

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

UNDERGROUND SOUNDS: ORAL TRADITION AND RECORDING CULTURE IN
AMERICAN POETRY, 1917–2008

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

BY

ANDREW PEART

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2018

Contents

Illustrations	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Abstract	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Carl Sandburg, John Lomax, and the Modernist Revival of Folksong	31
Chapter 2: Saying the Blues in and after the Chicago Black Renaissance	100
Chapter 3: Soul Poets of the Black Arts Movement	170
Coda	261
Bibliography	294

Illustrations

Figure 1: “The Boll Weevil” and “Negro Spirituals,” by Carl Sandburg (1926)	57
Figure 2: <i>Southern Exposure: An Album of Jim Crow Blues</i> , by Josh White and Waring Cuney (1941)	111
Figure 3: <i>Caught Up</i> , by Millie Jackson (1974)	212
Figure 4: <i>Just a Lil' Bit Country</i> , Millie Jackson (1981)	224
Figure 5: <i>How I Got Ovah: A Gospel Tribute to Carolyn M. Rodgers</i> , featuring Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Billy Preston, and Community First Baptist Church Choir of Dallas (1982)	234
Figure 6: Ruby Dee, in <i>How I Got Ovah: A Gospel Tribute to Carolyn M. Rodgers</i>	236
Figure 8: <i>Black Encyclopedia of the Air: A Big Black Beautiful History: Stories of the Rise and Spread of Black Culture in Africa and America</i> (1968–1969)	251

Acknowledgments

If there is a special joy to writing a dissertation, it is the opportunity it affords to reflect on the individuals and communities who made it possible. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the members of my dissertation committee, Bill Brown, Jennifer Scappettone, and Kenneth Warren, whose commitment and engagement clarified the vision for this project and created openings at every turn for new interpretive possibilities. Their support and guidance has been unwavering since the early years of my graduate school career, and it will be a credit to this dissertation if it reflects the influence they have had on my thinking. My thanks also to Elizabeth Helsinger and John Wilkinson, who provided constructive input on earlier projects that helped nourish the early seeds of this dissertation.

The student and faculty members of the Poetry and Poetics Workshop in the Division of the Humanities have sharpened, and sometimes shaken, my thinking about the problems addressed in this dissertation. Over the years, Stephanie Anderson, Joel Calahan, Michael Hansen, Jose-Luis Moctezuma, Patrick Morrissey, Eric Powell, Geronimo Sarmiento Cruz, and Chalcey Wilding have been invaluable interlocutors, while Chicu Reddy and John Wilkinson have been both generous and judicious with the Socratic method. My colleagues at *Chicago Review* inspired me every day for seven years.

Outside the University of Chicago, I owe thanks to several individuals who offered their help to this project at crucial moments. Jahan Ramazani and Herbert Tucker, the editors of *New Literary History*, provided indispensable commentary on the article version of Chapter 1 that reverberated throughout the entire dissertation. Meanwhile, Todd Harvey at the Library of Congress and Marten Stromberg at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, opened my

eyes to archival gems that enriched large portions of this project. I thank each one of these scholars for the genuine interest they took in my work.

I was especially fortunate in the course of my doctoral research to meet folks who became like family to me. Ed Roberson and Nina Rodgers Gordon welcomed me into their homes, made their personal collections available for my study, and provided warm encouragement over many months for me to finish this dissertation.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family, especially my wife Rory Pavach, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, for her boundless love and support and for always, as The Dells sing, staying in my corner.

Abstract

“Underground Sounds” examines the roles played by folklore collecting, sound recording, and popular song in twentieth-century American poetry. What was it about the age of mechanical reproducibility in sound, this study asks, that drew poets to the world of folklore, oral tradition, and vernacular song? In recent decades, influential studies of modern poetry and modern media have emphasized experiments with the graphical and graphemic dimensions of language—whether it be the verbal plasticity of poetic texts or the sound patterning of poetry performances—as the *sine qua non* of modernism. This study, however, highlights a subterranean tradition of collaboration and exchange between American poets and folklorists that contributed to a very different kind of modernism predicated on explorations into the cultural and technological substrata of poetic expression as such. Folklore scholarship in the twentieth century appealed to American poets, I argue, because its theories about cultural identity and cohesion put tools in the hands of poets as the makers of song to address problems of social conflict and anomie. After the First World War, the most salient of these problems for poets and folklorists fell along lines of race and class. The advent of phonography in folklore collecting only deepened poets’ interest in the field, as the medium’s acoustic amplitude and affective resonance seemed to give an aura to song that exceeded the communicative powers of language itself to produce the various forms of cohesion that folklorists upheld as cultural ideals.

Since the late nineteenth century, American folklorists found a matrix for theories about cultural identity and cohesion in the ballad. Through readings of Carl Sandburg, Sterling Brown, Margaret Walker, Amiri Baraka, Carolyn Rodgers, and others, this study shows how poets in the twentieth century urged folklorists to consider genres of song beyond the ballad—the folksong, the blues, and soul—as cultural concepts with similarly deep social and political stakes. Like the

ballad, these genres also served folklorists and poets alike as models for the democratic political processes that they thought were capable of solving problems of social conflict and anomie. This study challenges a prevailing view in the current field of ballad studies, however, that sees vernacular song in general as a canon of artifacts expropriated from non-elite cultures and used as vehicles to further elite political ends. In demediating vernacular song from the forms of textual artifactuality in which such reduction could occur, I argue, phonography introduced a new kind of abstraction—acousmatic and imitable voices proliferating throughout recording culture—that also expanded vernacular song’s social and political horizons beyond mere ideology. This study builds on a growing body of scholarship on American literature and popular song by focusing on the ways poets and folklorists made vernacular song a crucible for the politics of racial segregation during Jim Crow, of racial backlash after the Civil Rights Movement, and of class conflict in the postindustrial era.

This study makes the case that folklore scholarship was central to the making of modern American poetry. It tells a story of collaboration and exchange between poets and folklorists that is part and parcel of an overarching narrative about the cultural politics of American pluralism and the fate of folk culture in particular as a vehicle in its quest for social and economic equality. This story of modern American poetry begins in Chicago in 1917, where Carl Sandburg debated John Lomax about the status of folksong as a model of cultural hybridization rather than homogeneity. It then explores the folklore-oriented Chicago phase of the Negro Renaissance and finds in Sterling Brown, Margaret Walker, and Richard Wright a theory of the blues as an expression of critical race consciousness. The story then concentrates on a post-Eurocentric moment in the postwar countercultural avant-garde, when the Black Arts Movement and a new anthropological turn in folklore scholarship used the dual musical and lifestyle concept of soul to

put black culture at the center of American ethnic pluralism. The story closes with the poet and folklorist Jonathan Williams, who died in 2008 after turning the cultural politics of folklore back on the kinds of class conflict that this year in American economic history would bring to the fore.

Introduction

In 1910, John Avery Lomax, the first literary folklorist to use phonographic recording technology in the field, published his first folksong collection, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. Lomax sensed how the new technology would reshape the media ecology in which folksong collectors gathered materials for assembling what were essentially literary texts, or what he would later call “composite ballads” formed from a combination of recorded performances and manuscript or print variants.¹ In the late nineteenth century American philologist James Francis Child had claimed the prestige of oral tradition for his canon of ballads but, like eighteenth-century British antiquarian Thomas Percy, had turned to manuscript sources rather than oral informants because of a distrust of the folk’s own methods of preservation and transmission. For his part, though, Lomax had refashioned the Romantic notion of the “popular ballad” in a form more amenable at once to a backward-looking sense of unmediated, primordial orality and to a forward-looking sense of modern, objective technological capture, apparently rendering transparent the relationship between what he recorded from the mouths of the people and what he ultimately printed on the pages of his songbooks.² What Lomax did not sense at the time he transcribed his first wax cylinders was the formative role that such a use of phonography would come to play in the development of modern American poetry, beginning in the years just prior to the First World War. Folksong collecting, loosened from the stronghold of philology and realigned with ethnographic and popular modes of literature through the emergence of field

¹ John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), xxviii–xxix.

² Child defined the “popular ballad” as any song that could be traced back to the singing of actual people and that could be said to represent the oral tradition of a homogeneous social community. He used the term in both a descriptive and a normative sense: popular ballads really existed, at least in a less technological age, but they were also ideal forms that the philologist aimed to approximate by collecting and arranging “remnants” of oral tradition. See Child’s 1874 essay “Ballad Poetry,” reprinted in *Journal of Folklore Research* 31.1–3 (January–December 1994): 214–22.

recording, did more than highlight fresh American folk traditions as important touchstones in the continuing search for sources of a national literature. Rather, the reinvention of balladry, in which Lomax and his Edison recorder figured so prominently, fomented a poetic counter-revolution that broke with dominant currents in Anglo-American and Continental modernism, galvanizing a wholesale revival of the idea of poetry as a technology of the voice and encouraging poets of the period to think about the place of their art in an environment defined by proliferating media channels for the transmission of sound. While folksong had become multiply mediated through phonography, poetry was becoming a multimedia art, but not in the way contemporary scholars have learned to understand it: that is, not through relays of musical, visual, and verbal art, but rather through circuits linking oral, print, and embodied modes of realization.

This dissertation recovers an underground current within modern American poetry where research into traditional expressive cultures met with explorations in new technological means of imagining, representing, and recording the voice of poetry and the voice of song. I call this strain of modern American poetry *subterranean* because its achievements over the past century, from 1917 to 2008, reveal the extent to which poetic modernism was—and is—preoccupied with the cultural and technological *substrata*, or enabling conditions, of poetic expression as such. This study provides a new narrative of what modernist free verse was in the early twentieth century and what it became as it evolved in later decades, refocusing attention on its place within a century of attempts to define modern American poetry as an oral art and an oral culture. My account begins in Chicago in 1917, where Carl Sandburg helped infuse folksong into modernist free verse through his work with John Lomax, and then explores the folklore-oriented Chicago phase of the Negro Renaissance before fanning out to the multiple fronts of what I call a post-

Eurocentric moment in the postwar countercultural avant-garde, when the Black Arts Movement and the ethnopoetics movement alike envisioned a modern oral poetry modeled on an anthropological conception of ritual drama. My account concludes by examining a conversation that took place nearly a century after Sandburg met Lomax, in which the poets Jonathan Williams and Amiri Baraka argued in print over what precisely was percolating underground in folk culture prior to the global economic crisis of 2008. Moreover, this study focuses on the *substrata* of modernist poetry by taking fuller stock of how phonography shifted the practical and theoretical relation between sound and writing throughout the twentieth century. Where most accounts of modern poetry and media technology see the relationship between the two predicated on patterns of remediation, this study traces a narrative of increasing demediation in modern poetry, where it becomes possible to see that the new modes of aural experience opened up by phonography at the turn of the twentieth century displaced the experience of poetry not only from metrical structures and graphic representations but also from the more basic abstraction of a linguistic system of minimal, substitutable signs. In this study, the formative experiments of modernist free verse are understood as attempts to remake poetry itself on the basis of a new phonographic conception of spoken language—affirmed by the sister-technology of the spectrograph—as a continuous, variable stream of sound only imperfectly notated by verbal signifiers.

The modernist allure of the phonograph for poets would ultimately be the way it rendered oral culture patently technological, as discussed below. Nevertheless, making use of the phonograph in its early years appealed to many poets in part because it offered what seemed like an experience of unmediated sound. Sound reproduction technology fundamentally changed the way American poets in the early twentieth century thought about the physical properties of vocal

sound, renewing awareness of it as poetry's most basic medium and generating a range of formal experiments that were sometimes just as much ethnographic as they were literary. As early as 1917, for instance, Carl Sandburg attributed what others identified as the quantitative prosody of his groundbreaking *Chicago Poems* (1914–1916) to the “cadences” of American Indian song and dance rituals, which he had learned about, among other sources, from Frances Densmore's field recordings of Chippewa and other midwestern tribes.³ For those poets who understood free verse as printed poetry's return to song by other means, the age of Edison was a time for thinking about what poetry had been—before print separated rhythm from phonological reality and turned the voice into a rhetorical figure—and what poetry might become now that print was only one of its technical media. The possibility of mechanically reproduced sound, and the experience of hearing sung or recited poetry rematerialized in this way, led them to believe that modern poetry should explore the reality of sound in oral performance, stripped of metrical and rhetorical abstractions, making forms of performance connected to preliterate oral traditions seem like the most generative models for their own experiments.

A canonical account of how this revived interest in oral expression galvanized a modernist folk poetry would begin with Ezra Pound's description of free verse as a modern return of the “quantitative element” of ancient sung poetry. It would concentrate on a tradition that stretches from Pound's early Imagist translations of classic Chinese musical folk poems in *Cathay* (1915), to Louis Zukofsky's expansive poetry textbook *A Test of Poetry* (1948) and its

³ Carl Sandburg, “Aboriginal Poetry,” *Poetry* 9.5 (February 1917), 254–55. Amy Lowell was popularizing the term “cadence” at the time as shorthand for the function of syllabic quantity in free-verse prosody. In a series of phonographic experiments undertaken in 1917 with William Morrisson Patterson, a professor of English and a pioneer in the emerging scientific field of “rhythmics,” Lowell read free-verse poems into a sound-recording machine and attempted to measure patterns in syllabic quantity that she thought fluctuated with the actual tempos of speech and thus could not be analyzed by the abstractions of meter. For an account of Lowell's collaboration with Morrisson, see Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody*, 2nd ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 39–42.

argument for a folk-based modernism based on Objectivist principles, to Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse" (1950), his archaeological research into Mesoamerican writing systems, and his emphasis on the spatialized text as the best medium for capturing the immediacy of the poet's thought and breath. My account circumvents the trajectories toward formalism and graphism underwritten by this genealogy and concentrates instead on a poetic counterculture of song and oral tradition that, like Imagism and Objectivism, emerged in and around the pages of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine in Chicago. Chicago and *Poetry* magazine, the context for such now-forgotten milestones as Vachel Lindsay's public discussion in 1914 with William Butler Yeats about the "higher vaudeville" of the elocutionary and musical "half-chanted lyric," and Alice Corbin Henderson's published exchange with John Lomax in 1917 about the oral transmission of American cowboy songs, fostered a strain of poetic modernism that took root in Lomax's folksong researches with Sandburg and flourished in the work of poets from Sterling Brown to Amiri Baraka who grabbed hold of new mass-media platforms and channels to revive what had been thought of as poetry's ancient function of holding together small collectivities through resonant sound. These subterranean poets sensed that phonography not only had permanently altered the status of the written word and the spoken word but also had brought the worlds of vernacular song and oral culture as a whole back within the ambit of modern poetry.

In the present study, the history of a subterranean folk poetry in the twentieth century begins with the convergence of phonography and oral tradition in the field of folksong studies because of what it revealed to poets about oral traditions themselves: that they seemed to embody a more basic convergence of the preliterate and the postliterate, their putative origins preceding, and their actual sounds exceeding, the evocative power of writing. This convergence appealed to poets because it seemed to put them in touch with the origins of their art, and of

human verbalization as such, while positioning them directly before the media environment—and the audiences—of the imminent future. For literary artists and scholars since the Romantic period, one particular category of folksong—the ballad—had represented the vexing question of how language and thought adapt to the evolving conditions of technological modernity, particularly as innovations in technologies of inscription upset traditional conceptions of the relationship between speech and writing. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, the study of oral cultures intersected with the study of technological media in fields as diverse as classics, ethnomusicology, and communications. In 1928, the American classicist Milman Parry completed a groundbreaking dissertation on Homeric poetry in which he argued that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the creations of an oral poet, passed down through generations of successors, who composed the epics through a technique of controlled improvisation, stitching together formula after formula from a memorized storehouse of phrases suited to fit the segments of his hexameter verses. Parry concluded that this theory of “oral-formulaic composition” could explain the mnemotechniques through which all preliterate cultures into the present day created, preserved, and transmitted their oral traditions. For Parry, the Homeric epics were a kind of folksong—and the first ones recorded in the Western tradition. Between 1933 and 1935, intending to test his theory, he took state-of-the-art electrical phonograph recording equipment into the Balkan peninsula to record the singers of Serbo-Croatian epic poetry and, with his assistant Albert Lord (who would ultimately complete his study on this question) set out to mine the recordings for evidence of how modern-day oral poets used lengthy traditional passages, short traditional formulas, and the responses of their listeners to keep the epics alive.⁴ Soon after Parry died in 1935, his extensive recordings of the Serbo-Croatian *guslars* were brought to

⁴ See Albert B. Lord, “Homer, Parry, and Huso,” in *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, edited by Adam Parry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 465–78.

Harvard, where the Hungarian composer and ethnomusicologist Béla Bartók was hired to transcribe and annotate them. A decade later, Bartók suggested that future scholars approach the insights into oral culture gained from his and Parry's investigations from the perspective of media history. Referring to the inventor of the phonograph, Bartók declared, "The father of modern folksong studies was Thomas Edison."⁵

During this period, American poets committed to the public function of their art in a diversifying media environment saw, like Bartók, an inviting field outside the aesthetic avant-garde in folksong studies, given the increasing public institutional role of this academic field in turn-of-the-century American culture. In his preface to *The American Songbag* (1927), Sandburg proposed an "American Bookshelf of Song" that would encompass the previous two decades' worth of folksong collecting activity by literary folklorists like John Lomax and Robert Emmet Kennedy, anthropological folklorists like Howard Odum and Dorothy Scarborough, musicologists like Cecil Sharp, and public folklorists like Robert Winslow Gordon, who would soon establish the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress that John Lomax and his son Alan later supervised.⁶ By 1950, when Sandburg revisited and augmented his collection with *The New American Songbag*, he could identify in the intervening decades a "tremendous upsurge of ballad and song research" and point to its tangible results: the publication of scores of songbooks, pamphlets, and music folios; the issuing of commercial phonograph records and the broadcast of popular radio programs devoted to American folksongs; and the founding of public folklore programs at the Library of Congress and in regional folklore societies.⁷

⁵ Bartók's statement, published in 1950, is quoted in Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 80.

⁶ Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), xii-xiii.

⁷ Carl Sandburg, *The New American Songbag* (New York: Broadcast Music, 1950), iii.

For Sandburg, modern folksong studies, with its public institutional role and its outreach through popular culture, began with John Lomax, whom he met in Chicago in 1917. For the following three years, Lomax held a regular salon in an apartment near the University of Chicago where he exchanged folksongs with Sandburg, folklorist Tom Peete Cross, journalist and historian Lloyd Lewis, and Chicago art patron Alfred MacArthur. In the late 1940s, Lewis wrote to Lomax about the importance of these exchanges to his and Sandburg's sense that American literature after the war needed to establish itself as a cultural front against the nightmarish modernity of precisely what the war had represented—"a civilization which was over-scientific, over-capitalized, over-mechanized"—and that it could do so only by abandoning the "sophisticated programs and artists" of the prewar avant-garde, including Imagism, along with the commitment to aesthetic autonomy that such "programs" had inherited from the Symbolists. "We were ready for realism," Lewis reflected, and this realism was the ultimate rebuke to Mallarmé's *poésie pure* and Eliot's purified language of the tribe: a poetics founded on the indexical recording of the voice, the transparent communication of popular sentiment, and the unfiltered transmission of oral tradition, all understood as the direct statement of democratic political motives, and all summed up in the phrase "genuine folk music."⁸ The language Lewis used to describe the antimodernity of this poetic counter-revolution, including its antipathy toward capitalist commercialism, echoed (paradoxically) the rhetoric of High Modernism, but only to a point. John Lomax's contribution to the Chicago salon, and most enduringly to the work of Sandburg, was not only an aesthetic reorientation toward orality and oral tradition but

⁸ For Lloyd Lewis's letter to John Lomax, see John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 87–89.

also, as Lewis recognized, a sense of belonging to the same culture of “the radio and the phonograph” that made folksong a popular tradition on a mass scale in the interwar years.⁹

From about 1890 to 1950, the field of folksong and folklore studies available to poets was, fortuitously, integrated in the academy primarily with the field of literary studies. Soon after the First World War, once the first “blues” and “old-time” records were issued commercially in 1920 and 1923, respectively, this hybrid scholarly field also began to cross-pollinate with the mass culture of popular song.¹⁰ In 1892, when Francis James Child began publishing his multivolume compendium *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, the nation’s first Department of English, at Harvard where Child worked, was only a decade and a half into its existence. Child was its first appointed chair, and his prestigious study of the ballad established folklore as a cornerstone of the new discipline. After Child’s death in 1898, his former student and academic successor George Lyman Kittredge completed the editing of Child’s ballad collection and supplied for it a revised concept of the ballad that would spark the proliferation of folksong studies as fieldwork: turning away from the theory of the ballad’s communal origins, as this study’s first chapter discusses, Kittredge linked oral tradition with oral transmission. As a professor of English at Harvard from 1888 to 1936, Kittredge exerted an immense influence on academic and public folklorists in the first half of the twentieth century, galvanizing what D. K. Wilgus in 1958 called the “teacher-collectors” and “local enthusiasts” who made or managed the regional collections that shaped the emerging canon of literary folklore.¹¹ An early student of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Most histories date the origins of the “classic” blues on record to Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” on Okeh Records (1920) and the beginnings of “old-time,” or “hillbilly,” music to Fiddlin’ John Carson’s “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane, also on Okeh (1923). See Peter C. Muir, *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 3–4; and John Minton, *78 Blues: Folksongs and Phonographs in the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 149.

¹¹ D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1959), 173–88.

Kittredge was John Lomax, who set the standard of the modern literary folklore collection with the fieldwork he undertook from his early teaching posts as an English instructor in central Texas. A later student of Kittredge was Sterling Brown, whose poems in *Southern Road* (1932) feature oral traditions he gathered in the vicinity of the rural central Virginia college where he first taught. In the early and mid 1930s, Lomax and Brown would both land in Washington, DC, where they supervised public folklore programs on a national scale, including those of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), which would support a new generation of teacher-collectors and local enthusiasts by coordinating their efforts to collect folklore in their own communities. Their folklore scholarship in Washington was overseen by Benjamin A. Botkin, who would formulate the strongest argument in this period for the integration of folklore and literature.

By the time Botkin was serving as folklore editor of the FWP, popular culture, especially popular song, was increasingly part of the matrix in which a literary folklorist could operate. Brown, like Sandburg, was branching into the new culture of the phonograph and the radio. Where Sandburg the poet-performer would enter the world of popular song as a recording artist in his own right, as Chapter 1 discusses, Brown supplemented his field notes with a vast collection of commercial folksong recordings and lifted their tunes for use in his poems. He found support for this practice in Botkin's "folk-say" thesis: once "almost every form and medium of writing" had been admitted into folklore research, including the broadsides, newspapers, and mass-market magazines where Botkin thought the folk imagination met and merged with the literary imagination, it was not long before the FWP's state-based folklore projects could also incorporate discographical research, as discussed in Chapter 2.¹² By 1942, Alan Lomax, working as the assistant in charge of the Library of Congress's Archive of Folk

¹² B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People* (New York: Crown, 1944), xxv–xxvi.

