favour of a willingness to act as the mouthpiece for egalitarian ideals and those unable to speak for themselves. Tensions nevertheless erupted between the solidarity artists sought with manual labourers, a desire to ‘inspire their actions’, and a deliberate ‘focus on the indignity or pathos of their situation—the hard work they perform, the inadequate rewards they receive for it, or the miserable conditions they work under’.²⁸⁹

Social realism had lost favour in the US by the Second World War. As Harris argues, this shift was due to a wartime propaganda machine ‘portraying “America” as synonymous with freedom and tolerance’; within such a context art foregrounding uncomfortable inconsistencies or providing critical dissent was no longer welcome—especially with regard to the burgeoning anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War.²⁹⁰ Meanwhile, in Britain, social realist approaches gained a new ascendancy during the upheavals of wartime: as Gillian Whiteley notes, World War Two functioned to democratise art and ‘invoked a heightened social awareness in the British art world’, with many artists responding ‘by producing accessible artworks that could speak to

²⁸⁵ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 2, 8.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25, 39.

²⁸⁷ David Shapiro, ‘Social Realism Reconsidered’, in *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, ed. David Shapiro (New York: Ungar, 1973), 3.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 15, 14.

²⁹⁰ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 153. See also James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

the traumatised and the war-weary'.²⁹¹ One facet of the drive toward documentary realism included Henry Moore's figurative drawings of Londoners sheltering in the tunnels of the Underground system. In literature, Rod Mengham argues, British social realist imagery was 'formed under the influence of post-war reactions to ideas of wartime social unity': when conceptions of life 'that might integrate past, present and future' surfaced in the aftermath of war, he suggests, novelists 'responded by replacing the experimental temporalities of modernism with a restoration of the linear conventions associated with realism'.²⁹² Yet, he continues, the emergence of this nostalgic approach coincided 'with the disillusionment of a populist culture that had both won the war and lost the peace'—an injured culture keenly aware of the alienating reassertion of class-based inequalities within the supposedly affluent society.²⁹³ Stephen Lacey thus asserts that to call a work social realist 'recognizes that it has political or moral intentions, an engagement with the darker and more controversial aspects of contemporary society'.²⁹⁴ As such, Keston Sutherland ventures, social realism 'takes a special, intense interest in damaging practices of representation that make people insensitive to suffering or blind them to the extent of suffering and its complex material causes'.²⁹⁵ Likewise, Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment have argued that British social realism was 'constructed as an aesthetics of responsibility with a mission to incorporate its citizen subjects within the public sphere'.²⁹⁶ Hallam and Marshment define social realism as a term employed to describe films that 'aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between locality and identity'.²⁹⁷ Seeking to be populist yet at odds with mass culture due to a focus on 'characters who usually figure as background presences in the generic mainstream', social realist films are conventionally set in marginal or economically

²⁹¹ Gillian Whitely, 'Re-presenting Reality, Recovering the Social: The Poetics and Politics of Social Realism and Visual Art', in *British Social Realism in the Arts Since 1940*, ed. David Tucker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 138.

²⁹² Rod Mengham, 'Bad Teeth: British Social Realism in Fiction', in *British Social Realism in the Arts Since 1940*, ed. David Tucker, 90, 81.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁹⁴ Stephen Lacey, 'Staging the Contemporary: Politics and Practice in Post-War Social Realist Theatre', in *British Social Realism in the Arts Since 1940*, ed. Tucker, 57, 66.

²⁹⁵ Keston Sutherland, "'This / is not a metaphor": The Possibility of Social Realism in British Poetry', in *British Social Realism in the Arts Since 1940*, ed. Tucker, 103–04.

²⁹⁶ Julia Hallam & Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 34. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

²⁹⁷ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, 184.

disenfranchised communities ‘familiar to many through their mediated representations, not from lived experience’.²⁹⁸ Indeed, social realism was devoted to an empathetic investigation of the low Other within native contexts habitually overlooked by globalised (read: Americanised) popular culture.

Lacey testifies to the prevalence of social realist aesthetics as a new form of cultural politics across the arts in Britain during the late 1950s and early 1960s—a paradigm ‘in which representations of class would assume an importance not only for the theatre, but also for the way that the myths of affluence and consensus were contested in a range of cultural and artistic forms’ principally by a young cohort of ‘emancipated working-class writers in rebellion’.²⁹⁹ Epitomised by the work of so-called Angry Young Men including playwright John Osborne and novelist Alan Sillitoe, this turn was coupled with an increase in British working-class actors ‘who could respond to the demands of the new plays and, in doing so, shift the parameters around what was considered “real” and “authentic”’.³⁰⁰ In addition, this aesthetic project was shot through with concern for ‘the debilitating effects of mass culture...centring on a fear for the political and cultural homogeneity of the working-class’, intimately entwined with reifications of a particular notion of masculine identity.³⁰¹ Indeed, Samantha Lay notes that the work of Free Cinema and the British New Wave demonstrated an ‘overwhelming preoccupation with working class males’—betraying a misogyny that, she argues, ‘severely limited and fatally undermined’ their realist aesthetics.³⁰² Not only did the radio ballads share in this fetishisation of the white working-class male body, they inherited Lloyd’s chauvinistic discourse of industrial song conditional upon visceral toil, independence, and military valour. Lloyd and MacColl, however, did not simply project such perceptions of gender polarity onto British working-class culture: the masculinity epitomised by the radio ballads was indicative of crucial aspects of working-class male self-perception. Bourke argues that in a context where nascent feminism ‘jeopardized conventional power relationships within working-class families’ and strong status links existed between masculinity, respect, and physical exertion, the

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190, 193.

²⁹⁹ Stephen Lacey, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context, 1956–65* (London: Routledge, 1995), 71, 1.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁰² Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit-Grit* (London: Wallflower, 2002), 16, 64.

identity of working-class men was ‘reaffirmed by manual labour, suffused as it was with ideas of potency and heroism’.³⁰³ Ideals of gallantry were thus self-consciously employed to bolster a male identity increasingly open to question. Such visions of difference were upheld by the exclusively male sphere of pitwork and the sharp divisions produced by domesticity, child bearing, leisure, and waged labour—along with what has been described as the ‘centripetal’ influence of collieries for men compared to their ‘centrifugal’ influence on women.³⁰⁴ MacColl unreflexively revelled in such constructions of working-class gender discrimination.

Alongside a heroic reinforcement of masculinity in the radio ballads stood representations of women as mere objects of romantic attention or as wives concerned with the plight of their courageous husbands. In *The Ballad of John Axon*, for example, Isla Cameron sang a MacColl song warning other girls to avoid the affections of railwaymen due to their misplaced loyalty and inconstant desires:

Come all you young maidens take a warning from me:
Shun all engine drivers and their company.
They’ll tell you they love you and all kind of lies,
But the one that he loves is the train that he drives

A sailor comes home when the voyage is done;
A soldier gets weary of following the drum;
A collier will cleave to his loved one for life;
But the fireman’s one love is the engine, his wife.³⁰⁵

Reading against the grain, the final line offers up a semantic ambiguity: is the ‘one love’ referred to the locomotive itself (as MacColl seems to suggest), or is it the wife-as-engine? This uncomfortable confluence of obedient industrial machinery—employed instrumentally, in need of taciturn control, technical mastery, and constant placation—and women evinces a latent trope spanning the recorded actuality. A typical example, spoken by a male driver, was as follows: ‘what a feeling you have when you get off the shed: you’ve got the engine, you’ve got the control of it, and what a feeling. I’m cock of the bank. There’s nobody can take a rise out of me now. She’s mine. Come on, me old beauty—and off we go. The moon’s out and the

³⁰³ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, 45, 130.

³⁰⁴ See Dennis, Henriques, & Slaughter in *Coal is Our Life*, 14.

³⁰⁵ Not all workers abided by MacColl’s hierarchy: one man responded by laughing and saying ‘when the work interferes with the girls, well you give up the work you see’.

countryside it's lovely...She answers to every touch'. This metaphoric alignment is also manifest in *The Big Hewer*, where the trope was translated from mechanical command (significantly, played out under the glow of moonlight) to the deep and inscrutable mystery of cavities in the earth itself. For instance: 'down the pit...you know full well that she can be a nasty bitch when she likes. She can be real nasty. She's just like an angry woman. She just throws her weight about'. Later, the pit-as-woman theme was combined with the perception of authentic masculinity: 'I think a good pit is like a good woman: you feel that you owe an obligation to both. It's been my life's love to serve the men that work in the pit...because I find that they are real men'. In *The Big Hewer*, women were also present as the voices of tragic prolepsis and lament, epitomised by the cry 'Jimmy come back!'—and the following stanza:

Many's the time I've sat by the fire and thought how the coal is won,
 Waiting to hear his step at the door when another day's work was done;
 Many's the time I've listened and trembled to hear that warning bell,
 Dreading to hear that knock on the door and dreading the news they might tell.

Although these lines are sung by a female voice, the overriding yet unacknowledged representational gaze of the early radio ballads is a (heterosexual) male perspective: men are subjects, women are objects—inconsequential embellishments or elaborate metaphors for sublime volatility and mechanical subservience.

Reception material tended to echo the underlying misogyny of the programmes: in what he termed Parker and MacColl's 'essays in words and music', Ferris proposed that the word 'man' was prevalent, 'accorded a proper dignity and put back at the centre of the songs, a hero with sweat on his brow, swearing and struggling'.³⁰⁶ He continued: 'it could all be the grittiest kind of corn, but never is because of the intense professional dedication with which people have been observed, recorded and patiently embedded in music'.³⁰⁷ Similar representations of masculinity were found in *Singing the Fishing*, where excerpts of actuality were chosen that emphasised men's role as intrepid social providers: 'if you was one of the old hunters in the old tribal days, you'd brought home the meat, you see, share it out; do what you like with it, you see; I done my bit'. Likewise, in *Song of a Road* women were only present as mothers, singing lullabies to their children about 'a man you seldom see /

³⁰⁶ Ferris, 'Herring Scales'.
³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

For he's had to roam far away from home, away from you and me'. Women's peripheral role was one of waiting at home for husbands at the mercy of capitalist exploitation; that very same distance from the domestic sphere, however, was romanticised as independence for male protagonists. As Dave Harker wryly observed, the early radio ballads thus celebrated 'the "worker as hero" (rarely as heroine)'.³⁰⁸ Given that such heightened representations of physical employment were common, Bourke argues, women were active in maintaining the division of labour in order to reduce their own subjugation.³⁰⁹ The parlour thus became symbolic 'of the housewife's power and control': the feminisation of cooking and housework, she argues, was 'based on the need of women to insure their eminence within the household'.³¹⁰ The narrative impetus of the ballad form, however, functioned to downplay such routine and elevate the intrepid aspects of working-class life that suited the declamatory style favoured by MacColl—relegating the quotidian either to passages of recitative or (in the case of domestic work or women's integral role in postwar society) silent omission. Indeed, the domestic sphere and any critique of working-class culture in the programmes was abjured by MacColl in favour of autonomous masculine archetypes that functioned as vicarious antidotes for an intellectualised alienation from the realm of manual labour.

The patriarchal masculinity of industrial folksong and the marginalisation of women in the radio ballads were coterminous: as Joan W. Scott has noted, gender opposition is produced as a relational, interdependent, and hierarchical construct in a dynamic network of other social forces and inequalities. Scott advocates historiographical attention to the symbolic systems used to represent normative gender roles and articulate social rules in order to account for the 'persistent associations of masculinity with power, for the higher value placed on manhood than on womanhood'.³¹¹ What is needed, she asserted, was 'a refusal of the fixed and permanent quality of the binary opposition, a genuine historicization and deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference'.³¹² Scott proposed that gendered meanings are produced through a strategic dispersal of actions conditioned by discourse: in such a reading, as Foucault has argued, power and knowledge are

³⁰⁸ Harker, *One for the Money*, 182.

³⁰⁹ See Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, 68.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

³¹¹ Joan E. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91/5 (1986), 1063. See also Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*.

³¹² Scott, 'Gender', 1065.

mutually implicative as ‘there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’.³¹³ Providing a way to both articulate and naturalize difference, Scott proposes, gender is thus ‘a primary way of signifying the relationships of power’; hierarchies, she continues, ‘rely on generalized understandings of the so-called natural relationship between male and female’ that can be mapped onto political forms of supremacy.³¹⁴ Such recourse to the natural is always already political. Indeed, as Judith Butler states, ‘the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent prescriptions’.³¹⁵ Butler’s theory of performativity helps to explicate how identities are enacted within linguistic schemes reliant upon systems of binary hierarchization. She argues that ‘the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself...what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body’.³¹⁶ Gender has therefore been central to the establishment of intelligibility and consequently the ‘ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression’.³¹⁷ Butler emphasises that ‘there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’.³¹⁸ Gendered existence is thus a regulative illusion of internal substance—a matrix of free-floating signification produced on the body’s surface. Butler concludes that the semiotics of gender ‘designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established’: sex ‘denotes an historically contingent epistemic regime, a language that forms perception by forcibly shaping the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived’.³¹⁹

Scott recommends that we ‘ask not only what is at stake in proclamations or debates that invoke gender to explain or justify their positions but also how implicit

³¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; London: Penguin, 1991), 27; see also Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1976; London: Penguin, 1998).

³¹⁴ Scott, ‘Gender’, 1067, 1073.

³¹⁵ Judith Butler, ‘Preface (1999)’ to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2006), viii. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993; New York: Routledge, 2011).

³¹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiv, xxv.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10, 155.

understandings of gender are being invoked and reinscribed'.³²⁰ Representations of working-class gender identity in the radio ballads begin to make sense only when seen in the context of debates surrounding postwar affluence and the changing role of women in British society. Although ideas of women's appropriate compass remained strong during the war years, in the wake of critical labour deficiencies after 1941, young women were temporarily conscripted into work for the war effort and many volunteered for auxiliary forces, producing dramatic changes in the type of work undertaken by women; as with the First World War, Susan Kingsley Kent notes, 'women took on work in industries formerly considered "male"'.³²¹ Unequal wages based on gender demarcation, however, remained the norm. Similarly, under welfare reforms and pro-natalist discourse of the immediate postwar period, the nuclear family was reinscribed as a unit in which husbands and wives were allocated roles based on conventional gender divisions; in working-class contexts, as Kent outlines, union officials 'opposed family allowances on the ground that it would undermine masculine identity and the role of men in the family'.³²² In addition, Lesley A. Hall notes, sex remained wedded to an orthodox, phallogocentric model often seen as a non-pleasurable duty within marriage.³²³ Women's roles and attitudes were nevertheless changing and women were present in the workforce in new ways during the 1950s. A significant motivating factor, as Kent outlines, was the rise in consumer spending, ironically enforcing women's roles while requiring them to work outside the home: 'women had to earn an income to buy the products that would enable them to meet new standards of domesticity'.³²⁴ In this period of instability brought about by the baby boom and American cultural influence, Hall argues that women were subject to 'moral pronouncements' that were 'defensive reactions to a sense, whether correct or not, that old constraints were falling away, that erotic energies nurtured by a buoyant economy and the Welfare State were threatening to break out'.³²⁵

³²⁰ Scott, 'Gender', 1074.

³²¹ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640–1990* (London: Routledge, 1999), 313. Women, for example, took up jobs in chemicals, munitions, transport, utilities, shipbuilding, commerce, government, agriculture, civil defense, and the armed forces (314).

³²² *Ibid.*, 318.

³²³ Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 122. See also Stephen Brooke, 'Bodies, Sexuality and the "Modernization" of the British Working Classes, 1920s to 1960s', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (2006): 104–22.

³²⁴ Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain*, 322.

³²⁵ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain*, 147.

Attitudes toward class, gender, sexuality, domesticity, and manual labour were thus closely bound up in postwar Britain. As Stephen Brooke argues, changes in the workplace, birth control, and marriage rendered gender identities increasingly uncertain: ‘femininity became less firmly tied to motherhood, while work gradually became accepted as a province of both men and women and masculinity was seen as reformed’.³²⁶ As such, older stereotypes appeared increasingly anachronistic amid the rhetoric of affluence—opening up a distance ‘between lived experience, established discursive expressions of class identity and newer articulations of gender identity’.³²⁷ The language of gender itself, however, proved simultaneously useful to enact angry or nostalgic rejoinders to these changes, as Brooke proposes:

In the 1950s a distinct and historically specific value was attached to the valorization of traditional gender stereotypes within the working classes...At a moment when such stereotypes might have had less resonance in lived experience, nostalgia for traditional, more certain and more fixed stereotypes of femininity (such as the working-class mother) became more intense. Such nostalgia not only evoked the loss of particular gender identities, but also represented an elegy to an older class identity, the foundation of which comprised established ideas of masculine and feminine roles.³²⁸

Such defensive reactions to developments in working-class life coexisted with the rise of what Brooke terms ‘aggressive masculinity’ in literature manifesting a backlash against uncertainty and reigning inequalities.³²⁹ A docile, domesticated femininity served as the necessary counterpoint to this valorisation of male heroism. Given that working mothers had become an indication of the modernised working class, MacColl’s cherishing of an older form of masculinity was a reactionary gesture representing a deliberate turning away from concurrent feminism. In Brooke’s words, gender ideology became the ‘principal means of expressing a sense of loss’—re-establishing resilient figures of masculinity at precisely the moment they were most in jeopardy.³³⁰ The radio ballads should be read in light of this moment in the history of British gender roles in relation to nostalgic and aggressive constructions of male camaraderie invested in romanticised projections of working-class community. As

³²⁶ Stephen Brooke, ‘Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain during the 1950s’, *Journal of Social History* 34/4 (2001), 774.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 775.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 786.

Bourke has shown, such fantasies primarily functioned as rhetorical devices bearing little relation to the pragmatics of working-class existence.³³¹ Although, as Butler notes, the typical mind / body distinction implicitly maintains and vindicates a gendered hierarchy of association, the radio ballads' construction of gender roles was reliant less on this conventional alignment of abstracted rationality with the masculine sphere than on an alignment of masculinity with the physical, labouring body itself—a virility produced through strenuous industrial work.³³²

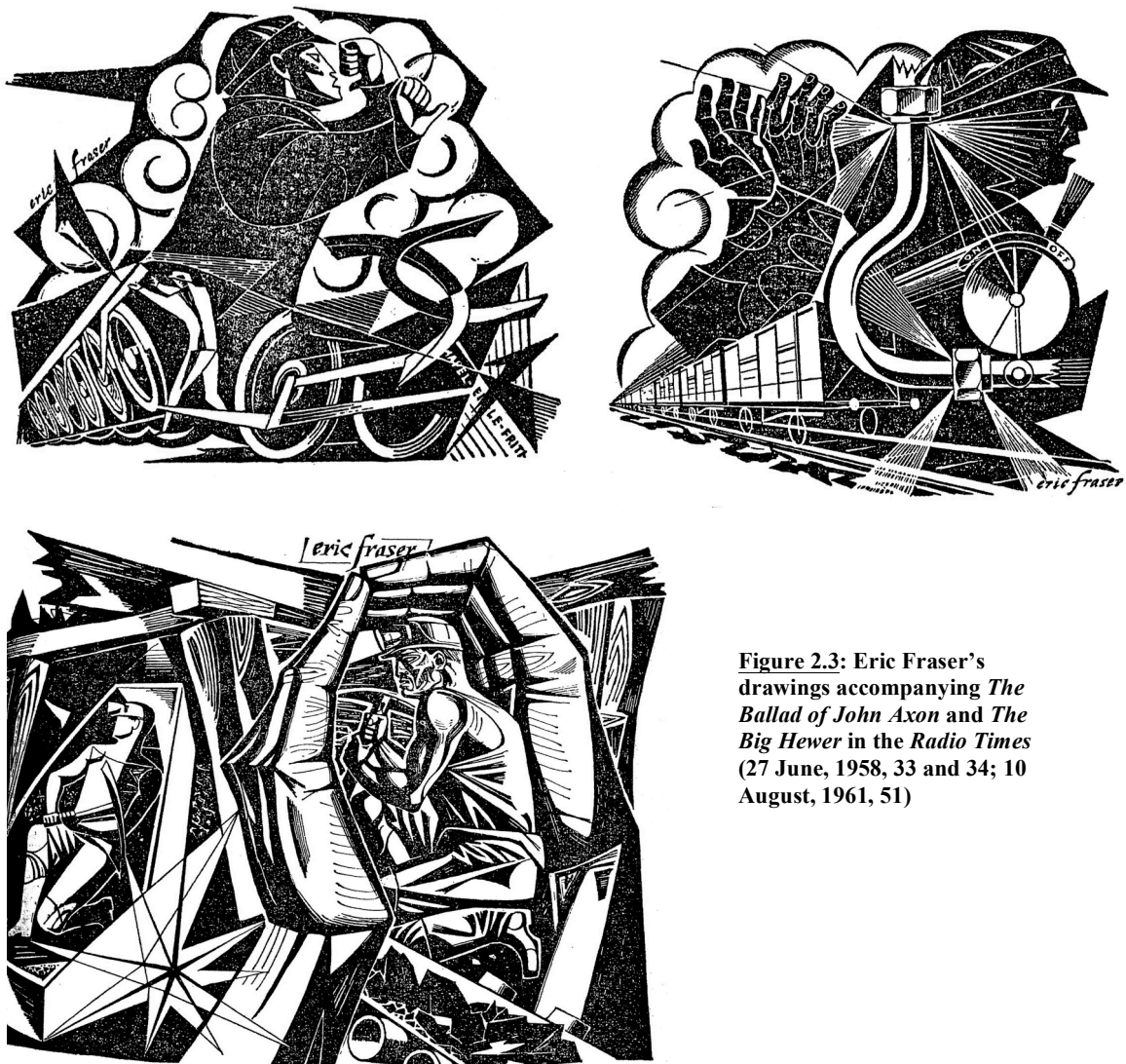


Figure 2.3: Eric Fraser's drawings accompanying *The Ballad of John Axon* and *The Big Hewer* in the *Radio Times* (27 June, 1958, 33 and 34; 10 August, 1961, 51)

Accompanying the programmes in *The Radio Times* and providing the most arresting example of their nostalgic fetishisation of the male working-class body were Eric Fraser's distinctive monochrome drawings. Born in Westminster in 1902 and

³³¹ See Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, 138.

³³² See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.

trained at Goldsmiths, Fraser had been illustrator for *The Radio Times* since 1926.³³³ By the end of the Second World War, he had abandoned the playful humour of his early work and assumed a new solemnity. Although never connected with a specific trend, Wendy Coates-Smith writes, Fraser's student works 'reflected the Arts and Crafts Movement', whereas later compositions toyed with Vorticism and Cubism.³³⁴ R. D. Usherwood, art editor for *The Radio Times* during the 1950s, states that it was the magazine's purpose 'to introduce people to programmes...and give them visual fodder for their imagination', recalling that after Fraser had read the scripts 'he had an uncanny genius for getting to the heart of the matter'.³³⁵ In a precise mirroring of MacColl and Parker's attitude toward recorded actuality, Fraser's son later recalled that his father 'didn't like realism for realism's sake, he liked to take the facts and bend them to his will'.³³⁶ Fraser's favourite subjects tended to be human figures and scenes of industrial machinery.³³⁷ He was therefore perfectly situated to provide consonant graphic representations for the early radio ballads, in which he depicted a Futurist confluence of man and machine in montages that evoke Fernand Léger, Wyndham Lewis, and Jacob Epstein's sculpture *The Rock Drill*. For *The Ballad of John Axon*, an archetypal engine driver magnified to heroic proportions rises in clouds of steam out of the violently speeding train itself, head raised blindly upward in a gesture of epic conation; in another drawing, the steam brake was reimagined as the face of the locomotive, its scalding steam erupting like beams of light onto huge upheld hands, serving also to form the silhouetted head of the driver. For *The Big Hewer*, the lean and chiselled visage of a miner—muscles emphasised by the high-contrast newsprint—is encased in the monumental grasp of superhuman hands representing the coal seam itself; his face holds an expression of steely determination and his figure blends so well into the conveyor belt below and the wooden joists above that he could be part of both the mine and the machinery itself; an equally prototypical co-worker with only an angular outline holds a pick to the left, unperturbed by an explosion nearby and oblivious to the coffin-like box he works within. Women are notably absent and it is clear that Fraser detected and embellished

³³³ For biographical information, see Sylvia Backemeyer (ed.), *Eric Fraser: Designer and Illustrator* (London: Lund Humphries, 1998) and Alec Davis, *The Graphic Work of Eric Fraser* (London: Uffculme, 1974).

³³⁴ Wendy Coates-Smith, 'Eric Fraser the Illustrator' in *Eric Fraser*, ed. Backemeyer, 18.

³³⁵ R. D. Usherwood, 'Foreword' in *Ibid.*, 6.

³³⁶ Quoted in Coates-Smith, 'Eric Fraser the Illustrator', 19.

³³⁷ See Davis, *The Graphic Work of Eric Fraser*, 11.

upon something more than documentary mimesis in the programmes, mimicking MacColl's highly gendered modelling of male socialist heroism.

Referring to what he terms the 'battle for realism' in British art of the Cold War period, James Hyman argues that Marxist critics identified in such debates 'specific ideological positions and understood their conflict to be a microcosm of political battles'.³³⁸ Likewise, MacColl and Lloyd's aesthetic positions were staked out in explicitly political terms and they too understood their use of song to exist in a synecdochical relation to political ideology. In the European artworld, Hyman proposes, a number of competing and diverse realisms existed: social realism championed by radical critic and staunch member of the CPGB John Berger, a dialectical form of 'liberal realism', and finally 'Modernist realism'.³³⁹ The desire to establish a distinctively European form of realism was intertwined with shifting interpretations of art from the Soviet Union—'referred to negatively when it served as the foil for the promotion of British social realism and positively when its reverence for tradition acted as a riposte to Western excess'.³⁴⁰ Typical of CPGB attitudes toward mass culture in the postwar period, realist painters were advocated by radicals within the context of an aspiration to reaffirm an indigenous heritage of urban realism against American cultural imperialism. During this period, Hyman notes, Berger increasingly distinguished between self-consciously activist work that aimed at revealing deeper mechanisms and work that merely demonstrated humanist or socially relevant implications: for Berger 'Socialist Realism was a deliberate political intervention, whereas social realism was an inherent but unconscious quality'.³⁴¹ Shapiro makes a related conclusion, slanted toward a pejorative assessment of direct political intervention, arguing that where social realism was 'opposed to the ruling class' and 'predominantly selects as its subject matter the negative aspects of life under capitalism', Soviet socialist realism 'supports the ruling class and the form of government' by depicting 'the positive aspects of life under socialism'.³⁴² In this reading, socialist realism was a pernicious and hegemonic ideology; for communists

³³⁸ James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War, 1945–60* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 2.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4. See also Esther Leslie, 'Interrupted Dialogues of Realism and Modernism: "The fact of new forms of life, already born and active"' in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Beaumont and Miško Šuvaković, 'Remembering the Art of Communism. Analysis of Contradiction: Approaches and Transgressions', *Third Text* 23/1 (2009): 15–24.

³⁴⁰ Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, 67.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁴² Shapiro (ed.), *Social Realism*, 28.

such as Berger, in contrast, it was the means to channel objectively ‘real’ social processes. Ultimately, the difference was drawn between a style that functioned within the confines of official Stalinist policy and one that was influenced by Marxism-Leninism but provided a critical perspective by representing structural socio-economic inequalities. One appeared to eschew irony and adopt the heroic—the other, to embrace the marginal and foreground the tragic.

This rigid binary between propaganda and critical reflexivity, however, proves far too simple and does injustice to the complex, paradoxical intentions of Stalinist aesthetics. Such art was seen by Soviet authorities as part of the fabric of political ontology—believing, as Brandon Taylor notes, that ‘the transformation of social life under the guidance of the Communist Party required a complete re-education of humanity in all its cultural habits, including everyday thoughts and emotions and its attitudes to all the practical as well as the most abstract matters of social life’.³⁴³ Within this context, socialist art involved the depiction of a particular view of reality in the teleological and didactic guise of its ‘revolutionary development’.³⁴⁴ Socialist realism itself was codified by Andrei Zhdanov at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, defined as a style in possession of the rising proletariat and juxtaposed to the values of Western modernism and the pessimistic, fragmentary nature of literature under capitalism. Related ideas can be traced to pre-revolutionary thought and in embryonic forms through the early 1920s under the New Economic Policy. The formation of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers in 1925, for example, signaled increased tensions between official literature and critical or avant-garde approaches; by 1927, under the First Five Year Plan, a rightward drift coinciding with the rise of Stalin’s influence forced writers toward a self-conscious proletarianisation and a renunciation of individualism. Throughout this period, Brandon Taylor argues, ‘a claim to “realism” remained a precondition of virtually any artistic or literary credibility’.³⁴⁵ In 1931, Stalin rehabilitated the technical intelligentsia, seemingly opening the way for the role of artists—a move coupled,

³⁴³ Brandon Taylor, ‘Socialist Realism: “To depict reality in its revolutionary development”’ in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Beaumont, 163. See also Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); John E. Bowlt, ‘Stalin as Isis and Ra: Socialist Realism and the Art of Design’, *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 34–63; and Leah Dickerman, ‘Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography’, *October* 93 (2000): 138–53.