Song, issued a mimeographed research document with a deceptively unassuming title: his “List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records” would become a blueprint for postwar collectors of American vernacular music recorded between 1920 and 1938.¹³ By treating commercially recorded songs as potentially “authentic” documents of oral traditions a collector might discover in the field, Alan Lomax also brought the field recording into the commercial record market. In this media environment, which peaked in the postwar era of the LP, poets and folklorists not only found it acceptable to write about performers of popular song but also made increasing use of the same recording and broadcast channels, as discussed in Chapter 3. Even as Alan Lomax grew doubtful about the empirical basis of the literary folklore he helped to institutionalize it and sought to realign it with the anthropological side of the discipline after 1950, he kept alive the literary impulse of early twentieth-century folklore by continuing, in the spirit of the 1930s and 40s, to popularize the field on record and the radio well into the century’s final decades.

Waged from the Classics rather than the English department, meanwhile, Parry and Bartók’s intervention in the field of folksong studies in the 1930s led to a distinct but parallel intellectual tradition, one that has come around to influence the current field of literary studies. With Bartók’s help, Parry’s use of phonographic technology to conduct fieldwork among epic poets had brought classical studies into an adjacent relationship with musicology. And the phonograph, by providing an extratextual means of obtaining objective evidence of oral traditions, pushed classical studies and musicology alike away from their traditional home in the humanities, as it eventually would for folklore, toward the social sciences. Parry’s investigation of the “Homeric question” among living oral cultures, coupled with Bartók’s critical interest in

¹³ Alan Lomax, “List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records,” mimeographed typescript, 1942. Recorded Sound Reference Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

the enabling technology of ethnographic investigation, gave rise to the interdisciplinary fields of oral tradition and media studies. Up until 1960, Albert Lord continued Parry's work of taxonomizing the morphology of oral formulae in folksongs. Beginning in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong consulted this growing body of work to theorize the technological and phenomenological differences among the "primary orality" of preliterate societies, the manuscript and print cultures of chirographic societies, and the "secondary orality" of electronically mediated mass societies.¹⁴ In the 1980s, on the basis of their scholarship, Friedrich Kittler developed an influential theory arguing that modern technologies of inscription, especially the phonograph, displaced the mnemotechniques of oral cultures that had maintained a residual presence and function within European literature until the late nineteenth century. In recent years, this foundational school of media studies has animated the work of contemporary scholars in the fields of oral tradition, ballad studies, and sound studies, who have synthesized the new evidence and insights gained by the anthropological and sociological turns in their antecedent fields with a renewed attention to Anglophone literature and literary history.

The present study follows this latest development in the intersection of media theory and the study of oral poetry. Looking back to the origins of what Bartók called "modern folksong studies" in the twentieth century can help to explain what is really at stake in a basic controversy in this field: why a seemingly oxymoronic term like "oral literature" gained renewed currency among scholars in the first place. The reasons were technological as well as social. To those collecting and studying oral traditions, phonography increasingly revealed the mediated status of all orality, creating a sense of convergence and circularity between the ancient and the modern. Then, still inspired by theories from the literary study of the ballad, poets as much as scholars

¹⁴ See Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) and Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

attempted to stake out a position between the reality of technological modernity and the old ideal of oral tradition as a model of organic democracy.

In media studies, particularly in the study of oral literature, there has been a longstanding critical consensus that identifies the concept of oral literature on the one hand with a so-called primary orality and on the other hand with inscriptive technologies prior to phonography. In Ong's theory, primary orality is the underlying condition of primitive societies that remain completely untouched by alphabetic writing systems. Primary orality is supposed to bring with it a certain cultural disposition and a certain mentality: speakers engage in "empathetic identification" with their listeners and the subjects of their own speech, their words give unmediated expression to the "human lifeworld," and their minds move in "mnemonically tooled grooves"—to be distinguished, of course, from the grooves of the phonograph record.¹⁵ Kittler stressed the last of these points in his application of Ong's theory. In what has become the standard account of phonography's repercussions for literature, Kittler argues that the new technology eviscerated the life of poetry, along with the utility of its metrical structures and rhetorical devices, by enabling the capture and replay of sound with far greater accuracy than the mnemotechniques poetry had derived from oral tradition. According to Kittler, this technological supersession lay behind the "crisis of verse" declared by Stéphane Mallarmé in 1896, and the avant-garde response was to redefine poetry's medium not as speech but as the graphic signifier, restricting poetic experiment to the spatialized play on the page of the alphabet's twenty-six letters.¹⁶ Kittler is correct that phonography captures the unfiltered acoustic event or phonological reality of speech without the sonic reduction of alphabetic representation, let alone

¹⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 35, 42, 45.

¹⁶ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 79–80.

the abstraction of poetic meter and rhetoric. But he misjudges the technology's effect on modern poetry and its relationship to oral tradition by presupposing a false dichotomy as the "crisis" facing poets: cling to the self-contained, unmediated world of a primary orality that phonography has shattered, or take a leap into the realm of the graphic signifier with only the resources of alphabetic writing and typography.

Cultural studies of oral literature, particularly in the African American tradition, have tended to make similar assumptions about primary orality as the originary state of their subjects and sometimes even starker claims about the effects of new technologies of the word. In his foundational work on the folk basis of African American cultural history, Lawrence Levine posited the key cultural transition after Emancipation also in terms of crisis. According to Levine, the crisis was literacy itself: knowledge of a writing system, and learning from texts, undermined what he described as the primary orality of slave culture. On one side of the crisis was slave culture's "world of pure sound," where speech, chant, and song were the available modes of communication; and on the other side, Levine argued, was the state of "cultural marginality" that awaited the formerly enslaved as they struggled at once with the loss of primary orality's "sacred values" and with the adjustment to the social and communication norms of the white master class.¹⁷ Levine's account remains important for the way it charts the evolution of black cultural and intellectual traditions through the transformations of early oral traditions, and it is especially valuable, for the present study, in establishing links between cultural interaction and media of communication. Its influence can be felt in more recent studies of African American folk culture, such as Jon Cruz's critical genealogy of the Negro spiritual, which draws out these links into a narrative about the interactions between singers and collectors

¹⁷ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 138–42 and 155–58.

that, in Cruz's view, produced a now canonical oral tradition as an object of knowledge.¹⁸ However, these accounts tend to mold their evidence into the almost conventional pattern of a narrative of loss. They do so because of an assumption they share with Kittler's account of technological modernity, which they all derive from Ong's theory of oral culture. Each one of these accounts starts with the assumption that orality is pre-technological, which is precisely what produces critical narratives about orality, literature, and technology that redound on themes of rupture, setback, and loss: they fail to account for the ways orality may show up differently on different technological substrates but still remain present—through forms, styles, motifs, or otherwise—as the intermedial basis for the category of oral literature.

This study argues that phonography brought about a new phonocentrism in modern American poetry. In doing so, it not only embraces critical attempts to form a new scholarly consensus about what the phonocentrism of oral literature has always been—imbricated with technology, not prior to or apart from it—but also offers its own alternative to a scholarly consensus about what modernism in poetry was.¹⁹ Over the past thirty years, the dominant scholarly accounts of modern poetry have aligned with Kittler's assessment of the late-nineteenth-century “crisis of verse,” championing an avant-garde tradition rooted in Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and what Michael Davidson has called the poetics of the “material text,” while eliding from twentieth-century literary history the resurgent interest in orality and oral tradition that my

¹⁸ Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ A new scholarly consensus may form around the work of Haun Saussy, who has recently argued that it is time to reappraise the theories of Ong, asking what assumptions it makes about the “unaccommodated human,” or the person lacking technologies of memorization and transmission, now that scholarship in the history of technology is revealing that the human “has always been a technologically augmented being.” For Saussy, this anthropological reality is well captured by the term “oral literature,” which he believes, “in all its jellylike amorphousness,” suggests the curious fact that oral cultures are subtended by technological substrates. Haun Saussy, “The Curious Case of ‘Oral Literature’” (paper presented at Franke Institute for the Humanities Forum, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, February 12, 2014).

account identifies among American modernists.²⁰ A consensus grew out of Marjorie Perloff's germinal 1981 study *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* that, rather than the high modernist lyric of Eliot and Auden, the ascendant current in Anglo-American modernism had in fact been the "other tradition" of non-referential, asyntactic, graphic, and at times lettristic poetry indebted to Continental responses to the "crisis of verse."²¹ Perloff was inscribing the aesthetic values of a contemporaneous avant-garde school, Language poetry, into a revisionist account of poetic modernism. Corroborating poet-critics such as Charles Bernstein, Perloff's account of modernism jettisoned several literary assumptions: that language was a transparent medium, that poetry was an extension of the voice, and that poems were other than autonomous *objets d'art*.

Cementing the visualist bias of the scholarship emerging out of Perloff's work, and adopting the Kittlerian reading of Mallarmé's original act of modernist rupture, Johanna Drucker's important first book on experimental typography made the turn to graphic poetics a hallmark of modernism. Now the "indeterminacy" at the center of modernist poetics involved not only forms of semantic opacity that riveted readers to the "words on the page" but also the material character, visual manipulation, and aesthetic appeal behind the "play of signifiers" celebrated by deconstruction.²² But it was the relentless formalism of this scholarship, rather than its affiliation with post-structuralism or media theory, that led a generation of scholars to view modernist poetry as a series of experiments with the graphic materiality of language. Perloff herself inherited the New Criticism's suspicion of any identification of poetry's sonics with music or song, a legacy that has hampered attempts to grapple with the phonocentrism of

²⁰ See Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

²¹ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 2nd ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 10–15.

²² Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 27–35.

modernist poetry.²³ Even Michael Golston’s study of early twentieth-century poetry and the racist scientific discipline of “rhythmics,” which unearths historical links between modernist poetry and early sound-recording experiments, is just as much about the visualization of poetry through phonographic “sound-writing” as it is about the sonic character of poetry.²⁴ And even in Perloff’s most recent scholarship, which looks afresh at the sonic dimensions of poetic language, the presence of sound in poetry is reduced to a spatialized structuring of phonemic units, or sound patterning—that is, formalism’s way of subordinating the sonic to the graphic.²⁵

But the modernist poetics of song that I address in this project approaches sound outside the boundaries of structuralism altogether, approaching sound not as phonemic data structured by visual signifiers but instead as acoustic resonances shaped by certain styles of recitation, oratory, and bardic or minstrel performance that were recognizable to performer and audience alike as special modes of communication. When folksong entered these styles of voicing poetry, my examples show, communication between performer and audience operated principally on non-discursive and pre-cognitive levels of awareness, influencing the consent-building faculties of those involved at the point where resonance and recognition meet in the apperception of sound.

²³ The suspicion extends to orality as such, due to a longstanding assumption that orality always already implies a specious metaphysics of presence. For instance, Bernstein’s 1998 proposal of new “close listening” practices to supplement time-honored practices of close reading helpfully articulates the need for methods of analyzing the elements of prosody in twentieth-century poetry that conventional prosodic notation fails to capture, including durational time and nuances in tonality. Bernstein’s object is the sound of poetry in performance, but the kind of performance for which he wants to devise a critical terminology is the vocal interpretation of sound images or verbal icons, as in the live interpretation of visual poetry. The relevant term for the acoustic dimension of the material signifier, Bernstein posits, is not orality but aurality: “By aurality I mean to emphasize the sounding of the writing, and to make a sharp contrast with orality and its emphasis on breath, voice, and speech.” See Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13.

²⁴ Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

²⁵ In *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, Perloff routes the origins of lyric in ancient forms of song through Russian formalism to end up at a counterintuitive proposal of why sound matters in poetry: it is through sound’s patterning at the level of the material signifier, Perloff suggests, that poetry becomes “language made strange, made somehow extraordinary by the use of verbal or sound repetition, visual configuration, and syntactic deformation.” See Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, eds., *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7.

In recuperating the crosscurrents between American poetry and folksong in the twentieth century, this study recovers a modernist poetics written out of Perloff's now-canonical "other tradition," one that held as axiomatic the poem's connection not only to the voice and its physical determinants but also to the social life of song and its technological mediations. These aspects of poetry, which formalist criticism tends to exclude from its focus on the poem as a verbal artifact, have nevertheless been the focus of literary scholars who have made contributions to the field of ballad studies. With roots in the "modern folksong studies" of the early twentieth century, the contemporary field of ballad studies begins with Susan Stewart, whose more recent work on poetic theory has brought a folklorist's practical understanding of orality into the study of poetic form. In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Stewart anticipated Perloff's embrace of the sonic but took the analysis of sound in poetry beyond the sound patterning of soi-disant verbal artifacts, focusing instead on the somatic effects associated with the aural perception and subvocalized experience of poetry.²⁶ In her analysis of what she calls "metrical allusion," for instance, Stewart shows that even as voice in poetry is grounded in formal precision, not self-expression, form itself is animated by a "discursive semantic" that is evocative rather than purely linguistic: using certain forms, Stewart writes, means that "one carries over into writing an enormous weight of social and cultural resonance."²⁷ Stewart's work demonstrates the sorts of claims that can be made about history, culture, and politics on the grounds furnished by an analysis of poetic form, as long as form is understood principally in relation to the long traditions of oral performance that are only imperfectly captured by the verbal artifact—an aspect of poetry that Stewart captures with the term "resonance."

²⁶ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 119–20.

Stewart's earlier work on the history and theory of the ballad framed the central questions of this field by asking how scholarship and poetry combine to produce objects of cultural knowledge. In a landmark essay on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century balladry, Stewart suggested that the ballad had become perhaps literary history's first example of a verbal artifact, paradoxically, through the efforts of antiquarians and philologists to produce evidence of a fundamental separation between speech and writing in a premodern orality that antedated mechanical printing and widespread literacy. The "distressed artifact" of the traditional ballad, she argued, emerged through the scholarly practice of mediating written adaptations of oral tradition with contextualizing prose: antiquarians and philologists felt the need to supply new histories for their ballads once they had deracinated them from their local oral cultures, which were suffused with popular print forms such as the broadside, and they did so through "documentation, evocation, and narrative."²⁸ For scholars who see the history of balladry extending into the twentieth century, these relationships between orality and literature pivot either on technological media or on culture writ large. Maureen McLane writes the history of Romantic and Post-Romantic poetry as media history: since the publication of Percy's *Reliques*, she argues, the preeminent task for poets has been to devise techniques for "remediating the oral," capturing the aura of living speech through metrical and rhetorical "orality-effects" or staging dramas of oral performance and its transposition into writing.²⁹ Meanwhile, Steve Newman argues that the ballad has been a useful pedagogical tool since the Restoration for introducing children and outsiders not only to the mechanics of literacy but also to the value of a national culture; even for nineteenth-century philologists and twentieth-century New Critics, the

²⁸ Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 67 and 106–08.

²⁹ Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22–32 and 114–15.

ballad recreates in the student its own supposed evolution from the “primitive” to the “civilized,” reproducing the cultural narrative at the center of a ballad concept that, as the present study shows, would continue to inform poets and folklorists throughout the twentieth century.³⁰ Where McLane understands the ballad or ballad adaptation as itself a technical medium, Newman views the ballad as a technology of acculturation.

This dissertation makes an intervention into the field of ballad studies by rethinking the nature of what had been a “distressed artifact” once folklore scholarship and poetic production recombine in the modern technological era. Though Stewart has never claimed that the ballad lacked a real history of its own, some recent work in ballad studies has nevertheless extended her interrogation of the “scandal of the ballad” through an extreme hermeneutics of suspicion, arguing that oral tradition does not exist outside its discursive construction and “artifactualization.” This line of critique has informed a critical consensus that finds more direct support in earlier studies of British folk culture by David Harker and Georgina Boyes. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Harker and Boyes argued that the category of “folksong” had historically been a modern contrivance of cultural elites who continually appropriate the expressive culture of non-elites and fashion it into a range of ideological constructs, not only “making the vernacular arts fit bourgeois aesthetics,” in Boyes’s words, but also neutralizing the political will of the working classes for bourgeois ends.³¹ The influence of the “Harker-Boyes thesis,” as David Gregory has called it, can be felt in studies of the ballad by Katie Trumpener and Meredith Martin, who have characterized the ballad as the result of the Enlightenment notions of primitive

³⁰ Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 187–89.

³¹ David Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British “Folksong,” 1700 to the Present Day* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985); Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 113.

and preliterate society that served the cultural imaginary of the modern European nation and empire.³² Extending this critical consensus into contemporary poetry and poetics, Richard Owens has recently argued that “the artifactualization of the ballad inaugurates a sort of cultural commons whereby working people are themselves artifactualized,” stressing that the ballad tradition available to poets in the twentieth century and later is a system built on an anonymizing of cultural production tantamount to the enclosure of the communal.³³ Though Owens believes that there is a genuine oral tradition within the history of the ballad, his argument reinforces the crux of this longstanding critical consensus, which is a suspicion that the ballad as it manifests in literary history is little more than a vehicle of ideology. What might be called the “artifactualization” thesis at the center of this consensus is difficult to support, however, for an historical period in which phonography not only provides new empirical evidence of orally transmitted song traditions but also forces ideas about orality and literacy to face an environment in which folk voices interact with both print and sound reproduction.

The present study offers an alternative to this scholarly consensus in ballad studies by providing an account of how phonography disrupted the process that scholars call artifactualization itself. Where Stewart and others argue that the ballad tradition artifactualizes oral tradition, this study goes one step further than McLane and argues that the reception of folksong in twentieth-century poetry is not simply a process of “remediating the oral” but also of demediating it. As I argue in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, the proliferation of phonography at the turn of the twentieth century removes the recording of oral tradition from its reduction to a

³² David Gregory, “Fakesong in an Imagined Village? A Critique of the Harker-Boyes Thesis,” *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* 43.3 (2009): 18–26; Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Meredith Martin, “Ballads, Nations, and the Histories of Form” (paper presented at University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, November 14, 2013).

³³ Richard Owens, “Circuits of Reciprocity: Folk Culture, Class Politics, and Contemporary Ballad Writing,” *Chicago Review* 60.2 (2016): 79–81.

textual medium and shifts it to an entirely different kind of abstraction, which is best understood not as another kind of medium but rather as a perceptual and affective matrix: a way of listening and feeling, of registering and responding, to what sound itself can signify. That matrix is just as much about the kinds of bodies sound touches, and the social and cultural markings of those bodies, as it is about technological substrates. As such, this study also aims to expand the focus of ballad studies by building on insights from sound studies into the interaction of technology and race and ethnicity. Alexander Weheliye, Helen Choi, and Anthony Reed have all produced studies that explore the circuit grounded by phonography that links particular types of bodies with certain structures of subjectivity or, in a more specialized domain, sutures cultural concepts with ethnographic subjects.³⁴ What this study adds is an account of how the cultural forms produced by the blending of poetry, song, and phonography became a crucible for debates over the politics of race, ethnicity, and class in America, particularly for the proponents and critics of the American tradition of cultural pluralism. In approaching African American folk traditions, in the hands of both white and black writers, this study charts various ways that poetry, song, and their inscriptive media were used in the long twentieth century to evoke what Jon Cruz, with reference to the Negro spiritual, calls ethnosympathy: where the merging of song's transcendent inwardness and the voice's signifiers of difference turn ethnic identity into grounds for empathetic identification.

A study of poetry and folksong in the twentieth century is also necessarily a study of popular song, and of the African American tradition in particular. When the focus is on vernacular song, whether "folk" or "popular," in the twentieth-century US, it is also necessarily a

³⁴ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Afro-Sonic Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Helen Onhoon Choi, "Vox Pop Modernism: Technology, Commonality, and Difference in American Literature of the 1930s" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006); and Anthony Reed, "Bodies Commingle: Phonographic Poetry" (paper presented at University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, November 16, 2013).

study of African American culture—or at least its literary representations. My hope is that this study will make a contribution to an emerging body of scholarship on the relationship of twentieth-century literature to popular song, not least because the scholarship in this area of the field has offered a promising challenge to the graphic bias I noted above in the study of modern and contemporary poetry and poetics. Taking up the classical idea of poetry’s origin in song alongside critical narratives, preceding even Kittler’s, about modern poetry’s increasing turn from sound to the grapheme, Jahan Ramazani has focused the conversation on poetics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and how they articulate themselves with popular song specifically. If the history of modern poetry is a story of its greater and greater divergence from song, Ramazani asks, then “why have song lyrics continued to play such a crucial role in poetry since modernism?” With a broad geographic scope, Ramazani approaches popular singers like the calypsonian Lord Kitchener as makers of poetic texts, and he reads a range of Caribbean, black British, and African American poets, in turn, with an ear for the calypso, reggae, and blues, respectively, that they incorporate into their poems. But with an interest in the often tense interplay between the internal prosody of a poem and the sounds and rhythms behind the song lyrics it cribs, Ramazani reproduces some of the assumptions about medium specificity and textual artifactuality that govern formalist criticism. “In transmogrifying American blues songs into blues poems,” Ramazani contends at one crucial point, “Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and other African American poets met with...the difficulties of removing song from its communal, performative, and musical contexts to the isolation of the printed page.”³⁵ In the present study, I concentrate on the extent to which poets in the twentieth century saw this intermedial red line not as a source of difficulty or frustration but as an opportunity for deep

³⁵ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 188, 198.

exploration, not as a harbinger of loss but as a sign that poetry had never quite left the communal, the performative, and the musical behind after all.

Nevertheless, Ramazani's focus on the "intergeneric" relationship between modern poetry and popular song remains generative for new scholarship in this field. So do several other recent studies. For instance, T. Austin Graham has argued that the ubiquity of song in the early twentieth-century era of mechanical reproduction led American poets and novelists to try a new intergeneric aesthetic platform, one in which popular songs served as subvocalized "soundtracks" embedded within larger literary works. The function of these intermediated songs, often drawn from African American performers, Graham shows, was frequently to create an imaginative space in which white readers could place themselves in differently racialized subject positions. Making a similar point, Derek Furr has focused attention on the convergence of "literary and folk balladry" in mid-twentieth-century American culture, arguing that attempts to represent the "folk voice" in print became scenes for negotiating a new racial politics.³⁶ Taking this line of thought one step further, Edward P. Comentale has examined the way popular song was used in the twentieth century to expand the concept of identity beyond questions of origins and toward the possibility of imagined affinities. What is at stake in the history of American popular music, Comentale argues, is less about "authentic" identities or representations and more about performativity and affect, routed through style and gesture: that history, in his evocative description, is "a vast tumultuous network of overlapping feelings and forms" where each song is "a dynamic node or modality, a tiny emotional circuit, generating relations, attitudes, stances, and poses for the public at large." In Comentale's account, popular song on record opened an

³⁶ T. Austin Graham, *The Great American Songbooks: Musical Texts, Modernism, and the Value of Popular Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 120; Derek Furr, "Re-Sounding Folk Voice, Remaking the Ballad: Alan Lomax, Margaret Walker, and the New Criticism," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 59.2 (Summer 2013): 232–33.

abstract space between expression and content, much as modernist art did in other media; flooding into that space were new “affective forms” with intensities of feeling as their mediating fluid, so that as vernacular traditions became deterritorialized from any regional or ethnic specificity, new ways of relating through gesture and style could create different kinds of community. But in the same way that the Perloff school of poetry critics treats any linkage between poetry and song or poetry and voice as the residue of a caricatured nineteenth-century sentimentalism, Comentale also finds convenient straw men for his argument in the so-called Romantic notions of selfhood, expression, and voice: popular song in the twentieth century, he argues, rode a parallel course alongside abstract art toward “the point of freeing song (and specifically lyric song) from the expressive demands of identity and tradition.”³⁷ In the present study, the infusion of folklore, balladry, and popular song into twentieth-century poetry is shown to engender a different kind of modernism based less on abstraction than on a new conception of realism: the outcome was indeed a displacement of the representational parameters that could be given to race, ethnic, and class identity onto stylistic rearticulation—part of what folklorists in the period, as noted above, called oral transmission—but the process behind it involved an intense belief that phonography’s indexical capture had revitalized voice and expression as aesthetic and social categories and had done so by linking the self-dramatizing dimensions of song with social reality.

To pinpoint the turn from abstraction and aestheticism to the realism of an alternative modernism, Chapter 1 of the present study tells the story of Carl Sandburg, John Lomax, and their collaborative folksong studies. Sandburg and Lomax met in 1917 at a salon held in Chicago by the journalist Lloyd Lewis, which quickly became a forum for exchanging and discussing

³⁷ Edward P. Comentale, *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 6–7, 10–13, 26.

various type of vernacular songs: hobo songs from Sandburg, cowboy songs from Lomax, and work songs, spirituals, ballads, and so forth from other members of their group. Chapter 1 argues that the collaboration of Sandburg and Lomax, initiated in the post-WWI years of 1917–1920 but continuing through the Second World War, produced a distinctly modernist revival of the idea of the folksong. The argument here is twofold. First, Sandburg and Lomax evolved the folksong concept into a suprageneric category of vernacular song, and in Sandburg’s hands its criteria began to look very modernist. With Sandburg and Lomax, as the list above suggests, the ballad had been demoted from the preeminent status it held with Child and Kittredge, becoming one among a large number of folksong types. What folksong itself now meant was equally determined by the history of lyric poetry and the new technology of the phonograph. Sandburg understood folksong to have a choral basis, a lyric depth, and a dramatic horizon: it was the product of many minds and voices, with subjective inwardness in addition to narrative objectivity, and it came with a built-in script for impersonating real or fictive characters realistically. The influence of phonography, moreover, meant that folksong would be cast in this period not as a cultural object or artifact but rather as a basis for dramatic enactment—in Sandburg’s hands, on the literary-theatrical model of the dramatic monologue—and that it would be used, in turn, as a medium for ethnosympathy, that is, for empathetic identification across lines of race, ethnicity, and class. Second, the Chicago of 1917–1920 in which Sandburg and Lomax met was a scene of momentous ethnic contact and conflict. In a place and time marked by the Chicago Race Riots of 1919, Sandburg and Lomax used folksong as a crucible for ironing out dueling models of what shape racial and economic justice should take, and whether America’s social and cultural fabric should pursue the assimilation and integration of different groups or something else entirely. Ultimately, just as Sandburg and Lomax were helping to forge

modern folksong studies, moving away from the ballad scholar's emphasis on origins and authenticity toward a focus on oral transmission and dramatic transformation, they were also forging competing visions of what American ethnic and cultural pluralism should look like.

Chapter 2 picks up the story with the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) studies in folklore of the 1930s and 1940s, focusing especially on the field research conducted in Chicago according to policies and methodologies developed in Washington, DC. John Lomax, stationed at the Archive of American Folk Song in Washington, and helping to oversee the FWP's Ex-Slave Narratives project, had new collaborators during this later interwar period in Sterling Brown and B. A. Botkin. Chapter 2 charts an intellectual and aesthetic genealogy from the folklore theory of this Washington circle to the Chicago Black Renaissance of 1935–1950, as exemplified by the blues writings of Richard Wright and the literary ballads of Margaret Walker, and ultimately to the stirrings of an ethnography of popular song in the nascent Black Arts Movement of the early 1960s. With a focus on the blues as a generic category and a cultural concept, this chapter argues that a joint result of the FWP era in folklore studies and the Chicago Black Renaissance was a notion of the blues, and the topical blues ballad in particular, as a discursive mode of critical, race-conscious reflection on the black experience of urban modernity. Uniting narrative realism and a kind of contemporary oral history with a distinctively African American verbal idiom, the topical blues ballad was regarded as a powerful instrument in expanding the parameters of racial representation, and evoking race pride, in the face of Jim Crow legal disenfranchisement. Folklore scholarship from Washington to Chicago in this period found a compelling subject in the blues and its foregrounding of idiom because of a theoretical shift the scholarship was undergoing, a shift in which the demediating influence of phonography could be felt powerfully: songs were losing formal distinctness and gaining discursive

complexity in the appreciation of folklorists as they became understood less and less as verbal artifacts wrought by sound patterning, and more and more by their styles of verbal presentation and oral performance. For Botkin and Brown, moreover, the humanistic cultural value of what they called “folk-say” and “living-people-lore,” respectively, was not ethnosympathy, as it had been for Sandburg and Lomax, but rather a direct recording of the self-conscious mentality defining the ethnic group itself. Ultimately, this chapter tracks a sociological turn in folklore scholarship beginning in the 1930s that defined the terms on which the contemporary African American folksong of the blues was received into poetry. Channeled through the Chicago School of Sociology, folklore scholarship of the FWP era and the Chicago Black Renaissance regarded African American folksong as an indexical record of a peasant-proletariat’s confrontation with urban modernity. And for poet-folklorists such as Brown and Walker it was as a critical reflection of contemporary life that the blues could enter poetry as a vehicle of social protest.

The work of the FWP folklorists and their counterparts in the Chicago Black Renaissance inaugurated a sociological turn in folklore studies with far-ranging implications that are explored more extensively in the following chapter. Ranging from the Black Arts Movement to ethnopoetics to postwar rhythm and blues, Chapter 3 focuses on a countercultural moment in the US artistic and intellectual avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s that, defined at the time by its oppositions, is best described now as post-Eurocentric and anti-hegemonic. In this period, folklore studies was branching further into the social sciences, and this chapter focuses on its affiliation with a field known as the ethnography of communication, a blending of anthropology and sociolinguistics that was the scholarly counterpart to the contemporaneous ethnopoetics literary movement. This chapter argues that in the 1960s and 70s the study of folklore as communicative action—with a concentration on expressive style, ritual behavior, and social

comportment—was an enabling discourse for the countercultural avant-garde of the period, and that the prime specimen of this type of folklore, embraced by scholars and poets alike, was itself a creation from the vanguard of American popular song: soul music. Like the ballad, the folksong, and the blues, soul was just as much a cultural concept as it was a genre: it represented a more complete supersession of form by style, a more thorough demediation of the voice from the verbal artifact, and a new transposition of singing into discourse, all of which was enhanced by the stereophonic sound of postwar phonography. Within the Black Arts Movement and the ethnopoetics movement, there was a belief that the countercultural impulse pervasive enough to enter popular music through soul—an anti-formalist impulse to reestablish culture itself in the grounds of human expression as such—challenged the normativity of Eurocentric ways of knowing and doing. Where the point of the folksong for Sandburg had been ethnosympathy, and the substance of the blues for Brown and Botkin had been the self-consciousness of the ethnic group, the aim of the counterculture embraced by the Black Arts Movement was often described as intraracial solidarity and union. Ethnopoetics went even further, describing this counterculture in terms of a quest for communalistic alternatives to the mechanized, industrialized, and capitalistic societies of the modern West. But by attending closely to the spoken word recordings of Amiri Baraka, the dramatized communicative acts of singer Millie Jackson, and the staged ritual performances of poet Carolyn Rodgers, this chapter finds that the postwar countercultural avant-garde belonged to the same tradition of ethnic and cultural pluralism as Sandburg, Brown, and Botkin, which had been recast for the tumultuous 1960s and 70s by the public folklore programs of Alan Lomax, a figure steeped in the ethnography of communication.

The present study ends with a coda that reflects on challenges faced later in the twentieth century by the coalition of leftist and liberal poet-folklorists who supported this pluralist tradition

and what those challenges meant for the project of literary folklore itself at the turn of the twenty-first century. Those challenges were especially acute for the poet and documentarian of folk art Jonathan Williams, whose work of the 1970s and 80s took as its subject matter the rift between what he called the folklorist's "old populist faith in the good sense of the citizenry" and actual folk belief and expression during the decades-long backlash to the Civil Rights Movement. Williams took a different approach to folklore than many of the other poets and scholars profiled in this study: a truly post-phonographic writer, Williams started from the assumption that folklore was a demediated field in which verbal art such as song and plastic art such as sculpture coexisted in a comprehensive system of folkways; yet he also insisted on the material artifactuality of all objects of folkloric study. Williams saw the artifact of the folklore specimen as a site where a critique of culture could happen because, in his view, it gathered traces of a folk belief's origins and transmissions. The coda's discussion turns on a disagreement Williams had with Baraka in 2002 over a subject of mutual interest to both poets: the cultural politics of African American folk art and the collectors who curated it. What Williams and Baraka discovered in the problem of representing black folk art, this coda suggests, was a question lurking all along in the folklore field about the adequacy of the liberal-progressive tradition in which it had been rooted since Child in light of the working-class politics it had assumed with Sandburg and Lomax. Though it falls outside the scope of the present study, the resurgence of folklore and folk history in contemporary American poetry since Williams's death in 2008 calls for further study of this question, which has only become more acute for poets after the 2008 economic crisis, from Richard Owens and his immanent critique of folklore's elitist appropriations to Tyehimba Jess and his attempt to recover the voices and stories submerged beneath them.

Chapter 1: Carl Sandburg, John Lomax, and the Modernist Revival of Folksong

When Carl Sandburg met John Lomax in Chicago in 1917, the result was a decades-long intimate and professional association (lasting until Lomax's death in 1948) that changed the face of folklore and folksong studies in the United States and, in the process, heightened the social and cultural stakes of a turn toward oral performance and oral tradition already underway in modernist free verse. Sandburg's relationship with Lomax upended traditional ballad scholarship by turning the folksong into a reflection rather than a rejection of technological modernity, by merging its performance and documentation with the new medium of phonography, and by embroiling its study in the tumultuous racial and class-based politics of the interwar period. Meanwhile, Sandburg learned much from the affiliation with Lomax about what the form and the phenomenon of the folksong (as they debated these terms) had to offer to a Chicago-centered poetic culture that understood itself as reviving the public recitation of verse on the order of primitive bardic orality, perhaps best embodied in the visit of William Butler Yeats to the offices of *Poetry* magazine in 1914.¹

Though Sandburg's experience with vernacular song extended back to the turn of the century and his days as a young itinerant laborer in the industrial and agricultural Midwest, his career as a folklorist had reached a fertile period by the time of Lomax's interlude in Chicago between 1917 and 1920, his collecting efforts toward what would become *The American Songbag* (1927) stimulated by his work as a reporter on the radical labor movement and on race relations in Chicago at the height of the Great Migration.² Lomax, for his part, had fomented a

¹ For Harriet Monroe's account of Yeats's visit, and of the conversation around primitive poetry and oral recitation that it occasioned, see her introduction to Vachel Lindsay, *The Congo and Other Poems* (Boston: Macmillan, 1914).

² For background on Sandburg's youthful phase as a hobo on the rails between Chicago and the Great Plains, and its influence on his early collecting of folksongs, see Penelope Niven's definitive *Carl Sandburg: A Biography* (New

homegrown ballad revival throughout the US less than a decade earlier with the publication of his *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910), which reopened the alleged “closed account” of the ballad when it produced examples of oral tradition alive and thriving on the southwestern frontier and did so with a claim to objective technological capture as the first ballad book (partially) sourced from phonographic field recordings.³ With his academic training in the Harvard school of ballad studies, his conservative politics, and his paternalistic stance toward his folk sources, Lomax was a somewhat unlikely associate for Sandburg. Yet Sandburg and Lomax, true to the tenets of Romantic nationalism, agreed on an idea of the indigenous folksong as the basic expression of American democracy.⁴ On this traditional assumption, and out of bitter political disagreement, they evolved a working theory of folksong much more urgent for the early twentieth century, promoting an idea of oral tradition as the formula of a multiracial and multiethnic democracy in the process of coming into being. The collaboration between Sandburg and Lomax fundamentally altered the fields of folklore and folksong by forcing a confrontation with these fields’ assumptions about race and ethnicity. For Sandburg, the result was a class-conscious modernist folk poetry that could promote a vision of American cultural pluralism and undercut the politics of racial segregation and ethnic conflict in a city like Chicago by

York: Scribner, 1991), 32–38 and 443–49. For an overview of Sandburg’s labor reporting in Chicago between 1912 and 1918, see Matthias Regan, ed., *Carl Sandburg: The People’s Pugilist* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2010), 1–41.

³ For an overview of the consensus in turn-of-the-century folklore studies that considered the ballad a “closed account,” and of Lomax’s role in overturning this consensus, see D.K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship since 1898*, 20–22. Between 1908 and 1910, on extended field recording trips among the cowboy camps of the southwestern states, Lomax used an Ediphone wax-cylinder recorder (a primitive office phonograph intended for voice transcription) to produce a reported 250 cylinder recordings for the *Cowboy Songs* project. Only thirteen of these early recordings survive. These details come from John Lomax’s field notes and recording logs. See John A. Lomax *Oklahoma and Texas Cylinder Recordings* (AFC 1940/017), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴ Histories of the discipline emphasize that, since the eighteenth century, folklore study has used the idea of the ballad or popular poetry writ large to model the internal coherence of the modern nation-state. See Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*.

synthesizing the oral traditions of a heterogeneous underclass.⁵

Out of Sandburg's folkloric activities came a complex poetics of song and a nuanced understanding of orality itself, both of which shaped the program of social transformation that he was able to bring to a certain front of the modernist free verse movement. The Sandburg of *Chicago Poems* (1916) was central to a current within modernist free verse that embraced Yeats's call for poets "to restore the primitive singing of poetry" and Vachel Lindsay's response in advocating a "higher vaudeville" of the elocutionary and musical "half-chanted lyric."⁶ This current of modernist free verse followed a different course than much of the contemporary avant-garde, nurturing a suspicion of the symbolist and aestheticist strains of Continental modernism and furthering instead a predilection for novelistic realism and naturalism inherited from the period's Chicago literary renaissance.⁷ Splintering what Ezra Pound called the breaking of the pentameter from the aestheticist tendencies of Imagism, folksong offered this strain of modernist free verse the model of a new poetic realism, in the words of Lloyd Lewis, a mutual collaborator with Sandburg and Lomax.⁸ This realism operated on the level of representation and sound,

⁵ The term "underclass" entered the lexicon of academic sociology with William Julius Wilson and his work *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), well after Sandburg's career as a folklorist and journalist. I use the term "underclass" in place of what would have been the nearest contemporary synonym for Sandburg, "lumpenproletariat," and in a sense somewhat different than Wilson's. My objective is to overcome the dichotomy inscribed in "lumpenproletariat," and also normally carried over into usages of "underclass," between the working class proper and a class of social outcasts who represent reserves of unused or unusable labor power for a society's dominant economy. For Sandburg, I contend, the working class and the "underclass" in our contemporary sense were developing an historical consciousness of themselves (not least of all through the oral transmission of folksongs) as possessing a common set of interests as people occupying positions in a class hierarchy beneath the middle class. For Sandburg, in other words, this entire class beneath the middle class constituted an American "folk." For instance, there would have been no essential class difference, in Sandburg's estimation, between a Chicago stockyards worker and the kind of Midwestern hobo from whom he learned his first folksongs. See William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁶ Lindsay, *The Congo and Other Poems*, vi.

⁷ The bent toward reportage in Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* belongs to a tradition of naturalism and realism extending from the fiction of Theodore Dreiser to the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters and prefiguring the social realism of the 1930s. See Dale Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance: The Literary Life in the Midwest, 1900–1930* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966).

⁸ For Lloyd Lewis's comment, see John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 90–91.

introducing narrative and dramatic scenarios while producing the effect of a fidelity to the voice in free verse through what its experimenters had called the “cadences” of song. The “cadences” that Sandburg often claimed his free verse derived from American Indian chants, Negro spirituals, and Euro-American ballads brought into his prosody a system of beats or pulses set by the interplay of accents and tempo, consistent with the most advanced thinking on poetic form among the free verse innovators of the Imagist period.⁹ What Amy Lowell and Pound described, respectively, as the “time-intervals” and the “quantitative element” of poetic rhythm in free verse were analogies borrowed from music and classical Greek verse to suggest precisely what Sandburg found in ethnographic sources: principles of timing and phrasing for a poetry that would harness the reality of the voice’s sounds as acoustic phenomena, wrested as much as possible from metrical abstractions.¹⁰ By achieving a transparency-effect for his voice and the voices of his sources and personas, the sonic realism Sandburg aimed for in his free verse established an important precedent for later poets who also wanted their texts to function as scores for or records of performance. In turn, Sandburg’s free verse prosody enabled a kind of theatrical realism on the page and on the platform, where the genre of the folksong once again proved a key model for a mode of dramatic impersonation—often, strikingly, across boundaries of racial and ethnic identity—that offered the poet and his audiences an experience of alterity and sympathetic identification. The popular appeal of Sandburg’s poetry and songs, as well as their revolutionary horizons, emerged from the transformative potential of hearing the sounds of

⁹ For Sandburg on the tribal derivation of his rhythms in *Chicago Poems*, see Niven, 242.

¹⁰ As Charles O. Hartman explains in his study of the Anglo-American *verse libre* movement, what these poets described was the musical principle of isochrony: “not counting the accents [in a line of verse] but equalizing the time between them.” See Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody*, 1996. For the poets’ own accounts, see Amy Lowell, “Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry,” in *The Musical Quarterly* 6.1 (1920): 126–30; and Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” in *Pavannes and Divisions* (New York: Knopf, 1918), 108. Sandburg’s own best articulation of isochrony, or the quantitative element, in his free verse appears (curiously) in the introduction to a collection of his poems for children. See Sandburg, “Short Talk on Poetry,” in *Early Moon* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), 13–28.

familiar and unfamiliar traditions and their call for indiscriminate recognition and respect.

Like Lomax, an early pioneer of field recording, Sandburg's sense of what constituted the reality of sounds produced by the voice derived from modes of auditory experience peculiar to early sound reproduction technologies. Beginning in his earliest years in Chicago, Sandburg was immersed in a new auditory culture subtended by the phonograph that for poets transformed the voice from a time-honored trope of expression into the material trace of a phenomenon. Sandburg's knowledge of Chippewa and Navajo song, an essential resource for the sonic breakthroughs of *Chicago Poems*, as mentioned in the introduction, was the result of dedicated study and correspondence with ethnologists and poets, such as Frances Densmore, Mary Austin, and Alice Corbin Henderson. Their transcriptions and translations of tribal performances now involved the mediation of wax cylinder recordings and the recognition of what Sandburg called "undersong": inflected textures and supporting rhythms of the singing voice.¹¹ By the mid-1920s, as part of his research for *The American Songbag*, Sandburg was shopping for "race records" on Chicago's South Side and amassing a collection of several hundred commercial jazz, blues, and gospel recordings.¹² Even before recording technology incorporated the microphone, phonography's mechanisms of acoustic registration and reproduction revealed otherwise imperceptible dimensions of vocal sound; its place in the listener's home, meanwhile, meant that a record collector like Sandburg could establish an intimate connection with a song tradition or a musical culture whose real locus existed on the other side of a geographic or social barrier. Most

¹¹ For Sandburg's involvement in the cross-pollination of free-verse experiment and ethnological research during the Imagist period, see his contribution to the "Aboriginal Poetry" issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 9.5 (February 1917): 254-55. Sandburg uses the metaphorical expression "undersong" in the poems "Clean Hands" (1920) and "Shag-bark Hickory" (1920).

¹² Stashed among Sandburg's research materials for *The American Songbag* (1927) are still to be found brochure catalogs for "race records" distributed by Chicago record shops. One such catalog, which Sandburg received from the Douglas Music Shop on 36th and State Streets, promotes new records on the Paramount label (c. 1925) from Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters. Carl Sandburg Papers, Connemara Collection, 153-4-1.

importantly, phonography's separation of the voice from the body of the performer displaced markers of race and class onto qualities of the voice itself, granting listeners new modes of precognitive access to the self-expressions of others.

These characterizations of the phonograph and the auditory culture that it subtended have persisted over generations of technological evolution: long before Marshall McLuhan or Friedrich Kittler described the basic operation of the phonograph as "outring" human auditory faculties, or "rematerializing" our eardrums and nerve pathways as hardware and substrates, Theodor Adorno wrote in 1928 of phonographic sound evoking a "primordial affect" in listeners by giving physical resonance to ethereal voices.¹³ Accounts of early modernist poetry, however, have not reckoned with these fundamental and widespread changes to the experience of sound in the period and how they shaped the context in which Sandburg and other poets stretched their formal resources and addressed their audiences.¹⁴ When Sandburg recorded his own folksong performances, the first of many, in 1925 and 1926, he combined the acoustics of the phonographic medium with the kind of rhapsody Yeats had called the primitive singing of poetry.¹⁵ His project was to transform a public into a collectivity through resonant sound.

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 300; Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 29-33 and 44; Theodor W. Adorno, "The Curves of the Needle," translated by Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 48-55.