³⁴⁴ Taylor, ‘Socialist Realism’, 161.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

however, with ‘an increasingly fanatical urge for social and cultural hegemony’ enforced by ‘conditions of rigid bureaucratic control’.³⁴⁶ It was within this environment of propagandistic conformism that the phrase ‘socialist realism’ arose, dedicated to the emphasis of obedient heroism. The concomitant tendency in the visual arts, Taylor proposes, ‘was to depict the heroes of socialism as smiling and confident enthusiasts—not as individuals but as exemplifications of strength of mind, spirit, and will’.³⁴⁷ In other words, as archetypal ideals. This confluence of imposing physical strength, dignity, and heroic willpower recalls the mythologised figure of the Big Hewer—precisely the factors that motivated the reviewer for *The Times* to contrast the squalid realism of ordinary working men (in the recorded actuality) with the municipal, statuesque, politicised ideal of labour (in MacColl’s ballads).

Boris Groys, however, has argued that such fetishisation of heroism through art must be understood in relation to a broader transformational plan to aestheticise culture under Stalin. As a style ‘projective rather than mimetic’, socialist realism was ‘a visualization of the collective dream of the new world and the new humanity’.³⁴⁸ Evgeny Dobrenko thus argues that socialist realism’s true purpose was not escapism or propaganda, but rather to ‘*produce reality by aestheticizing it*’; as such, he proposes, ‘*socialist realism was the means for producing socialism*’—a mechanism for generating socialist society via the forced consumption of ideological imagery.³⁴⁹ Dobrenko concludes that socialist realism was the primary ‘incarnation of socialism’ itself: ‘*socialist realism describes a world to the existence of which only it bears witness*’.³⁵⁰ As a dialectical practice necessarily opposed to the mere recounting of the here-and-now, socialist realism can therefore be read not as a facile device for distracting the population, but as a tool in the narrative of revolutionary progress toward communism. Such teleological optimism, Dobrenko cautions, must also be seen with a culture predicated on hysterical control and the suppression of artistic dissent: the socialism modelled through socialist realism, he ventures, ‘was supposed to recall revolutionary fantasies in a completely discursive way, since it was

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 169, 170.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁴⁸ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (1988; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 113.

³⁴⁹ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 4, 5.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7, 13.

functionally the antidote to them'.³⁵¹ Likewise, the optimistic heroes and heroines depicted in socialist realism functioned as 'a machine for the sublimation of accumulated trauma'.³⁵² Dobrenko thus sees the hero-figure arising in a compensatory relationship to the gulag: such idealistic depictions of political becoming signified 'the already "reforged" masses' under the harmonious conditions of 'real' socialism rather than the unresolved dissonances of contemporaneous life.³⁵³ As Dobrenko notes, 'in revolutionary culture, socialism was above all a *political and economic* project, while in Stalinist culture, socialism became a *representational* project par excellence'.³⁵⁴ Such ideological deformations, Petre Petrov argues, cannot simply be removed to reveal an underlying and more truthful reality.³⁵⁵ The Stalinist conception of socialism, he states, manifested a 'turn toward truth understood as an ontological happening' whereby the state 'acts as if it were merely the power of codifying and securing objective realizations' untethered from subjective beliefs.³⁵⁶ This vision of the gradual and inexorable unfolding of socialism demanded a unified, official art to the exclusion of all other methodologies reliant on the individual. Socialist realism was therefore not an illusion, but a dynamic Party-political instrument seen to be capable of generating the very 'real' socialism it depicted—an aesthetic necessarily untethered from the realm of documentary investigation.

Clearly, then, the BBC radio ballads could never have been true examples of socialist realism: the literature in which they have been considered as such demonstrates a fundamental lack of awareness surrounding the political ontology of Soviet art. Rather, MacColl's aesthetics tended to recall the vanguard Proletkult movement associated with the heterogeneous 'euphoric optimism' of the 1917 revolution that, as Lynn Mally stresses, saw its task as independently founding a new cultural order 'dominated by a proletarian class spirit' in which 'any worker could write a sonnet'.³⁵⁷ Matthew C. Bown notes, for example, that Proletkult poetry was

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 216, 214.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

³⁵⁵ Petre Petrov, 'The Industry of Truing: Socialist Realism, Reality, Realization', *Slavic Review* 70/4 (2011): 873–92.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 886, 887.

³⁵⁷ Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 258, 254.

‘notable, above all, for its hypertrophied industrial romanticism’.³⁵⁸ Indeed, MacColl’s work fits much more comfortably within the *pre*-socialist realist period of class struggle prior to the ‘realisation’ of socialism in the purportedly classless society of the 1930s. As Bown argues, inchoate realist aesthetics at this time ‘required a work of art to be constructed dramatically, in such a way as to reveal class conflict and its successful resolution; and it required a figurative style, founded in observation of the real world and focusing on the human figure’.³⁵⁹ In the early 1930s, however, the Party’s decision to officially play down class antagonism evidently required new paradigms of representation centred on the New Soviet Person—the positive, archetypal, aspirational hero of socialist realism. At the height of Stalinism a subtle but profound shift away from future projections to the apparently transformed present occurred in state rhetoric under the banner of a Theory of Conflictlessness, implying, as Bown notes, that ‘the bright communist tomorrow had moved closer’: the theory stated that because Soviet society was now officially classless ‘it was no longer producing serious social conflicts, and therefore there need be no reflection of such conflicts in art’.³⁶⁰ The class enmity and socio-economic inequalities found in the radio ballads do not fit into such a scheme: no matter how heroic and aestheticised his representations of labour were, MacColl was not attempting to engender a classless utopia. The only other parallel that can conceivably be drawn between the radio ballads and Soviet art was the *post*-Stalinist emphasis on what Bown terms a ‘new heroic view of the ordinary person’ and the tentative motion toward social critique under Khrushchev—an approach that ‘ran counter to the whole social ethos that had produced socialist realism’.³⁶¹ In the contradictory and ill-defined aesthetics of this period, Bown detects both an increased acknowledgement of fallibility and humane informality along with the rise of an unofficial Severe Style. Engaged in representing a new breed of hero ‘usually male, strikingly broad shouldered and firm-limbed, impressively muscled, athletically posed’, this style focused on stoic labouring figures ‘built for endurance...engaged in a grim, determined struggle’.³⁶²

Likewise, rather than tools for the production of a conflictless utopia, the radio ballads invested in depictions of class struggle and structural socio-economic

³⁵⁸ Matthew C. Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 52.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 266, 403.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 397.

disparity while presenting manual labourers as stoic archetypes toiling heroically under the weight of exploitation. As such, they are not examples of Soviet socialist realism (in spite of the superficial similarities), but rather a particularly Western form of social realism critical of free-market capitalism, Americanisation, and rampant mass consumption. Although, as Ben Harker has argued, *The Ballad of John Axon* did not stress workers' alienation and can thus be read as 'a fable of socialism celebrating Axon's heroic decisions to put collective interests above individual ones', MacColl's work was not part of the broader political 'realisation' of socialism.³⁶³ Moreover, Axon's heroism was not typical of socialist heroism as officially depicted in the Soviet Union under Stalin: his tragic demise and human fallibility were peculiar to a British approach to realism conditioned by the narrative impetus of the ballad form. At the same time as Axon and The Big Hewer were celebrated as characters in their own right, Long argues that what resulted from the radio ballads 'was a constant disavowal of individuality', with the largely anonymous voices of the recorded actuality used as 'examples of "collective" expression' in class terms.³⁶⁴ Rather than depicting a socialist paradise, MacColl selected and distilled his own version of oppositional working-class culture in both heroic and quotidian figures and defined it against what he saw as an encroaching world of bourgeois suffocation and women's liberation. The early radio ballads are thus neither parables nor fables of socialism, but contrary panegyrics for the distinctiveness of British working-class life—portrayed as an endangered national subculture increasingly threatened by the jaws of postwar affluence, globalisation, and gender equality. As both Harker and Long note, at a time of economic flux the programmes indulged in the 'fantasy of a continuous industrial community unimpeded by history', romanticising masculine traditions of labour 'for the evidence they provided of a genuine and enduring working-class consciousness'.³⁶⁵ As such, the radio ballads demonstrated closer epistemological parallels with the nostalgia of Edwardian folk revivalism than with Soviet aesthetics invested in the anticipatory optimism of an egalitarian society.

³⁶³ Harker, 'Class Composition', 348.

³⁶⁴ Long, 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain', 148.

³⁶⁵ Harker, 'Class Composition', 349; Long, 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain', 148.

4 | Conclusion: 'Dictatorship of the Heart'

Situating the BBC radio ballads within the context of British social realism of the late 1950s allows them to signify in relation to broader cultural trends and thus as elements within a dynamic network of Leftist critique provoked by postwar affluence. Following Hallam and Marshment's terminology, the radio ballads displayed both 'expositional realism' and 'rhetorical realism'. Forming the programmes' structure, the expositional aspect—'where an episodic or picaresque narrative structure aims to explicate the relationship between characters and their environment'—was manifest in the desire for actuality that would situate working-class voices amid a constitutive environment of manual labour under capitalism.³⁶⁶ The rhetorical aspect—'where an argument is presented to convince the audience of the truth of the [work's] proposition'—amplified and distorted such material (itself a deliberately skewed selection from the total collected) through the mediation of lyrical form and more overt political ideology.³⁶⁷ Hallam and Marshment argue that rhetorical crafting within realist cinema adopted 'the conventions of classical narrative and melodrama through an emphasis on an individual's heroic actions within the context of a personal socio-political dilemma'.³⁶⁸ This interpretative scheme suits the aesthetics of the radio ballad song cycles far better than any awkward attempt to make them fit the shifting dictates of socialist realism. Akin to Free Cinema, the radio ballads can be seen as a form of *curation* reliant on a *poetic* or *rhetorical* social realism that necessitated particular representations in order to transform social reality into an effective political conduit. Lay notes that such 'aestheticisation of squalor' tended to undermine the radical intentions of social realism through a romanticisation of Britain's decaying industrial infrastructure.³⁶⁹ Likewise, the radio ballads retained crucial elements of Sharp's legacy, implicitly drawing on the tropes of Edwardian folksong discourse. The implication of such heavily mediated representations, Long points out, is that the British working-class has customarily been presented as an 'object that never knows itself'—perennially reliant, like 'the folk', on the external interpretation of sympathetic artists, journalists, intellectuals, and theorists.³⁷⁰ Such mediators have

³⁶⁶ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, 101.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Lay, *British Social Realism*, 64.

³⁷⁰ Long, 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain', 148.

imposed a gaze foregrounding or even ascribing desired characteristics while downplaying or ignoring others—in the process, creating crude abstractions indebted to a romantic socialist worldview. Blinded by Marxist historiography, Lloyd and MacColl could only see a proletarian mass where a manifold and heterogeneous working-class subculture existed—their abstractions betraying an instrumental and reactionary bias through the nostalgic valorisation of heroic masculinity. Lloyd and MacColl are thus guilty (on the same terms that Scott criticised labour historians) of reproducing inequalities ‘that their principles commit them to ending’.³⁷¹

Moderating what Roland Barthes has termed the *punctum* of realism, folk revivalists transformed their working-class subjects into the low Others of representation.³⁷² In an example that could easily be applied to aspects of Lloyd and MacColl’s output, Colls criticised British social realism of the 1930s for being ‘spawned out of ignorance’, in spite of its Marxist ambitions: ‘it was a monster in which only the intellectual middle-class left could believe’.³⁷³ Dave Harker concurs, proposing that revival singers ‘were effectively retailing a nostalgic and deformed version of industrial culture’ to uninformed outsiders.³⁷⁴ Such depictions of the north through songs concerned with railways and mining followed a noteworthy relationship between periphery and metropolis in English discourse. The north, as Dave Russell argues, has most often been defined as Other and portrayed as ‘bleak, industrial, proletarian’; such stigmatised views of the north as the land of the urban working class, he suggests, ‘came to predominate in the productive interchange between objective reality and discursive practice’.³⁷⁵ Industrial folksong echoed an ideology in which ‘the North has generally been coded as masculine...and set against a more effeminate South’.³⁷⁶ Russell’s work demonstrates that Lloyd and MacColl partook in a familiar tradition through which northern culture provided the corrective ground for an defensive examination of class, gender, and patriotism: from the late 1950s, he argues, its residents came to stand ‘for the ordinary English community at its most virtuous and self-sustaining’, forming ‘a powerful bulwark against the

³⁷¹ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 67.

³⁷² See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; London: Vintage, 2000).

³⁷³ Colls, *The Collier’s Rant*, 184.

³⁷⁴ Harker, *One for the Money*, 156.

³⁷⁵ Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 10, 24.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

general threat of mass culture and the specific one of Americanisation'.³⁷⁷ Ironically reliant on progressive ideas generated within the US itself, folksong ideology directly counterpoised British working-class *production* (industrial and cultural) with emerging patterns of (Americanised) postwar *consumption*. Inspired by radical class enmity and aversion to cultural imperialism, Lloyd and MacColl essentialised both the labouring culture they eulogised and the gender roles they unquestioningly reproduced. The romantic socialist project was always more reliant on such rhetoric than on political acumen. As Cannadine notes, the class consciousness British Marxists sought did not always exist as they wished to find it: social status did not easily translate into partisan fervour and political parties were thus 'as much about the creation of social identities as they were a reflection of them'.³⁷⁸

Viewed within the context of British Marxism and nostalgic social realism, Lloyd and MacColl's ideology can be read as an instantiation of what novelist Milan Kundera has termed 'political kitsch'. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* set during the Prague Spring of 1968, Kundera proposed that 'political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that *political kitsch*'—a vocabulary of metaphors that join activists together in a common sensibility.³⁷⁹ Amid the 'weighty' and aestheticised realm of kitsch, Kundera asserts, 'the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme' and answers preclude all questions.³⁸⁰ The work of Lloyd and MacColl was not the totalitarian kitsch of a Stalinist regime (where critique and individualism were renounced under conditions of 'real' socialism), but rather the antagonistic, partisan kitsch of the CPGB in its period of class militancy under capitalism. Indeed, the image of the working class that emerged from the radio ballads reveals far more about the political fantasies of inveterate British socialists than it ever did about working-

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁷⁸ Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 150. Cannadine proposes that 'changes in the economy were never so momentous, so straightforward or so pervasive as to make possible or bring about the creation of those homogeneous, self-conscious classes of landlords, capitalists and labourers, locked in perpetual conflict with each other, that Marx and his later followers among British historians hoped (and claimed) to discern... The sort of classes for which Marxists searched never existed as they hoped to find them. And so it is hardly surprising that class as it *has* actually existed did not fulfil its task as the animator and agitator of the historical process which Marx had wished on it' (8–9, 17).

³⁷⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 250. I use the term 'kitsch' here in specifically Kundera's sense of political belonging. Most often, however, the term has been used synonymously with mass commercial culture: see, for example, Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review* 6/5 (1939): 34–49.

³⁸⁰ Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 244, 247. See also John Bayley, 'Fictive Lightness, Fictive Weight', *Salmagundi* 73 (1987): 84–92.

class culture itself. Candidly looking back on this period, MacColl later proposed that ‘our efforts with folk-music did not lack ideological purpose...we hoped to arrest the plasticisation of the popular culture’.³⁸¹ In 1961, this desire would motivate MacColl (in partnership with Seeger) to open a puritanical platform for folksong in London named the Singers’ Club—opened in order to rescue young people and protect traditional singers ‘from the ravages of the commercial machine’.³⁸² Industrial song and the radio ballads were unmistakably viewed by MacColl as calculated political interventions—not projections intended to directly effect an ontological change toward socialism, but as *reactionary apologetics for the integrity of an indigenous working-class in the face of unprecedented cultural change*. At the very moment a distinctively masculine working-class culture seemed to be at risk of disappearing through increasing female emancipation and under the rising tide of an affluent and classless commodity utopia, industrial balladry generated the portrait of a patriotic and stable British subculture damaged and defined by capitalist exploitation yet resistant to the unwelcome dawn of Americanised postmodernity.

³⁸¹ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 337.

³⁸² Ewan MacColl, ‘Why I am Opening a New Club’, *Sing 5/4* (1961), 65.

'Found True and Unspoiled'**Blues, Performance, and the Mythology of Racial Display**

And Galahad watch the colour of his hand, and talk to it, saying, 'Colour, is you that causing all this, you know. Why the hell you can't be blue, or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you!'

~ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)

Charles Keil began his pioneering *Urban Blues* by suggesting that black music served as a 'projective test' for a range of cultural illusions: 'white liberals, black militants, and others of varying pigmentation and persuasion hear in the blues essentially what they want to hear, find in the blues ethos what they expect to find'.¹ This insight should serve as a perennial warning for scholars of African American culture caught up in what Ronald Radano and Philip V Bohlman have called the 'racial imagination'—a network of unexamined assumptions that lead us to view music in the terms of a racial binary.² Their implication is that the racial imagination conceals the intricate processes through which difference is generated and maintained through patterns of discourse and representation. One of the most salient aspects of race in this regard is its presence in both abstract political debate and the most intimate interactions: identity is actively established, negotiated, and challenged through

¹ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), vii.

² Ronald Radano & Philip V. Bohlman, 'Introduction: Music and Race, Their Past, Their Presence' in: *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano & Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

systems of representation when these domains interact.³ As bell hooks argues, power and knowledge frame such interactions: the ‘politics of domination’, she states, ‘inform the way the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed’.⁴ The ‘collective crisis’ of African American identity is thus experienced ‘within the realm of the image’.⁵ Critique of musical performance is fundamental to an understanding of racializing ideology and the challenge to white supremacy, and thus to the practice of ‘unlearning racism’ that hooks advocates. The reception and discourse surrounding the performances I focus on in this chapter stem from the racialized visions of John A. Lomax discussed in chapter 1. A 1939 article in the *Washington Post* demonstrates how Huddie Ledbetter was essentialised and miscast as a blues artist, setting the mould for later paradigms of integrity:

The music of this untutored genius was not the popular old-time ballads nor the ragtime of tin-pan alley, nor even jazz or swing, as we know them today. It was the blues...It was the emotional, rhythmical, primitive wail that provided the base and spark to present-day jazz...[His songs] are devoted to relating the reactions of a simple people to the basic problems of spirit and body... There is no mincing words, no adornments.⁶

The author, Bill Gottlieb, proposed that real blues (as opposed to commercial song) was an acquired taste for white urban audiences and might at first sound as alien as ‘ancient Chinese music—and just as unintelligible’.⁷ Rewards, however, would come to the devoted, who could appreciate singers ‘with a rich, powerful voice, with sincerity in his delivery and the ability to add those colourful tonal nuances that tingle your spine, surge within you and put your emotions at the singer’s command’.⁸ The ineradicably masculine taint of Gottlieb’s vignette contributed to what Benjamin Filene has described as a ‘cult of authenticity’ originating with Ledbetter that would continue to reverberate throughout the postwar period.⁹

In this chapter, I use multimedia recordings of two blues events staged by Granada TV in the early 1960s to trace contemporaneous British attitudes toward

³ See Howard Winant, ‘Race and Race Theory’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 169–85.

⁴ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶ Bill Gottlieb, ‘Blues of Today are Formal Versions of Original Tunes’, *Washington Post*, 26 March 1939, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

African American expressive culture and to suggest more broadly how such environments might provide a way to understand the representational ontology of race itself. In order to approach such events from a critical perspective, it will be necessary to interrogate their layers of signification against the grain of reception—citing them within wider processes of performative essentialism drawn up under the long shadow of Atlantic slavery and blackface minstrelsy. As a genre predicated on being ‘always already’ revived, Richard Middleton argues, blues animates a nostalgic process of cultural imagination in which a lost home is ‘conjured up, brought into the present, re-configured’.¹⁰ Using Joseph Roach’s terminology, blues is thus a precious (though factitious) cultural *surrogate*—as with folklore, condensing a dialectical relationship between the rationalising encroachment of modernity and the perceived alienation from a former, prelapsarian state (embodied by the low Other).¹¹ The blues aesthetics that I trace are a contradictory invention generated through engagement with particular horizons of expectation. As ‘the unmarked category against which difference is constructed’, George Lipsitz has argued, whiteness ‘never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations’.¹² This equivocal aspect of white culture is what grants it the power to represent Otherness while remaining absent through its own seeming normativity. Ultimately, the blues that revivalists believed to be an embodiment of authentic blackness was in fact a lucrative relational fantasy performed to fulfil white demand.

After an introduction exploring the concept of race and the complex history of black music, this chapter falls into two core sections: a genealogy of blues discourse through books and periodicals, and a revisionist reading of revivalist blues theatricality drawing on performance studies and the semiotics of representation. I conclude by asking *why* such fantasies of racial difference arose, respectfully inverting Frantz Fanon’s axiom ‘black skin, white masks’ by arguing that racial ideologies written into a white gaze forced African American artists to assume ‘black masks’—i.e. to perform a desired version of black Otherness for the benefit of white cultural fantasy.¹³ Through a focus on mediation, representation, and asymmetrical

¹⁰ Richard Middleton, ‘O Brother, Let’s Go Down Home: Loss, Nostalgia and the Blues’, *Popular Music* 26/1 (2007), 51, 48.

¹¹ See Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

¹² George Lipsitz, ‘The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the “White” Problem in American Studies’, *American Quarterly* 47/3 (1995), 369.

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968).

encounter, I thus stage a critique of Houston A. Baker Jr.'s ludic and nebulous—although rhetorically powerful—characterisation of blues as a ‘culturally specific’ vernacular matrix.¹⁴ Although siding with Paul Gilroy by nuancing antiessentialism, I follow Ronald Radano in affirming that the idea of black music has perpetuated anachronistic constructions of racialized difference that African American musicians have been compelled to invest in for their own success.¹⁵

1 | **Negotiating Essentialism, Identity, and Legacies of the Black Atlantic**

Race is a fiction—based, as Richard Dyer notes, on ‘supposedly visibly differentiable, supposedly discrete social groupings’ related to ‘intrinsically insignificant geographical / physical differences between people’.¹⁶ Howard Winant suggests that although race is a concept that ‘*signifies and symbolizes socio-political conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies*’, there exists ‘no biological basis for distinguishing human groups along the lines of race’.¹⁷ As Stephen Jay Gould proposes, purportedly scientific ideas of race were always ‘imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within’.¹⁸ Indeed, the ontology of race can be

¹⁴ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 200. Employing the work of Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver, Baker invests in the simplistic idea that blues is ‘black folk expression’ (197).

¹⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 224. See also John H. Stanfield II, ‘The Myth of Race and the Human Sciences’, *Journal of Negro Education* 64/3 (1995): 218–31 and Joel Rudinow, ‘Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52/1 (1994): 127–37.

¹⁷ Winant, ‘Race and Race Theory’, 172. I follow Winant in adopting racial formation theory, as follows: ‘(a) It views the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as unstable and politically contested; (b) It understands racial formation as the intersection / conflict of racial “projects” that combine representational / discursive elements with structural / institutional ones; (c) It sees these intersections as iterative sequences of interpretations (articulations) of the meaning of race that are open to many types of agency, from the individual to the organizational, from the local to the global’ (182).

¹⁸ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Rev. edn. (New York: Norton, 1996), 61. Gould argues that biological determinism merely reveals social prejudice. Most interestingly, Gould undermines scientific conceptualisations of race hitherto affirmed by noting that ‘genetic variety among Africans alone exceeds the sum total of genetic diversity for everyone else in the rest of the world combined... Africa is most of humanity by any proper genealogical definition; all the rest of us occupy a branch within the African tree... I suggest [therefore] that we finally abandon such senseless statements as “African blacks have more rhythm, less intelligence, greater athleticism.” Such claims, apart from their social perniciousness, have no meaning if Africans cannot be construed as a coherent

historicised to reveal its constitution as a *political and aesthetic ideology* within Western capitalist modernity. Winant argues that ‘the onset of global economic integration, the dawn of seaborne empire, the conquest of the Americas, and the rise of the Atlantic slave trade were all key elements in the genealogy of race’; in short, racial taxonomy both legitimated and emerged from processes of European colonialism.¹⁹ As Arif Dirlik notes, ‘racism appeared as an organizing principle of politics at the moment the United States became a nation’.²⁰ The normative mythology of race has created falsely discrete categorisations that conceal the manifold intricacies of ethnic diversity, cultural hybridity, and subjective self-identification. In other words, racial ideology has forcibly polarised human beings into groupings using an untenable classification system, providing the justification for systematic exploitation, social discrimination, legalised segregation, eugenics, and even genocide. Race does not exist outside this framework of received ‘knowledge’—in classically Foucauldian terms, race is thus a *disciplinary discourse about perceived difference*.²¹ As Rutledge M. Dennis points out, such discourse reveals far more about those with the requisite power to construct racial categories than it ever does about low Others who find themselves so described; the desire to subjugate, he argues, ‘speaks volumes about the tangible political and economic gains accrued to those doing the subjugating’.²² I want to use this section to sketch out briefly how music became an integral element of such practices—through slave culture, blackface minstrelsy, and perceptions of the southern US—in tandem with theories of identity construction that inform the approach I take in this chapter. Although race is a fiction, it will become increasingly clear that in practice the idea contributes indelibly to lived experience for both ‘black’ and ‘white’. As Richard A. Jones asserts, race remains a painful and salient reality for many ‘because the oppressive effects of the historical-

group because they represent more diversity than all the rest of the world put together’ (399). Likewise, he states, ‘the African American population of the US today does not form a genealogical unit’ (397).

¹⁹ Winant, ‘Race and Race Theory’, 172.

²⁰ Arif Dirlik, ‘Race Talk, Race, and Contemporary Racism’, *PMLA* 123/5 (2008), 1367.

Affirming links between global capital and racialization, Dirlik argues that ‘if colonialism racialized both the colonizer and the colonized, the persistence of these racialized identities is a sign of the persistence of colonial modernity under the rubric of globalization’ (1374).

²¹ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; London: Penguin, 1991) and Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1976; London: Penguin, 1998).

²² Rutledge M. Dennis, ‘Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race’, *Journal of Negro Education* 64/3 (1995), 249.

political reality' of race remain.²³ Throughout the chapter I present the term 'race' as it appeared in historical context, with its revealing ideological baggage; in contrast, I employ the term 'racializing' to characterise discursive or performative practices that have actively contributed to the myth of objective racial difference.²⁴

As a racially marked expression, black music is inescapably entangled in the reciprocal play of stereotype. Providing a useful way to begin theorising how such caricatured visions emerged, Robert Cantwell proposes that the relative insularity of social milieux often 'cause[s] people otherwise unknown to one another to conceive the other on the basis of perceptible signs that lend to that conception the character of a mimesis or fictional attribution'.²⁵ Describing this imaginatively mediating and reductive gaze as 'ethnomimesis', he suggests that through such processes 'it is the image entertained by the socially powerful that permits the socially powerless to exhibit otherness'.²⁶ He concludes, furthermore, that stereotype is a product of the 'coupling through which personality and society conjoin to produce identity'.²⁷ The implications of Cantwell's interpretation are profound: first, that dominant socio-economic groups tend to view low Others (with whom they have little direct cultural contact) through the lens of caricature; second, that such asymmetrical processes of representation work to generate the very attributes of Otherness itself; and third, that mimetic fictions can subsequently be internalised and recast as forms of self-perception and group identity. Reliant, in other words, on the logic of tautology, stereotypes are constructed relationally and in turn affect lived experience. Stereotyping thus works to deny independence and self-definition to those caught within its snares and is complicit in the construction of racialized difference and the policing of imposed social divisions. Ultimately, Cantwell argues that stereotypes are ways of concurrently reading and inscribing cultural meaning, as they govern 'the relations among the members of different social groups and among the hierarchical levels within those groups, supplying, by dint of the pressure of expectation, forms of

²³ Richard A. Jones, 'Race and Revisability', *Journal of Black Studies* 35/5 (2005), 629. Jones argues for a pragmatist adoption of the concept of race as an instrument for black liberation.

²⁴ I thus follow Dirlik, who states that racialization refers 'to discursive efforts to render race into the fundamental principle of organizing human groups' ('Race Talk, Race, and Contemporary Racism', 1364). I thus agree with Dirlik that 'even antiracist race talk may contribute to racism by normalizing the category of race in everyday discourse, popular and academic' (1372).