¹⁴ The poststructuralist suspicion of phonocentricism has led scholars exploring the impact of sound reproduction technologies on modernist poetry to maintain a similarly narrow focus on the materiality of poetic language. From Adalaide Morris's phonotextual "sound states" to Charles Bernstein's "close reading," the apprehension of poetry's interaction with recording technologies has thus far kept sound locked within phonetic, lexical, and syntactic frameworks. One important exception to this static approach is Lesley Wheeler, who argues that the distancing technologies of the phonograph and the radio transformed public poetry performances of the 1920s by requiring poets to find new ways of shoring up such intimate values in the experience of poetry as authorial presence and personality. See Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Two of these performances, "The Boll Weevil" and a medley called "Negro Spirituals," were released in 1926 by the Victor Talking Machine Company. Captured through microphones and amplifiers by Victor's new "Orthophonic" electrical recording process, these Sandburg recordings, as Andre Millard says of the technology, would have been a revelation to listeners for the unprecedented fidelity of their sound reproduction, particularly of Sandburg's deep baritone. "The Boll Weevil"/"Negro Spirituals," performed by Carl Sandburg, Victor 20135,

In this chapter I examine the intellectual background and the multi-faceted artistic outgrowth of the Sandburg-Lomax collaboration, providing an account of what their renovations to traditional ideas of communal expression in folksong contributed to a poetic culture more closely affiliated with the early history of recorded song than scholars have recognized. I begin by reconstructing a literary and cultural history encompassing the Chicago “salon” in which Sandburg and Lomax exchanged folksongs and ideas about oral tradition, the platform circuit where Sandburg staged a revival of oral poetry on the basis of folksong performance, and Sandburg’s career as a recording artist. Sandburg and Lomax would eventually produce ballad books assessing the heterogeneity of American oral traditions to settle a debate about race relations in a modern democratic society, but here I explain how the debate itself arose within a broader conversation—and a forgotten modernist experiment—around the social and political problems of modernity writ large and what solutions might emerge from a reconsideration of older cultural models. Turning to *The American Songbag*, I then argue that the serious historiographical ambitions of this masterwork temper and retool the Romantic nationalism of traditional balladry, clearing the way for a new project of cultural pluralism supported by Sandburg’s theatrical-realist approach to folksong. In their call for dramatic impersonation, song texts for Sandburg become scores for enacting sympathetic identification with different subjective interiors, dramatizing the formation of a united multiracial and multiethnic underclass. Finally, I contextualize the cultural and political horizons of Sandburg’s *American Songbag* within a larger agonistic debate about race relations, civil rights, and cultural pluralism in Jim Crow America that allowed Sandburg and Lomax to recognize the stakes of their joint efforts as folklorists. By reconstructing this debate from the correspondence they began once Lomax left

78 rpm. See Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 139-44.

Chicago, and by framing it in terms of the arguments from Sandburg's *Chicago Race Riots* (1919) that had instigated it, I unfold how Sandburg and Lomax used their disagreements to articulate two contrasting accounts of folk culture as the governing logic for practical negotiations between racial identity and cultural pluralism. In his reaction to Sandburg's advocacy for economic and political equality among Chicago's working classes during and after the race riots, John Lomax argued for a kind of racial equality that depoliticized the Chicago salon's critique of modernity by presenting folk culture as a realm in which sentiment and behavior define social relations. Ultimately, I argue that Sandburg took the critical impulse of the Chicago salon in a different direction, redefining folksong as both a document of social history and a public hearing for present social injustices, and channeling it as a performer into a form of political dissent, if not outright protest.

I

Now that revisionist accounts of Sandburg's early career as a political activist and journalist have met with more recent attempts to recuperate his political poetry from decades of disrepute on formalist grounds, it is time to open a wider view onto the political dimensions of his collaborations across disciplines and across media.¹⁶ Fusing scholarship and first-hand investigation, Sandburg's career-spanning work as a folksong collector and popularizer enabled him to combine and extend the realist modes of his early poetry and journalism toward an art of direct social participation and engagement, all in the context of a scholarly discipline with an increasing public outreach. Even in its nascent interwar years, public folklore itself operated by

¹⁶ Phillip R. Yanella, *The Other Carl Sandburg: A Portrait of the Radical Sandburg before His Glory Days in the Pantheon of Popular Writers* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1996); Brian M. Reed, "Carl Sandburg and the Problem of Bad Political Poetry," in *Phenomenal Reading: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 3–31.

disseminating the products of research across multiple mass media channels, as John Lomax's career in print and on record and radio amply demonstrates; and for Sandburg a growing public audience for folksong in the interwar period allowed him to explore a mode of poetry that ranged in its realization from the page to the stage and the phonograph record.¹⁷ Prior to their meeting in 1917, what drew Sandburg to Lomax's published work were the folklorist's efforts to naturalize vernacular songs as manifestations of the practical rhythms of labor, which imbued them with a unique capacity to describe and to evoke the practical social and political life of agrarian laborers. When they met and heard each other sing from their respective repertoires, what sounded like folksinging to Sandburg was Lomax's ability to naturalize his voice as a seemingly transparent medium for the expressions of collective practical life that had been sedimented into the songs themselves.¹⁸ While folklore research as a source of cultural knowledge would give Sandburg an alternative to the antiquarianism of Pound, Eliot, and others with Continental leanings, its popular and populist dimensions also offered him an escape from the retreat into aesthetic autonomy that these peers were soon to make on the path to High Modernism—precisely the vantage point from which they would dismiss his poetic achievements.¹⁹ “[We] had had our fill of sophisticated programs and artists,” said Lloyd Lewis of himself and Sandburg

¹⁷ Early manifestations of public folklore include Sandburg's “lecture-recitals” on and of American folksongs from 1919 onward; Robert Winslow Gordon's “Old Songs that Men Have Sung,” a column for *Adventure* magazine (1922–26), and his “Folk Songs of America” series for the *New York Times* (1927–28); and John and Alan Lomax's release of phonograph albums and radio programs based on their holdings in the Archive of American Folk Song, Library of Congress, beginning in the early 1940s. See especially John Lomax's radio series *The Ballad Hunter* (Archive of American Folk Song, AFS L53, 1941), cassette. Public folklore came into its own in the postwar period when academic folklorists began founding institutions and societies dedicated to merging the conservation and presentation of folklore with public life. See Robert Baron and Nicholas Spitzer, *Public Folklore* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992).

¹⁸ Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 88; Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 8.

¹⁹ Walter Kalaidjian, Carey Nelson, and Michael Thurston have posed strong historical arguments critiquing the standards of aesthetic autonomy underpinning the consolidation of the field of modernist poetry from the 1930s onward. See Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Thurston, *Making Something Happen: Political Poetry between the World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

and the other Chicago writers who embraced Lomax's folklore as a contribution to modernist poetry just before the end of the First World War. These writers saw themselves as launching a poetic counter-revolution within a broader modernist movement that would come to reject them as *arrière-garde*.

Sandburg first met Lomax through Lewis, who would become the principal chronicler of the group they formed in Chicago for the performance, exchange, and discussion of folksongs.²⁰ Lomax had moved to Chicago in 1917 from Austin, Texas, for reasons wholly unrelated to his work as a folklorist. After a long power struggle with the state governor, Lomax left the University of Texas, where he had been president of an alumni association, and secured a job at a Chicago investment bank through the literary scholar Barrett Wendell, who had encouraged and sponsored Lomax's study of cowboy songs at Harvard.²¹ Once in Chicago, however, Lomax found his interests again turned to folklore. He reconnected with his former Harvard classmate Tom Peete Cross, now professor of English at the University of Chicago and an expert on Celtic folklore. At Cross's Hyde Park home, which Lomax called his "one bright spot" amid the "financial vortex of Chicago," the two men began sharing song material and discussing the professionalization of folklore as a "scientific" discipline, which Cross would eventually help establish on the basis of comparative structural analysis of folklore texts.²² But as more members joined them, their informal discussions assumed a tenor that resembled more closely the literary

²⁰ Unless otherwise noted, my primary sources for the details of this historical account are a letter from Lloyd Lewis and the portion of John Lomax's memoir that the author included it there to supplement. See John Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 85–91.

²¹ For a full account of the local political antagonisms that drove Lomax out of Austin and into Chicago, see Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867-1948* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 195–230.

²² Lomax's 1920–21 correspondence with Cross gives glimpses into the nature of their folklore conversations in Chicago. John Avery Lomax Family Papers, Box 3D155, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. The scientific rigor of Cross's comparative folkloristics is best displayed in his *Motif Index of Early Irish Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1952).

study of the ballad that Lomax and Cross had both learned at Harvard, while prefiguring aspects of the public folklore programming that Lomax would soon help establish at the Library of Congress. When Cross introduced Lomax to Lewis, a Chicago journalist and budding historian with deep connections to the city's literary circles, the conversations about folklore moved to Lewis's Hyde Park apartment and became a salon devoted to the singing and appreciation of ballads and other vernacular songs. Sandburg had known Lewis since 1914, when his work on the Chicago workers' newspaper *The Day Book* put him in touch with the city's leading reporters. Before Lomax arrived, Sandburg and Lewis, along with fellow journalist Otto McFeely and publisher Alfred MacArthur, regularly gathered on the Indiana Dunes of Lake Michigan, where they formed a kind of campfire bohemia for the purpose of reciting and exchanging various types of vernacular songs. This precursor to the Hyde Park folksong salon was modeled on an archetype popularized by Lomax's folklore writing, and echoed in Sandburg's labor reporting, of the communal situations where living oral traditions were supposedly circulated: the microcosms of simple egalitarian societies found in the campsites of cowboys and International Workers of the World.²³ The Hyde Park folksong salon imported this imagined life world into a semi-private space of impersonal recitation and rational discussion.

Part academic smoker, part campfire songfest, and fully immersed in the atmosphere of Chicago's ludic but learned interwar bohemia, the salon where Lewis introduced Sandburg to Lomax encompassed the elite and popular cultures surrounding the circulation and study of folksong in the early twentieth century.²⁴ The disparateness of the salon was matched by the various strains forming the idea of folksong that the group evolved together. Each member of the

²³ See John Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (Boston: Macmillan, 1910), xvii-xxvi.

²⁴ "Songfest" was Sandburg's term, apparently derived from hobo or Wobbly slang, for a communal gathering where songs were performed and exchanged in a convivial spirit. See Sandburg, *American Songbag*, 190-91.

salon contributed examples of one or more types of regional or occupational song traditions to a group repertoire that stretched the idea of folksong beyond the Euro-American ballad: Lomax contributed the ballads of western cowboys and southern tenant farmers, as well as the field hollers and moans of southern levee camp and lumber mill workers, all collected on early recording trips; Sandburg, the humorous and defiant political songs, often parodies of popular hymns, that he learned from hobos and (later) Wobblies like Joe Hill; Cross, the Negro spirituals that he heard as a student and later as a teacher in rural central Virginia; and Lewis, the chanteys and other work songs of black steamboat roustabouts that he learned as a youth in the Ohio River Valley. At the salon, Lomax sang “The Buffalo Skinners,” “The Ballad of the Boll Weevil,” and “Dink’s Song (Nora’s Dove),” a levee camp moan close to the source of the blues; Sandburg sang “Hallelujah I’m a Bum Again,” a hobo song that was becoming a Wobbly anthem; and Cross sang “These Bones are Gonna Rise Again,” a traditional Negro spiritual in call-and-response form. Evolving into a supra-generic category, folksong was coming to mean any song that, as an oral tradition, had become particular to and widespread among a specific social or ethnic group, and any song that, as a collectible artifact, would become useful in identifying the experiences, values, and feelings that held those communities together and the grounds on which out-group members might understand their inner natures.

The songs shared at the Hyde Park salon encompassed a heterogeneous plurality of specific scope, and the group’s intuitive sense of what belonged within the salon’s evolving repertoire crystallized a new conception of folksong that, for Sandburg, rendered folksong modern. What qualified as a folksong for the salon was no longer a question of the song’s origins or pedigree, as it had been for Francis James Child and his students of the ballad at Harvard, but rather a question of its historicity and legacy as a common bond among those who worked and

traveled in strata of society outside or beneath the dominant and ascendant white middle-class. Sandburg would eventually designate American folksongs construed in this way as “songs that men have sung in the making of America,” with the emphasis on labor and migration as the activities that made the songs the substrata of both a long national history and an emergent modern society.²⁵ The proceedings of the Hyde Park salon demonstrated the group’s understanding that folksongs themselves were defined by circulation, exchange, and recontextualization: songs became increasingly *of the people* as more and more varied constituencies took the songs up and with them and, in the process, transformed the tunes and verses for their own purposes. Under this definition of folksong, Sandburg and Lomax could expand the parameters of oral tradition dramatically to include media sources for their song collections that were indirectly related to oral informants, while Sandburg himself embraced informants whose class position diverged from the folk status of the songs they supplied. Sandburg readily accepted Cross’s version of “These Bones are Gonna Rise Again” for *The American Songbag*, for instance, because this second-hand interpretation of the spiritual attested to its common currency among and deep resonance for the many white communities he knew to have heard and adopted it.²⁶ By the time of the Hyde Park salon, meanwhile, Sandburg had already begun his pioneering use of mass media as a forum for collecting songs, a practice that would become a cornerstone method not only for *The American Songbag* but also for Lomax’s “composite ballads” in *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1932). The first published record of Sandburg’s work as a song collector, in fact, appeared in 1915 in the *International Socialist Review*, where Sandburg offered the first verse of a bawdy song that he had heard from railroad operators and work gangs and asked his readers, who also moved in these worlds, to supply the

²⁵ Sandburg, *American Songbag*, viii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 470.

rest from memory.²⁷ Lomax learned from Sandburg how print could serve as a vehicle for oral tradition: in the book that he said issued from new insights acquired at the Hyde Park salon, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* (1919), Lomax explored the relay between print and oral culture as definitive of modern folksong, setting the newspaper and magazine verse of Western poets alongside transcriptions of cowboy singers who had reformulated the published material for oral performance.²⁸ If the folklorists at the Hyde Park salon had seized on the communitarianism implicit in the accretive circularity of oral tradition's production and reception and held this dynamic as essential to folksong itself, then the methods of collection and presentation that they devised together also served to display the peculiar modernity of folksong, which they showed could thrive on early forms of remediation and commons-based sourcing of material.

When the Hyde Park salon formed in 1917, a crucial theoretical shift had been underway for a decade within the academic study of folklore, and this shift subtended the salon's rethinking of the folksong as a creature of vernacular practices of sometimes mass-mediated distribution and participation. Since the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, as Steve Newman has shown, collectors and scholars of the ballad had defined this genre of oral poetry by locating it on the starting point of a schematic timeline of cultural evolution that extended from "primitive" to "civilized" stages of development: the ballad was to be understood as the cultural expression of human groups living together in the most rudimentary forms of social organization.²⁹ Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) shaped the Romantic

²⁷ See Regan, ed., *The People's Pugilist*, 125.

²⁸ See Lomax's comparative presentation of Charles Badger Clark's "High Chin Bob" and a version of the poem as set to a tune and sung by a cowboy informant. John Lomax, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 33-35.

²⁹ Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon*, 44-48.

idea of the ballad as an “effusion of nature” bearing witness, in the realms of sentiment and custom, to the first stirrings of progress toward civilization.³⁰ For Francis James Child, the cultural infancy of the ballad meant that it could be defined as popular poetry in contrast to what he called the poetry of art: rather than the self-communion of an individual author writing privately for an unforeseen public, the ballad was to be understood now in more refined terms as the anonymous expression of an entire people or nation having just reached a stage of intellectual and moral coherence.³¹

In the early twentieth century, Child’s influential students at Harvard, Francis Barton Gummere and George Lyman Kittredge, set in place the theoretical framework for the numerous collections and studies of the ballad that would appear in the first three decades of the twentieth century by identifying the ballad even more closely with the type of community they thought necessary for its production. According to Child, this community was a reality in premodern and preindustrial Europe but was now only an ideal deducible from the ballads themselves, a homogeneous and unified “community of ideas and feelings” free from divisions among social classes and from distinctions between high and low cultural expression.³² The homogeneity of the community secured the conditions of communal authorship, in the words of Child and his students, that made the ballad genuinely popular. Gummere ascribed the communal authorship of the popular ballad to an archetypal “singing, dancing throng,” which he described as articulating “common emotion in common expression” through the unconscious activity of rhythmic

³⁰ Percy proposed that his collection of heroic and romantic narrative songs, which he dated from roughly 1000 to 1650, and ascribed to minstrels of the court and tavern, be used as a baseline “to survey the progress of life and manners [in England], and to inquire by what gradations barbarity was civilized, grossness refined, and ignorance instructed.” See Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (London: Allen, Unwin, 1927), 1-2 and 345-50.

³¹ Child articulated his theory of the ballad in an 1874 essay that was published posthumously in 1900. Francis James Child, “Ballad Poetry,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 31.1-3 (January–December 1994): 214.

³² *Ibid.*

improvisation.³³ Child had also emphasized ballad composition as an unconscious process, the absence of subjective and self-conscious expression serving as a key indicator of a ballad's popular origin.³⁴ And when Kittredge used the word "folk" in connection with this mode of expression in his 1904 preface to Child's monumental *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1892–1898), he meant not only the people as a homogeneous social entity but also, paradoxically, the people in the widest possible sense, as the mass.³⁵ Gummere, for his part, explicitly linked the idea of folk expression with the revolutionary political thought of the eighteenth century. In a series of books written between 1901 and 1909, he made the first half of this era's crucial shift in folklore studies: insisting on the unconscious process of communal ballad composition as an anthropological reality, he posited this mode of folk expression as a participatory activity essential to the organization of a democratic social body.³⁶ In the ballad, Gummere argued, "thought is absorbed in the perception and action of communal consent," and it was precisely this precognitive and nondiscursive mode of consent-giving and consensus-building that the ballad seemed to offer, for a next generation of scholars and collectors like Lomax and Sandburg, as a mechanism for practicing communitarian alternatives to a modern society predicated on bourgeois individuality.³⁷

But Lomax and Sandburg were equally informed by Kittredge's more radical revision to the ballad theory inherited from Child. While Sandburg never received any formal training in folklore studies, Lomax pursued a graduate degree in the field at Harvard when Kittredge not only led the department's courses on the popular ballad and advised all graduate-level research in

³³ Francis Barton Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 83.

³⁴ Child, "Ballad Poetry," 214.

³⁵ George Lyman Kittredge, "Introduction," in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads, Edited from the Collection of Francis James Child*, eds. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), xii.

³⁶ These works include *The Beginnings of Poetry* (1901), *The Popular Ballad* (1907), and *Democracy and Poetry* (1911).

³⁷ Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry*, 83–84.

folklore but also, through his teaching and scholarship, revised the communal theory of ballad composition to improve its empirical validity. This theoretical shift in the ballad concept that American folklore studies had inherited from Child was necessary on pedagogical as well as professional grounds: with the founding of the American Folklore Society in 1888, the discipline was entering the world of organized research associations alongside such anthropological outfits as the Bureau of American Ethnology (founded 1879), and in this professional atmosphere younger folklorists like Lomax and his fellow-students Tom Pete Cross and Robert Winslow Gordon needed to straddle the methods of literary and anthropological folklore in their work.³⁸ The unverifiable hypothesis of ballad composition by a “singing, dancing throng,” an image of egalitarian society extrapolated from historical accounts of medieval festal song performances, could not support research into the emergence and survival of living oral traditions, which, as Lomax found, required some degree of descriptive anthropology. Kittredge’s solution was to posit the folksong’s communal authorship, its very folk origins, as the practical effect of an observable process that he called “secondary composition.”³⁹ Some songs, especially those like work songs that involve large vocal ensembles and reiterative call-and-response patterns, really do originate through collective and spontaneous acts of invention, Kittredge argued, while others come from the imagination of a single and determinate author performing for an audience comprised of individuals who begin a cycle of adaptation and accretion by singing the original back to the author and passing it onto new audiences with their interpolations and improvements. In both cases, the song evolves over a series of stages, and in its earliest stage it functions more

³⁸ On the alternating divergences and convergences between literary and anthropological folklore in the early twentieth-century, see Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 22–44.

³⁹ For Kittredge’s theory of secondary ballad composition, see his “Introduction,” *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, xvi-xviii.

as a template for the elaboration and refinement of a song than as an integral song in and of itself.

Anticipating by two decades ethnomusicologist Milman Parry's theory of oral-formulaic composition, Kittredge described the process of "secondary composition" as one in which singers borrow from a storehouse of verbal commonplaces or floating verses belonging to their community's folklore and, testing out various permutations, use them to assemble a song whose final form would depend on the consensus of the entire community. This process of "secondary composition" might begin immediately and unfold synchronically in the initial stages of the song's collective improvisation, as in the work song, on the basis of shared verbal commonplaces; but for what Kittredge considered genuine folksong the process would always extend diachronically over the entire lifetime of the song, as new stock phrases replaced existing ones in the mouths of different singers. According to Kittredge's theory, a song becomes a folksong when its earliest permutations, whatever their origins, are remade through oral transmission, whose effects as a process of secondary composition could be observed by collecting variants of the same song from manuscript and print sources or directly from oral informants. Effects that ballad scholarship from Percy to Child had denigrated as evidence of the "mutilation" brought upon heroic verse by oral tradition—the introduction of new dialects and musical idioms, the melding of verses from multiple songs into one, and the alteration of setting, plot, character, and point of view—became, in Kittredge's theory, the defining characteristics of folksong. For Kittredge, the "inextricably complicated chatter" of oral transmission was essential, not accidental, to the folksong; and through this long and circuitous process, songs articulated communities just as much as communities composed songs. For the generation of students educated by Kittredge at the turn of the twentieth century, his descriptive and normative

theory meant that folksong could be grasped as a social phenomenon rather than an antiquarian relic.

Drawn to folksong in the first place by the possibility of joining and honoring the ranks of anonymous singers who listened to the oral traditions around them and “kept those songs as living things of the heart and mind,” Sandburg enthusiastically received Kittredge’s theory of oral transmission from Lomax and Cross and, in the years of the Hyde Park folksong salon, made it the basis of his practice as a performing poet. Insofar as the accretions, condensations, substitutions, and transpositions involved in oral transmission gave folksong its essential character, Sandburg reasoned, he could enter the stream of a song’s transmission and assume the license as collector and performer to reshape its musical and lyrical elements, keeping true the tradition of those anonymous singers who had launched the song’s “secondary composition.” Though in practice it could look like an art of assemblage, Sandburg understood folksong in the hands of the literary author as an art of adaptation: his interventions in his folksong material were encompassed (and sanctioned) by the law of variance that scholarly consensus after Kittredge had deemed inherent to oral tradition. “The most distinctive sign of a folk song is the existence of variants,” wrote Sandburg in 1950, after decades of producing his own variants of traditional songs as part of his repertoire as a platform speaker.⁴⁰

Sandburg had lectured on the Lyceum and Chattaqua circuits since 1905, but it was not until the years of the folksong salon that he began including song performances alongside poetry recitation and oratory in his speaking engagements. Sandburg billed these omnibus performances as “lecture-recitals,” and in the years prior to *The American Songbag*, they served as the staging ground for the evolution of his approach to song material, providing Sandburg with a middle

⁴⁰ Acknowledging that he was presenting “Cold Rainy Day,” a song collected by Zora Neale Hurston, with his own adaptations, Sandburg explained: “There are no rules against such adaptation when so indicated. When a folk song undergoes an adaptation [in the course of singing] it becomes a variant. The most distinctive sign of a folk song is the existence of variants.” Carl Sandburg, *New American Songbag*, 76.

ground for experimentation between the intimacy of singing for the salon and the publicity of disseminating his voice across mass media.⁴¹ From 1919 to 1927, before he unveiled a full-fledged style of song presentation on phonograph record and in print, Sandburg's lecture-recitals in scores of clubrooms, banquet halls, and university auditoriums allowed him to develop a singular musical idiom and a learned amateur's explanatory discourse, half-anecdotal and half-scholarly, for framing diverse song traditions into a coherent public program of what he called "American songs." This program's very earliest listeners heard as its organizing principle the authenticity not of Sandburg's performances but of his own personality as a figure representing the working classes, blending the foreignness of his Swedish immigrant background with the ordinariness of his prior life as a common laborer.