²⁵ Robert Cantwell, *Ethnomimesis: Folklife and the Representation of Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

self-presentation and conduct'.²⁸ Latent in this final point is the neglected aspect of stereotype as dialectical practice: as Cantwell notes, symbolic mediations include the 'self-representations of one group to another, often in response to the other's stereotyped expectations'.²⁹ Indeed, Dyer reminds us, due to a fundamental power imbalance stemming from a long history of Western exploration, colonialism, and exploitation, white people have exercised 'very much more control over the definition of themselves and indeed of others than have those others'.³⁰

Ethnomimetic processes have created limits of constraint surrounding accepted modes of musical expression. Cantwell, for example, suggests that black caricatures most often refer only to 'aspects of the African American cultural endowment that white culture has permitted or demanded'.³¹ Indeed, Radano has demonstrated that the internalisation of stereotypes by a subordinated group is fundamental to the very idea of black music—forming an 'architecture of meaning' tied up in racializing discourse.³² Despite the powerful rhetorical attraction of black musical distinctiveness generated through narratives of integrity, oppression, and resistance to white supremacy, Radano argues, 'the qualities that define black music grow out of a cultural ground that is more common than many may realize'.³³ Established stories concerning black music have overlooked the complex negotiation of racial difference in US history and how such differences have been enacted. Forming a cultural palimpsest for authenticity bound up with the body, Radano demonstrates, black music arose coterminous with racial ideology itself. Its emergence, he states, 'is inextricably linked to a racial logic...shaped and reshaped within a peculiar interracial conversation whose participants simultaneously deny that the conversation has ever taken place'.³⁴ In this sense, he continues, 'black music both reveals and obscures the lies we tell when attempting to define who and what we are'—much like race itself, black music embodies a potent myth of essential unity

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ Dyer, *White*, xiii.

³¹ Cantwell, *Ethnomimesis*, 178.

³² Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, xi. See also Samuel A. Floyd Jr. & Ronald Radano, 'Interpreting the African-American Musical Past: A Dialogue', *Black Music Research Journal* 29/1 (2009): 1–10 and Ronald Radano, 'The Sound of Racial Feeling.' *Daedalus* 142/4 (2013): 126–34.

³³ Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, xiii.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Radano argues that 'being African grew from the constructed assembly of experiences of being different according to an emerging modern ideology of race'; in this context, 'representations of African music laid down the discursive pathways through which a North American "Negro" expression would eventually come into being' (65, 89).

hiding a multitude of contingent discrepancies.³⁵ Despite being ‘constituted within the circumstances of the social’, Radano states, black music coalesced ‘as a form claiming a mythic racial origin’—generating ‘a never-ending spiral of cultural mimesis’ in its wake that he compares to patterns of resonance.³⁶ Emphasising black music’s historical constitution, Radano argues that spirituals (much like dance music) ‘could not have been anything but a cross-cultural mixture’, articulated ‘within and against the parallel performances and receptions of whites’.³⁷ However, he states, antebellum southern whites sought ‘to demarcate a distinctive, yet thoroughly hybrid black humanity on racial grounds’, projecting cultural attributes then absorbed by African American communities: ‘by playing the noise of racial difference’, he suggests, ‘slaves found the means of asserting their own human value’.³⁸

Foremost in constructing a resistant iconography of racialized difference throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the burnt-cork mask of minstrelsy—what W. T. Lhamon Jr. refers to as ‘a paradigmatic instance of the disdained and fugitive figure popping up on the dominating culture’s center stage’.³⁹ A ubiquitous form of white popular entertainment originating in the US and prevalent in Britain from the 1830s to the 1970s, blackface minstrelsy involved comic skits, crossfire dialogue, sketches, an eclectic variety of songs, dances, and stump speeches performed in crude dialect and outlandish outfits intended to derive humour from imagined racial difference. Through its protean appeal, Michael Pickering suggests, minstrelsy encouraged a cross-section of society ‘to think in racial categories, and to rank those categories on the basis of allegedly innate inequalities’.⁴⁰ Such ritualistic ‘strategies of symbolic expulsion, and of rendering inferior what was regarded as different’, he argues, became integral to the process of national self-definition.⁴¹ Simultaneously, the blackface mask provided expressive liberation for white performers, offering ‘an inverted image of all that meant success...and all that was

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 232, 107; see also 11 & 54.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 138–39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁹ W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 131.

⁴⁰ Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 109. Unlike its raucous American counterpart, Pickering notes that British blackface minstrel shows ‘established a reputation for respectability and propriety’ that cut across class divisions (3). Blackface could be seen at seaside towns, in circuses, at shows by professional touring companies, and at amateur concerts.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

held respectable in Victorian society'.⁴² As a form of knowing disguise—in which the distance between hyperbolic simulacrum and embodied puppeteer was always in flux—the blackface mask thus animated an oscillation between divulgence and camouflage. Eric Lott describes this effect as ‘a kind of disappearing act in which blackface made “blackness” flicker on and off’.⁴³ The result of over a century of essentialising minstrel caricature, Pickering concludes, was that blackface ‘formed an unavoidable template’ for what African American entertainers could achieve, carving out intractable expectations and modes of audience evaluation.⁴⁴ As Europeans first acquired knowledge of African American music through minstrelsy, Derek B. Scott notes, an economics of cultural consumption arose dictating ‘that black artists needed to cater to a white subject position’ in order to succeed.⁴⁵ Indeed, as Catherine Parsonage has shown, British reception of African American culture manifested a clear historical preference ‘for “diluted” versions of black entertainment presented by whites (e.g. blackface) rather than more realistic portrayals’; competition among minstrel troupes subsequently generated ‘pressure for black minstrels to conform to a white stereotype’, establishing warped and racializing self-depictions in response to the regulative demands of white desire.⁴⁶ As a consequence, Scott proposes, ‘African Americans were left dispossessed of a means of representing themselves on stage’.⁴⁷ Blackface effectively produced the very difference it played upon—creating a space for white impersonators to step fleetingly outside their own subject positions and inhabit a role bearing little relation to African American cultural practice but inevitably calling upon its racialized signifiers.

Lott has argued that US blackface performance was predicated upon a complex and ambiguous process of love and theft that encoded both respectful fascination and self-protective racialized mockery—a ‘Janus-faced figure for the cultural relationship of white to black’.⁴⁸ As a theatrical form ‘highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences’, minstrelsy thus

⁴² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴³ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 121.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁵ Derek B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12, 53.

⁴⁶ Catherine Parsonage, ‘A Critical Reassessment of the Reception of Early Jazz in Britain’, *Popular Music* 22/3 (2003), 317.

⁴⁷ Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis*, 154.

⁴⁸ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 30.

provided the urbanising north with a conceptual space for the negotiation of male working class and national identity that involved a ‘simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries’.⁴⁹ Motivated by working-class identification with blackness as well as a bohemian, folkloristic desire to create genuine imitations of African American culture, the blackface mask functioned as a complex, mutable, and contradictory signifier that both sentimentalised the era of slavery and portrayed aspirational black dandyism as hilariously contrived. Nevertheless, Lhamon notes, blackface ‘can work also and simultaneously *against* racial stereotyping’.⁵⁰ Indeed, Lott proposes that white audiences for early blackface minstrelsy ‘were not universally derisive of African Americans or their culture’.⁵¹ Blackface was thus reliant on the flux and instability of performance itself: Lott nuances arguments surrounding expropriation with the crucial acknowledgement that

black performance itself...was precisely ‘performative’, a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world. Black people, that is to say, not only exercised a certain amount of control over such practices but perforce sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators. Moreover, practices taken as black were occasionally interracial creations whose commodification on white stages attested only to whites’ greater access to public distribution (and profit).⁵²

Viewing blackface within a simple relationship of either distorted representation or authentic blackness thus misses the complexity of this dialogic history of synthetic and self-consciously racializing interaction. As a mediating device for exploration of an exotic low Other, blackface served to reveal white fantasies about blackness—in the process, constructing through stereotype the very culture it claimed to represent. Lott proposes that the pleasure of blackface for white audiences was thus tied to the perception that black Others held access to a *jouissance* unavailable to the dominant social milieu: ‘for white Americans the racial repressed is by definition retained as a (usually eroticized) component of fantasy’.⁵³ As such, Lott argues, figures marked as racially black acted as screens shaped to the demands of racial desire, their primary

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁰ Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain*, 6.

⁵¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 15, 20.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 154. For a broader psychoanalytic reading of this point, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989; London: Verso, 2008) and Slavoj Žižek *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991; London: Verso, 2008).

role being ‘to secure the position of white spectators’.⁵⁴ Lott concludes that minstrelsy’s consequences were therefore disastrous, as ‘black people had little room to contest publicly the social meanings generated out of the culture’—generating ‘an enduring narrative of racist ideology’ that remains to this day.⁵⁵

During the late nineteenth century, another paradigm legitimated even as it contested the carnivalesque charade of blackface, further reifying its racial dichotomies—the discipline of folklore. Karl Hagstrom Miller proposes that the discourse of folk authenticity was absorbed by music publishers and the nascent phonograph industry under the long shadow of minstrelsy, leading toward an expedient division between ‘race’ and ‘hillbilly’ artists. Prior to the 1920s, Miller argues, southern US musicians performed ‘a staggering variety of music’ including blues, sentimental ballads, ragtime, string band music, minstrel tunes, Tin Pan Alley songs, and Broadway hits.⁵⁶ As W. C. Handy recalled when looking back at the world in which he had earned his living, ‘the Negro musicians simply played the hits of the day’.⁵⁷ Robert Johnson, for instance, was known to sing an indiscriminate variety of material throughout a career in which, as George Lipsitz has noted, he needed to ‘display mastery of the codes of commercial culture’.⁵⁸ In other words, Miller states, ‘differences within African American or white music cultures were more extreme than the differences between black and white music cultures’: moreover, local economics in the south ‘encouraged musicians to command large repertoires’ and cultivate stylistic versatility to fulfil audience demands and thrive as entertainers.⁵⁹ Miller’s revealing claim is that, in concordance with legalised enforcement of corporeal demarcations under Jim Crow, a process of musical segregation emerged

⁵⁴ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 105, 17. Using the example of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ tours during the nineteenth century, Paul Gilroy proposes that ‘black people singing slave songs as mass entertainment initiated and established new public standards of authenticity for black cultural expression’, arguing that ‘the legitimacy of these new cultural forms was established precisely through their distance from the racial codes of minstrelsy’; Paul Gilroy, ‘Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a *Changing Same*.’ *Black Music Research Journal* 11/2 (1991), 121. Blackface minstrelsy, however, furnished white audiences not only with racializing horizons of expectation but resistant stereotypical projections and repertoires that the Jubilee Singers were incapable of avoiding: as Lott notes, alongside spirituals, the choir sang minstrel songs by Stephen Foster (see *Love and Theft*, 244).

⁵⁶ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

⁵⁷ W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, ed. Arna Bontemps (1941; London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1961), 195.

⁵⁸ George Lipsitz, ‘Remembering Robert Johnson: Romance and Reality’, *Popular Music and Society* 21/4 (1997), 47.

⁵⁹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 15, 71.

initiating an enduring turn from mere *employment* of racialized signifiers to their literal *embodiment*—generating an unprecedented belief that ‘racial bodies performed racial music’.⁶⁰ Thus historicised, sonic practices reveal a contingent relationship to broader modes of social discipline. Complicit in this segregation were folklorists, vetoing mass-produced popular songs (consumed across racial lines), investing in ideas of hermetic primitivism, and constructing frameworks that did injustice to the heterogeneous cultural experience of southerners with ‘no operative difference between folk and nonfolk songs’.⁶¹ Similarly, R. A. Lawson notes, blues were ‘by no means timeless cries of the folk past’; instead, he suggests, they were ‘conceived, inherited, and reshaped by aspiring professional musicians who saw music as a countercultural escape from economic and social subservience’.⁶² Ultimately, Miller argues, scholarship and the music industry were able to control processes of symbolic representation far more easily than performers themselves: many musicians therefore won favour by ‘actively personifying’ racialized categories.⁶³

Records marketed under the ‘race’ rubric, Miller concludes, ‘left relatively little evidence of black southerners’ long investment in commercial pop or their participation in the region’s interracial music culture’.⁶⁴ The blues accrued its identity as the embodiment of black folk expression within this context; as Middleton points out, the blues was ‘a construction always mediated by white desire’.⁶⁵ Indeed, the earliest examples of commercial blues were predicated on mimesis, as Middleton notes: white and middle-class black composers working during the early twentieth century ‘in a context defined increasingly by a sequence of black-tinted music fads—coon song, ragtime, jazz—and by conventions of blackface performance, had crystallised a new commercial song genre out of the appropriation of a bundle of African-American vernacular practices’.⁶⁶ As a result of this process, he continues, models of blues vocality were created ‘which black performers could not evade’.⁶⁷ African Americans entering the commercial sphere, Radano argues, sought to please

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁶² R. A. Lawson, *Jim Crow’s Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners, 1890–1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), xi.

⁶³ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 21. Divisions stemming from ‘race’ and ‘hillbilly’ markets still haunt the global music industry today in the form of MOBO (‘Music Of Black Origin’) Awards and discrete categories for Grammys in Urban / R&B, Country, and Pop music.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶⁵ Middleton, ‘O Brother, Let’s Go Down Home’, 50.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

audiences according to ‘the authority of white taste’; in so doing, they intentionally produced ‘particular expressions that affirmed racial difference’.⁶⁸ The differential qualities of black music thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy performed under (and against) the ideological regulation of folksong scholarship, minstrelsy, and Jim Crow segregation. Indeed, as David Brackett argues, the blues is ‘a form of symbolic communication imbricated in a lengthy history of power struggles’.⁶⁹ Brackett proposes that genre mediates reception through what he describes as ‘a tacit and contingent collective agreement about the “proper” place for different types of music and the social groups most associated with them’.⁷⁰ Genre thus conditions how musical utterances are formed and reformed while also ‘anticipating how these utterances will be heard’.⁷¹ Through the historical play of expectation, African American musicians were enfolded in the discursive structures of white fantasy and encouraged to perform preordained roles drawn up by the demands of a dominant socio-economic order. Exemplifying this process, blues always already existed in dialectical relation to white culture—the performative result of a long history of interracial and fundamentally unequal discursive interaction.

In this cultural dialectic, blackness appeared as the racially marked element in a representational process that hid the markings of dominant whiteness itself. Dyer has argued that such absence is the key means through which whiteness has historically accrued its insidious form of cultural supremacy: ‘the position of speaking as a white person’, he asserts, is one that white people ‘almost never acknowledge and this is part of the condition and power of whiteness’.⁷² As such, whiteness assumes a position of discursive normativity—a fluid, contingent identity fraudulently standing in the place of a universal. Indeed, Dyer proposes, white people and the prevailing images of the world created by them have been ‘systematically privileged’ in Western society via histories of enterprise and imperialism, Christianity, paradigms of physical perfection, and the very concept of race itself; in addition, techniques such as chiaroscuro, early photography, and standard movie lighting developed by taking the white face as a touchstone, serving to further strengthen the regulative position of

⁶⁸ Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, 271.

⁶⁹ David Brackett, ‘Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music’, *Black Music Research Journal* 25/1–2 (2005), 89.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷² Dyer, *White*, xiv.

whiteness.⁷³ Dyer makes the crucial point that, unlike in traditional representations of cultural or bodily exoticism, whiteness ‘does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception’ and is thus able to effectively disappear through its own seeming self-evidence.⁷⁴ The ideal to which whiteness aspires, he argues, is to be ‘everything and nothing, literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent’; such ‘paradoxes and instabilities’ have constituted its flexibility, elusiveness, and consequent success in controlling modes of representation that cast blackness as Other.⁷⁵ Existing within a relational framework, whiteness has relied upon the polarity of Otherness to articulate and demarcate its own value system. Dyer thus notes that blackness has operated as ‘a privileged term in the construction of white racial identity’—with a certain amount of conceptual ‘slippage’ between skin tone and colour as ethical symbols.⁷⁶ Philip Tagg has suggested that through this process, hegemonic whiteness has traditionally forced ‘black people into absurd court jester positions’ by using musical Otherness as a ‘corporeal panacea’ for problems of white subjectivity.⁷⁷ Indeed, Paul Gilroy argues that blackness has traditionally been used as a signifier of ‘irrational disorder or as a means to celebrate the power of human nature uncorrupted by the decadence of the civilizing process’; from either perspective, he continues, ‘blacks enjoy a subordinate position in the dualistic system that reproduces the dominance of bonded whiteness, masculinity, and rationality’.⁷⁸ This subordinate position, however, was crucial to the transgressive lure of black difference: Dyer suggests that the marginalised figure of the non-white has historically allowed whites to ‘feel what being, physicality, presence, might be like’.⁷⁹ Racial alterity has thus functioned as an aesthetic foil or a tool for vicarious experience and the exploration of verboten pleasure.

The critical project I have outlined above and implicitly endorsed can be described as ‘antiessentialism’—a deconstructionist endeavour following Foucault’s genealogical approach by stressing the historical incoherence and complex

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 39, 40.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11; see also 63.

⁷⁷ Philip Tagg, ‘Open Letter: “Black Music”, “Afro-American Music” and “European Music”’, *Popular Music* 8/3 (1989), 294.

⁷⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 45.

⁷⁹ Dyer, *White*, 80.

heterogeneity of identities claiming pure origin.⁸⁰ Antiessentialism is thus highly suspicious of arguments that attempt to link culture to a distinguishable racial essence, rather than seeing culture as the arena in which racial difference itself is discursively constituted. Gilroy, however, has argued that such theorising has a tendency to form the second term in an unreconciled opposition between empowering rhetoric driven by ‘mystical Afrocentrism’ focusing on tradition and continuity, and an outlook that ‘moves toward its casual and arrogant deconstruction of blackness while ignoring the appeal of the first position’s powerful, populist affirmation and black culture’.⁸¹ As such, Gilroy proposes that antiessentialist theorising is ‘tantamount to ignoring the undiminished power of racism itself and forsaking the mass of black people who continue to comprehend their lived particularity through what it does to them’.⁸² Indeed, figures such as Amiri Baraka had stressed the existential aspect of blues: ‘African-American culture comes to exist as the living historical experience and development of the African-American people...Blues is first a feeling, a sense—knowledge.’⁸³ For Baraka, blues was ‘black life historically, politically, and socially’.⁸⁴ Likewise, Samuel A. Floyd Jr. proposed that ‘a work of *black music*’ is ‘a *sonic temporal organism whose internal relationships express and communicate essentials of the Afro-American experience*’; such music would be ‘infused with qualitative properties common to the black experience in the United States’.⁸⁵ More recently, Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. deliberately adopted the term ‘race’ to identify African American cultural experience, proposing that black music is ‘an important part of the materiality of identity’ through which ‘history and memory have played powerful roles in the generation of meaning’.⁸⁶ The straw-man antiessentialism of Gilroy’s binary, however, downplays the political value of critical reflexivity in the project of liberation: racism, we should remember, is reliant on the conceptual

⁸⁰ See Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ (1971), in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991).

⁸¹ Gilroy, ‘Sounds Authentic’, 124, 125.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸³ Amiri Baraka, ‘The “Blues Aesthetic” and the “Black Aesthetic”’: Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture’, *Black Music Research Journal* 11/2 (1991), 101, 106. See also LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963).

⁸⁴ Baraka, ‘The “Blues Aesthetic” and the “Black Aesthetic”’, 108.

⁸⁵ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., ‘Black American Music and Aesthetic Communication’, *Black Music Research Journal* 1 (1980), 4. See also Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from African to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁸⁶ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 37, 215.

validity of racial difference itself. Nevertheless, Gilroy was correct to recognise that unchecked deconstruction would cheat African Americans (and other minorities) of the very tools of self-identification and resistance needed to generate solidarity in overcoming discrimination and injustice. In order to bring this section to a close, I would like to nuance antiessentialism with Gilroy's insights.

Viewing African Americans within an intercultural context, Gilroy argues that the fractal history of what he terms the black Atlantic 'yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade'.⁸⁷ The 'unashamedly hybrid' character of diasporic black cultures, he argues, 'continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or antiessentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial nonidentity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal'.⁸⁸ Rather than viewing racial identity as static or consistent, Gilroy directs attention toward the self-consciously synthetic nature of black subcultures—racialized sites of assembly and reinvention facilitated by common funds of experience. Returning us to Foucault, Brackett thus describes black Atlantic music as 'hybrid at the root'.⁸⁹ Indeed, music is particularly important in such a framework as it provides a model for viewing identity as neither fixed essence nor superficial construction. Proposing that blackness 'is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self', Gilroy evokes the work of Judith Butler on gender: 'though this identity is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity' whereby significations 'produce the imaginary effect of an internal racial core or essence by acting on the body through the specific mechanisms of identification and recognition that are produced in the intimate interaction of performer and crowd'.⁹⁰ Radano notes that such myths function as 'a crucial mode of musical coherence that reflects the constituting role of sound in the formation of racial subjects'.⁹¹ In what follows, I use blues performance to trace this process of identity formation. In so doing, I follow Gilroy in citing blues as a tradition that 'grew inside modernity in a distinctive relationship of antagonistic indebtedness'.⁹² I also look at what Gilroy describes as 'the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performative, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew

⁸⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, xi.

⁸⁸ Gilroy, 'Sounds Authentic', 115, 123.

⁸⁹ Brackett, 'Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music', 88.

⁹⁰ Gilroy, 'Sounds Authentic', 127. Butler's *Gender Trouble* is listed in the bibliography.

⁹¹ Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, 3.

⁹² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 190, 191.

identity’.⁹³ As Brackett has noted, the contingent nature of identity is predicated on this form of mutually implicative gaze whereby personal and collective identity ‘becomes meaningful in relation to other identities as they are performed in the same social space’.⁹⁴ A critical approach to such hybridity calls into question the idea(l) of authenticity while understanding its heuristic power and the potential for gestures of strategic self-stereotype—demonstrating a reflexivity and astuteness often denied the racialized Other by the terms of white subordination.

2 | ‘The Deepest Strains of Negro Music’: Nostalgia, Imagination, and Authenticity in Blues Discourse

Given that cultural practice acquires meaning through discourse, this section traces the constitution of British attitudes toward black music in the postwar period through a transatlantic genealogy of texts—predominantly by white aficionados—that formed the ideological backdrop against which blues artists were received in the 1960s. These texts initiated representational trends that (as I will show in the third section) had striking material consequences. For British blues fans unfamiliar with US culture, the contours of blues discourse provided a ready-made frame for touring African American musicians, generating particular ‘horizons of expectation’. Literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss employed this phrase to argue that the idea of genre ‘predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception’ and can also bring new audiences into existence through processes of defamiliarisation.⁹⁵ Artworks, Jauss reminds us, are ‘received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life’.⁹⁶ Jauss proposed that modes of reception are therefore fundamentally contingent, as expressive culture of

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹⁴ Brackett, ‘Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music’, 89.

⁹⁵ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 23. See also Brackett, ‘Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music’. On reception theory, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1984; London: Routledge, 2003) and Robert C. Holub, *Crossing Borders: Reception Theory, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). On Jauss’s relevance to contemporary musicology, see Georgina Born, ‘The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuan Theory of Cultural Production’, *Cultural Sociology* 4/2 (2010): 171–208. Jauss’s theories reveal parallels with the so-called Russian Formalists: see Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Normal: Dalkey Archive, 1990) and Viktor Shklovsky, *Knight’s Move* (Normal: Dalkey Archive, 2005).

⁹⁶ Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 41.

the past ‘survives not through eternal questions, nor through permanent answers, but through the more or less dynamic interrelationship between question and answer, between problem and solution, which can stimulate a new understanding and can allow the resumption of the dialogue between present and past’.⁹⁷ In blues discourse, this dialogue was played out on structurally unequal terms primarily within the realm of cultural fantasy: during the mid-century revival, blues artists and recordings were received in an unprecedented social environment and through genre expectations cultivated by the imagination of a small number of white middle-class writers. Marybeth Hamilton argues that in the absence of evidence relating to southern African American culture, these scholars often relied on anecdote and speculation.⁹⁸ Such enigma helped preserve revivalists’ hold on a romanticised ideal of blues origins: indeed, she concludes, the very power of such a projection lay ‘in the ambiguities that suffused it’.⁹⁹ As with folk discourse, ideas constituting the blues genre necessarily relied on such enticing empirical lacunae.

In his 1941 autobiography *Father of the Blues*, African American composer, cornetist, and bandleader W. C. Handy penned perhaps the most enduring tableau of blues origins.¹⁰⁰ In a chapter entitled ‘Mississippi Mud’, Handy paused to describe a memorable encounter at a town called Tutwiler around late 1903:

as I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and wakened me with a start. A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁸ Hamilton, ‘Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition’, 139.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰⁰ Although originally published in the US, the book was made available in Britain in 1961 as a reprint edition through the Jazz Book Club. For biographical information, see David Robertson, *W. C. Handy: The Life and Times of the Man Who Made the Blues* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009). See also Lawson, *Jim Crow’s Counterculture*.

Perhaps I should have known, but he didn't mind explaining.¹⁰¹

Handy's romanticised vignette would haunt the postwar blues revival, distilling and helping to forge powerfully emotive tropes of marginality, solitude, itinerancy, poverty, sorrow, masculine autonomy, enigmatic expression, and independence from the realms of mass commerce and slick popular entertainment. The lone singer appeared to exist outside of time as both living relic and contemporaneous bard. This archetypal male figure became the focus of revivalist nostalgia and the cypher of a racialized, existential authenticity—a tantalising cultural mirage dictating the lineaments of roles later inhabited by professional blues performers in active response to horizons of white expectation. It was not coincidental that Handy's anonymous singer referred to a railroad intersection (between the Southern and Yazoo-Delta line, colloquially referred to as the Yellow Dog). Marked by liminality and transience, Baker proposes, the railroad intersection itself was key to an ideology in which the blues syntagm was 'an instrumental imitation of *train-wheels-over-track-junctures*'.¹⁰² Handy noted that similarly quotidian themes were prominent in the vernacular music he had heard: 'Southern Negroes sang about everything. Trains, steamboats, steam whistles, sledge hammers, fast women, mean bosses, stubborn mules—all became subjects for their songs. They accompany themselves on anything from which they can extract a musical sound or rhythmical effect.'¹⁰³

Born in Alabama in 1873 to a family of church pastors, Handy was a highly skilled musician who had chosen the questionable profession of vaudeville performer—initially working for a travelling blackface troupe called the Mahara Minstrels, which he described as 'the genuine article, a real Negro minstrel show'.¹⁰⁴ With what David Robertson describes as a 'superior educational and social training', Handy eventually worked his way up to become (in his own words) a 'director of many respectable, conventional bands' that performed marches, waltzes, and ragtime for white plantation owners, merchants, Republican politicians, and prestigious

¹⁰¹ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 74.

¹⁰² Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 7, 8.

¹⁰³ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 74.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 34. See Errol G. Hill & James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The troupe was under white management.

dances and supper clubs.¹⁰⁵ As such, Robertson argues, Handy harboured ‘no desire to be a poor, itinerant Mississippi bluesman’.¹⁰⁶ Instead, Handy wished to elevate the raw aesthetic he had heard to the status of a (profitable) national art through his own composition. Indeed, while in Cleveland, Handy experienced what he describes as ‘enlightenment’ upon seeing a popular local string band of African Americans playing ‘a battered guitar, a mandolin and a worn-out bass’ for a party:

They struck up one of those over-and-over strains that seem to have no very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all. The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on and on it went, a kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps. Thump-thump-thump went their feet on the floor...A rain of silver dollars began to fall around the outlandish stomping feet. The dancing went wild. Dollars, quarters, halves—the shower grew heavier...There before the boys lay more money than my nine musicians were being paid for the entire engagement. Then I saw the beauty of primitive music.¹⁰⁷

Clearly, such music heralded the promise of lucrative reward. Handy describes taking his own arrangements to the ‘latticed houses of prostitution’ in Clarksdale’s red light district: ‘rouge-tinted girls, wearing silk stockings and short skirts, bobbing their soft hair and smoking cigars’, he writes, ‘were among the best patrons [our] orchestra had’.¹⁰⁸ Handy would subsequently set up a sheet music publishing venture in Memphis and, having moved to New York City in 1918, become one of the most successful Tin Pan Alley entrepreneurs of the 1920s and ’30s (indicated by his composition ‘St. Louis Blues’). Robertson concludes that Handy’s genius thus lay in transforming Mississippi vernacular song into a newly sophisticated and urban popular music suffused with ‘weird’ blue notes: if not father of the blues, Handy was ‘at least the Father of the Commercialization of the Blues’.¹⁰⁹

A member of the aspirational black bourgeoisie, Handy thus acted as a musical and discursive mediator for marginalised aspects of southern African American culture: travelling through the Delta, he confesses that he ‘suddenly saw the songs with the eye of a budding composer’, describing them as ‘folk melodies’ that ‘were kept in the back rooms of [his] mind while the parlor was reserved for dressed-

¹⁰⁵ Robertson, *W. C. Handy*, 104; Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 76. Lawson nevertheless argues that rather than openly challenging segregation, Handy’s music gave black listeners ‘a veiled way to cope with discrimination and to shape their own identities’ (*Jim Crow’s Counterculture*, 62).

¹⁰⁶ Robertson, *W. C. Handy*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 76–7.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 78–9.

¹⁰⁹ Robertson, *W. C. Handy*, 97.

up music'.¹¹⁰ Drawing an artificial line between oral and literate domains that chimed with revivalist perceptions, Handy proposed that 'the blues did not come from books. Suffering and hard luck were the midwives that birthed these songs. The blues were conceived in aching hearts.'¹¹¹ Although his narrative revolved around the solitary, dispossessed, and itinerant male singer—what Hamilton characterises as the 'central figure of blues iconography'—Handy's account of blues origins contained a host of contradictory elements.¹¹² Indeed, his vignette of 'blind singers and footloose bards' in Clarksdale revealed the existence of conscious craft and commercialism alongside a profoundly under-acknowledged textuality in early blues culture:

Usually the fellows were destitute. Some came sauntering down the railroad tracks, others dropped from freight cars, while still others caught rides on the big road and entered town on top of cotton bales. A favorite hangout with them was the railroad station. There, surrounded by crowds of country folks, they would pour out their hearts in song...They earned their living by selling their own songs—'ballets', as they called them—and I'm ready to say in their behalf that seldom did their creations lack imagination. Many a less gifted songsmith has plied his trade with passing success in Tin Pan Alley. Some of these country boys hustled on trains. Others visited churches. I remember buying such a ballet (ballad) entitled 'I've Heard of a City Called Heaven'. It was printed on a slip of paper about the size of a postcard.¹¹³

Taken without this caveat, Handy's vignette of the Tutwiler station essentialises the musical culture of the Mississippi Delta at the turn of the century. Revivalists, however, latched onto only one aspect of Handy's account—emphasising destitution and seemingly unmediated, heartfelt acts of expression over commercial transactions. In the process, Handy's vital contribution to the genre was itself neglected.

If Handy's account of the blues laid bare a process of commercial mediation and frustratingly diverted attention away from the solitary sounds of a Tutwiler station, the artist who brought British blues enthusiasts closest to what they believed to be the real thing was Big Bill Broonzy. A frequent visitor to Europe during the 1950s in the guise of a folksinger, Broonzy was the subject of a 1955 biography entitled *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as Told to Yannick Bruynoghe*; Paul

¹¹⁰ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 75. Handy later composed many blues songs himself, including one entitled 'Yellow Dog Blues' (83).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹² Hamilton, 'Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition', 141.

¹¹³ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 87–88. Handy's observations confirm the fundamental reciprocity of oral and literate culture discussed in chapter 1.

Oliver provided a series of hand drawn illustrations for the British edition, which was serialised in the popular music newspaper *Melody Maker*.¹¹⁴ To produce the book, blues aficionados Yannick and Margo Bruynoghe interpreted and edited material Broonzy had written on various scraps of paper, dividing stories into segments on his life, songs, and fellow musicians.¹¹⁵ In a foreword, British critic Stanley Dance proposed that the book ‘open[ed] a door on the world of the blues...a world that is very much a part of America, yet withdrawn and little known’.¹¹⁶ Shadowing the primitivist edicts of prior folksong discourse, Dance continued by asserting that the kind of blues Broonzy played ‘had an undisputedly rural origin amongst the Negroes of the southern United States...where men are closer to Nature and more dependent upon the soil’.¹¹⁷ As Broonzy had since moved outside this domain, Dance felt the need to play down the apparently insidious influence of the urban north:

The way he has maintained his integrity as a folk artist is in itself a remarkable achievement. His blues took him from a Mississippi farmstead to the night clubs and recording studios of Chicago, to New York’s Carnegie Hall, and to the cities of Europe, where the different circumstances and pressures might have brought about commercialization, or the vitiation of self-conscious artistry witnessed in others. Yet when he is heard singing, in person or on records, he is found true and unspoiled, the finest possible example of the authentic blues singer, and very much a man.¹¹⁸

Dance thus cast Broonzy in the role of endangered species—a cultural remnant to be diligently observed, collected, and protected from the hazards of modernity.

Broonzy, however, did not play an entirely passive role in this narrativisation: through his memoir and interviews, Middleton suggests, ‘it is as if he himself is “inventing” a musical past that would substantiate his folk persona’.¹¹⁹ Indeed, Roberta F. Schwartz notes that reception of Broonzy as a rural southern bluesman ‘required some selective memory’.¹²⁰ Colluding in the construction of his own stereotype, Broonzy adopted a stylisation encouraging the belief that he was the last

¹¹⁴ See Bob Riesman, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 213.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 207–8.

¹¹⁶ Stanley Dance, ‘Foreword’ to William Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy’s Story as Told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (London: Cassell & Company, 1955), vii.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Roberta F. Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 41.

remnant of a dying blues tradition, claiming that his reason for writing the book was to tell ‘the real truth about Negroes singing and playing in Mississippi’, as he was ‘one of the oldest still alive’.¹²¹ Lamenting that he was only able to play what was then referred to as an outmoded style reminiscent of slavery (at odds with the changing socio-economic conditions and tastes of black audiences in the US), Broonzy claimed that ‘it was just born in us to sing and play the blues...I don’t want the old blues to die because if they do I’ll be dead’.¹²² Likewise, he bolstered claims that authentic blues suffered under the pressures of a competitive urban marketplace, describing some artists as ‘just a meal ticket for the man or woman who wears dollar signs for eyes’ and castigating ‘big town blues players’ who lived like kings: ‘them men didn’t know how cotton and corn and rice and sugar-cane grows and they didn’t care. They went out, dressed up every night and some of them had three or four women’.¹²³ For Broonzy, this lack of authenticity was tied up in a denial of their identity: ‘Negroes...don’t want to be a Negro and they try not to look like one. They fix their hair, wear their clothes, talk and act like the American white man’—the implication being that true blues singers accepted their subordinate and racially-marked status as black.¹²⁴ Broonzy’s explications of his lyrics (making up the central section of *Big Bill Blues*) validated the idea that the deepest and most authentic blues material concerned loss, heartache, and endemic racism in words that provided an open window onto Southern African American society. Such modes of authenticity were only accessible to black males who had lived in the south: ‘white men...could say the blues words and some of the blues they could sing was of the kind that we call big-city blues and dressed-up blues, but not the real Mississippi blues’.¹²⁵ Within the genre, Broonzy thus fashioned a gendered polarity between ‘real blues’ and the consciously polished products of men like Handy: ‘for me to sing the old blues that I learned in Mississippi I have to go back to my sound and not the right chords as the musicians have told me to make...the blues didn’t come out of no book’.¹²⁶ Real blues, for Broonzy, was honest, innate, untutored, rural, and black.

In a concluding envoi, however, Broonzy made a provocative observation that

¹²¹ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 3.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 22. There is some irony here given Broonzy’s own romantic proclivities; see Riesman, *I Feel So Good*.

¹²⁴ Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 62.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 88–9.

began to hint at an underlying factitiousness: ‘as for me, I would love to pick up a book and read a story about Big Bill Broonzy. I wouldn’t care if it’s just a story...I would enjoy reading it because it could be true’.¹²⁷ Indeed, revisionist scholarship has demonstrated that Broonzy’s famed ability as a storyteller extended well beyond his songs to the fabrication of his own past: as Bob Riesman notes, ‘his greatest invention may have been himself’.¹²⁸ Broonzy’s name was in fact Lee Conley Bradley and although he maintained that his birthplace was in the Mississippi Delta, family records show that he grew up in Jefferson County, Alabama; furthermore, his vivid description of serving in the US Army in France during the First World War and returning as a veteran were fictions spun from eyewitness accounts. As Riesman points out, rather than merely editing aspects of his life, Broonzy ‘crafted a set of stories about his relatives that made them characters in a larger story’—illuminating the world of poverty, racism, and injustice that he witnessed through acts of poetic licence.¹²⁹ Reinvention and shrewd commercial adaptability played a large part in Broonzy’s musical and personal identity, forming the basis of his success in a number of divergent cultural environments. As Riesman states, Broonzy frequently switched between styles over the course of a thirty-year recording career as singer, songwriter, and studio guitarist, becoming ‘one of the most versatile musicians in American popular music’ with a preference for ‘presenting himself in different ways at different times’.¹³⁰ Such theatrical expertise was seen in embryo at the notorious ‘From Spirituals to Swing’ concerts held at New York City’s Carnegie Hall in the late 1930s, where Broonzy had adopted the role of primitive blues raconteur for white audiences expecting a museum-like lineage of black musical style. Riesman proposes that Broonzy ‘discerned what his audience wanted and then delivered it’, tailoring his stance to suit fashions and adeptly straddling the varying musical worlds that he inhabited in order to make a living.¹³¹ As his familiar African American audience altered, Broonzy thus began ‘increasingly orienting his professional focus to the tastes and preferences of whites’.¹³² This focus set the tone for his visits to England, where the transition away from playing in an ensemble (as he had been in Chicago) became

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹²⁸ Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, 5.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27, 40.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 138.

‘a crucial element in securing bookings’.¹³³ Additionally, Broonzy self-consciously ‘positioned himself as a historian of the blues’ and began cultivating a reputation as a paradigmatic embodiment of rustic authenticity—bestowing his blessing on a select roster of artists such as Muddy Waters, conversing with influential critics, and shaping the incipient tastes of British blues fans.¹³⁴ His book substantiated this persona: as Riesman notes, *Big Bill Blues* was ‘primarily intended for a white audience’ with little direct knowledge of US culture.¹³⁵



Figure 3.1: Sketch of Big Bill Broonzy by Paul Oliver, from *Big Bill Blues* (1955); note the similarities to Lomax’s representation of Huddie Ledbetter from chapter 1

The earliest book on blues by a British writer was Iain Lang’s *Background of the Blues*, published by the Workers’ Music Association in 1943 as part of their Keynote series. As with A. L. Lloyd’s *The Singing Englishman* discussed in the previous chapter, the book was motivated by a tacitly Marxist agenda conditioned by the wartime cultural outlook of the Communist Party of Great Britain, of which the WMA was an affiliate.¹³⁶ Once again, Left partisan politics were predicated on both a

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 164. Not all back performers, of course, fitted the Broonzy mold. Henry Starr, for example, had a highly paid international career as a pianist and singer during the same period. See Douglas Henry Daniels, “‘All God’s Children Got Swing’: The Black Renaissance in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1906–1941’ in *The Harlem Renaissance in the American West: The New Negro’s Western Experience*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud & Cary D. Wintz (New York: Routledge, 2012), 90–92.

¹³⁵ Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, 209.

¹³⁶ See James Eaden & David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain Since 1920* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002). See also Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, & Kevin Morgan (eds.), *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of British Communism* (London: Pluto, 1995) and Andy Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1998).

rejection (as mass culture) and an embrace (as New Deal democracy) of the US. Lang began the book by asserting that the music he was interested in was ‘not the article of commerce pumped out on the air waves at all times of the day and night’—later described as ‘debilitating and stultifying stuff that the entertainment industry wants the public to want’—but ‘music of the people (not quite the same thing as “popular music”)’ in which ‘money-making, while sometimes incidental to, is never the sole purpose of its production’.¹³⁷ This music stemmed from the Mississippi Delta and ‘grew out of the everyday life of the people, their working hours as well as their playtime’, thriving in a marginal ‘underworld’ that eschewed the staid social prejudices of the bourgeoisie.¹³⁸ For Lang, blues and related forms retained a ‘stubbornly traditional element’ derived from ‘the unschooled many’ and were engaged in for a common purpose—‘to unite the many as one’.¹³⁹ A jazz band (Lang used the term jazz to denote all authentic vernacular music), he continued, was ‘a true democracy’ in contrast to the ‘totalitarian’ hierarchy of a symphony orchestra: collective improvisation, akin to socialist political organisation, was ‘possible only where every man’s creative liberty is respected and where every man respects his neighbour’s liberty’.¹⁴⁰ In line with his Marxist reading, Lang shifted debate away from issues of ethnicity toward economy: ‘jazz is not the music of a race, black or white, but of a class—of a proletariat which is both black and white’.¹⁴¹ In so doing, he advanced a far more nuanced argument than other postwar blues scholars, proposing that what he termed the ‘jungle fallacy’ of racial attribution creates ‘a convenient emotional smoke-screen, either of admiration or distaste’.¹⁴² Lang saw such music as a gritty cultural hybrid produced by immigrants in ‘huge industrial centres’—an American language ‘evolved by the common people of cities’.¹⁴³ Real jazz, he asserted, ‘comes from the streets, the docks and levees, and its only link with rural living is the railroad, which unrolls a ribbon of urbanism through the remotest

¹³⁷ Iain Lang, *Background of the Blues* (London: Workers’ Music Association, 1943), 3, 14.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8, 14, 9.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 10–11. Drawing on contemporaneous scholarship, Lang proposed that jazz had ‘nothing to do with the jungle’ and was ‘not African, but American’ (10). In some ways, this strategic embrace of sameness and rejection of racialized readings on egalitarian political grounds chimes with V. Kofi Agawu’s arguments concerning asymmetries of knowledge production in *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁴³ Lang, *Background of the Blues*, 13.

countryside'.¹⁴⁴ In the blues, 'a people had found its voice...such people as labourers, truck-drivers, bellhops, scrubwomen, waiters, garage-hands, taximen; a kind of people which had never before been so powerfully articulate'.¹⁴⁵ Expressive integrity, he asserted, was wedded to this labouring environment.

For British radicals such as Lang, so-called proletarian song provided an exotic riposte to both 'pretentious...emotionally hollow' concert music (such as George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*) and the sybaritic jazz of 'smart nightclubs and neon-gaudy theatres'.¹⁴⁶ In other words, African American music—found amid the catalogues of race records—was valued as a symbol of honest humanist resistance to (white) mass commercial culture and bourgeois decadence. Such neatly racializing juxtapositions, however, were simultaneously complicated by Lang:

The archetypal figure is...a young man, white or Negro, in faded jeans, plucking at a guitar with a broken knife-blade for plectrum, or sitting at a barrel-house piano marking a solid beat with hand and heel; or perhaps a sweating, coatless trumpet player riding out of this world for nobody's sake but his own; or simply someone singing the blues.¹⁴⁷

Unlike later writers of the 1950s and '60s, the democratic, postcolonial ideals of British communism had furnished Lang with a progressive conceptualisation of race and its relation to cultural practice. Nevertheless, amid this vision of parity lurked familiar inequalities that would form the basis of later blues ideology: Lang's archetype was explicitly male (in spite of his emphasis on Bessie Smith), solitary, wilfully independent, and opposed to professional entertainment—providing an alluringly vicarious experience for white British men. Tellingly, Lang listed Broonzy as one of only a handful of 'great blues singers'.¹⁴⁸ A crucial aspect of this allure was also felt in the genre's 'direct and unselfconscious' approach to sexuality, from both a female and male perspective: Lang stressed that although many blues songs were 'complaints of unrequited or unsatisfied love, as many are frank celebrations of satisfaction'.¹⁴⁹ Lang thus represented a position strikingly at odds with later revivalist discourse. For such purists, Marybeth Hamilton argues, 'wrapping the blues in the cloak of the authentic meant disentangling it from the taint of the body',

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

ignoring popular urban records that dealt playfully and overtly with sex in favour of ‘telling a tale of rural despair’ centred around marginal and mythologised male figures such as Robert Johnson—artists who had only a minor following among African Americans themselves.¹⁵⁰ Lang saw blues as manifesting a profane satirical edge that could be used for emancipatory purposes; likewise, he highlighted the genre’s ability to comment on contemporaneous events from a critical angle. Betraying a folkloristic perspective underlying such ideas, however, he concluded that ‘the blues may have a contribution to make to the general body of poetry analogous to that made in the eighteenth century by the rediscovered ballad’.¹⁵¹

Published in 1959 and indulging overtly in the ‘emotional smoke-screen’ of racial fantasy, Samuel B. Charters’s *The Country Blues* was the first American study of blues from a revivalist perspective—proving highly influential to figures such as record producer and promoter Joe Boyd, who describes its ‘epic’ portrayal of southern talent scout Ralph Peer being wedded to a ‘Eureka!’ moment when he decided to pursue a career in the music industry.¹⁵² Boyd would go on to manage the Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan tour, filmed for Granada’s *The Blues and Gospel Train*. Such books set the stage for transatlantic reception of blues during the 1960s. Charters admitted in his preface to the 1975 edition that the book contained ‘errors of fact’ and was written for ‘particular reasons’ when ‘research in the field was only beginning’—portraying it as an attempt to effect socio-political change ‘by presenting an alternative consciousness’ to pervasive US racism.¹⁵³ For Charters, however, blues existed within a reified binary opposition as the racialized antidote to perceived flaws in his own cultural environment: ‘in the black expression I found a directness, an openness, and an immediacy I didn’t find in the white’.¹⁵⁴ He believed that if the true voice of African Americans could be heard, white people ‘might begin to see them as human beings, and not as stereotypes’.¹⁵⁵ Continuing a chain of painfully ironic contradictions, Charters confessed that he had conscientiously ‘tried to make [the

¹⁵⁰ Marybeth Hamilton, ‘Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition’, *Past & Present* 169 (2000), 139, 136–7. See also Marybeth Hamilton, ‘The Voice of the Blues’, *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002): 123–43 and Lipsitz, ‘Remembering Robert Johnson’.

¹⁵¹ Lang, *Background of the Blues*, 49.

¹⁵² Joe Boyd, *White Bicycles: Making Music in the 1960s* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2006), 17. See also Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 117. The book became available in Britain the following year.

¹⁵³ Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (1959; New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), vii, ix.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

book] romantic’ by describing ‘black culture in a way that would immediately involve a certain kind of younger, middle-class white American’, approaching the project when he ‘really didn’t know enough’ about his subject.¹⁵⁶ Charters concluded by defending this expropriative stance on the grounds that ‘we use another culture just as we use the past, as raw material to build our own present’.¹⁵⁷ That present, however, was Charters’s present: as Ulrich Adelt proposes, such authors effectively ‘solidified white power structures by playing up their own privileged position’, further perpetuating inequalities.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, through an ostensibly anti-racist rejection of white culture, blues enthusiasts were complicit in celebrating outmoded constructions of African American life that predated the Civil Rights Movement: as Adelt argues, ‘instead of challenging racial classifications or grappling with contemporary black politics, white performers, audiences, and cultural brokers helped to create a depoliticized and commercially charged blues culture’ with a perfunctory relationship to black political liberation.¹⁵⁹ Ultimately, Hamilton states, the blues revival demonstrated that African Americans’ cultural value ‘lay in their remaining rural and primitive’, providing a foil to ‘the self-controlled, disciplined, rational white self’.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Charters’s comparison between museums filled with ‘examples of African sculpture, taken out of context—supposedly ‘without dimming their beauty or their importance as human expression’—and blues revival is telling.¹⁶¹ Reified as ‘authentic’, country blues artists and recordings were prized by purists as a racialized antidote to alleged failings in the cultural mainstream.

The Country Blues became available for British readers in 1961 via a Jazz Book Club edition, complete with appendix on how collectors could obtain rare early blues recordings and reissues.¹⁶² Throughout the book, Charters invested heavily in an imposed distinction between what he described as ‘dull, obscene party blues’ and ‘intensely personal’ and largely unappreciated expressions of anguish—constructing, in other words, a gendered polarity between ‘thin’, commercial, urban music with ‘endless sexual double meanings’ and the rural ‘cry of heartsick, beaten man’ mired

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, x, xi.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁵⁸ Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 93.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Hamilton, ‘The Voice of the Blues’, 130.

¹⁶¹ Charters, *The Country Blues* (1975), xv.

¹⁶² Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (1959; London: Michael Joseph, 1961).

in poverty and desolation.¹⁶³ For Charters, authentic blues songs were

generally sung by men accompanying themselves on the guitar, with a highly developed interplay between their singing and the guitar accompaniment. Their music was related to the city-blues styles in the arrangement of the lyrics and the harmonic patterns, but the singing styles and the rhythms were from the music of the fields and work gangs. The country blues were an intense individual expression of the deepest strains of Negro music in the South.¹⁶⁴

In this scheme, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, Blind Willie Johnson, and Lightnin' Hopkins became artistic paradigms—in Robert Johnson's case, due to a 'brooding sense of torment and despair' and performances that 'reshaped the songs into a searing, harsh poetry'.¹⁶⁵ Although Charters states that his study centred on the music's 'relationship with its own audience' (African American communities), his real concern was with the music's relationship to a white, purist milieu.¹⁶⁶ This perspective is unmistakably apparent in the inclusion of Johnson and Rabbit Brown despite their admittedly 'minor roles', as well as a striking dismissal of Muddy Waters's Chess records as 'relentlessly tedious'; Waters's music had apparently 'become secondary to the din and the dancing', achieving 'the same level of banality that the city blues singing of the women singers in the 1920s had reached'.¹⁶⁷ The audience's perspective evidently slipped Charters's mind when it conflicted with his own value judgements. The book concluded, as it had begun, with an exaltation of Hopkins in typical folkloristic style as the last great bluesman:

In a poor, shabby room in the coloured section of Houston, a thin, worn man sat holding a guitar, playing a little on the strings, looking out of the window. It was a dull winter day, a heavy wind swirling the dust across the yard. There was a railroad behind the houses...Lightnin', in his way, is a magnificent figure. He is one of the last of his kind, a lonely, bitter man who brings to the blues the intensity and pain of the hours in the hot sun, scraping the earth, singing to make the hours pass.¹⁶⁸

Charters's nexus of authenticity was clear: real blues was masculine, and predicated upon poverty, solitude, harsh rural toil, heartsick despair, and racial segregation. This

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 38, 44, 135.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 144, 143.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13, 181.

environment created ‘magnificent’ figures—a setting that Hopkins no doubt would have found far less easy to romanticise than Charters. When Charters ‘rediscovered’ him, Hopkins (then in his late 40s) was indeed destitute and willing to accede to an unalloyed folk paradigm for professional and financial recompense—deftly reinventing himself from electrified entertainer at black juke joint parties to acoustic archetype for white concert hall audiences.¹⁶⁹

Published the following year, British architectural historian Paul Oliver’s pioneering *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* provided a similar angle on the genre conditioned by revivalist desire. Oliver had begun writing articles on blues in 1952 but only visited the US after publication of his first book—relying instead for source material on personal transcriptions from a catalogue of recorded material, a node of contacts around *Jazz Journal*, and ‘many hours of conversation’ with Broonzy and other travelling artists; he also describes being indebted to the work of Charters and Alan Lomax.¹⁷⁰ In a preface to the 1990 edition, Oliver admitted that he had since ‘come to modify [his] views’ and regretted an initially ‘moralistic tone’, noting how he had underplayed blues music’s ‘function as entertainment, the personalizing of the lyrics, [and] the interaction between vocal expression and instrumental techniques’.¹⁷¹ He confessed that due to an aspiration to foreground relationships between the ‘thematic content’ of blues and ‘aspects of black experience’ he always ‘started from the lyrics of the blues, rather than from sociology or history’.¹⁷² Indeed, Oliver’s principal failing lay in this questionable methodology: throughout the book, lyrics were treated as unmediated mirrors onto southern African American culture. Oliver drew on 350 text excerpts abstracted from the vocal and instrumental inflections of singers, cultural context, and the manifold complexities of

¹⁶⁹ See Timothy J. O’Brien & David Ensminger, *Mojo Hand: The Life and Music of Lightnin’ Hopkins* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 76–106. O’Brien and Ensminger note that prior to the acoustic recording Charters made of Hopkins in 1959, his last large body of work ‘amounted to the ferocious, primitive blues-rock that he recorded for Herald. On those recordings, he played an electric guitar and was accompanied by a bass and drums lineup’ (83). Hopkins was paid \$300 for the session, later released on Folkways, but disputes over royalties ensued; from personal correspondence, it is clear that Charters saw lucrative potential in Hopkins. After his entry into the revivalist scene, Hopkins encountered the very same issues that had frustrated Huddie Ledbetter: acting as agent, John Lomax Jr. had made him wear stereotyped rural clothes for a concert in California against his will.

¹⁷⁰ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* (London: Cassell & Company, 1960), xvii–xx. John Lomax’s *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly*, *Adventures of a Ballad-hunter*, and *Our Singing Country* all appear in the Bibliography, along with Broonzy and Bruynoghe’s *Big Bill Blues*. See also Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 113.

¹⁷¹ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), xxi, xxii.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, xxiv.

the recording industry itself. Indeed, he asserted that ‘the blues singer is a realist and his statements are accurate portrayals of his state of mind, uninhibited in their self-expression’—casting African American men as natural conduits of emotion who use terms ‘with scarcely a thought for their value as metaphors’.¹⁷³ This position unfortunately led Oliver to treat songs about voodoo magic (such as Muddy Waters’s ‘Louisiana Blues’) literally, rather than as cultural artefacts wedded to diasporic memory, record industry trends, and self-referential fantasy.¹⁷⁴ Any sense that such lyrics were carefully crafted intertextual signs produced through reflexive acts of composition was lost, along with perhaps the most important aspects of blues—performance, and the various dramatic personae adopted in each song. Although newspaper advertisements for records were amply reproduced as illustrations, Oliver never discussed their role as marketing devices. He thus denied creativity and agency to blues musicians, composers, and listeners in both poietic and esthetic domains.¹⁷⁵ Fundamentally, Oliver thus neglected to treat blues as a form of artistic expression—not a direct reflection of historical circumstance, but a multifaceted and mediated space of conscious craft, imagination, and signification.

Oliver stated that he was devoted to understanding ‘the meaning and content’ of ‘traditional and folk blues’ forms through recorded objects—but that ‘only the American Negro...can sing the blues’.¹⁷⁶ Like Charters, Oliver was complicit in drawing a gendered distinction between purportedly ‘synthetic’ commodities and ‘authentic’ blues, proclaiming that ‘sophisticated night-club song’ was merely derivative.¹⁷⁷ In such a scheme, blues authenticity rested on untenable folkloristic conceptions of communality: as ‘the blues of their own race’, such music was seen to reflect ‘the environment of the people who create[ed] it’.¹⁷⁸ Oliver insisted that blues was ‘at its best when least self-conscious, when least sophisticated’ and ‘created by

¹⁷³ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960), 59–61, 126. This failing is particularly striking given the necessary intricacies of African American language use; see Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Lawson, *Jim Crow’s Counterculture*.

¹⁷⁴ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960), 141. On this aspect of Waters’s output, see Filene, *Romancing the Folk*.

¹⁷⁵ On the distinction between poietic and esthetic, see Jean Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). For Nattiez, the ‘poietic’ refers to *production* of a ‘trace’ whereas the ‘esthetic’ refers to *reception* of this trace. This scheme is not a linear chain of transmission, but an active and dialogic process.

¹⁷⁶ Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960), xvii, xviii, 5.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3, 130.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 47; see also 19.

the Negro lower classes'.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, he was invested in what he referred to as the 'racial qualities' of African Americans.¹⁸⁰ Ultimately, for Oliver, the blues archetype consisted of 'a man with spirit but without hope, who has been so long severed from the outside world', giving voice to 'the utterances of his innermost feelings, the outpourings of his heart'; paradoxically (given this emphasis on unmediated expression), Oliver also portrayed blues lyricism as a philosophical exercise predicated on intense self-examination.¹⁸¹ Undermining Oliver's naïve focus on this epitome of unvarnished realism, blues was contextually grounded in performance rituals reliant on lyric dexterity, personification, and dramatic stage presentation: as Jacques D. Lacava has suggested, blues 'exhibits the ultimate expressiveness and poignancy of a total theatrical experience'.¹⁸² In spite of such blunders, novelist Richard Wright provided a laudatory foreword lending *Blues Fell This Morning* cultural credibility.¹⁸³ Wright was impressed by the book and added fuel to revivalist fire by drawing attention to suffering and melancholy in 'those devil songs', suggesting that this sense of defeat was 'redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope'—a position ratified by the admission that he spoke as 'a Southern-born American Negro'.¹⁸⁴ Describing the blues as 'starkly brutal, haunting folk songs created by millions of nameless and illiterate American Negroes', he nevertheless characterised the paradigmatic blues singer as a strong individual—'the convict, the migrant, the rambler, the steel driver, the ditch digger, the roustabout, the pimp, the prostitute, the urban or rural illiterate outsider'.¹⁸⁵ Wright thus followed Oliver in ignoring the tangled networks of commerce within which blues had developed and invested in the romantic idea that the genre dealt primarily in 'lusty, lyrical realism'; he happily stated that the book told what the 'probable emotional and psychological meaning' of the blues is, despite being written 'neither by a Negro nor an American nor by a man who had ever seen America and her teeming Black Belts'.¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 230, 310; see also 299.