Sandburg's first documented lecture-recital occurred in Chicago on December 21, 1919, when he performed such newly acquired cowboy ballads and black ballads as "Jesse James," "The Boll Weevil," and "Frankie and Albert," alongside fellow Chicago poet Lew Sarett, who chanted his interpretations of "Amerindian" songs to the accompaniment of a large tom-tom drum.⁴² Criticizing Sarett's overt theatricality, Emanuel Carnevali praised Sandburg in his notice of the joint performance for *Poetry* magazine, remarking on how Sandburg enlivened his "old ballads" with the "majestic dignity of his voice." Carnevali emphasized the power of Sandburg's personality in performance and his use of song as a vehicle of self-expression, describing him hyperbolically as "one of the most completely, successfully alive human beings" he had ever

⁴¹ My account of Sandburg's lecture-recitals is based on extant publicity materials associated with these performances, and on first-hand accounts by Sandburg's friends, associates, and peers, especially Lloyd Lewis. But my account is also indebted to Niven's synoptic presentation of other primary documents. "Lecture-Recital," Carl Sandburg Papers, Connemara Collection, 160-010, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; Lloyd Lewis, "Last of the Troubadours," Lloyd Lewis Papers, Box 7, Folder 120, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Niven, 444–50.

⁴² For a review of this performance, the earliest extant account of Sandburg's lecture-recitals, see Emmanuel Carnevali, "The Sandburg-Sarett Recital," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 15.5 (February 1920): 271-72.

witnessed. But for Carnevali the aural medium of Sandburg's voice (the locus of the "dignity" he imparted to his songs) broadened what he considered the humanity of Sandburg's performance beyond the narrow channels of self-expression. In Carnevali's account, Sandburg's voice functioned as a social interface that allowed performer and audience alike to share in a common sense of dignity drawn from the heritage of oral traditions they were told was their own.

Sandburg "gave the audience some credit for being human, too," said Carnevali, now with ironic understatement. The human dignity Sandburg evoked in his singing united his audiences in what the Harvard ballad scholars had called a community of feeling, irrespective of their own ethnic, racial, or class identity: the soon-to-be usual program of white and black folksongs in Sandburg's first reported lecture-recital made clear that the dignifying and ennobling power of Sandburg's voice worked indiscriminately over materials of disparate origins. Carnevali's descriptive language indicates that Sandburg's songs had not yet acquired the "folk" designation in his lecture-recital program; they would have been more properly called workers' songs. But the link between the dignifying, legitimizing effect of Sandburg's voice and what he would mean by "folksong" is evident in the fact that Carnevali, an Italian-American poet who had arrived in the country only half a decade earlier, could be brought to recognize "The Boll Weevil" as an "old ballad."

If Lomax and his teachers and peers at Harvard had adopted the term "folk" from the early anthropological thought of German Romanticism to denote the anonymity of oral tradition, whether of improvised or authored origin, then Sandburg's eventual use of the term "folksong" for his vocal performances after 1920 allowed him to articulate the basic tenet of a democratic and popular poetic art: that all cultural production, in the words of Lloyd Lewis, "is the product of many minds."⁴³ In addition to his 1947 account of the Hyde Park folksong salon, Lewis also

⁴³ Lloyd Lewis, "Last of the Troubadours," Lloyd Lewis Papers.

wrote the most complete contemporary biographical sketch of Sandburg as a folksong collector and performer, in two distinct versions—one in 1928, and one in 1947.⁴⁴ As Lewis reveals, Sandburg thought that the antinomy between the poetry of art and the poetry of the folk could be resolved in his own poetry of public performance. Lewis's earlier account makes clear that Sandburg's project of reconceiving poetic art as folk culture in his lecture-recitals took shape at a decisive moment of transition in his own approach to the political instrumentality of poetry. Lewis recalled in 1928 that Sandburg's earliest lecture-recitals, preceding only slightly the one documented by Carnevali, predominately featured what he called "songs of social protest," particularly the songs of hobos and railroad workers that had become popular among I.W.W. activists. But by the early 1920s, Lewis noted, Sandburg had simultaneously softened the political edge and broadened the variety of his songs, rechanneling his radical socialism into a democratic populism by shifting the repertoire of his lecture-recitals from the specificity of workers' songs to the generality of people's songs.⁴⁵

Lewis's initial account also makes clear that, by 1919, with the early audiences of his lecture-recitals, Sandburg had negotiated the basic terms of a communicative situation in which they would participate with him as a *heterogeneous* "community of feeling" unified provisionally in the push-pull dynamic of identity and difference involved in what they heard: a voice sometimes familiar, sometimes strange, calling forth a new collective substratum of oral tradition precisely by giving individual and idiosyncratic expression to songs considered the heritage of other social and ethnic groups. Likening him to Ossian, Lewis described Sandburg as "wander[ing] over the Republic spading out the people's songs and singing them back to them

⁴⁴ Lewis's earlier account of Sandburg's folksong performances was never published, but internal evidence dates its composition to 1928. His later account first appeared in *The Chicagoan* and was revised for publication in Lloyd Lewis, *It Takes All Kinds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), 73-81.

⁴⁵ Lloyd Lewis, "Last of the Troubadours," Lloyd Lewis Papers.

like revelations.”⁴⁶ Lewis may seem to assert simply that Sandburg brought his listeners a new and revivifying aesthetic appreciation of a common folk heritage, but the logic of Lewis’s statement is deceptively complex. Because the people who composed Sandburg’s audiences were often second-hand informants of the songs he sang, but rarely the same people who had originated or popularized them, Sandburg’s first revelation for his listeners was the recognition that they, too, despite their class or ethnicity, belonged to the people invoked by “people’s songs.”⁴⁷ Sandburg affirmed for his white middle-class audiences and colleagues that the songs they had overheard in their proximity to various working classes, often from a young age, and passed onto him—songs that Lewis, for instance, had heard from roustabouts and field hands in the Ohio River Valley; or Robert Frost, from sailors in the San Francisco wharves; or Julia Peterkin, from tenant farmers and domestic servants on her South Carolina plantation—formed a collective substratum or deep national tradition underlying their own identity as Americans. The second revelation consisted in what Lewis described cryptically as the “abstract pathos of song” that Sandburg had learned to transmit in his mature, “other-worldly and mystic” style of delivery, especially for Negro spirituals.⁴⁸ His singing evoked for his listeners a continuum of emotional sensitivity and response that exceeded both the semantics and the pragmatics of the song’s communication, absorbing the song’s narrative or discursive content, referential contexts, and expressive intent into the perception of its innate human and national character. This emotional perception was revelatory, in Lewis’s sense, because it seemed to trigger tacit and immediate consent from all listeners that the sounds they heard, of whatever specific social or ethnic origin,

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sandburg confirmed that the circularity of collection, performance, and reception was central to his practice as folklorist and folksinger. See Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, ix.

⁴⁸ Lewis insisted that for Sandburg the “abstract pathos of song” was the “essence of folk-singing.” Lewis, “Last of the Troubadours,” Lloyd Lewis Papers.

adequately expressed the depth and richness of their own interior lives and articulated the essence behind the ideals, beliefs, and psychological orientations of American life in general.⁴⁹ Though Sandburg may have muted the political content of his songs, Sandburg made his singing the vehicle for a way of knowing based on resonance and recognition that manifested itself in feelings of commonality and fellowship. Steeped in the ballad scholarship of the period, he considered these feelings the baseline for preliminary exercises in forging political consensus.

Historicizing Sandburg's voice is essential to understanding the knowledge his singing communicated for the early audiences of American folksong as they cohered after the First World War. The voice Sandburg used as a singer was no transhistorical, metaphysical entity that mystified listeners with its pure ontic presence; rather, like any medium, it contained within itself the sedimented history of practical usage and technical development that had brought it forth from earlier forms of the same apparatus. Sandburg's voice combined several traditional performance styles.⁵⁰ First, as a lone voice accompanied by his own guitar playing, he inhabited a style of bardic solo singing that for centuries had been the bedrock of Euro-American balladry, and that since the turn of the twentieth century, and especially since the interwar popularity of

⁴⁹ Sandburg emphasized the diverse origins of his songs: like the informants whose voices he explicitly invoked, the songs themselves were "brought together from all regions of America." And yet the diversity of the songs and their informants all spoke with one voice an idea of national identity as independent of national origin and based instead on an imagined national destiny. In *The American Songbag*, Sandburg invoked this idea from Whitman's "Song of the Open Road": "Forever alive, forever forward they go, they go, I know not where they go, but I know that they go toward the best, toward something great." Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, viii.

⁵⁰ My approach to interpreting Sandburg's performance style, which is to identify traces of deep cultural patterns within its sounds, is based on Alan Lomax's theory of song style. See Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Song Style and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968). My account of Sandburg's voice is based on long and careful close listening to the vast discography of his recordings and my own attempts to hear it in the broader context of interwar American vernacular music on record. Few contemporary accounts of Sandburg's singing give careful attention to the qualities of his singing voice, but I am indebted for important details to Lloyd Lewis's liner notes on Sandburg's 1941 recordings from *The People, Yes*, Oscar Brand's liner notes on Sandburg's recordings from *The American Songbag*, and to Gregory d'Alessio's first-hand accounts of Sandburg's lecture-recitals of the 1950s and 60s. See Carl Sandburg, *The People, Yes*, Decca 29M 273, 1941, 33 rpm; Carl Sandburg, *Sings His American Songbag*, Caedmon TC2025, 1967, 33 rpm; and d'Alessio, *Old Troubadour: Carl Sandburg with His Guitar Friends* (New York: Walker, 1987), 35–36.

commercial “race” records, had become a dominant form of African American secular singing in the blues.⁵¹ Next, with his background as a public speaker for leftist political campaigns and the popular lecture circuit, Sandburg’s vocal delivery style was undergirded by the loud, exhortative, barnstorming oratory that had filled the soundscape of American political culture’s socialist-progressivist era.⁵² At the same time, finally, Sandburg softened and deepened this elocutionary style with a crooning delivery technique meant to evoke the chant and hymnody of choral singing in the black church. Listeners would have perceived these paradigms of expressive culture through a set of discrete but often overlapping traits of Sandburg’s singing voice: an Irish brogue inflection that evoked both Yeats’s “primitive singing” and Lindsay’s “higher vaudeville”; a dramatic *ore rotundo* elocution that, set at a baritone pitch, suggested a declamatory stage voice; and a constant, pulsating vibrato effect (bordering on tremolo) that served as a grounding sonic allusion to what Sandburg, referring to black religious and secular singing, once called the “murmur, moan, and cry” of “resonant moaners.”⁵³ In Sandburg’s voice, the cross-racial profile of these basic styles reflected a fusion of white and black song traditions that, as Scott Reynolds Nelson argues, germinated what would become known commercially as “country music” in the late 1920s.⁵⁴ Sandburg’s imprint on this form of American popular music was profound, but the hybridity of his performance style in the early interwar years altered the

⁵¹ On the transhistorical and cross-cultural performance style of bardic solo singing, see Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture*, 15-18. For the influence of balladry on the song traditions captured on race records, see Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 22-23.

⁵² Sandburg had been a prizewinning orator while a student at Lombard College, in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1900–1901, and from 1905 until his transition to the mass media of the phonograph and radio, he was both an indoor and outdoor platform speaker on the Lyceum and Chautauqua circuits, first throughout the Midwest and later nationally. Delivering lectures on Lincoln, Whitman, the ills of industrial society, and socialism, Sandburg trained himself in a style of performance he described as “oratory flung by a voice from a platform at a living audience.” Sandburg’s oratorical lectures evolved into his “lecture-recitals” of the folksong salon era, and his elocutionary style of vocal delivery later shaped the performances he gave on his recorded poetry recitations of the 1940s, some of the first ever “spoken word” recordings. See Niven, 54–57 and 114–15, and Sandburg, *The People, Yes*, 33 rpm.

⁵³ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 237 and 232.

⁵⁴ Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of An American Legend* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 136–38.

meaning of folksong more drastically (in its commercial *and* literary incarnations) by revolutionizing the very idea of nationality that it came to signify and communicate.

To arouse and transform listeners' tacit notions of national identity, Sandburg combined Euro-American solo singing with sonic elements of the non-European oral cultures comprising North America's hybrid folk music. For Sandburg, the total blend produced a perceptible idea of American indigeneity in his folksong performances that fed from and into a pluralist impulse common in cultural tracts of the period, from Waldo Frank's *Our America* (1919) to William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* (1925).⁵⁵ Consider, for instance, one of the performances captured on Sandburg's very first phonographic recording: "Negro Spirituals," recorded for the Victor Talking Machine Company in New York in 1926. The performance encompasses a medley of three fragments from Negro spirituals that Sandburg had collected in the early 1920s from oral informants, untrained singers who had taken the refrains and select verses from larger choral songs (or the storehouse of black religious oral tradition) and made them into private workaday songs, or what Sandburg called "work song-spirituals."⁵⁶ These fragmentary songs, then, were already a kind of solo performance when Sandburg first heard them; but his innovation was to sequence them as a composite form and present them as the "overheard" lyric utterance of a private voice in public, a format he remediated from his live performances to his recordings and then replicated in his songbooks.⁵⁷ In *The American*

⁵⁵ In his preface to *The American Songbag*, Sandburg argued that the racial, ethnic, and national diversity of song traditions he assembled there were "so intensely and vitally American" that they could be enlisted in the Emersonian campaign to establish roots for all those "persons born and reared in this country who culturally have not come over from Europe." These songs, Sandburg added, could be synthesized as the raw material of a "great native American grand opera." Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, vii-viii.

⁵⁶ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 480.

⁵⁷ For Sandburg, his informants' transformation of the spiritual from choral song into solo singing provided him with a new model of the lyric by giving him access to a more "true instance of the poetry 'to be overheard rather than heard.'" Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 447.



Figure 2: "The Boll Weevil" and "Negro Spirituals," the two sides of Carl Sandburg's first commercial phonograph recording. Victor 20135, 1926. (Author's collection.)

Songbag, the songs comprising “Negro Spirituals” bear the titles “I Know Moonlight,” “All Night Long,” and “Zek’l Weep,” the final two songs of the medley belonging to what Sandburg described as a “majestic trilogy” collected in Columbia, South Carolina from an elderly black domestic worker named Rebecca Taylor.⁵⁸ In his 1926 recorded performance, Sandburg aimed to capture the “majestic” effect of Taylor’s voice through the minimal but recognizable musical cues that his technically limited voice could reproduce, adding what he elsewhere called the “power” and “authority” of the black voice (with its nuanced, controlled “wails and quavers”) to rhythms and instrumentation borrowed from other sources.⁵⁹ As he did for most of the black song material that he performed, Sandburg compressed the sprawling measures of his “Negro Spirituals” to an eight- or twelve-bar ballad meter, transposing their slow dirge-like tempo and elongated phrases into the loping, uptempo pulse and heavily-accented punctuation of the *corridor*, *canción ranchera*, and southern mountain music that fed into cowboy ballads. The “abstract pathos of song” in “Negro Spirituals” sounds through the essence of Sandburg’s

⁵⁸ For the Rebecca Taylor trilogy, see Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 447-49.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

signature song style: vibrato in tone and rubato in rhythm, with three-chord, finger-picked guitar accompaniment beneath the voice. In “All Night Long,” for instance, Sandburg evokes the “wails and quavers” of the black religious singing he imitates by pronouncing long vowel sounds with a periodic variation in frequency that the phonograph reproduces with great sensitivity (“*All night long*”), while the free rhythm and flexible phrasing of his *parlando rubato* breaks through the regularity of alternating accented beats when he relaxes the simple guitar work that sustains it, particularly on the elongated vowels of the closing refrains (“Do, *Lord*, deliver poor *me*”). Sandburg’s guitar playing places the spiritual in the world of the Northern European Child ballad, but his vocal effects allow the song to overstep its boundaries into a soundscape that is elusively non-Western. The presence of Sandburg’s guitar on the recording, too, introduces a baseline of non-Anglo, continental North American alterity that partially estranges both the African and Northern European elements of the spiritual. Still a novelty in the 1920s as a Southern European import into the folk music of the Mexican-American border, the guitar possessed in its “low Mexican thrumming” what Sandburg called the “sound / potential of profound contemplation,” giving credence to the epithet of “troubadour” he had earned among critics, and serving as physical metonymy for the continental breadth and ethnic pluralism of his *American Songbag*.⁶⁰ Preserving the African American and Latin American elements of his musical sources as substrata of his balladeer persona, Sandburg equipped his songs to produce a widespread historical consciousness of America itself as a multinational polity.

The alterity of black folksong, like the hybrid musical culture of the Mexican-American border, captured Sandburg’s attention from the years of the Hyde Park folksong salon onward and deepened his investment in the antinomian cultural and political possibilities of oral

⁶⁰ Carl Sandburg, “The Guitar, Some Definitions,” in Jhon C. Akers, ed., *A Small Friend: Carl Sandburg’s Guitar* (Spartanburg, SC: Holocene, 2008), 45.

tradition. Sandburg, Lomax, and Lewis all understood black folksong in particular as a kind of radical outside to the forces of industrial capitalism that seemed to threaten the national project of becoming a more perfect union. When Lewis wrote that the Hyde Park salon had turned against the “sophisticated programs and artists” of the pre-war avant-garde in their embrace of oral tradition, he meant that they were establishing folksong as a cultural model resistant to the capitalist ideology of civilizational progress founded on rupture and supersession, which the propulsive movements of the avant-garde had replicated. For Lewis, the watchword of this ideology was “efficiency.” Lewis likened the “culture” of Chicago at the time of the folksong salon to a giant “mechanism” churning the gears of industrial modernity. Foremost among the “big industrial cities of the 1920s” that Lewis, Sandburg, and Lomax had grown “a little sick of,” Chicago was, despite the rich confluence of vernacular song traditions forming there as a sustaining environment for the salon itself, the central site of several regimes of industrial-age efficiency.⁶¹ According to Lewis, these forces of disenchantment combined to create “a civilization which was over-scientific, over-capitalized, [and] over-mechanized,” and in his view the folksong salon “represented an escape from [its] complexities” by incubating an experience of nostalgia for what he called the “natural” and the “authentic.” The anti-industrialism that Lewis ascribed to the Hyde Park folksong salon made it bear a family resemblance to the “national agrarian movement” declared a decade later in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). This Southern Agrarian polemic opposed the “capitalization of the applied sciences” in the economic

⁶¹ These regimes, I suggest, would have included the technological modernization of industry itself, which streamlined the human rhythms of the labor process through automation; the scientific engineering and bureaucratic management of Progressive reform, which proposed waste-management policies such as anti-noise ordinances that often stifled the expressive cultures unique to urban-industrial life; and the profit-motive of big business and big finance where Lomax himself found employment, which entrusted control over economic life to the supposedly self-regulating mechanisms of the laissez-faire marketplace.

organization of the urban north.⁶² But the Chicago coterie stopped well short of the Southern Agrarians' wholesale anti-modern stance. Not even in his folksong collecting did Sandburg ever turn to an agrarian arcadia outside the history of modernity as a vantage point from which to levy his critical portrayal of capitalist and urban-industrial society. As a folklorist, Sandburg wanted to uphold the survival of folksong into modernity as a sign of utopian possibility on many fronts *within* urban interwar society, and he wanted to historicize the coequality of America's folksong heritage with its rise as a modern industrial nation. As such, Sandburg handled even song material with rural origins or transhistorical horizons as part of the local oral culture of industrial cities and, often, as reflections or commentaries on urban working-class life. For Sandburg, the apocalypticism of the Negro spiritual "God's Going to Set This World on Fire" was best understood through its appropriation by I.W.W. agitators before the First World War.⁶³

The stakes of the Hyde Park folksong salon greatly exceeded mere nostalgia for agrarian wholeness and simplicity in the frenzied atmosphere of industrial-metropolitan Chicago. But Sandburg realized as a performing artist that he could tap into a nostalgia-like structure of feeling, and operate on a related spectrum of emotional perception, to make folksong do political work. Sandburg's voice on the stage, in the parlor, and amid the banquet had a powerful affective hold over his listeners, as certain listeners' reports indicate.⁶⁴ The "haunting" resonance of Sandburg's voice was perceptible for these listeners in the environmental acoustics of live performance, but phonographic reproduction gave it what had become audible, as other reports indicate, as the essential folk quality of reverence. After he heard Sandburg's recording of

⁶² Donald Davidson, et al., eds., *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), xxxix.

⁶³ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 478.

⁶⁴ In 1925, Sandburg sang "The Buffalo Skinners" at a banquet for Sinclair Lewis, and Lloyd Lewis remembered the occasion as "the night Sandburg made Sinclair Lewis cry." Around the same time, Sandburg also reportedly sang "The Foggy, Foggy Dew" for filmmaker D.W. Griffith and soon received the ardent telegram, "I am haunted by the song." See Lloyd Lewis, "Last of the Troubadours," in *It Takes All Kinds*, 73-74; cf., Niven, 445.