¹⁸² Jacques D. Lacava, 'The Theatricality of the Blues', *Black Music Research Journal* 12/1 (1992), 138.

¹⁸³ Oliver met Wright in Paris and had asked him to critique the manuscript. See Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 114.

¹⁸⁴ Richard Wright, 'Foreword' to: Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960), x, ix.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, vii, x.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, x

Alongside a somewhat cursory presence in jazz periodicals and the mainstream music press, discourse surrounding and generating ideas about blues in Britain was carried into a number of specialist publications during the early 1960s on the back of books by Oliver and Charters. Magazines such as *Blues Unlimited* (Bexhill-on-Sea, 1963) and *R'NB Scene* (Manchester, 1964) began to cater for and reflect a diversity of conflicting tastes ranging from archaic Delta purism to urban rhythm and blues, white cover bands, gospel, Cajun music, soul, and even rock'n'roll. As the Journal of the Blues Appreciation Society, *Blues Unlimited* noted in its second issue that sales had been 'astonishingly far beyond expectation, proving beyond any doubt that a publication such as this is long overdue'; discographic data, lists of performer pseudonyms, biographies, and record reviews dominated.¹⁸⁷ By issue twelve, editor Simon A. Napier asserted that the magazine had 'probably the most informed bunch of contributors on the blues ever assembled'—lamenting that 'books on the blues are few' and that 'incompetent' jazz journalism was not doing justice to the genre.¹⁸⁸ The position taken in *Blues Unlimited* mirrored its antiquated, typewritten layout: commercial music was trashed as inauthentic along with white imitators and records too deliberately aimed at a fashionable 'folk' aesthetic. John J. Broven in particular championed African American artists such as Lightnin' Slim—'a singer in the true "down home" tradition of the south...intensely savage and bitter'—over 'synthetic rubbish from The Cheynes and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers'.¹⁸⁹ Napier also complained that it was 'easy to find some "blues" columns taken up with Dylan, Van Ronk, Kweskin & Co., a state of affair which is very saddening indeed'; 'by such a standard', he added, 'anyone singing a 12-bar affair is a blues singer'.¹⁹⁰ Echoing this attitude, Mike Leadbitter provided a fanatical response to some of (white) Cyril Davies's pejorative remarks about (black) Jimmy Reed: 'We all know that Reed has his faults, but his is representative of American blues today...He also possesses originality!!! Why can't Cyril, like his pal Alexis, remember his place—that of a mere copyist, an English one, and a very poor one at that'.¹⁹¹

Urban blues were not entirely dismissed by the journal, however: in 1964, Oliver argued that although 'country blues' was undoubtedly authentic 'the music of

¹⁸⁷ Simon A. Napier, 'Editorial', *Blues Unlimited* 2 (1963), 1.

¹⁸⁸ Simon A. Napier, 'Editorial', *Blues Unlimited* 12 (1964), 2; Simon A. Napier, 'Editorial', *Blues Unlimited* 9 (1964), 1; Simon A. Napier, 'Editorial', *Blues Unlimited* 6 (1963), 1.

¹⁸⁹ John J. Broven, *Blues Unlimited* 1 (1963), 4; John J. Broven, *Blues Unlimited* 14 (1964), 9.

¹⁹⁰ Simon A. Napier, 'Editorial', *Blues Unlimited* 17 (1964), 2.

¹⁹¹ Mike Leadbitter quoted in: Simon A. Napier, 'Editorial', *Blues Unlimited* 3 (1963), 1.

the blues bands of Chicago is no less so, for it is a mirror to the Negro world of today'.¹⁹² What seemed to matter above rural ideology was the music's relation to particular instantiations of blackness tied to sincere expression over showmanship. Indeed, Pete Lowry's review of *Muddy Waters: Folk singer* demonstrated that aficionados rejected what was perceived to be any form of cynical or commercially-driven roleplay: the album was 'a great disappointment' and lacked 'real feeling' for Lowry, who wished instead 'that Muddy had not been so adaptable to the times'.¹⁹³ Such reviews bring into question the extent to which Waters was ever able to 'master' the shifting 'cult of authenticity' identified by Filene.¹⁹⁴ In contrast to the vitriolic purism of *Blues Unlimited*, the more elegantly produced *R'NB Scene* aimed to 'encourage British groups who are genuinely desirous of playing rhythm and blues', riding a revival of interest in contemporary material; editor Roger Eagle claimed, however, that as blues was 'the negro's form of self-expression' the style could not simply be 'learned overnight'.¹⁹⁵ Instead of juxtaposing esoteric black artists with music tainted by white commercial imitation, the cultural polarity constructed by *R'NB Scene* revolved around blues as an antidote to mainstream popular music: as Eagle noted, rhythm and blues was 'a consistent attraction for people who want to hear music with some guts to it, as opposed to the watery wailings of so many of the "pop" groups' or 'favourite rock numbers ruined by "beat" groups'.¹⁹⁶ The antidote to 'loud, death-dealing' ensembles that risked 'ruin[ing] the entire movement' was to cultivate the tastes of indiscriminate audiences and defend what was seen as authentic music against the 'rubbish' that was supposedly being 'sold under the name of "Rhythm and blues"'.¹⁹⁷ From this vanguard perspective, Eagle proposed that Muddy Waters and Otis Spann were 'not as exciting a proposal as some of our other visitors, but still very welcome'; instead, an eclectic miscellany of younger artists generated excitement in the magazine—such as Fats Domino, James Brown, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Freddie King, and Spencer Davies.¹⁹⁸

A contemporaneous article in *Jazz Journal* entitled 'Standards in Blues

¹⁹² Paul Oliver, *Blues Unlimited* 10 (1964), 3.

¹⁹³ Pete Lowry, *Blues Unlimited* 12 (1964), 15.

¹⁹⁴ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*.

¹⁹⁵ Roger Eagle, 'Editorial', *R'NB Scene* 1/1 (1964), 2.

¹⁹⁶ Roger Eagle, 'Editorial', *R'NB Scene* 1/2 (1964), 2.

¹⁹⁷ Roger Eagle, 'Editorial', *R'NB Scene* 1/3 (1964), 2; Roger Eagle, 'Editorial', *R'NB Scene* 1/4 (1964), 2.

¹⁹⁸ Roger Eagle, 'Editorial', *R'NB Scene* 1/5 (1964), 2.

Criticism: A Change of Emphasis' contradicted the optimism manifest in *R'NB Scene* while developing and rejecting ideas found in *Blues Unlimited*, indicating the existence of internal fissures in the blues scene. John Barnie supposed that by writing the piece he would 'inevitably be labelled purist and intellectual by that large, amorphous body of fans who seem to think that any record labelled blues must automatically be good'.¹⁹⁹ He was suspicious of how critics 'tried to use the idea of a continuing tradition to imply that the qualities inherent in the country blues of say Son House and Robert Johnson are still to be found in the R&B singers'.²⁰⁰ Dismissing contemporary 'so-called blues', Barnie proclaimed that the Mississippi tradition—threatened by crass commodification—was in a terminal state of decay:

what remains today are the more superficial and immediately noticeable elements of the tradition—the heavy, surging sensuous rhythms, and a certain intensity of melody and voice, all of which have become over-emphasised and coarsened...R&B shows all the signs of a folk-music in decline, a music which has been lost to the monetary and mediocre claims of commercialism...a great tradition is swiftly dying.²⁰¹

Referencing Charters, he chastised contemporary blues songs for their lyrical 'banalities, the superficial mawkish sentiment which dominates white pop music'.²⁰² Authenticity was to be found only in the cultural practice of the black low Other—through rural southern music, the more exotic and dissimilar to native culture the better. Although blues was seen to address 'universal' themes of 'love, loss, loneliness, [and] death', Barnie felt that 'uninhibited emotional intensity is more often than not based upon deeply felt personal and racial experience'.²⁰³ Such perceptions were typical of the British intellectual jazz world, in which the longstanding protectionist stance of the Musicians' Union toward 'alien' labour had meant that aficionados primary access to American material was via recordings.²⁰⁴ This didactic, acquisitive, and purely acoustic focus skewed consumption of African American artists and led to false ideas surrounding live performance. Within the scene,

¹⁹⁹ John Barnie, 'Standards in Blues Criticism: A Change of Emphasis', *Jazz Journal* 17/7 (1964), 6.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰⁴ See Martin Cloonan & Matt Brennan, 'Alien Invasions: the British Musicians' Union and Foreign Musicians', *Popular Music* 32/2 (2013): 277–95. See also Parsonage, 'A Critical Reassessment of the Reception of Early Jazz in Britain'.

Schwartz argues, it was ‘generally accepted that the blues was the parent idiom of jazz’; this posited relationship (‘emphatically and enthusiastically promoted’ by the jazz press) crystallised a view of blues as black folksong.²⁰⁵

Dedicated ‘to the memory of Malcolm X’, the only book that explicitly challenged such resistant strains of nostalgic, agrarian purism during the 1960s was Charles Keil’s *Urban Blues*. Pursuing an anthropological focus that rejected racial essentialism by foregrounding contextual attributes, Keil began by proposing that the term race itself should be ‘abandoned altogether’ (along with its associated rhetoric) in favour of an investigation into struggles for *cultural* pluralism.²⁰⁶ Unlike Charters and Oliver, Keil recognised that what he termed ‘the art of the “put on” has of necessity been developed to an exceptionally high level in Negro culture’; in consequence, he continued, the researcher ‘who reports recited values at face value may be putting us all on twice over’.²⁰⁷ The key to understanding African American culture, Keil argued, was a careful reading of what many had dismissed as mere entertainment—a domain experienced, however, as ‘ritual, drama, or dialectical catharsis’ by initiates.²⁰⁸ In this guise, entertainers (including singers, musicians, preachers, comedians, writers, and DJs) were ‘the ablest representatives of a long cultural tradition—what might be called the soul tradition’ and were consequently ‘all identity experts...specialists in changing the joke and slipping the yoke’.²⁰⁹ In other words, they were trickster figures—artists in the subversive, veiled practices of signifyin(g).²¹⁰ Keil complained that all prior sources on the blues had refused to discuss ‘the music as it exists today’, rebuking Charters and Oliver as exemplifications of this ‘mouldy-fig mentality’.²¹¹ Noting that a ‘romanticizing motive’ was ubiquitous in such writing, Keil mercilessly satirised purists’ quixotic construction of an authentic role for African American bluesmen:

The criteria for a real blues singer...are the following. Old age: the performer should

²⁰⁵ Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 21.

²⁰⁶ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 3. On related issues, see David Clarke, ‘Elvis and Darmstadt, or Twentieth-Century Music and the Politics of Cultural Pluralism’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 4/1 (2007): 3–45.

²⁰⁷ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 12.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15. Given this stance, Keil foreshadowed aspects of Gilroy’s ‘anti-antiessentialism’.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*; Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., ‘Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry’, *Black Music Research Journal* 11/2 (1991): 265–87; and Ayana Smith, ‘Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster’, *Popular Music* 24/2 (2005): 179–91.

²¹¹ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 34.

preferably be more than sixty years old, blind, arthritic, and toothless...Obscurity: the blues singer should not have performed in public or have made a recording in at least twenty years; among deceased bluesmen, the best seem to be those who appeared in a big city one day in the 1920s, made from four to six recordings, and then disappeared into the countryside forever. Correct tutelage: the singer should have played with or been taught by some legendary figure. Agrarian milieu: a bluesman should have lived the bulk of his life as a sharecropper, coaxing mules and picking cotton, uncontaminated by city influences.²¹²

In contrast, Keil advocated openness to the myriad styles and commercial processes in modern blues culture rather than an escapist retreat into an invented past. In Keil's view, blues involved all-encompassing symbolic performances (tied to a community of knowing listeners) that could synthesise experience and negotiate new identities by recalling elements of the past without binding blackness to the memory of exploitation, sharecropping, and southern racial violence—precisely those elements most prized by white revivalists in creating paradigms of authenticity.

The British blues scene of the early 1960s afforded Keil the keenest exemplification of 'mouldy-fig' revivalist mentality in practice:

An affair I witnessed in London featured an array of elderly bluesmen, a few of them quite decrepit...the concert might be best described as a third-rate minstrel show. The same show presented to a Negro audience in Chicago (assuming they could be enticed into watching a parade of invalids in the first place) would be received with hoots of derision, catcalls, and laughter. The thousands of Englishmen assembled for the event listened to each song in awed silence; the more ludicrous the performance, the more thunderous the applause at its conclusion...Howlin' Wolf's performance style—stalking around, rolling his eyes, lunging to and from the microphone—so appropriate to the boisterous atmosphere of a Chicago lounge, made him look like an awkward Uncle Tom.²¹³

Keil's insinuation was that the show had unintentionally become a caricature of racialized difference through a valorisation of marginality, archaism, and nonconformity—causing a consummately modern performer such as Howlin' Wolf to appear as bizarrely out of place. Indeed, the blues sold to white audiences differed markedly from the sounds of a contemporaneous American metropolis: one audience treated blues singers as exotic living relics to be observed in reverential silence, the

²¹² *Ibid.*, 34–5.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 37. The event was the 1964 American Folk Blues Festival tour, which I discuss more fully in the next section.

other recognised them as interactive and artistically relevant constituents of urban existence. Moreover, as Keil pointed out, it was ‘rather ironic that many musicians who had been living in the city since their childhood found it convenient to let themselves be labelled country singers, primitives, or folk singers, unhooking their electric amplification and cleaning up their diction a bit to fit the new roles demanded of them’.²¹⁴ British audiences seemed so invested in such myths of authenticity that they were blind to the calculated, astute, and economically necessary adaptability of professional entertainers at the mercy of shifting audience desires. Keil proposed that such myths stemmed from a condescending liberal response to a sense of collective guilt over black suffering, leading to a situation in which he could imagine Charters and Oliver ‘helping to set up a “reservation” or Bantustan for old bluesmen’.²¹⁵ Analogous to the colonialist motivation behind John Lomax’s role as interlocutor, protector, and attempted puppet master for Lead Belly, Keil suspected a vicarious pleasure in the process of ‘rediscovery’ and display. Ultimately, he saw such gestures as means of escaping modernity and abdicating present political responsibilities: ‘by concentrating on old-timers and scorning today’s blues as commercial or decadent, the writer can effectively avert his eyes from the urban ghetto’.²¹⁶

Symptomatic of this mentality, *Melody Maker* ran an interview with Lonnie Johnson in 1963 in which he protested at being repeatedly described as older than he was: ‘People expect to see an old man coming out on crutches, and when they see me they often say “you must be his son, or something”...These stories really have hurt me’.²¹⁷ Johnson was then asked for his opinion on the revival: ‘Well’, he offered, ‘it’s been good for every blues singer financially speaking’.²¹⁸ Conditioned by a history of discursive caricature, British audiences’ horizon of expectation and reality did not always match: as Schwartz notes, ‘most of the blues artists who toured Britain didn’t look or act like the poor, oppressed musicians that were frequently described as the source of the “real” blues’.²¹⁹ Some did, however, as Keil noted—serving to bolster

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ ‘You’re in Love with the Blues’, *Melody Maker*, 26 October 1963, 6. In the interview, Johnson claims he was born in February 1900. Elsewhere, Johnson’s birthdate is listed as February 1899; see Paul Oliver, ‘Johnson, Lonnie’, *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>> [accessed 04/12/14]. Ultimately, the date itself is unimportant—what Johnson was protesting was being treated as a relic rather than as a contemporary performer.

²¹⁸ ‘You’re in Love with the Blues’.

²¹⁹ Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 169.

‘mouldy-fig’ purism. As the audience for blues shifted increasingly toward a lucrative white milieu during this period, Adelt argues, such aesthetic demands led ‘to a more rigid conceptualization of the genre and a commercially driven, nostalgic celebration of an invented past informed by essentialist notions of race and gender’.²²⁰ Prefiguring Adelt, Keil was correct in identifying the confluence of imaginative investment in docile and regressive forms of ‘country’ blues with an implicit repudiation of contemporary black politics occurring at precisely the moment in US history when radical voices were beginning to assert new forms of empowered and insurgent black identity.²²¹ As Adelt states, revivalist audiences ‘were beginning to demand an older and safer conceptualization of blackness at the exact moment when calls for black power were becoming imminent’.²²² The contingent ideals developed by blues revivalists of the late 1950s and early ’60s drew on a foundation of folksong ideology to create a dominant image of authenticity allied to bardic primitivism, expressive sincerity, poverty, agrarian toil, assumed rejection of commerce, and hermetic cultural difference. Such projections were contingent upon suffering, sorrow, and segregation—coding black males as solitary, existential rebels at odds with bourgeois values. Revivalists thus deliberately overlooked industry ‘middlemen’, commerce, and the symbolic roles enacted by professional African American entertainers in their own communities. The result of such overt acts of gatekeeping by Charters and Oliver was a purism that saw blues as a genre predicated on racial difference itself. Schwartz proposes that such perceptions were driven by stereotypes of ‘how it was imagined the music of rural African Americans ought to sound’, along with the mistaken impression that true representatives of country blues consciously rejected contemporary styles.²²³ In the next section, I explore how such notions functioned to direct both the representation and reception of African American artists in Britain, ultimately serving to reinforce racial ideology.

²²⁰ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 135.

²²¹ See James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Maurice Isserman & Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 3rd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²²² Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 7.

²²³ Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 40; see also 100.

3 | 'A Living History of the Blues': Reading Granada's TV Specials as Theatres of Representation

In the eighth issue of *Blues Unlimited*, editor Simon A. Napier proposed that 1964 'could be the year of the big break through'; by September, he noted that the scene was 'obviously...at its healthiest yet'.²²⁴ Such intense excitement was generated by rare opportunities to see artists live or via televised concerts: Napier, for instance, wrote that 'on December 18th [1963] came the ultimate—a 45 minute screening at a near-peak hour of a special show' featuring the members of that year's American Folk Blues Festival tour.²²⁵ Entitled *I Hear the Blues*, the programme was produced by John Hamp and directed by Philip Casson; in May of the following year, Hamp and Casson collaborated to produce another, more elaborately staged, programme also for Granada TV entitled *The Blues and Gospel Train*. In the only substantial account of these programmes to date, Michael Brocken proposes that they 'avoided cultural and genre stereotypification' through a 'synchronically challenging and self-reflexive' approach.²²⁶ He proposes that the programmes' anachronistic staging placed touring artists in 'critical, historical relief', leaving open the possibility for what he refers to as moments of 'immediate authenticity' and a 'theoretical deconstruction of the myth of origin'.²²⁷ Although Cousin Joe Pleasants' short cakewalk during *The Blues and Gospel Train* provides an element of subtle satire, Brocken invests in a staggeringly naïve conviction that the show actively critiqued racializing caricature. Likewise, he fails to acknowledge the extent to which the entirely white audience held a historically privileged position in a dialogic play of representation relating to broader patterns of colonial display constructing exoticised racial difference for European consumption. Indeed, the elaborate *mise-en-scène* of these two programmes involved both the African American musicians and the white audience performing an asymmetrical paradigm specific to the blues revival and yet indicative of more pervasive hegemonic relations between cultural marginality and dominance.

²²⁴ Simon A. Napier, *Blues Unlimited* 8 (1964), 19; Simon A. Napier, 'Editorial', *Blues Unlimited* 15 (1964), 1. Roger Eagle of *R'NB Scene* also picked up on the existence of a boom, declaring 'what a year 1964 is going to be'; see 'Editorial', *R'NB Scene* 1/2 (1964), 2.

²²⁵ Simon A. Napier, *Blues Unlimited* 8 (1964), 19. In British advertising, the tour was labelled as 'The American Negro Blues Festival' and subtitled 'A Documentary of the Authentic Blues'. The tour was promoted in conjunction with the National Jazz Federation.

²²⁶ Michael Brocken, 'Granada TV, Johnny Hamp, and *The Blues and Gospel Train*: Masters of Reality' in *Popular Music and Television in Britain*, ed. Ian Inglis (Farnham: Ashgate 2010), 206.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 209, 207, 210.

Moreover, the mediations of television broadcast functioned to disguise the curatorial intervention of white producers in spite of their crucial role as gatekeepers in delimiting modes of black representation. The deceptively anti-didactic spirit that Brocken praises—supposedly allowing viewers to decide what they thought without any ‘condescending’ academic clarification—thus hid the programmes’ ideological content in plain sight: the ostensibly direct presentation of blues artists in fact drew on a powerful discursive history that functioned to define what behaviour was accepted as natural.²²⁸ I will argue from the exact opposite of Brocken’s nescient standpoint—suggesting that such fallacious theatrical environments created the very space within which racial identity was itself performatively fashioned, negotiated, and ultimately reified into forms of injurious cultural shorthand.

Staged and recorded at a time of burgeoning national interest in television as a mass cultural medium, *I Hear the Blues* featured hootenanny style performances by Willie Dixon, Matt ‘guitar’ Murphy, Lonnie Johnson, Big Joe Williams, Victoria Spivey, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Muddy Waters (backed by Otis Spann and Bill Stepney).²²⁹ Memphis Slim played the avuncular role of interlocutor on a low, dimly lit stage platform extending wooden walkways into a tiered crowd—its rough-hewn construction mirroring the use of antiquated ‘wild western’ typeface throughout the broadcast in designating a node of authenticity revolving around nostalgia, frontier independence, and agrarian primitivism. This down-home setting was juxtaposed with the sharp suits of male performers, electric guitars, and a polished grand piano, creating a revealing discontinuity between the aspirations and urbane self-presentation of black artists and an imposed emphasis on unspoiled cultural stasis. *The Blues and Gospel Train* continued this staging practice by situating black artists among signs of quondam rural poverty. The programme began with shots of Manchester Central station where a billboard announced a special departure to ‘Chorltonville and all stations south’—its destination alluding to the Mississippi Delta in a telling reverse of the Great Migrations that had seen millions of African Americans escape Jim Crow for urban cities of the north.²³⁰ Invited fans boarded the carriages of a vintage steam

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

²²⁹ See Rob Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture: Britain and the Transformation of Modernity* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007) and Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*.

²³⁰ The Manchester location was a disused station at Wilbraham Road (formerly Alexandra Park) on the Fallowfield loop line adjacent to the suburb of Withington; Chorltonville was the name of a nearby garden village development, serving to accentuate the desired impression of provinciality. On the Great Migration, see Lawson, *Jim Crow’s Counterculture*.

locomotive—fitted with a large cowcatcher grill and a placard reading ‘HALLELUJAH!’—to the sound of field hollers as the performers were introduced on screen: Cousin Joe Pleasants, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee (backed by Otis Spann, Willie Smith, and Ransom Knowling). On arrival, passengers joined an audience already seated in tiers on one platform: across the tracks was an imaginative (re)creation of a railroad station from the deep south around the turn of the century. No expense had been spared in creating an atmosphere rich in symbolism: Hamp recalled that they ‘blew the whole budget and had over seventy of the stage and maintenance staff building the set’.²³¹ Manifesting what Paige McGinley has termed ‘the trope of South-as-stage’, this platform area included wonky shutters, broken windows, cotton bales, a cart on wagon wheels, printed bill posters, wooden barrels, a rocking chair, a crate of live chickens on a vintage upright piano, and even a goat; the most striking moment of imposed stagecraft involved Tharpe, who approached the platform atop a horse-drawn surrey.²³² This atmosphere of rustic authenticity was cultivated not simply through arrangement and selection of props but via instructions to spectators, who were instructed on their tickets that ‘casual gear’—consisting of denims and sweaters—was ‘essential’.²³³

Drawing on interdisciplinary performance studies and the work of Roland Barthes, I want to use this section to pursue a reading of revivalist blues as a representational practice that maps broader relational processes of racializing identity formation. Gilroy hinted in 1991 at how a performative turn in the humanities might inspire work on African diasporic cultures, suggesting that the strengths of an orientation toward performance are clear when ‘contrasted with approaches to black culture that have been premised on textuality and narrative rather than, say, dramaturgy, enunciation, and gesture’.²³⁴ Similarly, Lacava noted that blues was reliant upon a staged combination of poetry, sound, visual signifiers, and the self-conscious cultivation of persona focused around the artist’s body—a ‘multifaceted expression...best rendered through a multimedia record’.²³⁵ In this sense, *I Hear the*

²³¹ Quoted in ‘When the Blues Train Rolled into Chorlton,’ *Manchester Evening News*, October 2007 <<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/local-news/when-the-blues-train-rolled-into-chorlton-1049592>> [accessed 03/04/13].

²³² Paige McGinley, ‘Highway 61 Revisited’, *The Drama Review* 51/3 (2007), 89. For eyewitness details from the manager of the package tour, see Boyd, *White Bicycles*, 40.

²³³ This information courtesy of Pete Goldsmith’s signed ticket for the event reproduced at <http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/w/wilbraham_road/index.shtml> [accessed 03/04/13].

²³⁴ Gilroy, ‘Sounds Authentic’, 113.

²³⁵ Lacava, ‘The Theatricality of the Blues’, 134.

Blues and *The Blues and Gospel Train* are key sources for investigating revivalist ideology as embodied theatrical events. Nicholas Cook has proposed that such multimedia texts involve a perceived interplay between diverse media forms: as such, he argues, ‘instead of talking about meaning as something that the music *has*, we should be talking about it as something that the music *does* (and has done to it) within a given context’.²³⁶ In the Granada programmes, music was one element in a mutually supportive textile of interactive signification that called upon visual iconography and theatrical stagecraft. Songs thus functioned as tools that both crafted and were simultaneously crafted into an ideological network of racial connotation for British audiences. Rather than viewing such intertextual and multimodal scenarios as reproducing inherent meanings, Cook treats performance as a fundamentally creative act—a ‘process of generating meaning’ in real time.²³⁷ Approaching music in this way entails ‘dispensing with the ethics of autonomy’ and instead looking for a dynamic process whereby a reciprocal transfer of attributes ‘gives rise to a meaning constructed, not just reproduced, by multimedia’.²³⁸ Granada’s blues specials highlight this reciprocal transfer of attributes, foregrounding how revivalist blues was predicated on a collusion of visual, auditory, discursive, and performative authenticities instantiating the idea of race itself.

Arguing that performance studies should be deeply woven into the disciplinary purview of musicology, Cook stresses that scholars should interrogate ‘how performances afford the production of meaning’.²³⁹ He argues for a turn away from a ‘paradigm of reproduction’ (inherent in traditional approaches to Western sound culture guided overwhelmingly by the score) toward a relational model ‘grounded in semiosis’ that would treat performance as ‘a social event in which meaning is produced’: performance, he writes, ‘is an art of telling detail—detail that falls between the notes of musical texts’.²⁴⁰ Scholars in other disciplines have already paid attention to a variety of performative details manifest in the dynamic rituals of everyday life, adopting a far broader view of performance than simply as roleplay under the traditional proscenium. Taking his cue from Foucauldian genealogy, for

²³⁶ Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 9.

²³⁷ Nicholas Cook, ‘The Ghost in the Machine: Towards a Musicology of Recordings’, *Musicae Scientiae* 14/2 (2010), 8. See also Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²³⁸ Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, 128, 97.

²³⁹ Cook, *Beyond the Score*, 1.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4, 225, 7, 3.

example, Joseph Roach has advocated a methodology that would ‘resist histories that attribute purity of origin to any performance’.²⁴¹ Roach’s standpoint instead provides a useful way to begin thinking about how performance and race might be constitutively imbricated—‘as an alternative to an ontological commitment to its reality’.²⁴² In the context of what he terms (after Gilroy) a circum-Atlantic interculture, societies have defined themselves through gestures of mutual opposition. The idea that a coherent point of origin undergirds such identities, Roach suggests, is a fallacy. Performative effigies have thus arisen to fill ‘by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of an original’; moreover, such myths of organic consistency require ‘a constantly visible yet constantly receding perimeter of difference’.²⁴³ Roach argues that performance reveals the ‘intricately processual nature’ of these relationships by creating communities through acts of selective retention: through performance, he states, ‘memory reveals itself as imagination’ in a context where ‘the relentless search for the purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure’.²⁴⁴ Folksong is thus a cultural surrogate *par excellence*—masking, by means of its ideological makeup, hybridity and historical incoherence. Likewise, revivalist blues discourse has served to perpetuate the myth that blackness has an essentially racial core. Indeed, racialized music relies on the very process of erasure and effigy construction that Roach theorises—generating performative fictions of pure origin dependent on relations of difference.

As a surrogate, revivalist blues concealed the ways in which an audience’s gaze was implicated in generating aspects of performance. Philip Auslander has highlighted how such acts of musical performance engender a flux of roles involving lyrical character, ‘star’ image, and self; he thus argues that in popular music ‘the demarcation line between real person and persona is always ambiguous’.²⁴⁵ This schema, however, should be nuanced with the acknowledgement that such roles are not free from the broader discursive constraints of stereotype. Indeed, Auslander stresses that ‘performers are not the sole authors of the personae they perform’: genre conventions, audience knowledge, and ‘the entire machinery of the music industry collaborate with artists, and sometimes coerce them, in the construction and

²⁴¹ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 286.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36, 39.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 76, 29, 6.

²⁴⁵ Philip Auslander, ‘Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14/1 (2004), 6.

performance of their personae'.²⁴⁶ Performatively generated personae thus span the liminal space between subject position and the adoption of expressive masks. Live performance inevitably enfolds the audience in this relational play of identity. As Auslander notes, 'the concert, as a social transaction between performers and audience, begins before a single note is sounded': aspects such as theatrical setting and patterns of discourse play a crucial role in scripting performative interactions 'by drawing upon existing cultural connotations'.²⁴⁷ Moreover, as Dyer has noted, 'looking and being looked at reproduce power relations'—analogously to Foucault's theorisation of the panopticon.²⁴⁸ Understood not as a single building but as an ideal 'figure of political technology', panopticism is a means of binding power to a gaze: as Foucault argues, prison cells become the stages of 'so many small theatres', guaranteeing an asymmetrical process of observation.²⁴⁹ In this model, power inheres not in a person, but in the theatrical scenario itself. The parallels with televisual broadcast are clear. Within the programmes, cameras functioned as panoptic devices, channeling a normative white gaze while concealing the true audience; as the paradigmatic technology of human surveillance, the cameras embodied a gaze inducing reflexive (racialized) behaviour in its subjects. Fully in the knowledge of being filmed, black artists performed for a viewpoint exemplified by the physical structure of the sets, internalising their modes of 'visibility' and incorporating white expectations into their cultivated act; in so doing, racialized power relations were not merely reproduced but *brought into being through performance*. Audiences were thus not passive or neutral observers of autonomous African American performers but were active in dialogically shaping their racial personae. As Foucault states, the performative relations engendered and guaranteed by the furtive structure of panopticism 'assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference'.²⁵⁰

Displayed in invented scenarios to fulfil white desires, African American blues artists thus appeared in European package tours of the 1960s as exhibits in a living museum of black culture. As Adelt notes, the promoters of the American Folk Blues Festivals were 'catering to audience expectations of the blues as simple, raw, and uninhibited' by instructing musicians 'to refrain from any disrespectful

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴⁷ Philip Auslander, 'Musical Personae', *The Drama Review* 50/1 (2006), 107, 108.

²⁴⁸ Dyer, *White*, 45.

²⁴⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205, 200.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

performance styles’ or superfluous gimmicks.²⁵¹ Granada’s televised specials paralleled the aesthetics of Günther Kieser’s elaborate studio sets for the German broadcasts: like British stagings, Adelt notes, Kieser employed a ‘curious blend of southern and western iconography’ supporting an ‘unthreatening, nostalgic (or even anachronistic) conceptualization’ of black culture.²⁵² In 1962, Kieser’s set had featured the incongruous combination of a frontier saloon, a contemporary American car, and a plantation veranda around which African American GIs and their partners were paid to dance, their bodies appropriated as legitimising racial props.²⁵³ The years up to 1965 saw backdrops featuring railroad imagery, a shotgun shack, and various urban photomontages. Such practices pre-empted the 1966 Newport Folk Festival where Alan Lomax had obliged artists to inhabit a segregated and sparsely furnished building dubbed ‘blues house’.²⁵⁴ Lomax had also constructed a ersatz juke joint in which Skip James, Bukka White, Son House, and (as the only representative of contemporary R&B) Howlin’ Wolf were to perform—marked ‘PROTECTIVE CLUB: MEMBERS ONLY’.²⁵⁵ Mark Humphrey has stated that Lomax simply ‘stocked the bar and let nature take its course’; what Humphrey neglects is that this ‘nature’ was heavily mediated by the camera’s (white) gaze and dictated by Lomax’s choreography.²⁵⁶ Ironically, Humphrey states that the resultant recording is in the manner of *cinéma vérité*, creating a musical space ‘suspended out of time in a super-real present, a nonspecific “bluestime”’.²⁵⁷ The myth of cultural surrogacy lurks precisely in this hyperreal simulation: through it, Lomax’s powerful curatorial role was erased and all we see are black pawns in the game of white racial fantasy. The legacy of such reification can be seen at the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale. As with promoters for the 1960s tours, Stephen A. King notes that the museum’s white curators have played a central role ‘in rhetorically shaping and constructing’ exhibits, grounding blues ‘in rhetorical narratives and visual tropes of poverty and primitiveness’.²⁵⁸ The Museum thus trades off the same semiotic codes that animated Granada’s blues specials: solitary wanderlust, romanticised poverty, and nostalgic or

²⁵¹ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 87, 88.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁵³ See *The American Folk Blues Festival, 1962–1969*, (Universal, 2003).

²⁵⁴ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 49.

²⁵⁵ Alan Lomax, *Devil Got My Woman: Blues at Newport, 1966* (Vestapol, 2001).

²⁵⁶ Mark Humphrey, liner notes to *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Stephen A. King, ‘Memory, Mythmaking, and Museums: Constructive Authenticity and the Primitive Blues Subject’, *Southern Communication Journal* 71/3 (2006), 239, 241.

rustic agrarian materials. Tellingly, whereas his Chicago home has been left to ruin, Muddy Waters's southern cabin has been preserved and remembered, King notes, 'not for its exploitative qualities but...for its "purity"'.²⁵⁹



Figure 3.2: Photographs of Granada TV's *The Blues and Gospel Train* (7 May, 1964). Clockwise: Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, John Hamp, Muddy Waters, Ransom Knowling

The museum-like environment of Granada's blues specials also recalled a distinctive legacy of European colonial exposition and ethnological display. Indeed, the exhibition of exoticised Others was enormously popular and profitable during the

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

nineteenth century; those on display, Sadiya Qureshi notes, ‘were often colonized peoples who had been specially imported to perform songs, dances, and other ceremonies as demonstrations of their “singular” nature’.²⁶⁰ In the process of being choreographed against elaborate backdrops or positioned in elaborately recreated villages, displaced people were ‘transformed into professional “savages”’ for the sake of mass entertainment.²⁶¹ Curated by scholars as well as entrepreneurs, such exhibitions were wedded to debates on race, nation, and human classification indebted to Social Darwinist discourse; like the writing of history itself, they span powerful and officially sanctioned public interpretations of culture through the selection, placement, and framing of artefacts.²⁶² Similar practices continued throughout the Victorian and Edwardian era in Britain, culminating in collections of objects and mass public spectacles animated by the nascent discipline of anthropology. With particular relevance to the historical reception of black difference, Annie E. Coombes argues that ‘through the taxonomies and descriptions devised to orchestrate African material culture in museums and exhibitions nationwide...a heterogeneous public was introduced to a symbolic universe with the British Empire at its heart’.²⁶³ Practices of performative display were thus crucial to the hierarchical racialization of culture and to hegemonic processes of generating black low Others for the amusement of a white audience. Racial display, Coombes notes, concentrated on the primitive body and its supposedly inherent qualities through ‘displays of anthropometry which frequently bore some relation to aspects of eugenic theory’.²⁶⁴ As such, she proposes, the Africa of public imagination was ‘an ideological space, at once savage, threatening, exotic and productive’—a contradictory amalgamation of traits that could be employed variously across the political spectrum.²⁶⁵ Asymmetric colonial encounters and resultant spectacles thus demonstrated the normative power of a white gaze, revealing

²⁶⁰ Sadiya Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁶² See Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Gregory Claeys, ‘The “Survival of the Fittest” and the Origins of Social Darwinism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61/2 (2000): 223–40.

²⁶³ Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 214.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 215. See also Richard Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

²⁶⁵ Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*, 2.

far more about British desires and fantasies than about the Others on display. Such patterns of exoticised cultural exhibition form part of a broader and more pervasive Western discourse that, as Edward W. Said has argued, ‘makes the Orient speak’ while remaining exterior to what it claims to explicate.²⁶⁶ As a representational system of thought grounded in ideologies dominating the Eastern Other through fantasy, Said proposes, Orientalism is a ‘political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar...and the strange’.²⁶⁷

Parallels between Orientalising display and the staging of revivalist blues tours during the 1960s should by now be obvious: black artists were imported from the US as embodied paradigms of authenticity and were encouraged to perform in patronising recreations of their ‘native’ culture. In the process, professional African American entertainers were transfigured into professional, anti-modern primitives with a view to generating profit through mass consumption. We can thus understand Granada’s programmes as constituting a similar ‘ideological space’ to the one Coombes defines in relation to colonial exhibitions of black culture: blues revivalism presented a ‘political vision’ endorsing, reifying, and drawing its allure from racialized perceptions of embodied difference. In the same way that expropriated material objects and ‘professional savages’ were seen to stand metonymically for colonised societies, British audiences saw blues artists as essentialised metonyms for blackness itself—investing the exoticised bodies of blues artists with fetishised ideals of racialized alterity. Analogous to what Lott describes as blackface minstrelsy’s ‘overriding investment in the body’, European blues tours dealt primarily in representations of somatic Otherness.²⁶⁸ Such authenticity was sustained by the invented stage settings, directing white audiences to view blues artists quite literally against an imposed backdrop, mirroring the ways in which discourse had already framed and delimited their identities. Indeed, the settings of Granada’s programmes—produced through the curatorial imagination of the show’s white producers—sealed black performers in a hermetic vacuum, physically and metaphorically segregating them from onlookers. King proposes that such gestures served ‘to solidify and privilege cultural memories’—in this case, the invented traditions of white fans over

²⁶⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; London: Penguin, 2003), 20.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁶⁸ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 40.

the multifaceted diasporic memories of African Americans themselves.²⁶⁹ Roach thus argues that genealogists of performance should attend critically to the ‘disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences’.²⁷⁰ Ultimately, the stage in a blues revival context functioned as a human museum brought into being through performative interactions between artists and audience. Such interactions (per)formed an anticipated cultural surrogate in the absence of clear origins, acting as a bastion of aesthetic fantasy against the vicissitudes of history. This theatrical staging of black authenticity now occurs in contemporary blues tourism. McGinley describes how deliberately anachronistic accommodation provided at the Shack Up Inn motel in Clarksdale—consisting of shotgun shacks filled with a nostalgic collection of kitsch and castoffs forming ‘a pastiche of assorted fantasies of Southern histories’—is designed to make (predominantly white) travellers ‘feel “at home”...while reveling in feeling out of place’.²⁷¹ In the same way, the staged environments of 1960s blues tours were chiefly constructed for the benefit of white audiences demanding an excitingly unfamiliar yet safe form of African American difference.

Contemporaneous reception of the American Folk Blues Festivals and the Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan tour reveal in more detail such investment in a reified conception of black cultural legitimacy. Simon Napier of *Blues Unlimited* noted that the popularity of the 1963 Festival (from which *I Hear the Blues* was taken) confirmed that ‘the boom in blues’ popularity is no passing fancy’: the ‘tremendous popularity of so-called rhythm and blues along with the pseudo-folk market’, he concluded, ‘must have some effect on the sale of the real thing’.²⁷² In *Jazz Journal*, Derrick Stewart-Baxter praised the Festival’s portrayal of ‘a living history of the blues’, singling out Big Joe Williams as ‘the most archaic singer to have visited Britain’, singing ‘the rawest blues [he] had ever heard’—a paradigmatic embodiment of Napier’s ‘real thing’, coaxing ‘beautiful music’ from his ‘battered’ guitar.²⁷³ Indeed, Williams stood out amid the urbane and tightly rehearsed house band of *I Hear the Blues*, providing a striking juxtaposition to Matt ‘Guitar’ Murphy’s calm, modern, and measured dexterity as well as Lonnie Johnson’s polished playing and

²⁶⁹ King, ‘Memory, Mythmaking, and Museums’, 235.

²⁷⁰ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 26.

²⁷¹ McGinley, ‘Highway 61 Revisited’, 89, 90.

²⁷² Simon A. Napier, ‘Editorial’, *Blues Unlimited* 6 (1963), 1.

²⁷³ Derrick Stewart-Baxter, ‘Blues Package—1963’, *Jazz Journal* 16/12 (1963), 7.

sophisticated harmonic progressions. Introducing him in a manner reminiscent of a minstrel interlocutor, Memphis Slim presented Williams as ‘the only man in the world that plays a nine-string guitar, the only man in the world that has a nine-string guitar!’ Williams sat apart from the central band, exposed as a solitary figure on one limb of the wooden stage, drawing subtly dissonant riffs from his homemade instrument while driving a relentless pulse with his heel. He sang a sparse but impassioned version of his 1935 Bluebird release ‘Baby, Please Don’t Go’ in which he assumed the desperate, pleading persona of the song’s protagonist; gesturing dramatically with his hands, his face contorted into raw expressions of anguish.²⁷⁴ In the show’s historical narrative, Williams was clearly intended as the embodied relic of a bygone era—‘country blues’ incarnate. Paul Oliver noted that Williams’s ‘fierce voice and solid figure’ seen live performance made him ‘far more interesting than he seems on record’.²⁷⁵ Oliver, however, complained that such ‘artificial’ chronological formats were in danger of becoming a ‘crippling cliché’.²⁷⁶ Reviewing the 1963 Festival tour, he dismissed what he saw as Lonnie Johnson’s ‘latent sentimentality’ and suggested that it was a mistake for Willie Dixon to sing ‘novelty blues’; similarly, Muddy Waters drew criticism for his inability to gauge white demand, having previously played ‘electric guitar to an audience that couldn’t take one from a blues singer’ and making another ‘tactical error’ by ‘playing a bright new Spanish box’.²⁷⁷ In contrast, harmonica virtuoso Sonny Boy Williamson (II) proved to be an exemplar of

²⁷⁴ See Gérard Herzhaft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992), 437. The fragmentary lyrics from *I Hear the Blues* were as follows:

Baby please don’t you; baby please don’t you go
 Baby please don’t you go back to New Orleans; you know I love you so

Turn your lamp down low
 Turn your lamp down low and I beg you all night long; baby, please don’t go

They got me way down here

Afore I be your dog
 I be your dog I get you way down here and I make you walk the dog

Well a man done gone
 Well a man done gone; that the kind that’s born with the shackles on

Baby please don’t go
 Baby please don’t go back to New Orleans; you know I love you so

Well, call my name; well, call my name
 Got me way down here when you bored of me

²⁷⁵ Paul Oliver, ‘American Blues Festival’, *Jazz Monthly* (December, 1963), 10.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

masculine authenticity—another example of the elusive ‘real thing’. Orientalised as a ‘Grand Vizier’, Oliver drew attention to his ‘long, angular fingers, seemingly carved in wood’ and proposed that Williamson’s ‘lined, troubled face’ recalled ‘photographs of veteran slaves taken in the ’twenties, with all their bearing’.²⁷⁸

Granada’s programmes exacerbated what critic G. E. Lambert described as the ‘surrealistic and improbable’ sight of watching Chicago club musicians perform in a ‘vast concert hall’ setting.²⁷⁹ Oliver concurred, noting that European music venues were ‘about as far removed from the setting in which singers normally work as you could get’.²⁸⁰ Suggesting that the circumstances of package tours were already ‘artificial’, Oliver argued that there was ‘no possibility of reproducing the atmosphere of a Chicago club or a country juke, and any attempt to do so would be fatal to the life of the shows’.²⁸¹ Nonetheless, this was precisely what Granada had chosen to do: for *R’NB Scene*, the ‘deserted railway station’ of *The Blues and Gospel Train* faithfully ‘recreated an atmosphere of the Deep South’.²⁸² In such a context, Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s ‘powerful and modern’ guitar playing came as a ‘real shock’.²⁸³ Tharpe’s positive reception provides a telling exception to the otherwise highly patronising and essentialist view of female performers. Describing Victoria Spivey’s ‘vaudeville’ mannerisms, for example, Oliver stated ‘we should have seen more of [her]—if only for the splendid array of dresses and furs that she treated us to!’²⁸⁴ Likewise, the five male reviewers from *R’NB Scene* described Sugar Pie DeSanto’s material during the 1964 Festival as ‘rather odd’: they were, however, ‘glad she came, even if it was because [they] were sitting in the second row from the front!’²⁸⁵ Oliver’s comments in *Jazz Monthly* clarify why this might have been the case:

At the first concert she appeared wearing what might be termed a chiffon gym-slip about thigh length and scantily revealing her bony, skipping legs...A real hip city chick. Unfortunately she didn’t change her repertoire like she changed her clothes. She wore an evening gown in pink brocade—slit to the hip; skin tight slacks, boots and loose jacket ensemble in flaming

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷⁹ G. E. Lambert, ‘The American Folk, Blues and Gospel Caravan’, *Jazz Journal* 17/6 (1964), 11.

²⁸⁰ Paul Oliver, ‘Festival Blues: The American Blues Festival, 1964’, *Jazz Monthly* (December, 1964), 4.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² ‘A Blues Downpour’, *R’NB Scene* 1/2 (1964), 3.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ Oliver, ‘American Blues Festival’, 11.

²⁸⁵ John White, Neil Carter, Dave Waggett, Brian Smith, Roger Eagle, ‘The Blues Festival 1964’, *R’NB Scene* 1/4 (1964), 16.

red; a red skirt and top with her hair in a red bandeau, hitching up the former to give more rein to her gyrations.²⁸⁶

Although Oliver was ‘knocked out’, Stewart-Baxter found her act ‘vulgar and tasteless’.²⁸⁷ Gendered reception caught women in a typical double bind—as either sexualised objects (thus incidental to masculine blues paradigms) or as symptoms of commercial theatricality (thus vapid and superfluous). Male artists, in contrast, were treated as complex bastions of expressive authenticity. Performers who failed to live up to such standards, however, were also rejected as mere entertainers: in 1964, for example, Oliver condemned Howlin’ Wolf’s ‘ham acting’ and ‘galumphing gorilla-like dance’—ironically, the very attributes (free from racializing metaphor) standard in contemporaneous club performance.²⁸⁸

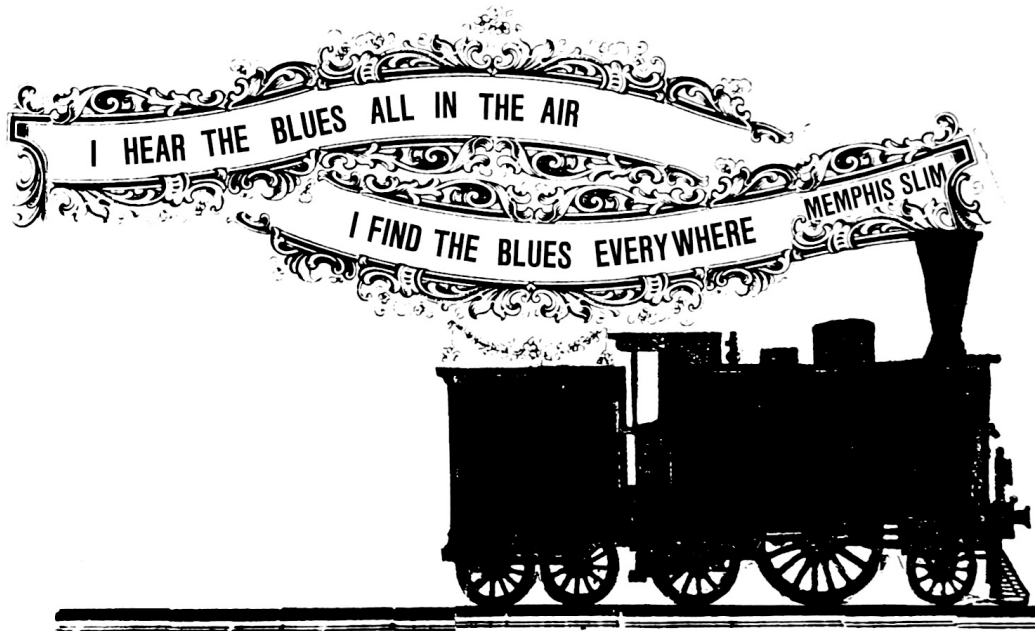


Figure 3.3: Locomotive detail from the souvenir brochure of the 1963 American Folk Blues Festival tour

The scenario of *The Blues and Gospel Train* was particularly rich in symbolism, choreographing artists’ movements and in so doing using their bodies as sites of what Roach refers to as ‘kinesthetic imagination’. Roach employs this term to describe how bodies become imbricated in social memory—the fictions of which are

²⁸⁶ Oliver, ‘Festival Blues’, 6.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; Derrick Stewart-Baxter, ‘Blues’, *Jazz Journal* 17/12 (1964), 28.

²⁸⁸ Oliver, ‘Festival Blues’, 6. See Keil, *Urban Blues*, 37.

a simulation that ‘may have material consequences of the most tangible sort’.²⁸⁹ Whether intentional or not, the railroad context of the programme drew on migratory African American narratives—punctuated, as McGinley notes, by ‘the sound of the recurrent train whistle’.²⁹⁰ The choice of a railway station as the setting also recalled Handy’s archetypal origin tableaux involving a solitary, itinerant male singer; in *The Blues and Gospel Train*, Muddy Waters took on this surrogate role. As Part II of the programme began, a camera tracked Waters as he emerged from the surrounding darkness, wandering despondently along the tracks themselves toward the station platforms carrying a leather travel bag while he sang the contemporaneous Chess release ‘You Can’t Lose What You Ain’t Never Had’.²⁹¹ The lyrics of the first three verses were as follows (Waters then began to riff freely on the content):

Sweet little girl; I lose my baby, boy ain’t that bad.
Sweet little girl; I lose my baby, boy ain’t that bad.
You can’t lose what you ain’t got; you can’t spend something you ain’t never had.

Had money in the bank; I got busted, boys ain’t that bad.
Had money in the bank; I got busted, boys ain’t that bad.
Can’t spend what you ain’t got; can’t lose what you ain’t never had.

Sweet little home; it got burnt down, boys ain’t that bad.
My own fault; people, ain’t that sad.
You can’t spend what you ain’t got; you can’t lose something you ain’t never had.

Less sharply attired than usual and employing a more subdued vocal delivery than on the record, Waters acted out the enigmatic lyrical persona by merging his own stage identity with that of a dispossessed southern ‘Negro’. The song’s protagonist laments the loss of his partner, money, and home, concluding each stanza with variants on the idea that ‘you can’t lose something you ain’t never had’—portraying the tragedies of inordinate loss while suggesting, in a darkly ironic tone, that such loss was as inconceivable as having a ‘sweet little girl’, sufficient money, and a house in the first place (and perhaps hinting at an abject independence gained from not having to worry

²⁸⁹ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 27.

²⁹⁰ McGinley, ‘Highway 61 Revisited’, 86.

²⁹¹ The song was released in the US in 1964 as the B-side to ‘The Same Thing’ (Chess 1895). The version Waters played during *The Blues and Gospel Train* is subtly different from this recording, although both include the use of bottleneck electric guitar.

about the concept of loss itself). When he finally reached the stage, Waters used a bottleneck slide on his Fender Telecaster, alluding to and yet transforming his pre-Chicago style while creating the very same ‘weird’ sounds of a knife on guitar strings that Handy had heard from the anonymous Tutwiler bard.

Ayana Smith notes that the railroad is a key theme in black consciousness as it historically enabled ‘the migratory lifestyle so frequently depicted in the blues’, transporting rural southerners north towards employment in more racially tolerant environments such as Chicago and precipitating the urban R&B genre.²⁹² The train thus manifests themes of liminality, choice, and liberation. Fascination with the railroad, she argues, ‘harkens back to its subtextual implications in slave songs; the train could refer to the Underground Railroad specifically, and, more generally, to freedom in both secular and sacred realms, as in the spiritual “Gospel Train”’.²⁹³ Smith reads the railroad as a mediating device similar to recurrent African American tropes of borders, crossroads, and doubleness that ‘represent attempts to reconcile the traditional with the modern, the African with the American, the self with the Other’.²⁹⁴ In this sense, the crossroad mythology figures in Waters’s performance: although he begins by singing on the ‘wrong’ side of the tracks (amongst the audience and disembarking crowd), when he walks toward the station for his second appearance he finds the stage platform to his left and the white audience to his right. This crossroads, however, instantiated a predetermined (not self-determining or liberatory) choice: conditioned by authenticity discourse and revivalist fantasy, the audience’s gaze forced Waters to make himself at home in the pastiche southern station—reinhabiting an exploitative past as a sharecropper in Clarksdale that he had done his best to leave through ambition, skill, and professional ingenuity. Smith notes that the railroad trope is often gendered in blues expression, with male singers portraying the train ‘in a positive light as a tool for escape’ and women depicting it as ‘an object of hatred and transferred anger against societal situations’—including breakdown of the family unit.²⁹⁵ Indeed, Smith argues, the train is not a straightforward metaphor for liberation as it can also bring division: tracks correspond to the crossroad metaphor in that they ‘segregate one section of town from another...thus, the vehicle that provides social and financial mobility also creates

²⁹² Smith, ‘Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster’, 181.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 188–9.

social marginalisation and separation'.²⁹⁶ Smith concludes that while locomotives mediate 'between distant locales, the railroad track mediates between contiguous neighbourhoods and divergent social classes'.²⁹⁷ As symbols, railroad tracks thus have the capacity to construct Otherness. Even if Granada's division of (white) audience and (black) performers on opposite sides of the track was simply pragmatic, it unwittingly revealed a far deeper cultural seam figuratively steeped in a history of colonialism, Atlantic slavery, and Jim Crow segregation: organic expressivity, racialized authenticity, and the exotically primitive divided from the mute spectator, the affluent consumer, and the nexus of institutionalised power.

Critic John Broven later recalled that Waters's performance seemed 'rather perfunctory' as it was 'presented in a plodding folk blues format' to deliberately meet European expectations.²⁹⁸ Waters was no stranger to performatively engaging with audience desire: like Broonzy, he had consented to acting out vacillating personae as an aspiring entertainer. Following a second wave of black migration, he had moved from Clarksdale to Chicago in 1943 and begun to refine and amplify his acoustic sound in response to new urban environments.²⁹⁹ His first hit, however, had returned to the nostalgic Delta style but employed electric guitar, creating what Filene describes as 'a new hybrid of downhome and urban elements' for a burgeoning market of southern migrants.³⁰⁰ Joining forces with songwriter Willie Dixon in the mid-1950s, Filene notes, Waters's output subsequently 'tapped into (and helped shape) African Americans' emerging collective memory of southern culture' through stylised references to a past involving violence and voodoo magic.³⁰¹ Lawson notes that blues singers 'created something of a public message board' through their music, allowing the black working class to comprehend and communicate the experiences of migration and cultural dislocation.³⁰² However, as demand shifted toward a white market, Filene proposes, Waters was 'willing to go along with any repackaging that would help him reach new audiences'—even if this meant altering his repertoire and

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁹⁸ Quoted in Gayle F. Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 188.

²⁹⁹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 87.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁰² Lawson, *Jim Crow's Counterculture*, 105.

cultivating a new image.³⁰³ Indeed, Waters had initially toured Britain in 1958 and deliberately altered his act on returning in 1963, as he told *Melody Maker*:

I was surprised this time...If you remember, I got a little criticism last time for playing electric guitar. Many people asked to hear me on straight guitar, and this time I brought one with me. I only got it a little while ago—it's Willie Dixon's really—and I been practicing hard, been using electric so long, I'm just getting used to it again. Now, when I come back, I find everyone is using electric, and playing as loud as they can get it. In the clubs at home, I do two or three numbers without guitar, and then I sing a lot with guitar. I don't use acoustic in the clubs—they wouldn't hear me—but I'll use it on the college tour.³⁰⁴

Waters was conscious of having to negotiate the externally imposed shifts of value in revivalist perception in order to become popular with a British audience—anticipating the sanctioned behaviour for a black artist caught up in the fissured discourse of Delta purism versus contemporaneous R&B. Waters clearly felt uncomfortable returning to an acoustic instrument he had long abandoned. Nevertheless, he was willing to play the role of blues chameleon: the persona he inhabited at home in rowdy Chicago clubs for a largely black audience was intentionally different from the persona he adopted for a largely white college audience listening in a far more sedate and folkloristic manner. Waters thus became a key site of kinesthetic imagination for white fans—acting as the mutable embodiment of authentic blackness.