“Negro Spirituals,” the first musicologist hired to transcribe the author’s singing for *The American Songbag* marked the experience as “the first time in my life I have ever wept over a phonograph record.” Calling the record “the most perfect piece of reproduction I have ever heard,” this sensitive listener detected a substratum of alterity in Sandburg’s voice that only technological mediation could reveal: “The depths and distances and the blue crying of black hearts are all there.”⁶⁵ Sandburg’s voice on record imaginatively dilated a listener’s sense of time and space while possessing an immediacy of emotional expression and evocation. Both features were the effects of a careful, studied interplay between voice and technology. As Adorno’s account from the same period suggests, phonography was one form of technological reproduction that for early observers seemed to enhance rather than destroy the aura of an artwork or artistic performance. The exaggerated timbre of Sandburg’s vibrato ensured that, in Adorno’s words, “specific sensory qualities” of the acoustic source (Sandburg’s body) materialized even in the abstract reconstitution of phonographic sound (the flat shellac disc), creating an auratic sense of “depths and distances” in the relation of source to substrate.⁶⁶ On an imaginative level, this aura elicited the recognition of an arcane tradition brought hauntingly to life. A technological feature of the recording substrate, then, enabled Sandburg’s close listener and collaborator to perceive the expressive culture of another folk or people as the underlying essence of their humanity, and with a degree of physical and emotional intimacy—the “blue crying of black hearts.” By transforming the supposed biological essence of race into a perceptible feature of performance style, phonography for Sandburg turned an ostensible category of difference into a site of more expansive identity for listeners, one shot through with

⁶⁵ Sandburg’s correspondence with his musical assistant, Alfred Frankenstein, contains illuminating insights into the successive stages of remediation that produced the total ecology of the *American Songbag* project. Alfred Frankenstein to Carl Sandburg, 9 October 1926, Carl Sandburg Papers, Connemara Collection, 2-021-053.

⁶⁶ Adorno, “The Curves of the Needle,” 54.

the new folk quality of acousmatic sound, uncertain in its origins but deep in its resonances. Lloyd Lewis, too, had a name for this unification of singer and listener in a new reality determined by the voice's medium: the "transporting of the imagination."⁶⁷ But for Sandburg this mobility of the imagination served a deeper engagement with the central conflicts of the modern industrial metropolis, where folk culture represented an imagined set of alliances within urban-industrial society rather than a renunciation of its basic terms.

II

By the time Lomax left Chicago in early 1920, he and Sandburg together had made a definite contribution to the study of folklore. Gummere had identified an innate politics of folksong by describing it as a mode of expression in which individual thought succumbed to the more basic, and more distributed, activity of unconscious "communal" consent-giving. And Kittredge, by highlighting the process of oral transmission, had produced a concept of folksong as coeval with the social existence of those who sang it. But Sandburg and Lomax took these principles of what Child had first called the impersonality of folksong and extended them into the political arena of the early twentieth century, positing the negotiation of individual and collective expression in song as integral to way industrial labor organizers and agrarian populists were in fact experiencing the political process in the interwar period. Whether supporting economic and social justice in the industrial metropolis or an egalitarianism established beyond it, Sandburg and Lomax tried to adapt notions of collectivity that even Gummere and Kittredge still associated with a hypothetical and ideal "folk" for use in addressing the practical and political lives of a diverse proletariat.

⁶⁷ Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 88-89.

Sandburg and Lomax would never agree on how to articulate the collective and communitarian life implicit in their concept of folksong with a single set of concrete political objectives, but they worked to resolve this disagreement by defining the content of folksong in relation to political sentiment rather than political action. This shift required Sandburg and Lomax, as collectors and editors, to produce accounts of their songs (by turns scholarly, documentary, and anecdotal) that framed them as testimony of the inner lives of their informants. Where Child and his followers at Harvard had identified the impersonality of the ballad with the objectivity achieved by its narrative mode of presentation, Sandburg and Lomax reconceived the impersonality of song in terms of the singer's act of impersonation.⁶⁸ In other words, they complicated what their predecessors had understood as the collective expression attainable in song, predicating song's capacity to communicate communal feeling and to activate communal consent on a public mode of subjective expression (one that could be inhabited from multiple actual subject positions) rather than the depersonalized stance of the traditional ballad narrator.

In Chicago, Lomax demonstrated to Sandburg the role of narrative realism in folksong, which Kittredge had identified in the ballad's conventional use of dialogue and reportage. When Lomax first sang "The Buffalo Skinners" for the Chicago salon, Sandburg responded by observing, "That's a novel—a whole novel—a big novel—it's more than a song."⁶⁹ But it was not simply narrative realism that led Lloyd Lewis to describe the effect of Lomax's singing on Sandburg and himself as the "transporting of the imagination." For Lomax's listeners at the salon, the target of this imaginative projection or semblance effect was more often a character, personality, or mood than a scene or story, its vehicle primarily the sound of the singer's voice; and Sandburg, first in his lecture-recitals and later in *The American Songbag*, translated this new

⁶⁸ See Child, "Ballad Poetry," 214-18; Kittredge, "Introduction," xii-xiii.

⁶⁹ Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 88; Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 270.

perception of folksong's unique blending of emotional and representational content into a full redefinition of folksong as a theatrical genre. Sandburg reinscribed subjectivity into the expressive function of folksong by answering its call for impersonation, which he achieved through means other than dramatic enactment: the voice itself, Sandburg suggested, could singularize the content of general or anonymous experience and feeling. In adopting a theatrical approach to what Lomax had taught him was the impersonality of folksong, Sandburg was in fact decoupling folksong from narrative and realigning it with the lyric.

Lyric poetry, of course, had been understood in terms of theatricality and impersonation since John Stuart Mill.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the ballad and its supposed absence of subjective orientation had for even longer been defined in antithesis to the lyric's reflexive subjectivity. As I have shown, the concept of the ballad that Lomax and Sandburg received from Child, Gummere, and Kittredge took shape from an Enlightenment-era evolutionary theory of poetic expression. In this theory, it is the lyric's subjective mode of expression that represents the final stage of progress from the ballad's collective voice, the entire teleology supposed to reflect the growth of civilization on epistemic grounds from primitive unconsciousness to modern self-consciousness. Operating within this evolutionary framework, Mill identified lyric utterance with theatrical presentation precisely to stress what he celebrated as the lyric's capacity for verbal displays of self-conscious, reflexive, and ironic awareness, which he thought transcended the prosaic

⁷⁰ In his 1833 essay "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," Mill wrote: "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy. It may be said that poetry which is printed on hot-pressed paper and sold at a bookseller's shop, is a soliloquy in full dress, and on the stage." For Mill, the union of self-consciousness and self-communion in the lyric meant that, in order to preserve its semblance of inwardness, the lyric subject's self-consciousness could not be betrayed as an affectation to 'eavesdropping' listeners. For Mill, the lyric subject had to be as if "a prisoner in a solitary cell" with listeners, unseen, listening through the wall. See John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," in *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Historical* (London: John W. Parker, 1859), 71; and Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 131.

consciousness at work in the ballad's collective mode of expression.⁷¹ As Mill's writing sponsored a modern idea of lyric on the model of dramatic monologue, primitivists like Gummere traced the unique expressive resources of the ballad and tribal song to ancient *choral* poetry and its drama of collective voice and movement. Inheriting these competing cultural theories of poetic expression, Sandburg established his model of folksong by synthesizing the ballad's claim to a deep and distributed collective consciousness with the lyric's features of inwardness and contemplativeness.

To make this synthesis work, Sandburg could not simply repudiate the objectivity and realism prized by ballad scholarship as the hallmarks of folksong and replace them with subjective self-expression. Rather, he claimed a new dimension of lyric interiority for the collective expression of folksong by cancelling any stable identification between interiority as such and a bounded individuality whose ultimate expression was self-consciousness. Sandburg's implicit definition of folksong in *The American Songbag* prefigured the dialectical model of the lyric that Adorno would posit at mid-century, where the self that speaks in the lyric is not circumscribed by or reducible to its origin in bourgeois liberal society but rather stakes its individuality on the "collective substratum" of a non-elite language.⁷² In contrast to the literary-historical phenomenon that Virginia Jackson has called lyricization, Sandburg gave expression not to Mill's self-communing subject but rather to the interior depths of non-identical subjectivities. Aiming to make the inner lives of different ethnic subjects permeable to one another and accessible to the bourgeois audience he called "middle-brow," Sandburg used the solo voice of lyric song to impersonate what literary theorists and folklorists alike had treated as

⁷¹ Among "nations in the earliest stages," Mill asserted, the only poetic expression available is through ballads; and ballads express only feelings "of the lowest and most elementary kind...wholly immersed in outward things." They have not, like the lyric, "turned themselves to the contemplation of the world within." Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," 66.

⁷² Theodor W. Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," translated by Bruce Mayo, in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edited by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Mackay Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 163.

the common stock material of a people's tradition, imbuing it with an intrinsic subjective character that did not point back to a reflexive self.

From the standpoint of the new lyric studies led by Jackson and others, Sandburg's early twentieth-century efforts to infuse lyric subjectivity into folksong may seem symptomatic of a modern literary-historical process in which poetic genres with their own distinct histories and frameworks for reception, such as the ballad, were becoming subsumed into a "singular idea of the lyric" as personal expression. Taking this view in Sandburg's case would be a mistake on two counts. First, lyricization names a process of reduction and deracination in the critical tradition since Mill, but from this tradition Sandburg inherited a different and more complex notion of the specific relationship between the ballad and the lyric. If modern Anglo-American literary criticism is responsible for an abstract idea of the lyric as self-communing thought and private utterance, this tradition has also upheld the ballad as a resource within poetic culture that resists the modern lyric's supposed drive toward subjectivism and solipsism. As totalizing a process as lyricization may be, since the eighteenth century the ballad has stood in relation to, rather than dissolving into, the lyric. Jackson and her coeditor Yopie Prins argue, in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, that "lyric" has become synonymous with "whatever we think poetry is," but the ballad has often served as the constitutive outside to normative definitions of the lyric, representing whatever we think poetry is no longer but could be if it somehow returned to its ancient status as oral art.⁷³ Whether it is the articulation of unindividuated consciousness preceding the lyric's origins (Mill), or the premodern antithesis to the modern "poetry of art" (Child), the ballad has stood for primordial embodiment and wholeness throughout the post-Enlightenment period, particularly for critics who have seen modernity as at once an ascent into

⁷³ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2–8.

greater rationality and a decline into increasing abstraction and dematerialization.⁷⁴ From Child to Sandburg and throughout the twentieth century, the abstract model of the lyric as interior monologue deracinated from historical experience had to contend with the idea that a “primary orality” leaves residual traces within modern poetic forms and draws them back into the communal world of song out of which they emerged. Casting Sandburg’s treatment of the folksong as simply a lyricization of the ballad would be to downplay what Sandburg’s folklore practice has to tell contemporary scholars about the role of the long ballad tradition in early twentieth-century conceptions of the modern lyric.

Second, to view Sandburg’s folksongs as a symptom of lyricization would be to misconstrue what the lyric itself meant for Sandburg and what role it played in his efforts to redefine modern poetry as oral poetry. The lyric for Sandburg was not a supra-generic poetic category like the folksong; rather, it named a specific mode of vocalization that the oral poet could assume in performing songs. The lyric element of a folksong, Sandburg wrote, prescribed a “role” for the singer and rendered the song “a little drama” in which singer and audience cooperated.⁷⁵ It did not call for personal expression, as the lyricization argument would have it. Cast in terms of genre, the lyric for Sandburg instead meant essentially dramatic monologue, but with an important difference. More than just the projection of a persona figure, this mode of lyric involved dramatic presentation and vocal utterance. It meant private utterance performed in public, its impersonality marked by an anonymous and fungible first-person singular. In this respect, Sandburg’s understanding of the lyric bears out Jonathan Culler’s recent claim that the new lyric studies has conflated two distinct conceptions of the lyric: the nineteenth-century lyric

⁷⁴ For a concise genealogical account of modernism’s vexations about the abstract and dematerializing world of modernity, see Bill Brown, “Materiality,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, edited by W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 49–63.

⁷⁵ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 31.

of personal expression and the twentieth-century lyric of impersonality and impersonation.⁷⁶ Sandburg's folksongs incorporate a dramatic model of the lyric that is modern not only for its embrace of impersonality and impersonation but also for its residue of oral performance traditions, from epic storytelling to declamation. For Sandburg, the lyric as "little drama" is an elocutionary posture that connects the song texts to a basic orality and the effects of immanent, realistic presentation it subtends. Sandburg populates his *Songbag* with characters, but what puts the lyric in Sandburg's folksongs is another kind of character, which might be called lyricity—not the forms, conventions, or "generative structures" of the lyric genre, as Culler would have it, but rather a character or quality of subjective inwardness issuing from the rhetorical and acoustic apparatus of the voice and the drama of impersonation that activates them.

Realigning folksong with dramatic lyric rather than balladic narrative, Sandburg nevertheless kept the "collective substratum" of oral tradition from vaporizing into subjectivism, by establishing a new realism based on impersonative and sonic character rather than representation. By the time he was drafting headnotes for entries in *The American Songbag*, he was rearticulating the realism of folksong in terms of both a dramatic role prescribed by each song text and an immediacy of expression made convincing by particular vocal styles. Theorizing these dual aspects of folksong's realism preoccupied the Chicago salon, and their practical application reached its mature form in Sandburg's two 1926 phonograph recordings for Victor. These recordings represent an early culmination not just of the theatrical and sonic realism that Sandburg brought to folksong but also of his attempts to engage these strategies as an aesthetic intervention into the racial and ethnic politics of the early interwar period. On each side of this first record, Sandburg's realist strategies enable him to perform a distinct mode of

⁷⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 84–85.

racial mimicry: on “The Boll Weevil,” Sandburg impersonates the archetypal, anonymous black songster by taking up his subject position in the song, while on “Negro Spirituals,” as I have suggested, he imitates qualities of a vocal style his letters and folklore writings would essentialize as the black voice. The storehouse of verses comprising “The Boll Weevil,” a ballad that originated in the 1890s from African American tenant farmers in Texas and the Mississippi Delta region, includes a self-effacing authorial attribution. From the earliest known version of the ballad, which John Lomax transcribed from a telephone conversation with an unnamed informant in 1905, to the performance he and his son Alan recorded on phonograph from Lead Belly in 1935, the solo voice of the black songster/informant literalizes the anonymity and impersonality of the oral tradition with some variant of this closing verse:

If anybody should ask you
Who composed this song
Tell 'em it was a dark-skinned nigger
With a pair of blue duckins on.
He's lookin' for a home.
He's lookin' for a home.⁷⁷

In the voice of a singer like Lead Belly, who lived and worked for many years on the farms and convict labor camps where the song circulated anonymously through oral transmission, this verse supports a reflexive gesture that points outward to the song's life in the community rather than inward into the transmitter's subjectivity. But for an interpreter like Sandburg, this verse establishes a general subject position (the black songster) that a non-member of the song's community can take up as a dramatic role. When Sandburg performs precisely this operation on his 1926 recording, he doubles the reflexive gesture of songster/informants like Lead Belly,

⁷⁷ For an account of the first recorded performance of “The Boll Weevil,” mediated by telephone, see Alan Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 519. For the version of “The Boll Weevil” quoted here, see the 1935 Lead Belly performance recorded by John and Alan Lomax in Wilton, CT, for the Library of Congress. *Leadbelly: Important Recordings, 1934–1949*, Disc A, performed by Lead Belly, JSP, 2006, compact disc.

calling attention not only to the community of black folk who continue to “compose” the song but also to the space it opens up for a white performer to credit this community of black authors while identifying with the singularity of the black songster. Inhabiting this space by projecting a dramatic persona creates an interiority-effect for a song that insists on its own locus in collectivity. The interiority-effect of Sandburg’s “Boll Weevil” is not a subjective depth somehow missing from the song itself and won for it by Sandburg’s performance; rather, this semblance of interiority belongs to a particular staging of intersubjective engagement, a conferral of recognition and respect that occurs through the very act of impersonation.

Sandburg had a name—“naivete”—for the peculiar lyric subjectivity that was manifested sonically when, in the performance of a folksong, reflexivity changed from a sign of self-communing inwardness to a perceived immanence linking the song’s expression with the singer’s and listener’s inner states. “Naivete” signified a way of knowing through song that Sandburg could define only negatively, as not-thinking. But just as the very idea of folksong gained a political charge for the Chicago salon in evoking a cultural pattern that seemed to oppose an “over-mechanized” and “over-capitalized” industrial civilization, so too did the naivete of folksinging assume a positive ethics for Sandburg as a performative gesture of defiance to what he considered the cerebral discourse of an over-intellectualized poetic culture. In a 1933 letter to John Lomax, Sandburg offered several songs from his *American Songbag* for Lomax’s use in his own book, *American Folk Songs and Ballads* (1934), which would attract a vast public the following year for the collection of field recordings he and his son Alan had produced for the Library of Congress in southern penitentiaries and work camps. Wishing Lomax precisely this kind of popular success with his songs, most of them from impoverished or incarcerated black informants, Sandburg told him to anticipate a less favorable reception from

critics. Having begun to experience a backlash against his own efforts to blend poetry, performance, and vernacular expression from the new formalist ethos of the nascent New Criticism, Sandburg sensed a critical atmosphere hostile to the tradition that he had inherited—and had seen embraced by the Chicago literary renaissance—of elevating folksong to the status of literature. The cause for the critical censure Sandburg anticipated was, as he wrote to Lomax, the sub-rational activity of singing itself and the stigma of racial inferiority attached to its “folk” character. Too “naïve” for the modern lyric of private contemplation and self-communion, singing—as folkloric presentation, as poetic vocation, as vernacular practice—could serve nevertheless as the “collective substratum” for imaginative acts of cross-racial identification:

[T]he intelligentsia of America just now emphasize cerebration above singing because to sing one must be naïve and to be naïve is a sin. One patronizes the negro’s naivete but one must beware of falling into any imitation of it. So goes the theory. One may relax for many various purposes but one must beware of how one relaxes to sing for singing is not the sign of thinking.⁷⁸

Naivete, as Sandburg describes it here, is both a cognitive and a theatrical category: shorthand for the operation of a mental faculty more basic and even primal than rational thinking (it requires you, as Lead Belly later sang, to “relax your mind”) and for the outward manifestation of that faculty through mimetic behavior or “imitation” (it is the “sign” of not-thinking).⁷⁹ Sandburg never cast folksong or its naivete as an exclusive property of black expressive culture or black racial identity. Rather, it was precisely the plurality of vernacular song traditions, identifiable both by categories of race and labor, that led Sandburg to posit naivete as a subjective disposition or stance common to all of them. Where the formalists Sandburg invokes in his letter would have described naivete as a surface feature of the lyric poem as verbal artifact,

⁷⁸ Carl Sandburg letter to John Lomax, 20 October 1933, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, Box 3D158.

⁷⁹ See Lead Belly’s original composition, “Relax Your Mind,” in *Lead Belly: A Life in Pictures*, edited by Tiny Robinson and John Reynolds (Gottingen: Steidl, 2008), 190.

and the primitivists who also “patronize the negro’s naivete” would have defined it as an inherent racial trait, Sandburg understood naivete as a mode of presentation and performance that enabled the practiced singer to inhabit unselfconsciously the subject position or “role” prescribed by a particular song.

But the particular instantiation of this naivete in black folksong interested Sandburg and Lomax deeply and abidingly throughout their decades-long correspondence, and even here Sandburg adjures the stigma attached to the “negro’s naivete” without disputing the underlying racialist assumption that black folksinging exemplifies naïve subjectivity. Instead, Sandburg retains the racial character of song’s naivete but transforms it from a mark of inferiority and infantilization into an aspirational goal for the white poet-singer, for whom it offers the means of accessing a subjective space of general alterity. Imitating the “negro’s naivete” through song not only overcomes the aridity of a cerebral literary intelligentsia but also, Sandburg suggests, creates a subjective space emancipated on a much larger scale from the norms of a white society dominated by the Western privileging of reason as a way of knowing. Crucially, the cognitive amplitude of inhabiting this other subject position involved more than an abeyance of rational control over unconscious mental activity. Rather, as Sandburg attested in his appreciation of the Alabama singer Vera Hall, such naivete rested on a conscious and deliberate “singing art” involving a control over the vocal medium so absolute that, above any determinate content, its “wails and quavers” communicated power and authority.⁸⁰

In *The American Songbag*, Sandburg identifies folksong’s synthesis of narrative realism and lyric expression as constituting a “singing art” especially well suited to the representation of psychological complexity. As the editorial apparatus of Sandburg’s songbook makes clear,

⁸⁰ Sandburg, *New American Songbag*, 84.

psychological realism formed the crux of his theatrical-realist model of folksong, in which dramatic presentation and impersonation turned songs into scores and embodied their psychological content through voice and gesture as palpable interiorities. From its opening pages, the *Songbag* foregrounds the dramatic and lyric dimensions of folksong that subtended Sandburg's theatrical realism: while the songbook groups and classifies most of its material by ethnic, national, regional, historical, and labor-specific categories, the first section is entitled "Dramas and Portraits," incorporating a range of song traditions and song types into a literary definition that emphasizes psychic action and interiority. "The Boll Weevil," "Foggy, Foggy Dew," and the racially hybrid lamentation "He's Gone Away" all have narrative elements, like "The Buffalo Skinners," of "great condensed novel[s] of real life," but Sandburg presents them as examples of his "little drama." These dramatic songs were no less "realistic in their method of approach" for turning inward the focus of events in American folk history; they simply established a subjective space of psychic response to the local experience of social and political history, keeping the representation of lives of labor, poverty, and exploitation internal to the psychic mechanism of folk wit—or, as Sandburg put it, "laughter at monotony and fate."⁸¹ Starting from the subjective point of view, Sandburg suggested, the singer could "implicate" social and political forces in the web of motive, action, and response comprising a dramatic character. In connection with a Kentucky murder ballad, Sandburg needed metaphorical language to describe this kind of dramatic realism. "Sung deliberately and with understanding of its implications, delivered as a series of character roles and situations having contrast, it has the pride of an ancient tapestry, with gashes of knife thrust and splotches of red that are on second look found to be dry blood."⁸² Taking songs as roles, in other words, allowed Sandburg to

⁸¹ Ibid., 180.

⁸² Ibid., 64.

produce both interiority-effects for the subaltern class he defended and reality-effects for the unwritten history from below that he intended his *Songbag* to embody.

These “little dramas” were the folksongs that Sandburg most frequently included in his lecture-recitals and commercial records throughout the entire interwar period because of their distinct dramatic personae, which enabled him to perform and elicit sympathetic identification with ethnically and racially marked subjective interiors. “Nora’s Dove,” a late addition to Sandburg’s repertoire, belongs to this class of dramatic songs. Called “Dink’s Song” by John Lomax in honor of the black washerwoman who sang it for him, this song, as a dramatic role, allowed Sandburg to identify with the personality expressed by a gendered and racialized subject on the absolute margins of the capitalist economic order. By identifying with the character Dink expressed in her song, Sandburg discovered in her utterance what he called a “lyric of tough life.”⁸³ In his headnote to the song, Sandburg pointed readers to Lomax’s biography of Dink. Not simply a domestic laborer, Dink was essentially an indentured sex worker: brought to the Brazos River Delta to wash the clothes, keep the house, and “warm the beds” of the black men hired to build the levees, Dink and the women alongside her endured a kind of dislocation, servitude, and degradation that substantiated the fears Sandburg expressed to Lomax of state authorities and business interests in the south who would, if they could, reduce black workers to the property value of chattel.⁸⁴ Without the framing of this biographical narrative, “Nora’s Dove” would lack political content; keeping this narrative visibly in the background, however, Sandburg chose strategically to foreground the song’s dramatic staging of personal experience and expression.