Adelt notes that such 'museumification' of blues by white revivalists was 'challenged repeatedly by the objects of their desires'.³⁰⁵ Radano, however, makes the crucial point that despite being in possession of a 'racialized power' deriving from their status of exception, black musicians have only been able to 'enact creative resistance through the same mechanisms that oppressed them'.³⁰⁶ Before concluding this section with a reading of Granada's 1960s blues specials through Barthes's theory of mythology, I want to address the issue of how African American artists were able to 'talk back' within the framework of racialized fantasy—bearing in mind Walter Johnson's astute observation that the term 'agency' itself has tended to smuggle 'a

³⁰³ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 119. See also Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 30 and Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 79–82 for details of Waters's self-reinvention and British reception, respectively. At the time, Waters was being sold by Chess Records as a 'folk' artist through albums such as *Muddy Waters: Folk Singer* (1964); prior to that, he had been cast in the Broonzy mould, releasing an LP of covers entitled *Muddy Waters Sings "Big Bill"* (1960).

³⁰⁴ 'London—It's the New Chicago!', *Melody Maker*, 2 November 1963, 6.

³⁰⁵ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 89.

³⁰⁶ Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, 229, 272.

notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice, right into the middle of a conversation about slavery against which that supposedly natural (at least for white men) condition was originally defined'.³⁰⁷ Although we are not dealing with antebellum slavery, the disappearing contingency of a liberal notion of agency should not be forgotten within the legacy of racial discourse in the US. Moreover, Johnson's point chimes with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential argument that poststructuralist decentering of the subject has often unwittingly brought about 'the clandestine restoration of subjective essentialism', manifesting an injustice to the lived complexity of subalterns: 'the intellectual', she proposes, has been 'complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow'.³⁰⁸ In Spivak's reading, the colonial subaltern *cannot speak* as s/he is trapped within representational scaffolding generated by the malevolent epistemology of European imperialism. Bearing in mind the subtle but significant contextual differences from such encounters, I would like to suggest that African American blues artists during the 1960s *were* able to 'speak' through performance—but only in oblique ways nonetheless disruptive to white revivalist ideology by signifyin(g) on its own language. Using Spivak's terms, therefore, we might reconfigure to question to ask 'can the subaltern *sing*?'

Willie Dixon's straight-faced performance of the comic song 'Nervous' from *I Hear the Blues* provides a prime example of disruptive 'talking back': playing the role of an uneasy, stuttering lover, Dixon highlighted the fallacy of such characterisation through his palpably self-assured performance, knowing smirks, and the strident melodic interjections issuing from his upright bass.³⁰⁹ In so doing, Dixon bared the

³⁰⁷ Walter Johnson, 'On Agency', *Journal of Social History* 37/1 (2003), 115.

³⁰⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 279, 280.

³⁰⁹ The song was released in 1960 as a single on Prestige Bluesville (45-803) and also featured on the 1960 album *Willie's Blues*. The lyrics from *I Hear the Blues* were as follows:

When my baby kiss me and squeeze me real tight
 She look me in the eyes and say everything's alright
 I get nervous; man, do I get nervous.
 I'm a nervous man and I tremble all in my bones.

Now every time she squeeze me it make me feel so good
 I wanna tell everybody in the neighbourhood
 But I get nervous; man, do I get nervous.
 I'm a nervous man and I tremble all in my bones.

Now every time she kiss me it make the lights go out
 My heart beat like thunder and my soul began to shout

device of his persona, providing a satirical perspective on the performative nature of blues authenticity. In Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s scheme, we might say that Dixon was Signifyin(g) on blues authenticity. Focusing on vernacular language, Gates argues that 'Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced' in African American discourse—a motivated act of formal revision that creates parodic play via signal difference.³¹⁰ Gates suggests that Signifyin(g) is akin to 'stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors', where signs appear redoubled or distorted, thus forming 'a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity'.³¹¹ As 'the slave's trope', Gates argues, Signifyin(g) 'functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically'.³¹² From the standpoint of Yoruba mythology, Dixon inhabited the double-faced figure of Esu-Elegbara—as Floyd notes, the 'guardian and inspirer of the art of interpretation'—by undermining white investment in literal readings of unmediated black expression.³¹³ Likewise, Dixon was using a comic genre to Signify on the genre of blues itself. Similar performative games were played by Sonny Boy Williamson, entering the stage of *I Hear the Blues* dressed in a dark suit and derby hat, carrying a mysterious leather briefcase and crook-handle umbrella. Through his sartorial style and considered mannerisms (removing the hat, placing the umbrella over his arm), Williamson Signified on the persona of a distinguished white gentleman while inhabiting the ideal of a wily, itinerant black bluesman—calling ironically on a history of racial 'passing' by repeating white style with signal difference. As Gates argues, Signification luxuriates in such 'free play of...associative rhetorical and semantic relations'.³¹⁴ Oliver had commented on Williamson's 'Harlequin suit' and witty use of 'jive patter'; *Jazz Journal* described him as 'sinister looking'; and *Melody Maker* painted him as 'satanic'.³¹⁵ Williamson was thus a classic trickster figure in a diasporic tradition originating with Esu. He was infamous, for example, for a quip about white backing groups: 'those cats in England want to play the blues so bad. And that's how they play 'em—so bad'.³¹⁶ He was,

But I get nervous; man, do I get nervous.
I'm a nervous man and I tremble all in my bones.

³¹⁰ Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, xxv.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44, 45.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 52, 124.

³¹³ Floyd, Jr., 'Ring Shout!', 53.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

³¹⁵ Oliver, 'Festival Blues', 4; Stewart-Baxter, 'Blues Package—1963', 7; 'Thrilling Blues Package—at Peak-Viewing Time', *Melody Maker* 28 December 1963, 3.

³¹⁶ Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 151.

however, known to generate this very outcome through conscious misdirection: Tom McGuniness recalled that he ‘would turn around to the band, and say “this one’s in E” and he would deliberately start playing in C, or anything but E. Then he’d stop the band and say to the audience, “you see, these white boys can’t play the blues!”’³¹⁷ Indeed, Gates notes that as symbols, Esu figures ‘are mediators, and their mediations are tricks’.³¹⁸ Ayana Smith concludes that such gestures of Signifyin(g) are part of ‘a whole process of veiling and masking that ultimately allows the singer greater freedom in speaking out against marginalisation and pushing the limits of social boundaries’.³¹⁹ Floyd proposes that the key to effective criticism of African American music is through attention to troping and Signification, ‘for such practices *are* criticism’.³²⁰ Through these practices, subaltern blues artists were able to ‘speak’ via performances that Signified on their own marginalisation.

Indeed, signifyin(g), was necessarily reliant on marginality within what Stuart Hall would term a ‘racialized regime of representation’.³²¹ Hall proposes that representation is one of the central practices by which we produce a system of shared symbolic meanings that ‘organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects’.³²² Tied up in regulative systems of knowledge production, representation thus ‘set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed’.³²³ Cultural materials, Hall argues, ‘are the vehicles or media which *carry meaning* because they operate as *symbols*’; that is, they function as contingent signs within a semiotic system.³²⁴ Following Hall’s scheme, I have so far mapped out the discursive terrain of early 1960s blues revivalism primarily ‘concerned with the *effects and consequences* of representation’; as a move toward conclusion, I now turn toward a semiotic approach ‘concerned with the *how* of representation’.³²⁵ The underpinnings for Hall’s ideas concerning the mechanics of racial representation ultimately derive from Barthes’ approach to semiosis. In *Mythologies*, Barthes had laid out a critique of mass culture based on the use of

³¹⁷ Cited in *Ibid.*, 152.

³¹⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 6.

³¹⁹ Smith, ‘Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster’, 190.

³²⁰ Floyd, Jr., ‘Ring Shout!’, 59.

³²¹ Stuart Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the “Other”’ in: Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, & Sean Nixon (eds.), *Representation*, 2nd edn. (Milton Keynes: Sage, 2013), 267.

³²² Stuart Hall, ‘Introduction’ in: Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 3.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

symbolic language, motivated by ‘a feeling of impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history’.³²⁶ Barthes employed the notion of myth to explain ‘examples of the falsely obvious’ and thus ‘track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which...is hidden there’.³²⁷ By treating representations as sign-systems he hoped to ‘go further than the pious show of unmasking them’ and account in detail for the mystifications that routinely confuse narrative with nature.³²⁸

In the essay ‘Myth Today’, Barthes specifies that myth is a ‘system of communication...conveyed by discourse’, consisting not only of written signification but also modes of representation in the form of photography, cinema, and advertising: pictures, he argues, ‘become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful’.³²⁹ Meaning in myth is constructed through what Barthes illustrates as a second-order semiological system where a total sign itself takes the place of a signifier in the conventional relation of [signifier + signified] = sign.³³⁰ Mythology is thus a useful way to elaborate on Derrida’s assertion that ‘no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present’.³³¹ In a kind of ideological hijack, myth creates a metalanguage out of prior signifying materials: ‘that which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system’, Barthes writes, ‘becomes a mere signifier in the second’.³³² Myth thus divests an initial sign of meaning in order to use its form at another level of semiosis where new concepts can be siphoned into its empty shell. For Barthes, this mode of signification is parasitical: in appearing to be emptied of content the initial sign’s complex and contingent history evaporates. However, he continues, ‘the meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness’.³³³ In other

³²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957; London: Vintage, 2009), xix. See also Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (1979; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

³²⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, xix.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

³²⁹ Barthes, ‘Myth Today’ in *Mythologies*, 131–3.

³³⁰ For an elaboration of his view of this relational scheme, see Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (1964; New York: Hill and Wang, 1973). See also Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*.

³³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (1972; London: Continuum, 2004), 23–4. Indeed, signs are innately relational and caught up in a play of *différance*—in Derrida’s words, a differential play in the form of ‘the (active *and* passive) movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving’ (*Ibid.*, 7). See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997).

³³² Barthes, ‘Myth Today’, 137.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 141.

words, its emptiness is an illusion: mythological signification in fact relies on a form of deceit that draws on histories covertly suffused with symbolic meaning. Through this process, ‘a whole new history...is implanted in the myth’—yet one dependent on a fundamental distortion (although not a total erasure) of the initial sign: ‘the concept, literally, deforms, but does not abolish the meaning...it alienates it’, forming an alibi.³³⁴ At the heart of myth is thus a process of appropriation.

As a ‘pure ideological system’, Barthes argues, myth ‘makes itself look neutral and innocent’ by employing ‘poor, incomplete images’ divested of depth and nuance.³³⁵ In this sense, he asserts, myth ‘aims at causing an immediate impression...its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it’.³³⁶ Even if we are able to expose its flaws, mythological representation tends to overwhelm rationality and generate deep and lasting emotional responses. For Barthes, myth’s primary ideological motion—the one most pertinent to a critical deconstruction of racializing discourse—is its ability to *transform history into nature*. Indeed, racial essentialism results from a mythological process of representation being read incorrectly as a factual or inductive system rather than as a semiotic process. Barthes argues that ‘myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things’: within its scheme, ‘things lose the memory that they once were made’ as the result of a conjuring trick that has ‘turned reality inside out’, ‘emptied it of history’ and ‘filled it with nature’.³³⁷ The politics of myth thus involve a reactionary attempt at a *depoliticisation* of culture. As Barthes argues, myth gives images and ideas ‘a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact...it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences’.³³⁸ Barthes argues that myth is not troubled by disparity or contradictions ‘so long as it establishes a euphoric security’: in other words, it manifests the ‘disease of thinking in essences’.³³⁹ Barthes reads (dominant) bourgeois culture as mythology in a similar way to how Dyer reads (dominant) whiteness: ‘as an ideological fact, it completely disappears’ even as it provides our normative epistemological framework.³⁴⁰ The deconstruction of myth thus carries a political and ethical duty,

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 142, 146.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 152, 149.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 79, 86.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

Barthes concludes, to question so-called human nature ‘in order to discover History there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical’.³⁴¹

The application of mythological analysis to Granada’s blues specials reveals the mechanics of racial essentialism within what I would like to term a ‘theatre of representation’. African American blues artists were imported to Britain like precious museum relics and exhibited in environments created through white investment in spuriously racialized and highly gendered origin narratives concerning the rural southern US. The rustic set of *I Hear the Blues*—consisting of a raised stage area fashioned from rough wood edged with diagonal planks resembling a fenced enclosure—called on tropes of poverty and primitivism through its appropriation of agricultural signifiers. As myth, the show used this form of symbolism as a way to signify the authenticity of black artists. This authenticity was drawn from their projected imbrication with an agrarian culture supposedly untouched by modernity, industrialisation, and mass-mediated entertainment. Furthermore, the wooden fence signified an unbridgeable distance between artists and audience (and perhaps even an uncomfortable parallel with livestock enclosures), portraying the blues as a reified and atavistic cultural artefact to be mutely gazed upon. Such signification, however, was not coherent: the slick outfits, amplified instruments, and general demeanour of Chicago club and studio regulars clashed with Granada’s folkloristic setting—yet the rhetorical power of the setting itself was able to overwhelm such blatant paradoxes. In so doing, the rough-hewn context made some acts (including Willie Dixon’s comic persona in ‘Nervous’, Matt Murphy’s assured urban licks, and Victoria Spivey’s vaudevillian facial expressions) seem hopelessly out of place while framing others, whose rugged presence seemed to match the backdrop (such as Big Joe Williams, described enthusiastically in *Melody Maker* as ‘a real country-style artist’), as authentic.³⁴² Although Memphis Slim announced that ‘tonight we bring to you the story of the blues’, the semiotics of the event—emphasised through its use of anachronistic ‘old time’ typeface—indicated that the story was weighted toward a nostalgic conception of the genre designed to suit the tastes of white revivalists.

In a similar way, *The Blues and Gospel Train* created a form of exoticised human display for white audiences—generating, through its representational matrix, the very cultural differences it claimed innocently to portray. The anachronistic use of

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁴² Max Jones, ‘Now it’s the South’s Turn at the Blues’, *Melody Maker* 12 October 1963, 9.

frontier signifiers (including a steam locomotive with cowcatcher, ‘wanted dead or alive’ posters, and hardware alluding to a western saloon) ahistorically combined with southern paraphernalia (including sacks of cotton, a surrey wagon, and a rocking chair) constructed a scenario rich in rural myth. This setting paid no attention to the presence of *de jure* segregation, constructing a factitious southern past free from violent and pervasive racial division; such a portrayal represented an erasure of key facets of African American historical experience, providing a more palatable cultural surrogate for British audiences. Racializing segregation was, nonetheless, present on a far deeper level within its performative scenario: the railway tracks provided a means to separate those who seemed ‘naturally’ at home amid its mythological detritus and those who were present simply to watch. This fantasy station scenario made some artists look comically out of place amid the platform’s semiosis (notably Sister Rosetta Tharpe, in stiletto heels and a sumptuous white fur coat with Gibson SG Custom) while supporting the rugged, down-home personas of others—including Cousin Joe Pleasants (wearing a flat cap and gesticulating at the crate of chickens atop his weather-beaten piano), Muddy Waters (dressed far more casually than the previous year, playing the role of a weary wayfaring bard), and Brownie McGhee (sat near a tethered goat). As well-established professional entertainers these musicians were nonetheless consummate actors, performatively adopting personae that demonstrated ‘natural’ access to the codes of blues expression demanded by revival aesthetics. The unfortunate effect of such personification, however, was to constrict the creative compass of black artists and merely reproduce the stereotypes projected by British fans. Through such performative surrogates, contemporary black politics were disregarded along with the heterogeneous, hybrid, and interracial cultural history of the south. In vainly attempting to be a historically informed spectacle, *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train* turned their form of invented history into racial nature: African American identity thus became inscribed with a valorised myth of folk primitivism, unable to ever become fully integrated into a white, establishment domain (read: modernity itself). As Radano and Bohlman argue, discipline and desire wedded to hegemonic whiteness was fundamental to ‘the rhetoric of masculinized conquest that narrated modernity’s colonial mapping’.³⁴³

³⁴³ Radano & Bohlman, ‘Introduction’ in: *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Radano & Bohlman, 18.

4 | Conclusion: 'Black in Relation'

Barthes grounds his analysis of myth in a contemporaneous cover photograph from the magazine *Paris Match* in which 'a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour'.³⁴⁴ A kind of tautologous reciprocity exists in the relation between imperialism and the boy soldier: 'French imperialism condemns the saluting Negro to be nothing more than an instrumental signifier...but at the same moment the Negro's salute thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to *establish* French imperialism'.³⁴⁵ Myth thus arises at the point when European colonialism achieves such a seemingly natural state. In this chapter, I have shown—through close readings of performances from the *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train*—a similar process of semiological hijack, whereby African American musicians are condemned to act as instrumental signifiers of racialized blues authenticity while simultaneously serving to establish the very conception of racial difference upon which blues discourse rests. Like the *Paris Match* cover, Granada's blues specials from the peak of the British revivalist boom dealt in the representation of racialized bodies—investing African American artists with somatic Otherness and situating them in a reified cultural binary mirroring the black-and-white visual topography of the medium itself. This racializing regime of visual representation used black performers as hermetic props to signify a paradigm of white cultural validity, supported by a discursive formation that had created the very idea of a fragile country blues subgenre untarnished by urban commerce or interracial contact. Big Joe Williams therefore gained symbolic capital due to his ability to create the illusion of deep, artless immersion in his adopted persona. As Schwartz has noted, purists viewed conscious artistry as the 'antithesis of sincere emotional expression'.³⁴⁶ In spite of efforts to inhabit this same arena, Muddy Waters fell short due to his own persistent self-fashioning—a position that, for purist blues ideologues, revealed the intolerable truth about such performative fictions.

In mythological terms, this revivalist blues matrix—saturated with gendered tropes of agrarian poverty, wanderlust, atavism, and nostalgia—generated an

³⁴⁴ Barthes, 'Myth Today', 139.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁴⁶ Schwartz, *How Britain got the Blues*, 165.

essentialised identity for black performers: through such ideology, *blues itself became the signifier of African American racial difference*. Historical complexity was rejected or glossed over for the sake of facile clarity and immediate impressions drawn through stereotypical visual and discursive imagery; as such, blues mythology functioned to obscure the convoluted making of American vernacular music. Such mechanisms of representation established the meaning and power of blues as a cultural symbol for white consumption. Schwartz argues that the musicians considered to be authentic representative of blues tradition were those confirming ‘ideas about what constituted blackness’.³⁴⁷ In consequence, she proposes, ‘artists who most closely matched preconceived notions about the music and its performers found the most favour in Britain’.³⁴⁸ Reflecting on the role of white revivalists of the 1960s, Jeff Todd Titon admitted that ‘mixtures of invention and interpretation’ motivated so-called ‘rediscoveries’ of esoteric artists: instead of locating a coherent blues genre, he confesses, ‘we constituted it’.³⁴⁹ In other words, Titon writes, ‘by our interpretive acts we constructed the very thing we thought we had found’.³⁵⁰ When confronted with such constructions, Titon notes, African American artists consciously ‘fashioned stories to satisfy their new audience’—learning how their performances would be received and adjusting their personae accordingly.³⁵¹ To black musicians, he concludes, the revival was simply ‘a way to earn money, prolong their careers, achieve prestige from recognition, and remain artists’.³⁵² Most pointedly, the very idea of ‘country blues’ itself was never part of African American terminology.³⁵³ Echoing Peter Narváez’s conviction that blues is best seen as the result of ‘discursive accidents’, Hamilton proposes that ‘blues revivalists did not revive the blues so much as invent it, disentangling it from jazz to pose it as a discrete musical form, a hermetically sealed harmonic landscape cut off from the taint of modernity’.³⁵⁴ Historians have tended to absorb this perspective and remain eager to paint the Delta

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴⁹ Jeff Todd Titon, ‘Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Revival’, in: *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil V. Rosenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 222.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 223. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969; London: Routledge, 2002).

³⁵¹ Titon, ‘Reconstructing the Blues’, 234.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁵³ See Hamilton, ‘Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition’, 150.

³⁵⁴ Peter Narváez, ‘*Living Blues Journal: The Paradoxical Aesthetics of the Blues Revival*’, in *Transforming Tradition*, ed. Rosenberg, 142; Hamilton, ‘Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition’, 156.

blues ‘as the direct voice of black folk experience’.³⁵⁵

One key question haunts all the above conclusions and yet is rarely addressed in the extant blues literature: *why* did white fans of the 1960s invest so heavily in mythologisations of African American blackness? What motivated such racialization of blues by young (usually male) fans and sustained the vociferous polemics of authenticity? Promoter, tour manager, and record producer Joe Boyd provides a telling clue, reflecting on his own adolescence:

There is a *naïf* sketch from the 1820s of apprentices at a New York market watching black kids ‘dancing for eels’ on overturned small tables. The white boys lean forward, fascinated by the exuberance of the dancers. Warwick and I and a few of our friends were like the boys in that old drawing, *leaning towards a culture we sensed held clues for us about escaping the confines of our middle-class upbringing and becoming male sexual beings*...When Warwick and I began listening to old blues and jazz records, the fraternal fighting that had marked our childhood ceased...The artists appeared in our imaginations like disembodied spirits in front of the hi-fi speakers as we listened.³⁵⁶

By late in 1960, the obscure artists were no longer disembodied spirits for Boyd: having immersed himself in Charters’s *The Country Blues*, he had become involved in local music promotion, securing a lucrative Princeton booking for Lonnie Johnson (then working in the kitchens of a Philadelphia hotel).³⁵⁷ Clearly, the nostalgic attraction that Boyd’s milieu had toward esoteric black music went beyond the mere sounds of records and live performance: blues and its musicians represented an exotic escape from what was seen as the bland conformity of postwar middle-class life. In short, hypervisible blackness offered a seemingly authentic antidote to the invisible normativity of whiteness. Like earlier folksong collectors such as Cecil Sharp and John Lomax, Boyd and his friends had gone in search of pure native low Otherness as a restorative force latent within the jaws of capitalist modernity itself. Moreover, such perceptions of black difference were intimately bound up in rituals of maturation tied to a growing consciousness of inhabiting an alternative, explicitly male heterosexual ontology. Adelt notes that revivalist blues would thus become ‘a distinctive category

³⁵⁵ Hamilton, ‘The Blues, the Folk, and African-American History’, 20.

³⁵⁶ Boyd, *White Bicycles*, 13 [emphasis added]. The 1820 drawing—entitled ‘Dancing for Eels, Catherine Market’—is discussed in detail in Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain*.

³⁵⁷ See Boyd, *White Bicycles*, 14–17.

of identification for white countercultural youth'.³⁵⁸ Like the white figures of Boyd's nineteenth-century sketch, however, blues counterculturalists were always external observers of African American expressive practice, leaning toward the hallowed margins from the bastion of racialized dominance.

Echoing Boyd, Titon proposes that white fans consumed blues as 'a symbol of stylized revolt against conservative politics and middle-class propriety', fuelled by a 'dialectical energy involving acquisitiveness and fantasy'.³⁵⁹ In such a context, blackness became a signifier linked to a fetishised inversion of established (white) cultural norms. Indeed, Keil suggested that 'the demand for Negro-like music on the part of whites, usually of the younger generation' seemed to 'indicate a perceived or felt deficiency of some sort in the American mainstream that the recurrent adoption of Negro or Negro-derived musical expression helps to remedy'.³⁶⁰ Precipitated in the wake of rock'n'roll mass consumption, Keil notes, blues revivalism pursued by 'white intellectuals, college students, liberals, cognoscenti, and later the beatnik-folknik crowd' revealed itself as a quest 'for "truth", "vitality", and "authentic ethnicity"'.³⁶¹ In particular, black masculinity seemed (to countercultural revivalists) to be unbounded by stultifying socio-political convention: as Titon notes, racializing ideology indebted to prior folksong discourse 'projected a kind of primitivism on the blues singer and located him in a culture of natural license'.³⁶² Keil contributed to this mythology by claiming that 'lower-class Negro culture includes a concept of manhood that differs in kind from the white middle-class definitions': black men of low social status—imagined by fans as sites of the purest blues expression in a discursive tradition traceable from John Lomax's conception of balladry and his valorisation of Huddie Ledbetter—held 'anomalous' positions that did not appear to fit 'a conventional American or Western kinship system'.³⁶³ For white youth looking for non-conformist models, such essentialised ideals of black masculinity (embodied

³⁵⁸ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*. On the US counterculture, see Peter Braunstein & Michael W. Doyle (eds.), *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (New York: Routledge, 2002). See also Isserman & Kazin, *America Divided*.

³⁵⁹ Titon, 'Reconstructing the Blues', 223, 226.

³⁶⁰ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 49.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 100–01. On such issues, see *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

³⁶² Titon, 'Reconstructing the Blues', 225.

³⁶³ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 26, 9.

by blues artists) became increasingly appealing in the ‘affluent society’.³⁶⁴ Indeed, white investment in black racial difference itself became a highly prized commodity that allowed vicarious access to alternative ways of being.

The most conspicuous instantiation of this particular vision of black masculine alterity can be found in Norman Mailer’s 1957 manifesto ‘The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster’. Mailer began his essay by framing the hipster as an ‘American existentialist’ alienated within a culture haunted by the ‘psychic havoc’ of the Holocaust and an omnipresent threat of global nuclear annihilation.³⁶⁵ The most appropriate response to this era of ‘conformity and depression’, Mailer argued, was ‘to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self’; in short, ‘to encourage the psychopath in oneself’ and to cultivate new modes of perception by living freely in a perennial present.³⁶⁶ Mailer thus offered what Phil Ford describes as a ‘binary orientation’ in cultural consciousness: ‘one is Hip or one is Square...one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society’.³⁶⁷ Merging with white bohemianism and juvenile delinquency in downtown New York City, the key to hip, Mailer asserted, was a jazz-inflected black masculinity: ‘if one is to be a man, almost any kind of unconventional action often takes disproportionate courage. So it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro’.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, hip ontology involved a powerful ‘disbelief in the socially monolithic ideas of the single mate, the solid family and the respectable love life’.³⁶⁹ Mailer continued:

In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro has stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his

³⁶⁴ See, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958) and the arguments made in chapter 2 in relation to the BBC Radio Ballads.

³⁶⁵ Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster’, in *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 338–39. Two revealing responses to Mailer’s essay (originally published in *Dissent*) are reproduced in *Advertisements for Myself* under the title ‘Reflections on Hip’. Jean Malaquais, for example, concluded that ‘Hip is, as far as I am concerned, a gorgeous flower of Mailer’s romantic idealism’ (362). See also Steve Shoemaker, ‘Normal Mailer’s “White Negro”: Historical Myth or Mythical History?’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 37/3 (1991): 343–60 and Margot A. Henrikson, *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

³⁶⁶ Mailer, ‘The White Negro’, 338–39.

³⁶⁷ Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Mailer, ‘The White Negro’, 339.

³⁶⁸ Mailer, ‘The White Negro’, 339–40.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 340.

existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence.³⁷⁰

The consequence of inhabiting this racialized subject position as a white man created, in Mailer's view, a new breed of urban wanderer, 'who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts'; the 'white Negro' was born because 'the hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro'.³⁷¹ Mailer's musical hipster thus amounted to a knowingly racist caricature of male blackness as a deliberate antidote to what he portrayed as a passive, staid whiteness: African American men were granted natural license as cultural primitives blindly seeking the authentic (non-commercial, anti-intellectual) thrill of orgasm.