Taking a song that Lomax had described as the first blues he ever heard, and comparing it to Sappho’s lyric fragments, Sandburg rearranged the verses to emphasize their encoding of

⁸³ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 188.

⁸⁴ Herbert Mitgang, ed., *The Letters of Carl Sandburg*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 175–76.

personal testimony in ancient literary motifs and more proximate folksong commonplaces:

If I had wings like Norah's dove
I'd fly up de river to the man I love.
Fare thee well, O Honey, fare thee well

I'se got a man, an' he's long and tall,
Moves his body like a cannonball.
Fare thee well, O Honey, fare thee well

One o' dese days, an' it won't be long
Call my name an' I'll be gone.
Fare thee well, O Honey, fare thee well

'Member one night, a-drizzlin' rain,
Roun' my heart I felt a pain.
Fare thee well, O Honey, fare thee well⁸⁵

“If I could have been born a Greek in the time of Sappho and the Greek language of Sappho and her lovers,” Sandburg reports having told Lomax, “I might prefer Sappho to Dink.” What seems to have captivated Sandburg about Dink’s language is its simplicity, both in its diction and its metaphorical presentation of emotion: “Norah’s” (Noah’s) dove surveying for land seeming the perfectly condensed image of a Biblical desire for escape and salvation much larger than erotic longing. In the comparison of Dink and Sappho, Sandburg evokes the poetic values of his early Imagist period: the song encompasses a complex of psychological motives and responses that operate like one of Pound’s “intellectual and emotional complex[es] in an instant of time.”⁸⁶ But given the folksong’s emergence out of shared experience as a “lyric of tough life,” this instant of time has its referent in the gendered historical experience of women laboring under Jim Crow, which, for Sandburg and Lomax, has no official record outside the song. Operating on a storehouse of floating verses and folksong commonplaces, Dink’s own lyric subjectivity

⁸⁵ Sandburg, *New American Songbag*, 82. Departing from his normal practice, Sandburg retains the dialect orthography out of fidelity to Lomax’s original transcription.

⁸⁶ Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited by T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 4.

expresses itself in her consistent use of the optative mood to give the song the emotional and psychological coherence of a personal plea for freedom. The lyric intensity of Sappho is Sandburg's best shorthand for Dink's transmutation of her historical experience into a mode of singularized utterance that nevertheless speaks for a general humanity. The fragments of Sappho, "the immortal Greek woman singing of love, lost love and death," writes Sandburg, "seem to be trying to find words and cadence for the same theme that shook the bones and diaphragm of Dink on the Brazos down in Texas." The eternal theme of "lost love and death" that Dink and Sappho share preexists, transcends, and subtends any particular utterance and manifests itself in the absolute depths of human interiority—the somatic core of shaking bones and diaphragm.

While connecting the personal to the transhistorical may seem like an unlikely way of establishing a social or political orientation for any song, Sandburg's framing of "Nora's Dove" underscores how the lyric dimensions of secular song forms like the blues represented such a social and political breakthrough for the expressive culture of black Americans, as ethnomusicologists would later demonstrate. For Amiri Baraka, for instance, the blues negotiated the social and the personal aspects of black expressive culture by combining commonplace verses (social matter) with the unprecedented solo voice (personal expression) in a song form he thought could have emerged only in post-Emancipation America: the blues flaunted an autonomous subjectivity and interior life that had to be won through the civil and political rights of a full human existence.⁸⁷ For Sandburg, Dink's blues contained the same underlying politics within its expression of a personality experiencing economic servitude as emotional bondage and sublating it into the subjective freedom of an imagined alternative. Liberated subjectivity in Dink's blues was not the universal subjectivity alternately celebrated and decried in

⁸⁷ Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 50.

contemporary studies of the lyric but rather a particularized subjectivity staking a claim on universal human values.

The general humanity instantiated in “Dink’s Song” and other dramatic folksongs gave Sandburg a foothold for imaginatively inhabiting their subjective spaces, but once he was there, recognizing markers of difference was essential for “transporting the imagination” of audiences, as Lloyd Lewis phrased it, into a new subjective space of sympathetic identification. The experience of a shared humanity crossing racial (and gendered) boundaries presumed the alterity of a particular subjective interior, like the “negro mind and soul” that Sandburg would thank Lomax for illuminating in their correspondence. In the same way, the humanizing of an oppressed subject’s “little drama” reflected the historical conditions and the social and political forces that had made this recognition of humanity possible, having worked upon the “negro mind and soul,” as Lomax would put it, and transformed it in the eyes and ears of both blacks and whites into what Sandburg would revise to name the “negro *human* soul.”⁸⁸

III.

Sandburg and Lomax’s thinking together about “Dink’s Song” came at the end of a long, intermittent conversation conducted before a public readership and mediated by print, as the two folklorists borrowed songs from one another’s published and unpublished collections and reintroduced them with annotations and framing apparatuses that added ever new layers of literary and historical interpretation to the song material. In his interpretation of “Dink’s Song,” Sandburg recovered the political content of the song in a manner that had been characteristic of Lomax’s own folklore writing: he located an historical *a priori* for the song—new conditions of

⁸⁸ Carl Sandburg to John Lomax, Carl Sandburg Papers, Connemara Collection, 6-366-13e.

servitude after the promise of Emancipation—that made political life appear to subtend lyric expression. But for three decades after Lomax’s departure from Chicago, Sandburg and Lomax carried on a parallel conversation in their private correspondence that addressed far more directly the politics of race implicit in their folklore research. Sandburg himself was never satisfied with making connections between expressive culture and political culture on the basis of scholarly conjecture. With his folklore research not far in the background, the political tenor of Sandburg’s early correspondence with Lomax issued from his work as a journalist for the *Chicago Daily News*, where, during the waning months of Lomax’s time in the city, Sandburg assembled a series of investigative reports and interviews on the causes of the social unrest that would very soon result in the Chicago Race Riots of July and August 1919. The reports collected in Sandburg’s *Chicago Race Riots* (1919) set the stage for an extended argument with Lomax over the character of the national democracy that a canon of American folksong would embody, and it did so precisely by making explicit the political stakes of their attempts to introduce the folksongs of black and other ethnic communities into a white-dominated literary culture.

Not content with presenting political conflict and struggle as the historical precondition for folk expression, Sandburg went straight to the mouths of the people in *Chicago Race Riots* for speech and song that addressed the current state of race relations in the city and the nation: “New things is comin’ altogether diverse from what they has been,” Sandburg in one report quotes a Pentecostal preacher leading a street meeting, who then sings the hymn, “God’s going to rule this nation after a while.”⁸⁹ As Sandburg and Lomax both knew, strict adherence to the tradition of folklore scholarship in America, with its celebration of what Gummere called “imagined communities” built on informal social bonds, would have endorsed a pastoral image of interwar

⁸⁹ Carl Sandburg, *The Chicago Race Riots: July, 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1919), 62.

American race relations.⁹⁰ Based on Sandburg's discovery that field research could reveal black folk speaking as agents of social and political transformation, however, his correspondence with Lomax forced this pastoral image up against the concrete factors that would determine the fate of a racially integrated American body politic and would, in turn, become the key elements of American folklore's new political imaginary: the civil campaign for equal dignity and equal rights, the pluralist negotiation of respect for difference and striving for unity, and the practical question of whether interracial fellowship required political work or represented in itself a politics by other means.

Sandburg and Lomax might never have resumed their direct affiliation as folklorists after Lomax's departure from Chicago had Sandburg's *Chicago Race Riots* not stunned Lomax by implicating the ideal of interracial fellowship—the special province, Lomax thought, of folk culture—in the political problem of American race relations. Sandburg and Lomax both recognized the problem but disagreed on how the work of folklorists could address it. At the most basic level, for Sandburg and Lomax the problem of race relations in America after the First World War was a problem for the integrity of a democratic nation committed in principle to the equal rights and dignity of its citizens. When Sandburg began his reporting for *Chicago Race Riots* in early July 1919, highly publicized race riots had already erupted that “Red Summer” in nearby East St. Louis, Illinois, and at least six other towns in the North and the South. Investigating the economic and social conditions underlying the “race problem” in and around Chicago's Black Belt, Sandburg reported from the perspective of an experienced labor reporter, an amateur sociologist, and a political poet who had overcome his conflicting stances on Woodrow Wilson's war to make the world “safe for democracy” by endorsing its idealism.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Gummere, *Democracy and Poetry*, 53–56.

⁹¹ For a comprehensive account of Sandburg's struggle to settle his viewpoint on the war, and of how that struggle put pressure on his socialist politics, see Niven, 289-302.

Given his prior commitment to an American socialist movement that had been split apart by the war, Sandburg channeled this democratic idealism into practical proposals for achieving the equal rights and dignity of a diverse citizenry. For Sandburg, the problem of race discrimination in Chicago appeared to be not fundamentally a problem of racial or white-supremacist ideology but rather a problem of “economic inequality.”⁹² His reporting in the *Black Belt*, then, focused on overcrowded and inadequate housing, predatory real estate investment, substandard schools, poor sanitation and other municipal services, and the collusion of white police and black crime rings against the reform efforts of black businesses, associations, and churches. Corroborating the vernacular wisdom of black street preachers with the expert opinions of black race leaders and white philanthropists, the bottom-up social history of Sandburg’s *Chicago Race Riots* supplemented what he thought the folk history in black song traditions could reveal about the equal dignity of black subjects.

After the pamphlet’s national publication, Sandburg and Lomax began to engage in an argument over what practical forms of equality and justice would be necessary to secure the dignity and respect for black Americans that both sought to confer in their folksongs. From the outset of the debate, Sandburg and Lomax disagreed fundamentally on where the political horizons of folk culture lay. If for Sandburg the interiority-effect of singing could turn his imitations of black folksong into appeals for recognition and respect across racial boundaries, then he took up the investigative, diagnostic, and polemical stances of his race-riot reporting because he knew the naivete of these lyrical appeals required a social and political context to become consequential as a practical demand for civil rights. While John Lomax shared Sandburg’s sentiments about black folksong as an expression of a people’s intrinsic dignity, he

⁹² Sandburg, *Chicago Race Riots*, 80.

considered the politics of this hard-won recognition and respect likewise intrinsic to the world of folk culture. If Sandburg's objective was to channel the words and songs of black folk into an argument for improved race relations in America on the basis of economic justice, then for Lomax, as his letters to Sandburg reveal, justice as such existed by default in the homogeneous "community of feeling" that, on the one hand, brought the song of a particular people into being and, on the other hand, was sustained by the song itself as lived experience.

In this disagreement about economic and social justice, Sandburg and Lomax were working out substantially different notions of what forms of interethnic and interracial connection would come to define a pluralistic modern America, both in the aftermath of the war and in the wake of massive European immigration and black migration to the nation's urban industrial centers. As *Chicago Race Riots* revealed, Sandburg was an advocate for racial integration and for a form of ethnic assimilation that would preserve the distinct identities of diverse populations but unite them in a common and equitable economic life.⁹³ As his responses to Sandburg's reports show, Lomax was an apologist for the racial segregation of the Jim Crow legal system, maintaining that the Southern way of life he had always known promoted social relations that were conducive to feelings of community if not the experience of "absolute equality."⁹⁴ Sandburg proposed, and Lomax vehemently disagreed, that the riots in Chicago were the unfortunate byproduct of an ongoing experiment in democratic pluralism that could only succeed in the ethnically heterogeneous and legally desegregated cities of the industrial North.⁹⁵ Sandburg's investigation into pre-riot racial tensions took him into the racially bifurcated

⁹³ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁴ John Lomax to Carl Sandburg, MS letter, 5 January 1920. Carl Sandburg Papers, Connemara Collection, 02-36-22.

⁹⁵ "Both north and south," Sandburg wrote to Lomax, "racial prejudice "was loosened with the end of the war and was given added impetus by the very physical hysteria of war. I believe that this prejudice, as sheer prejudice, runs deeper and wider down south than up north and that this is the basic reason why the southern business interests have completely failed in their endeavors to induce movements of the negro population from northern points back south again." Sandburg to Lomax, 9 January 1920, in *Mitgang*, 175-76.

neighborhoods adjacent to Chicago's stockyards, where the rioting would erupt within what Sandburg called the "gangland" element among the Irish, the Southern and Eastern European, and the African American proletariat who lived there. Here Sandburg found that competition for work and economic resources fueled the internal antagonisms among Chicago's racially and ethnically diverse working classes, and that a solution lay in the integration of the city's labor unions. The ultimate outcome of the Chicago race riots, Sandburg thought, promised to be a united working class recommitted to the ideals of "Lincoln, the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation" as well as a "theory [of equality] sanctioned and baptized in a storm of red blood."⁹⁶ Sandburg's optimistic vision took shape in his witnessing "a large body of mixed nationalities and races—Poles, Negroes, Lithuanians, Italians, Irishmen, Germans, Slovaks, Russians, Mexicans, Yankees, Englishmen, Scotchmen—[who] proclaimed that they were organized and opposed to violence between white union men and colored union men."⁹⁷ Lomax, as his letters suggest, seemed to find a threatening harbinger of social and political revolution—a kind of Bolshevik usurpation of traditional folklore's communitarian ideal—in the economic restructuring that would be necessary for the kind of united multiethnic proletariat that Sandburg envisioned.⁹⁸

Sandburg promoted a political vision of American democratic pluralism that strikingly resembled the cultural pluralism encoded in the hybridizing process of folksong transmission as he understood it: distinct and independent entities, like the self-contained but modular units of an oral tradition's floating verses, each maintain identifiable traces of a separate and external origin

⁹⁶ Sandburg, *Chicago Race Riots*, 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁸ In response to a telegram from Sandburg in October, 1920, which has gone missing, Lomax wrote, "I do not like your calling yourself a 'Red' even in half-joke nor do I like the word 'revolution' when it applies to America with the train of blood and human suffering that are associated with that terrible word.... What we need at this moment with the world in such ferment, is not reckless talk but sober sane thinking with every man on his job." John Lomax to Carl Sandburg, MS letter, 23 October 1920. Carl Sandburg Papers, Connemara Collection, 02-36-22.

but entangle and interpenetrate on a new common substratum. For Sandburg, that common substratum was the economy of the labor market in which multiple ethnic groups would struggle together for collective rights. Documenting that multiethnic struggle as it was playing out in Chicago in 1919, half a decade before the philosopher Horace M. Kallen would draw a sharp (and now standard) distinction between cultural pluralism and ethnic assimilation, Sandburg was able to envision the formation of what Whitman had called a “nation of nations” in the city’s industrial workforce as a patchwork or a mosaic rather than an interfusion—a corporate entity of manifold parts.⁹⁹ By synthesizing pluralism and an attenuated form of assimilation, Sandburg offered an image of American working-class identity that overcame what Werner Sollors has identified as the traditional conflict in American thought between ethnicity as a matter of descent and political allegiance as a matter of consent: through volitional allegiance to a united labor movement, one could retain an inherited ethnic identity and gain a kind of multiethnic national identity as a constituent of an evolving body politic, whatever one’s shade of white, brown, or black.¹⁰⁰ Reporting that between 1914 and 1919 some 70,000 African Americans had migrated to Chicago from Southern states, Sandburg stated that this mass migration, compounded by labor competition from European immigrants and from returning white soldiers who intended to refill the jobs they had vacated, handed Chicago “the task of assimilation.”¹⁰¹ With his particular usage of the term “assimilation,” Sandburg pointed to a process distinct from either Israel Zangwill’s “melting pot” of homogenizing ethnicities or Randolph Bourne’s “trans-nationalism” of

⁹⁹ On Kallen’s proposal of “cultural pluralism” as a replacement for the concept of assimilation, which privileged the idea of a normative and native whiteness, see Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 14.

¹⁰⁰ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 150-55.

¹⁰¹ Sandburg, *Chicago Race Riots*, 13.

cosmopolitan interculturalism.¹⁰² For Sandburg, the assimilation of Southern black families into the industrial metropolis involved the transformation of their economic and social life, as they transitioned into industrial modernity from the agrarian economy and feudal society of the South. It required no reversal of their ethnic and cultural identities.¹⁰³ A common and leveled economic base, Sandburg thought, would enable the heterogeneous ethnic, racial, and national groups comprising Chicago's working and underclass to form a united body politic that embraced a plurality of identities and traditions. Assimilation, then, named for Sandburg the process of incorporation by which black workers would enter into "economic equality" with the rest of the proletariat. Economic equality both supported and depended on equal access to the political process, Sandburg recognized, and both forms of equality sustained the social relations of a democratic pluralism in which black identity and culture could contribute to and participate in, but not absorb or dissolve into, a multiethnic culture of shifting and permeable dimensions.¹⁰⁴

Conversely, Lomax promoted a vision of American pluralism that insisted so strongly on racial, ethnic, and cultural distinctiveness that it retained the possibility of stratification along these lines. Lomax rejected even the qualified form of assimilation that Sandburg described: in the pluralistic nation that Lomax imagined, it was a set of homogeneous social groups, and not a mass of economic and political agents, that arrayed themselves around an immaterial economy of mutual sentiments. He wrote to Sandburg about "respect" as an affective mechanism—an

¹⁰² See Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot: Drama in Four Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1909) and Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-National America," in *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86–97.

¹⁰³ Of course, Sandburg hastened to add, many blacks making the Great Migration had already undergone this economic transformation. "Among the recent arrivals, for example, are a banker, the managing editor of a weekly newspaper, a manual training instructor in the public schools and several men who have made successes in business." See Sandburg, *Chicago Race Riots*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ "It is economic equality that gets the emphasis in the speeches and the writings of the colored people themselves," wrote Sandburg. "They hate Jim Crow cars and lynching and all acts of race discrimination, in part, because back of these is the big fact that, even in the north, in many skilled occupations, as well as in many unskilled, it is useless for any colored man or woman to ask a job." See Sandburg, *Chicago Race Riots*, 26.

omnipotent force of civility and goodwill in the Jim Crow South—that could somehow replace social integration and political enfranchisement as the preconditions for a just and harmonious democracy.¹⁰⁵ The reciprocal exchange of respect was supposed to be the source of sentimental cohesion for internally homogeneous communities. For Lomax, respect mediated all social relations, including race relations, on the economic scale of the household; it was the kind of social fabric that allowed members of different racial groups to maintain intimate domestic relationships without disrupting the integrity of the larger homogeneous communities. Because respect entailed its own codes of just social comportment, grounding a *sui generis* society that required no political management beyond the rule of law, Lomax could dispense with political and social equality as mechanisms governing the function of his pluralistic society. As Lomax recognized, however, respect as a medium of social relations cut two ways. While feelings of respect involved a sense of fellowship that could ease and even perforate the boundaries protecting the distinctive character and intrinsic value of different identities, a pluralistic respect for racial difference often also involved a degree of deference and restraint that could reinforce those boundaries—precisely by respecting them.

For the white folklorist interviewing a black informant, as Lomax’s correspondence taught Sandburg, respect made possible the central aim of accessing the interiority of another racial subject. But for the white private citizen “adjusting” to life with black fellow citizens and neighbors, Lomax wrote to Sandburg, respect also meant a recognition of black interiority as a subjective depth that might remain opaque in remaining self-identical. “Perhaps I can tell you something about the psychology of the negro [sic] that you do not know,” Lomax admonished Sandburg. “[T]he negro doesn’t tell his whole mind but always keeps something in reserve,”

¹⁰⁵ Lomax to Sandburg, MS letter, 5 January 1920.

Lomax explained, for he “will tell the white man what he thinks the white man wants to hear rather than what the negro himself actually believes.” For Lomax, knowledge of this withdrawn black interiority came not from personal observation but from black folk wisdom itself. “A witty old negro friend of mine puts it this way,” Lomax related to Sandburg: ““the white man talks with the front of his head, the nigger talks with the back of his head.””¹⁰⁶ Lomax and Sandburg harbored different pluralisms that both depended on the hypostatization of such distinctive racial or ethnic characteristics as the “Negro” mind, heart, soul, and voice, but only for Lomax could such distinctive qualities lead to the kind of reified distinctions between in-group and out-group members that ended in the cognitive impasse and subjective insularity that he described.¹⁰⁷ Lomax, not fully willing to accept Sandburg’s notion that racial and ethnic identities could remain unique *and* interpenetrating in a democratic society, promoted instead a version of pluralism in which the negotiation of race relations sought connections but not interconnections between different communities. Such connections would be based on feelings of goodwill when the crossing of racial boundaries, through subjective identification or cultural imitation, was either impossible or undesirable.

In his January 1920 letter to Sandburg, Lomax found an occasion to challenge the racial politics of Sandburg’s democratic pluralism by taking aim at the biggest claims staked in *Chicago Race Riots*. Lomax, a Southern conservative with anti-federalist leanings, objected to Sandburg’s framing of the Chicago race riots in the context of the Civil War’s unfinished work and of regional differences in race relations between North and South. He also resisted the idea that ameliorated race relations throughout the nation rested on federal enforcement of full

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ For an example of Sandburg’s particular way of essentializing racial characteristics, which suggested their contingency on acculturation, see his description of Rebecca Taylor’s voice. Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 447.

political enfranchisement for black Americans. For Lomax, though, the flashpoint of Sandburg's pamphlet on the riots came when he attempted to explain black outrage and protest in the context of the nation's most recent war, adopting the perspective of the black veterans who returned from it and expected some share of the democracy they had supposedly fought for. Suggesting that black veterans of the First World War found economic and political incentives in the urban North, Sandburg wrote in a dramatic periodic style:

[H]undreds—it may be thousands—have located in Chicago in the hope of permanent jobs and homes in preference to returning home south of Mason and Dixon's line, where neither a world war for democracy, nor the Croix de Guerre, nor three gold chevrons, nor any number of wound stripes, assures them of the right to vote or have their votes counted or to participate responsibly in the elective determinations of the American republic.¹⁰⁸

Lomax interpreted these critical gestures as “needless and unjust digs at the South” showing a lack of appreciation for what he upheld as equitable if not equal relations between black and white Southerners before and after the First World War. He believed these equitable relations could thrive within a system of legal segregation because, as a sentimental apologist for Jim Crow, he sensed a unique tradition of mutual affection between the races in the South that from his perspective predated Emancipation and survived through customs impermeable to the conflict between political enfranchisement and disenfranchisement. “[I]f you could live in a negro community as I have for twenty or twenty-five years,” Lomax told Sandburg, referring to his homes in the near-rural outskirts of College Station and Austin, Texas, “you would not feel quite so sure about some of your conclusions.”¹⁰⁹ Here Lomax was claiming privileged insight into the innermost desires and aspirations of black Americans as a whole, which he credited to his intimate familiarity with Southern blacks living as a homogeneous community rather than as

¹⁰⁸ Sandburg, *Chicago Race Riots*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Lomax to Sandburg, MS letter, 5 January 1920.

a bloc among a heterogeneous population—a claim he staked despite his admonition to Sandburg about the opacity of black interiority to white observers.