In Mailer's hypothesis, hip culture embodied an elite of psychopathic rebels-without-causes and sexual outlaws. Shrouded in nihilism and 'self-protective irony', the liminal hipster represented the potentially violent 'divorce of man from his values, the liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society'.³⁷² In such a scheme, African Americans possessed a racialized and romanticised moral 'superiority' as pure id:

if an alien but nonetheless passionate instinct about the meaning of life has come so unexpectedly from a virtually illiterate people, come out of the most intense conditions of exploitation, cruelty, violence, frustration, and lust, and yet has succeeded as an instinct in keeping this tortured people alive, then it is perhaps possible that the Negro holds more of the tail of the expanding elephant of truth than the radical, and if this is so, the radical humanist could do worse than to brood upon the phenomenon.³⁷³

This hedonistic vision of black alterity—signified by the male body's presence in a non-conformist heterosexual matrix—as an existential liberation far more profound than political radicalism itself coincided precisely with the blues revival in the US and

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 351, 354.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 356–57. In a reply to Malaquais, Mailer elaborated on this point: 'it may well be that the rise of the hipster represents the first wind of a second revolution in this century, moving not forward toward action and more rational equitable distribution, but backward toward being and the secrets of human energy, not forward to the collectivity which was totalitarian in the proof but backward to the nihilism of creative adventurers...its desire would be to turn materialism on its head, have consciousness subjugated to instinct' ('Reflections on Hip', 363).

its transatlantic reverberations during the early 1960s. Mailer's highly gendered theory of hip begins to make sense of why African American blues artists attracted such a keen following among male, countercultural, middle-class white youth: fans could use the bodies of blues artists as cyphers on which to project fantasies of rebellion, emancipated sexual potency, and cultivated difference from the square. As Ford suggests, 'the principal idea from which hipness is constituted is an image of the individual in opposition to society'—a resistance achieved through artistic sensibility rather than political intervention.³⁷⁴ This desire to cultivate an aggressive but aestheticised contemporary hipness might also explain the factional struggles within blues discourse and reception between nostalgic 'country' purists and modern urban 'Chicago style' R&B fans. In consigning African Americans to such realms of transgression, Ingrid Monson argues, whites fell 'into the trap of viewing blackness as absence...of morality or of bourgeois pretensions', thus buying into legacies of primitivism.³⁷⁵ In consequence, deceptive stereotypes came to demarcate an ostensibly 'real' African American essence and create a powerful relation between blackness and subcultural capital. As hooks has argued, in white culture 'rebel black masculinity has been idolized and punished, romanticized yet vilified'—thus caught in endless double binds.³⁷⁶ Ultimately, as Ned Polsky argued at the time, 'the white Negro accepts the real Negro not as a human being in his totality...[and] in so doing he creates an inverted form of keeping the nigger in his place'.³⁷⁷

Ford argues that hip perceptions of square hegemony developed 'as a way of picturing the mass man and mass culture', drawing a distinctive youth consciousness against bureaucratic conformism and docile mass consumption.³⁷⁸ Likewise, British investment in US blues resulted from what Dave Allen refers to as a 'search for authenticity and the rejection of artifice' in mainstream popular culture.³⁷⁹ Allen directs attention to a facet of British blues reception intimately related to broader postwar visions of hip sensibility yet little remarked upon in the academic literature:

³⁷⁴ Phil Ford, 'Somewhere / Nowhere: Hipness as an Aesthetic', *The Musical Quarterly* 86/1 (2002), 50. See also Phil Ford, 'Hip Sensibility in an Age of Mass Counterculture', *Jazz Perspectives* 2/2 (2008): 121–63.

³⁷⁵ Ingrid Monson, 'The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48/3 (1995), 398.

³⁷⁶ hooks, *Black Looks*, 96.

³⁷⁷ 'Reflections on Hip', 369.

³⁷⁸ Ford, 'Hip Sensibility in an Age of Mass Counterculture', 144.

³⁷⁹ Dave Allen, 'Feelin' Bad this Morning: Why the *British Blues*?', *Popular Music* 26/1 (2007), 146.

Mod culture. As one young audience member at the *Blues and Gospel Train* later recalled, ‘my mates were all Mods and the blues were the key to the new scene that was springing up around us’.³⁸⁰ Mod culture emerged just after the Teddy Boy—perhaps the clearest incarnation in Britain of Mailer’s hipster hypothesis. A xenophobic working-class youth subculture combining rock’n’roll music with greased hair and sartorial exotica calling on Edwardian dandyism, the Teds manifested what Dick Hebdige termed ‘an illicit delinquent identity’.³⁸¹ Serving as a focal point of media outrage and public anxiety over the new phenomenon of the teenager, Teddy Boys were involved in violent assaults on West Indian immigrants during the 1958 race riots. Mods, in contrast, responded positively to immigrants: Hebdige notes that they displayed ‘an emotional affinity with black people’, transposed into style and taste in music.³⁸² Mod style revolved around an obsessive, contemporary smartness and the boutiques of London’s Carnaby Street—involving a cultural bricolage of slim fitting suits, narrow ties, parka coats, neat hair, amphetamines, and scooters.³⁸³ Fights between Mods and Rockers (sporting longer hair, leather, and preferring motorbikes to Vespas) in coastal towns such as Brighton came to national attention in summer 1964. Such unprecedented clashes sparked debate in parliament and the press over juvenile delinquency largely due, as Richard S. Grayson notes, to the fact that participants were from the relatively affluent ‘employed working or lower-middle classes’.³⁸⁴ Newly independent youths with augmented disposable incomes were seen as the root cause of the problem: the ‘affluent society’, Grayson proposes, was believed to have ‘fractured traditional family and community controls on behaviour’.³⁸⁵ A racialized vision of blackness resonating with Mailer’s theorisation of hip provided the impetus for such cultivations of difference through acts of stylised transgression. Indeed, Hebdige argues that in postwar subcultures ‘the Negro’ appeared to be ‘untouched by the dreary conventions which tyrannized more fortunate members of society’—escaping ‘emasculatation and the bounded existential

³⁸⁰ Quoted in ‘When the Blues Train Rolled into Chorlton’.

³⁸¹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979; London: Routledge, 2003), 50. A useful source on teenage aesthetics of this era is Colin MacInnes’s 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*. See also Susan Willis, ‘Hardcore: Subculture American Style’, *Critical Inquiry* 19/2 (1993): 365–83.

³⁸² Hebdige, *Subculture*, 53.

³⁸³ See Richard S. Grayson, ‘Mods, Rockers and Juvenile Delinquency in 1964: The Government Response’, *Contemporary British History* 12/1 (1998), 24.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 19. Hebdige romanticises Mods as a fundamentally working-class movement; Grayson’s findings demonstrate a more complex picture.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

possibilities which middle-class life offered'.³⁸⁶ In the postwar marketplace, perceived racial difference thus became a lucrative subcultural commodity.

Given the increasing presence of West Indian immigrants, such associations with blackness compounded the threat Mod culture (and other patterns of deviance) posed to established social paradigms. Indeed, Chris Waters proposes that British culture of the 1950s witnessed 'a veritable crisis of national self-representation'—the solution of which involved mapping 'the characteristics of Black migrants...against those of white natives, serving in part to shore up definitions of essential Britishness'.³⁸⁷ In the reality of a multiethnic Commonwealth, he argues, 'questions of race became central to questions of national belonging': representations of black immigrants as Other (or, using Warters's term, 'strangers') thus 'helped to reconfigure and secure the imagined community of the nation during a period of rapid change and great uncertainty'.³⁸⁸ By aligning themselves enthusiastically with racialized black Others, British blues fans of the early 1960s secured the subversive aesthetics of Mod while consciously challenging the white, middle-class, establishment culture they reviled. In short, blackness became an instrumental way of signifying social deviance and subcultural distinction. Moreover, as Waters notes, 'fears of unlicensed Black male sexuality could generate anxieties not only about the safety of women, hearth, and home but about the very safety of the nation itself'.³⁸⁹ Blues fans knowingly played upon such fantasies of gendered nonconformity, using black men as a way to articulate and stage a potentially dangerous and anarchic identity through musical performance. Ultimately, the blues gave young white fans a way to vicariously experience the feeling of being an outsider. As Waters notes, contemporaneous race relations discourse not only marginalised immigrants, but also those 'who deviated from the norms of the national imaginary'—including homosexuals, Mods, Rockers, and Teds.³⁹⁰ The fact that this valorisation of black Otherness was imagined through US culture only contributed to the countercultural attraction of the blues genre for revivalists given the pervasive fears of

³⁸⁶ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 47.

³⁸⁷ Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers" in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1963', *Journal of British Studies* 36/2 (1997), 208.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.* See also Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso, 2006).

³⁸⁹ Waters, "'Dark Strangers" in Our Midst', 212. See also Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

³⁹⁰ Waters, "'Dark Strangers" in Our Midst', 229.

Americanisation sketched out in the previous chapter. Aired to a broad public, Granada's blues specials thus encoded contradictory messages of fear and fascination in a precise analogue to early blackface minstrel performance in the US: African American artists provided British audiences with a racialized point of opposition for the construction and maintenance of (national) identity while simultaneously providing a point of identification for subversive, countercultural fantasy.

Adelt argues that even if blues is embraced for such counter-hegemonic ends, however, it 'does not necessarily defy structures of oppression' and may even perpetuate inequalities in even more insidious ways.³⁹¹ Indeed, as Radano has shown, African American musicians 'have been motivated and rewarded both socially and economically for realizing versions of black musical distinctiveness' mediated by interracial concession: African Americans, he writes, 'would vigorously invest in the evolving, racial myth of black music', professionally accommodating 'a consumer public caught up in racial fantasy'.³⁹² Even Baker admits that, despite acts of 'artful evasion and expressive illusion' that have helped maintain integrity under a white gaze, the public theatricality of blues 'is analogous to the Afro-American's donning of the minstrel mask'.³⁹³ To 'deliver the blues as entertainment', he continues, 'is to maintain a fidelity to one's role...if the performance required is that of a minstrel and one is a genuine performer, then donning the mask is an act consistent with one's stature'.³⁹⁴ I want to conclude by elaborating this idea of a strategic black mask being adopted by African American blues artists by following Cook's idea that 'the audible body becomes a medium through which black performers *masquerade* at being black'.³⁹⁵ I believe that the best way to approach this performative illusion is to invert the second term of Fanon's well-known pairing (expressed in the title of his book *Black Skin, White Masks*) by using aspects of his own argument to suggest that African Americans not only inhabited a superficial bodily Otherness (black skin) but were also forced to perform a burlesque of that very Otherness as a theatrical role (*black masks*). In 1952, Fanon proposed that 'the man who adores the Negro is as "sick" as the man who abominates him'; moreover, he argued, 'what is often called

³⁹¹ Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 5.

³⁹² Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, xiii; Radano, 'The Sound of Racial Feeling', 132.

³⁹³ Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 196, 194.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁹⁵ Cook, *Beyond the Score*, 302.

the black soul is a white man's artifact'.³⁹⁶ Fanon mapped the trauma of racialized juxtapositions that had generated black difference while tacitly directing African Americans toward the condition of whiteness. Through a relational process of sensitised interaction, he suggested, African Americans internalised the stereotypes projected onto them by the dominant social milieu: 'the Negro', he asserts, 'has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him'.³⁹⁷ As with minstrelsy, Fanon noted that this form of black culture was fetishised for its perceived difference and exotic potency—'but only if [it] is made palatable in a certain way'.³⁹⁸ He thus proposed that acceptable black Otherness was a product of white supremacist culture: racists, in short, actively constitute the object of their hatred.

Fanon concluded that African Americans had been coerced into inhabiting a reified form of identity established through the lens of white culture: 'not only must the black man be black', he argued, 'he must be black in relation to the white man'.³⁹⁹ He thus followed W. E. B. Du Bois, who famously proposed in *The Souls of Black Folk* that African Americans possessed the veiled 'double consciousness' of 'two warring ideals in one dark body'—a state deriving from 'a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'.⁴⁰⁰ My inversion of Fanon's title, in which he emphasised what he saw as the forced destiny of black society, draws out this latent conclusion—that, as well as being stigmatised by the marks of outward appearance, African Americans have been reciprocally compelled to perform a vision of black difference demanded by the regulations of white fantasy. Successful black musicians in the 1960s blues revival—itsself a reification of black identity through an untenably narrow conception of the genre—learned to wear this racial mask as a strategic black guise generated through relational interaction with horizons of white expectation. Such communicative gestures, Gilroy states, 'are not expressive of an essence that exists outside of the acts that perform them'.⁴⁰¹ This observation is crucial in uncovering the racialized semiotic workings undergirding blues revivalism: the black mask is not indicative of an African American essence, but animates the illusion of an essence through gestures of performance. Through such representations of blackness,

³⁹⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 10, 16.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁰⁰ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; London: Archibald Constable, 1905), 3.

⁴⁰¹ Gilroy, 'Sounds Authentic', 135.

whiteness itself found a foil in a black identity inscribed as the marker of primitive Otherness—a sign appropriated and made to carry the heavy burden of projected authenticity. George Lipsitz reminds us that race is indeed a cultural construction, ‘but one with sinister structural causes and consequences’.⁴⁰² My suggestion that African American entertainers donned black masks should not be taken as a denial of race’s tragic consequences, as if the mask could simply be removed along with the scourge of racism itself. Rather, like Radano, I believe that the performative fictions of black music should be reheard as a ‘challenge to the natural histories of race’ and seen as a ‘cultural expression cast within and against the formations of racial ideology’.⁴⁰³ The challenge for a critical musicology is therefore to expose the dynamic contingencies and relational performativity of intercultural dialogue while acknowledging the lived experience of African American musicians unable to fully discard the preordained mask of racialized difference.

⁴⁰² Lipsitz, ‘The Possessive Investment in Whiteness’, 371.

⁴⁰³ Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, 44, 278.

Conclusion |

'Regeneration of the Imaginary'

If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's. I must be getting sentimental. But I must say it's pretty dreary living in the American Age—unless you're an American of course. Perhaps all our children will be Americans.

~ John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (1957)

During one of his notorious rants against establishment propriety (in this case, the 'high summer' of Edwardian England), Osborne's theatrical invention Jimmy Porter distilled the essence of what I want to call the 'folkloric imagination'. Such a view rests upon the idea that a chimerical authenticity always lies elsewhere, just out of reach, just unfamiliar enough to generate the frisson of exoticism while retaining its potential as a partisan tool of social critique—a tamed, disciplined low Otherness generated through processes of asymmetrical observation, invention, and fantasy. The folkloric imagination has been predicated on and justified by a seeming lack in the culture of those with the power to represent alterity—a lack that might conceivably be remedied by adopting and expropriating aspects of 'the folk' themselves, enfolding their ostensibly natural, innocent, and unselfconscious primitivism into the dominant culture as an antidote to the alienating encroach of technocracy, mass consumption, and the inexorable flows of global capital. As such, the folk were required only ever to be *producers* of genuine culture, never *consumers* within the ersatz culture industry itself. Western elites during the twentieth century saw their own ideals and salvation mirrored in such essentialised representations of difference. Through a deeply ironic inversion, the folkloristic imagination thus employed low Others (bucolic peasants,

industrial labourers, Southern African Americans) as *instrumental correctives to the very social structures that had oppressed them*. Indeed, *folk epistemology confirmed the very social order it outwardly challenged*: for all its egalitarian charm, the concept functioned to maintain a cherished alterity through the double binds of subordination. Extrapolating Richard Middleton's tantalising idea of a 'revival without a source', I want to conclude this thesis by using critical theory to show that ideologies generated through the folkloric imagination are *discursive simulacra*, drawing together the work of Michel Foucault, Slavoj Žižek, and Jean Baudrillard.¹

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have relied on the notion that ballads, folksong, and revivalist blues are fundamentally discursive phenomena—not only that they exist within a complex framework of written statements and conversations about music, but that these declarations and disputes are responsible for establishing their meaning, generic ontology, and particular horizons of expectation. Indeed, 'folk' and 'blues' do not exist as self-evident or preordained aesthetic classifications but have been unquestionably shaped by contingent systems of knowledge including Social Darwinism, nationalism, British communism, social realism, colonialism, blackface minstrelsy, and racial theory. The relations and regularities established between material objects, institutions, statements, concepts, and processes within the folkloric imagination reveal it to be an example of what Foucault describes as a 'discursive formation'.² *Folksong itself is the product of such discourse*—a thoroughly modern genre actively constituted by a nexus of ideologies. Foucault defines discourse as the way concepts are put into words through what he characterises as a 'will to knowledge'—a dispersed regime of surveillance governing how human beings are observed, classified, regulated, understood, and their identities institutionalised.³ Knowledge and discourse, he proposes, are virtually coterminous: 'there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms'.⁴ Moreover, Foucault asserts, 'it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together'.⁵ Indeed, as Michel de

¹ Richard Middleton, 'O Brother, Let's Go Down Home: Loss, Nostalgia and the Blues', *Popular Music* 26/1 (2007), 60. See also Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 2006).

² See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969; London: Routledge, 2002), 41.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume One* (1976; London: Penguin Books, 1998).

⁴ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 201.

⁵ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 100.

Certeau argues, in order to establish power ‘discourse binds itself to the institutional structure that legitimates it in the eyes of the public’.⁶ *Folk discourse was thus a means of exercising power over the very objects it ‘identified’ and exalted.* Foucault cautions, however, that ‘we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse...but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies...Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it’.⁷ In other words, debate takes place *within* and using the elements *of* a heterogeneous discursive formation. I have shown how particular strategies within folk discourse achieved stability through the action of gatekeepers: figures such as Cecil J. Sharp, John A. Lomax, A. L. Lloyd, and Samuel Charters occupied what Foucault might term ‘transdiscursive’ positions, as they produced ‘the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts’ in their wake.⁸ Their ideological strategies drew together discursive elements to create the illusion of clarity and coherence:

Every statement involves a field of antecedent elements in relation to which it is situated, but which it is able to recognize and redistribute according to new relations. It constitutes its own past, defines, in what precedes it, its own filiation, redefines what makes it possible or necessary, excludes what cannot be compatible with it. And it poses this enunciative past as an acquired truth, as an event that has occurred, as a form that can be modified.⁹

Discursive strategies within the folkloric imagination relied upon, redistributed, and rearticulated available forms of knowledge and in so doing brought new modes of thought into existence—manipulating signs and ideas from the storehouse of Western culture to fit the configuration of their own invented traditions.

The rules of a discursive formation, Foucault argues, are made possible ‘by a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation, and specification’: discourses, he continues, ‘give rise to certain organizations of concepts, certain regroupings of objects, certain types of enunciation’.¹⁰ Every

⁶ Michel de Certeau, ‘History: Science and Fiction’, in: *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 207.

⁷ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 100–01.

⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, in: *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991), 114.

⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 140.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49, 71.

statement made within such a formation thus ‘belongs to a certain regularity’.¹¹ A discourse, however, is not ‘an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions...it is rather a space of multiple dissensions’.¹² Similarly, the folkloric imagination established a platform for hegemony while opening up the possibility of critique through its own latent contradictions by figures such as Percy Grainger and Louise Pound. The most intriguing aspect of discourse in Foucault’s theorisation is that it designates ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (in his examples, psychiatric illness, docile bodies, and sexual deviancy).¹³ Such discursive strategies work to sustain artificial unities and systematically produce what they claim merely to identify. Foucault thus urges a critical response to ‘ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination’.¹⁴ Coherence should be disturbed by showing that such unities ‘do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized’; critique must therefore ‘tear away from them their virtual self-evidence’ and ‘free the problems that they pose’.¹⁵ In the case of the folkloric imagination, what appears at first sight as a self-evident definition of cultural practice turns out to be a fabricated belief system and a nexus of dissent. Although ‘the folk’ never existed (and have thus been easy to idealise), they have effectively been created *by* discourse itself: through being discussed as if they did exist, these elusive low Others and their songs were conjured up as the mirage of alterity. In other words, *folksong was itself constituted through the discursive strategies that claimed only to describe it*. Herein lay its charm: always already out of reach, the folk afford romanticised projections, creating a balm for modernity’s unwelcome advance.

The folkloric imagination thus bears striking resemblance to what Johannes Fabian has criticised as the ‘allochronic’ tendencies of anthropology. Fabian argued that the historical discipline of anthropology has repeatedly denied coevalness in fieldwork, manifesting ‘*a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹² *Ibid.*, 173.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28–9.

discourse'.¹⁶ What he termed 'allochronism' involved citing this Other in a prior cultural or evolutionary phase of development. Additionally, Fabian argued, anthropological knowledge not only relegated the Other to another Time, but actively constituted the Other as an object (rather than a dialogic subject) through processes of observation, documentation, and publication—what de Certeau has referred to as 'the circularity between the production of the Other and the production of the text'.¹⁷ This gaze and its imposed classifications functioned to create a global spectrum of low Others reified in the light of Western epistemology:

Anthropology contributed above all to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise...It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derives, in ways that can be specified, from evolutionary Time...A discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World, or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the 'primitive'; it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive. *Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought.¹⁸

Likewise, folk Others (Sharp's peasants, Lomax's African American prisoners, Lloyd's balladeers, Charters's country blues singers) were caught in the wake of allochronic discourse and necessarily situated as temporal relics—living analogues of a colonialist mentality. Moreover, such discourse only ever saw culture through the lens of its own terminology—as primitive folk, as radical proletariat, or as traditional bluesmen. Constructions of temporal inequality suggested that cultural *difference* formed an unbridgeable *distance*, confining global low Others to a 'naturally' inferior role. The constitution of 'the folk' by a collecting elite with institutional power is therefore a gesture with deeply problematic geopolitical resonance. Apposite critique, Fabian argues, must therefore 'inquire into the dialectical constitution of the Other', demonstrating that 'our theories of their societies are *our praxis*'.¹⁹

¹⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983; New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 31.

¹⁷ de Certeau, 'Montaigne's "Of Cannibals": The Savage "I"', in: *Heterologies*, 68.

¹⁸ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 17–18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxviii, 165.

Such praxis is the very location of ideology. Žižek argues that ideology proper is ‘a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence’.²⁰ For Žižek, ideology ‘is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our “reality” itself’.²¹ In this sense, ideology is at its most powerful when it ‘succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience’—converting facts that at first sight contradict it into arguments in its favour.²² Crucially, Žižek suggests, ideological fantasy *is* praxis: ‘the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what people are doing.’²³ Existing in a cycle where habit breeds conviction, ideologies are thus manifest in practical activity—a situation Judith Butler refers to as performative. Butler argues that performativity is not simply performance writ large, but rather ‘the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names’.²⁴ Similarly, de Certeau argued that narrative ‘has a pragmatic efficacy’ able to generate systems of belief and, in so doing, ‘an active body of practitioners’: through ‘pretending to recount the real’, he proposes, history ‘manufactures it’.²⁵ No history is objective, but postmodern suspicion of metanarrative does not excuse poor scholarship: knowledge produced through the folkloric imagination is guilty of flagrant and ideologically motivated misreadings.²⁶ Folk revivalism, moreover, did not simply create an illusory Otherness through its narrative strategies, but *performatively brought this very illusion to life*. As Žižek emphasises, ‘belief, far from being an “intimate”, purely mental state, is always *materialized*’ in social activity.²⁷ Signifying elements, he continues, are woven into such ideological fantasies via a ‘nodal point’:

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989; London: Verso, 2008), 15–6. See also Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Spectre of Ideology’ (1994), in: *The Žižek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright & Edmond Right (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

²¹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 45.

²² *Ibid.*, 49, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29. See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997; London: Verso, 2008).

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993; New York: Routledge, 2011), xii. Her original argument was made in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2006).

²⁵ de Certeau, ‘History: Science and Fiction’, in: *Heterologies*, 207.

²⁶ See Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006). See also Alan Munslow, ‘Why Should Historians Write About the Nature of History (Rather than Just Do It)?’, *Rethinking History* 11/4 (2007): 613–25; Patrick Joyce, ‘What is the Social in Social History?’, *Past and Present* 206 (2010): 213–48; and Salmi, Hannu. ‘Cultural History, the Possible, and the Principle of Plenitude’, *History and Theory* 50 (2011): 171–87.

²⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 33.

The multitude of ‘floating signifiers’, of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain ‘nodal point’ (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which ‘quilts’ them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning... The first task of the analysis is therefore to isolate, in a given ideological field, the particular struggle which at the same time determines the horizon of its totality.²⁸

In bringing together a knot of meanings, such nodes unify a given field by both designating and constituting its identity. Žižek argues that the connection between a term and its referents arises from acts of ‘primal baptism’.²⁹ He suggests, for example, that ‘the Jew is Hitler’s *point de capiton*’—a device through which Fascist ideology creates a unified narrative.³⁰ In this sense, the nodal point ‘is perceived and experienced as an unfathomable, *transcendent*, stable point of reference concealed behind the flow of appearances and acting as its hidden cause’.³¹

The folkloric imagination employed signifiers such as ‘folk’ and ‘country blues’ as *points de capiton*—devices baptised with contingent meanings purporting to be universal. Invented traditions were unified by concepts acting as rigid designators to ‘quilt’ semiotic elements into a series of superficially stable meanings: as a result, complex subcultures were cast into recalcitrant patterns of caricature. Utilising this psychoanalytic insight enables us to approach the genres of folksong and blues in a new and revealing light: rather than existing as definitions based on fidelity to source material, ‘folksong’ and ‘blues’ (like the racializing designations ‘black’ and ‘white’) were nodal points subjected to acts of naming with no necessary connection to external reality. In other words, *such concepts functioned through ideological praxis to self-referentially constitute their own imagined fields of cultural production*. Indeed, Žižek emphasises a paradoxical juxtaposition between ‘the radical contingency of naming and the logic of emergence of the “rigid designator” through which a given object achieves its identity’.³² The role of the nodal point is therefore purely structural, its signification coinciding with enunciative action, its reference a phantasm: ‘it is a “signifier without the signified”’.³³ Žižek proposes that ‘the crucial

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95–7. See also Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 99.

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991; London: Verso, 2008), 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 107.

³³ *Ibid.*, 109.

step in the analysis of an ideological edifice is thus to detect, behind the dazzling splendour of the element which holds it together (“God”, “Country”, “Party”, “Class”...), this self-referential, tautological, performative operation’.³⁴ Ideological fantasy harbours one final trick: ‘the last support of the ideological effect (of the way an ideological network of signifiers “holds” us) is the non-sensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment’.³⁵ This form of fantasy, Žižek asserts, ‘is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance’; where ‘one doesn’t (want to) know, in the blanks of one’s symbolic universe, one enjoys’.³⁶ Ideologies of the folkloric imagination depended upon such resistant kernels of *jouissance*—the irrational enjoyment of jingoism, imperialism, racism, and misogyny.

Philip V. Bohlman proposes that the ideal of authenticity ‘widens the gap between the past and the present, idealizing the validity of folk music’s origins but purposely failing to define them’.³⁷ Like the *point de capiton*, this illusive talisman functioned as a signifier without a signified—recalling Butler’s conclusion that ‘the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin’.³⁸ Baudrillard’s concept of simulation thus provides a fitting way to theorise the results of performativity. Defining simulation as ‘the generation by models of a real without origin or reality’, Baudrillard argues that the hyperreal represents a substitution of ‘signs of the real for the real’.³⁹ He proposes that simulation stems from ‘*the radical negation of the sign as value...*[and] envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum’.⁴⁰ As ‘a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra’, Baudrillard argues, Disneyland in the US ‘exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country’: it is a ‘deterrence machine’, a space for ‘regeneration of the imaginary’.⁴¹ Baudrillard outlines a quadripartite model connecting images as reflection of reality (1), images denaturing reality (2), images masking an absence (3), and images as pure simulacrum having ‘no relation to reality whatsoever’ (4).⁴² Folk revivalism animates this play of simulation through its ideological filtering of intricate

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 142; Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 2.

³⁷ Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 11.

³⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 188.

³⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12, 13. See also Jean Baudrillard, *America* (1986; London: Verso, 2010).

⁴² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

cultural practice, signs lacking historical referents, and processes of outright invention. It is a revival without a source, a copy in search of an absent origin. Likewise, through its textile of simulacra, the folkloric imagination provides a space for rejuvenation of the imaginary via ideological fantasy—functioning as a form of deterrence by directing our gaze away from hybridity and the vicissitudes of history toward facile images, mythological signs, easy narratives, and essentialised identities. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we might say that *the folkloristic imagination is a disquieting emergence of the colonialist Real*—a symptomatic desire of Western modernity to reify, dominate, essentialise and thus produce ‘the Other’ as such.⁴³ As Raymond Williams has noted, ‘what seems an old order, a “traditional” society, keeps appearing, reappearing, at bewilderingly various dates’: due to such stubborn persistence, he argued, the idea cannot be dismissed as a simple illusion.⁴⁴ Returning to Louise Pound’s apt metaphor, the folk have always been dancing puppets in the hands of those with power to represent, made to speak through acts of cultural ventriloquism—signs awaiting the projection of burlesqued authenticity, arousing the pleasures of an imagined past for the sake of an alternative present.



⁴³ Žižek argues, via Lacan, that the Real is ‘not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the crack within the symbolic network itself’; see Slavoj Žižek, ‘Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real: “Strange Shapes of the Unwarped Primal World”’, in: *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 233. Žižek illustrates the Real as follows: ‘It is the same with a phenomenon that designates most accurately the “perverse” obverse of twentieth-century civilization: concentration camps. All the different attempts to attach this phenomenon to a concrete image (“Holocaust”, “Gulag”...), to reduce it to a product of a concrete social order (Fascism, Stalinism...)—what are they if not so many attempts to elude the fact that we are dealing here with the “real” of our civilization which returns as the same traumatic kernel in all social systems?’ (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 51).

⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011), 35.

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Periodicals & Newspapers

<i>Blues Unlimited</i>	<i>Society</i>	<i>R’NB Scene</i>
<i>Daily Worker</i>	<i>The Manchester Guardian</i>	<i>Radio Times</i>
<i>The English Review</i>	<i>Melody Maker</i>	<i>Sing</i>
<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>New Left Review</i>	<i>Sing Out!</i>
<i>Jazz Journal</i>	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>The Times</i>
<i>Jazz Monthly</i>	<i>The Observer</i>	<i>The Times Literary Supplement</i>
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