This contradiction in Lomax’s view of social relations between whites and blacks in the South coincided with a similar contradiction in his assessment of their political relations. Lomax disagreed with Sandburg about the advantages that northward-migrating blacks found for their political enfranchisement in Chicago, where, according to Sandburg, their ability to form the “strongest effective unit of political power...in America” (white or black) was further reason to expect a positive ultimate outcome to the riots.¹¹⁰ Lomax recalled with pride that in 1896, when he enrolled at the University of Texas, five or six black congressmen were serving on the state legislature in Austin, and that, in the years since, he had cast his ballot on election day alongside some of his black neighbors; but he made excuses for a current (as of 1920) poll test in the state capitol (it was a mere “educational qualification”), acknowledging no infringement of political rights in a law that, he admitted to Sandburg, “deprives more negro adults than white adults of the ballot.”¹¹¹

For Lomax, the state of race relations North or South were to be judged not on the basis of overarching political arrangements but rather on the possibility of intimate gestures of interracial fellowship. Such gestures might include casting a ballot next to a black neighbor at the polls, or in the case Lomax used as an appeal to Sandburg’s sentiments, receiving from that neighbor a Christmas gift of sweet sugared yams and then sharing with him one’s own hearth. In this encounter, as Lomax describes it, not only all political dissensus but also all awareness of racial difference seems to evaporate, offering respite in a momentary “community of feeling” from consideration of what Lomax calls the “real facts” of the race problem:

¹¹⁰ *Chicago Race Riots*, 5.

¹¹¹ Lomax to Sandburg, MS letter, 5 January 1920.

I respect him and he respects me. We are genuinely fond of each other. There couldn't be any race question between us. He delivered his potatoes to the back door but I took him into the house and we chatted before my open fireplace just as two good friends, as we are. He has no more patience with the secret of the cause of lynching in the South than I, for this crime is the basis, if not the direct cause, of a large majority of the lynchings in the South.... You can perhaps talk about the facts in this situation even in the *Chicago Evening News* [sic] but just between me and you, you ought to face the real facts. What the negro wants, what his real ambition is is to have absolute equality. I do not blame him for it, I only know that he wants it and equality involves social equality. The ignorant, debased negro sometimes attempts equality by force and that means always in the South and usually in the North a lynching bee.¹¹²

The strange, involuted logic of Lomax's letter demonstrates equally the absolute commitment, and the ultimate futility, behind his attempt to reframe the "race question" as a matter of social bonds rather than political structures. Just as Sandburg found that for the multiethnic unions of Chicago stockyard workers after the riots a simple leveling of economic opportunity was sufficient cause for them to think "the race problem is solved," Lomax intended this portrayal of his "negro community" to highlight an alternative economy of interracial sympathies that he thought could persist outside the world of industrial capitalism and put to rest the "race question" once and for all.¹¹³ Unflattering to his intentions and revealing of his biases, however, Lomax's letter quickly devolves at this point from a shaky argument about political equality into a baseless justification of social inequality between the races. Lomax rejects the idea of a racial equality that would encompass social equality by trotting out innuendo for the kind of rumorous, inflammatory charges of miscegenating rape ("the secret cause of lynching in the South") that, long used by white-supremacist local Southern governments as a pretext for racial terrorism, had been debunked as racist propaganda by Sandburg in his reporting on the Chicago race riots. Lomax defaulted on old (but still very current) racist clichés in his stance toward interracial social equality because he needed to untangle the contradiction of two competing motives behind

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Sandburg, *Chicago Race Riots*, 56.

his argument. First, Lomax wanted to deflect attention from the political apparatus of Southern racial segregation by persuading Sandburg that “absolute” equality between the races would happen not in the political arena but in intimate social contexts. Second, Lomax wanted to exonerate Southern race relations by persuading Sandburg that the cause of lynching was not a systematic, extralegal campaign to impede black political equality but rather the insistency of black claims to social equality. For Lomax to persuade Sandburg that racial equality would depend on social rather than political mechanisms without conceding the South’s failure on both fronts, then, he required some means of invalidating black claims to social equality as part of a legitimate mechanism for achieving the kind of pre- or extra-political form of equality that he celebrated in his hearthside tableau. Lomax found the means he needed to make this point in the idea that blacks in the North and South were prone to claim their social equality illegitimately, or “by force,” another euphemism for miscegenating rape. A weak argumentative ploy, this racist cliché nevertheless served to drive a wedge in Lomax’s account between the social equality of the public sphere, where interracial sympathy might provoke a political restructuring of race relations, and the social equality of intimate communal bonds where “[t]here couldn’t be any race question” of political consequence.

Sandburg’s response is remarkable for adamantly conceding no part of the social and political argument that Lomax raised about actual race relations while charitably crediting Lomax for the privileged insight he claimed into black racial consciousness. More than cordial gestures, both rhetorical maneuvers served a political purpose: Sandburg maintained enough dissension between himself and Lomax to keep the question of subjective expression in folk culture from reverting to an apolitical one, but he aimed to establish consensus by sublating the practical political questions of *Chicago Race Riots* into what *The American Songbag* would

unfold as a political imaginary of cross-racial identification. In his letter to Lomax, Sandburg begins by doubling down on what Lomax had called the “Civil War prejudices” of his race riot reporting, this time indicting Southern white authorities not only for the disenfranchisement of black citizens but also for a deep-seated desire to deny their humanity. “I know you would understand, if we had time to go over all the evidence,” Sandburg wrote, “that there is a prejudice which if it could achieve its desire would segregate, repress and again make a chattel of the negro if that status could again be restored.”¹¹⁴ Having told Lomax where the charge of “prejudice” rightly belonged, Sandburg then recovered the “race question” from Lomax’s distorted view of social equality by restoring political and economic equality instead as the question’s relevant categories. “There is no place in the south that I have heard of,” Sandburg continued, “where the negro has the freedom of the ballot and the political equality and economic opportunity accorded him in Chicago and other northern cities.” For Sandburg, the recognition of the political and economic rights of blacks was directly related to the recognition of their intrinsic humanity on a continuum of liberal law and liberal sentiment essential to his conception of pluralism. And if this pluralist ideal were to bring folk culture and political culture together, then its sentimental aspect would have to include not only mutual respect, as Lomax insisted, but also common interest between different racial and ethnic groups.

Such an investment in the prerogatives of another group required an understanding of what Sandburg described in his writing on folksongs as psychological motive, which meant that Sandburg could not accept, as Lomax had suggested, the possible opacity of black interiority to white interlocutors. Crediting Lomax for recognizing *a priori* his racial politics that “the negro

¹¹⁴ Carl Sandburg to John Lomax, TS letter, 9 January 1920, qtd in Herbert Mitgang, ed., *The Letters of Carl Sandburg*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 175–76. All subsequent references to Sandburg’s response come from this source.

mind and soul have cultural values,” Sandburg used praise to establish a new consensus with Lomax for their joint folkloric enterprises: “no other white man in recent years did so much for me to help me get at the way inside interiors of the negro human soul as you did.” Sandburg and Lomax differed significantly in how they described the “human interiors” of black subjects that Lomax had helped Sandburg to access. For Sandburg, this deep interiority encompassed the sub-rational, precognitive domain of “soul” that manifested itself in “naivete,” while for Lomax, the “whole mind” of the racialized subject was knowable only through the racial self-consciousness that it betrayed. But Sandburg wanted to win Lomax over to his conception by crediting him for deeper and more privileged access than he had claimed. And he modeled the consensus-building made possible by such access into interiority by conceding that Lomax, in suggesting that Sandburg think again about the “psychology of the negro,” had penetrated to the heart of the matter, and to the heart of him. “There isn’t a man south of the Mason and Dixon line who could reach in and get at me as you do in criticism,” Sandburg wrote. According to the consensus that Sandburg aimed to reach with Lomax, if they could not agree on the political nature of folk culture, they could nevertheless discuss the psychological features of folk expression that articulated political as well as human subjects.

While Sandburg’s treatment of individual songs like “Nora’s Dove” demonstrated his understanding of how political content surfaces within psychic interiority in folk expression, his overall work as a compiler and editor in *The American Songbag* replicated and extended this dialectical operation on a larger scale. Several of the twenty-four chapters in *The American Songbag* support what might be called historical through lines for the ballad book’s overarching song history of a modernizing America, such as the synchronous narratives of westward expansion and newly emerging communications and transportation media. But no chapter in *The*

American Songbag better tells the story of an emergent multiethnic national American identity than “Southern Mountains,” and it does so by modeling Sandburg’s vision of a deep intercultural pluralism and emphasizing its psychological dimensions, where different ethnic and racial subjects become not only accessible to the white scholar or performer but also, more importantly, transparent to one another.

On the surface, “Southern Mountains” would seem to take the most traditional approach to balladry and folklore on display in *The American Songbag*: the chapter begins with an epigraph about Cecil J. Sharp, the British-born ballad collector who traveled throughout Appalachia from 1916 to 1918 in search of “survivals” of the Child ballads, and it ostensibly focuses on songs of a purely British provenance.¹¹⁵ But the Appalachian songs around which Sandburg structured this chapter reflect the wildly impure genealogies that he considered essential to folksong as the substratum of American pluralism. Contextualizing the songs in his headnotes, Sandburg represented the Southern Appalachians as a region that had been a site of confluence not just for British traditional ballads and African American secular songs but also for a diverse array of later popular songs, including songs from British broadsides and American blackface minstrel shows. Presenting a corpus of song that is a heterogeneous assortment of elements from these various sources, Sandburg uses his framing devices to give them the status of a national popular literature on par with venerated European traditions: he begins the chapter by describing these songs as a folk poetry “now wayward, now wild,” like the poetry of the “Provençal balladists of France,” and he traces the evolution of this folk poetry into its fully indigenous form as a matrix for cross-racial borrowing and adaptation.¹¹⁶

This implicit evolutionary narrative emerges just as it coincides with the chapter’s other

¹¹⁵ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 306-326.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 307.

historical through line, the story of encroaching industrialization and “oncoming civilization” inside Appalachia. All at once the chapter culminates with several railroad songs that exemplify the convergence of black and white song traditions through adaptive performance.¹¹⁷ With “The Midnight Train,” a black railroad song originating from the Deep South, Sandburg notes that the “beats and accents of a Limited Express” work their way into the “tireless syncopation” of every verse (“The midnight train and the fo’ day train / Run all night long”), proliferating a refrain drawn from one of Sandburg’s own favorite spirituals (“Run all night long”) into new secular floating verses that have diffused to points northward by synchronizing with the railway circuitry and work rhythms of the industrializing South.¹¹⁸ With “I Don’t Like No Railroad Man,” Sandburg presents a song that takes one of those floating verses and uses its incremental repetition to create a ritual of denunciation of the kind pervasive throughout African American expressive culture (“I don’t like no railroad man / I don’t like no railroad boss / I don’t like no railroad fool”). Sandburg gives no indication that a racial origin or provenance for the song is either known or knowable, and instead he emphasizes the difference in class between his informant, an upper middle-class Kentucky woman, and the “mountain people who sing this [song],” as if the shared subaltern class position of the white and non-white Appalachian population alike constituted a race of people in a more contingent sense.¹¹⁹ Thus, if his informant’s performance were an impersonation, as Sandburg asserted, then the character with which she identified in performing the song was an abstract one: the identity of an entire people made indigenous by commonalities of land and labor, where class becomes race, sedimented into the complex verbal and melodic character of the song itself. With “Lonesome Road,” finally,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 326.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 325.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 326.

Sandburg shows how this form of abstraction reconstitutes racial identity into a complex of expressive modes that speak, when assembled into a lyric voice, for a set of converging subject positions. Its own oral transmission having followed the railways from Texas to Southern Appalachia and ultimately to Lloyd Lewis's hometown in central Indiana, the song takes up a triple-beat time signature that would become popular in the cowboy waltzes of country-western music and the slow drags of urban rhythm and blues, fusing it to a pair of verses that blend the lyricism of the sentimental ballad ("The best of friends must part some day, / An' why not you an' I?") and that of the blues ("I wish to God that I had died / Before I seen your smilin' face"). As in so many of Sandburg's song texts and performances, a dialogic structure emerges through a variety of musical themes, accedes into a colloquy of voices, then culminates in an interchange of subject positions—and here, in a "lyric of a desperate heart," that interchange reveals one subjective interior to another.¹²⁰

Over the course of *The American Songbag*, readers witness Sandburg making discoveries about the pluralist America embodied in his manifold song history. "Lonesome Road," for instance, patched together as it is through a history of white and black singers imitating one another's customary styles and commonplaces, brings Sandburg around to a basic dictum about cross-racial folksong adaptation. Such adaptation keeps source and target traditions distinct but makes them complementary: "The white man," Sandburg says, "takes such pieces and shades them to his own ways and likings."¹²¹ Pluralism happens when whites identify with black interiority by recognizing the distinctiveness and complementarity of their voices, idioms, and sounds. But this is only half of Sandburg's discovery. Pluralism also happens when blacks reinterpret *white* song traditions through the subjective modalities of their own voices, idioms,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 322.

¹²¹ Ibid.

and sounds. “Lonesome Road” and the conclusion of “Southern Mountains” set the stage for a subsequent chapter on railroad and work gang songs, where Sandburg demonstrates that cross-racial borrowing and adaptation in American folksong is a continuum in which both white and black singers participate. In “Railroad and Work Gangs,” Sandburg brings the multiethnic America envisioned in *The American Songbag* back to its germination in his early experience with folksong among the heterogeneous underclass of the 1890s hobo camps. He includes here one of the work’s many emblems for cultural pluralism, only in this late instance the emblem reveals that the key to pluralism, and the multiethnic democracy it undergirds, is a dialogic pattern of cultural exchange. This pattern emerges in a pair of mirroring songs. The now-perennial children’s song “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain When She Comes,” as Sandburg describes it, was originally adapted by white Appalachians from the Negro spiritual “When the Chariot Comes,” and was then adopted by black railroad work gangs who in turn passed it onto the legions of hobos from whom Sandburg learned it in the Midwest.¹²² “I Went Down to the Depot,” immediately following, is the version of the Jesse James ballad that Sandburg’s informant collected from black railroad work gangs in the South. If for singers and listeners there is a transformative potential to the oral transmission of folksong, Sandburg seems to have realized, then the transformation occurs not simply when the cultural consciousness and sensibility of one people—their “ways likings”—work upon and “shade” the cultural material of another people, but ultimately when that cultural work feeds back into its source and leads to a greater synthesis of culture, consciousness, and identity.

This realization bore tremendous political significance for the concept of folksong that Sandburg promoted to a popular American audience in the interwar period. It meant that the

¹²² Ibid., 372.

politics of folksong inhered in more than just an historical *a priori* for its modes of expressing experience. It meant, rather, that folksong's oral transmission could be understood as contributing directly to the social and political instantiation of an idea—that America's historical trajectory tended toward a wild but harmonious pluralism. The social and political reality of this idea rested on Sandburg's Romantic notion that the activity of singing could advance as well as document the development of a national identity.¹²³ But in holding fast to that assumption Sandburg also reframed the naïve consciousness of song as a kind of political consciousness that he would later call a "public mind," or a communal mode of sensing and thinking that gave life to a body politic.¹²⁴ The diverse and manifold body politic of "varied human characters and communities" in *The American Songbag* make their "wide human procession" beyond national identity and toward a universal humanity, and this is also precisely where Sandburg would come to locate the politics of his own folksinging in the 1930s and 1940s.¹²⁵ As early as 1928, as Lloyd Lewis noted, Sandburg had begun replacing many of his time-honored hobo songs with spirituals on the programs of his lecture-recitals, a change that marked Sandburg's shift from a direct to an oblique mode of political protest.¹²⁶ Negro spirituals, since they were first collected by a group of abolitionists in the Georgia Sea Islands during the Civil War, had served as a medium through which politically liberal white audiences attuned themselves to a voice of protest against both racial injustice and general human injustice.¹²⁷ When Sandburg released his popular commercial record album *Cowboy Songs and Negro Spirituals* in 1947, it was Alan Lomax who this time

¹²³ In his preface, Sandburg suggested that *The American Songbag* could be a text memorized by school-age children and sung in the classroom at examination time to demonstrate knowledge of American history. See Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, viii.

¹²⁴ Carl Sandburg, *The People, Yes* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936), 273–74.

¹²⁵ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, viii.

¹²⁶ Lewis, "Last of the Troubadours," Lloyd Lewis Papers.

¹²⁷ For the first Civil War-era collection of Negro spirituals, see William Frances Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States*, facsimile edition (New York: A. Simpson, 1867; New York: Dover, 1995).

wrote the annotations to the songs. In his rendition of “Go Down, Moses,” wrote Alan Lomax, Sandburg “thunders ‘Let my people go’ like a latter-day abolitionist, calling for freedom and security to all oppressed peoples.”¹²⁸

By describing Sandburg’s spirituals as appeals for a human justice with universal horizons, Alan Lomax was aligning these folksong performances with both the progressive liberalism of the late 1940s and the legacy of the Communist-sponsored American Popular Front. These strong political associations, built as they were on a folksong of oblique political protest, had been written out of John and Alan Lomax’s key Depression-era ballad book, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936), which caught the folksinger on the cusp of a transition between traditional black songster and voice for the Popular Front, particularly in its campaign against Jim Crow. John Lomax’s narrative of Lead Belly was an attempt to arrest this transition from folk naivete to self-aware political consciousness; the elder Lomax preferred to fix Lead Belly in his rise to national fame within the old evolutionary theory of the ballad, in which the songster would emerge from the primitive existence of the Southern convict camp into the civilized existence of the middle-class yeoman farmstead. Lomax included no indication of the topical political songs Lead Belly began writing during the Depression, such as “The Scottsboro Boys” and “Bourgeois Blues,” a protest song about Jim Crow segregation in the nation’s capital—ostensibly because they had not arisen through *communal* authorship. And though he noted that Lead Belly’s work songs “sometimes reflect...the injustices of the white man,” Lomax occluded the reality that Lead Belly, evolving what Sandburg called “lyric[s] of a desperate heart” into songs of protest, gained his notoriety in New York City (and lost Lomax’s trust) not simply by gravitating toward the cabaret culture of the Harlem Renaissance but also by entering

¹²⁸ Liner notes to Carl Sandburg *The People, Yes* (Decca 29M 273, 1941), 78 rpm.

the radical political community of Aunt Molly Jackson, Tillman Cadle, and other leftists of the nascent urban folk revival.¹²⁹ The idea of folksong that Lomax and Sandburg had launched in Lloyd Lewis's Chicago salon may have been splintering into two different communitarian ideals, one based on the homogeneity of distinct agrarian folk communities and the other on the heterogeneity within a united national folk culture. But at the end of the interwar period that encompassed the most fertile phase of Lomax and Sandburg's collaboration, Lead Belly was already showing that what folklore had to contribute—to political culture, to popular culture, and to modernist culture—came from Sandburg's turn toward folksong as a voice of universal human dignity speaking through its proliferation into multiple political subjects and the various contexts besetting them. Lead Belly, for his part, evoked the tune of a Negro spiritual and sang in affirmative protest about the creation of an ark for a new world on precisely these grounds of a universal community:

[God] built him a boat for a mixed-up crew
With eyes a-black and brown and blue
So that's how come that you and I
Got just one world with just one sky.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ John A. and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), ix. Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 203–10.

¹³⁰ Lead Belly, "We're in the Same Boat, Brother," *Lead Belly's Last Sessions*, recorded by Frederick Ramsay, Jr., Folkways FW 40068, compact disc.

Chapter 2: Saying the Blues in and after the Chicago Black Renaissance

Carl Sandburg's folksong collecting in Chicago in the 1920s had been immersed, as Lloyd Lewis suggested, in the commercial culture of "the phonograph and the radio," which by the end of the decade had established a new media system for the transmission of black vernacular music. Chicago was at the center of this system. In 1924, when Paramount records hired Chicago-based black record producer J. Mayo Williams as the manager of their "race artist" record series, the city became the primary hub for southern rural folk musicians who arrived to meet the growing urban audience for blues and gospel recordings.¹ Embodying a new expression of racial identity that joined black folksong tradition with black urban-industrial life, race records supplied an essential musical undercurrent, particularly in the blues, for the phase of the New Negro literary renaissance that would emerge in Chicago in the 1930s. If Sandburg collected race records and the blues in the 1920s as living documents of folk culture's urban reinvention as popular music, then the Chicago Black Renaissance a decade later took the popularization of the blues as a constitutive part of its own cultural program. Chicago poets such as Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, and Gwendolyn Brooks, along with guiding movement figures such as Sterling Allen Brown, formed a distinct body of literature by engaging directly with the oral culture that was being disseminated on blues and other race records since 1920. In addition, their literary work mediated between the culture of recorded black music and the field of folksong scholarship that continued to evolve after the collaboration of Sandburg and

¹ The beginning of the "race record" industry is customarily dated in 1920, with the release of Mamie Smith's performance of the Perry Bradford-authored "Crazy Blues," recorded in New York for the Okeh Records label. By the middle of the decade, Paramount, Vocalion, Brunswick and other record labels had entered the market and set up recording studios in Chicago. Still the major sourcebooks for data on the race record industry, and among the few sources of information about the career of J. Mayo Williams, are Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), along with their updated companion discography, *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, fourth ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

John Lomax. The Chicago Black Renaissance solidified the status of the blues as black American folklore, and it did so by presenting the blues as a form and style of critical reflection on the experience of black urban modernity.

Representing a new phase in the New Negro movement, and responsive to the social and economic realities of the Great Depression that had effectively ended the Harlem Renaissance, the Chicago Black Renaissance emerged through a confluence of local and national institutions. According to Robert Bone, who first wrote of a Chicago Renaissance in African American literature dating from 1935 to 1950, this generation of literary “efflorescence” had its great participant-historian in Arna Bontemps and its animating center in Richard Wright.² These figures represented overlapping cultural institutions. Bontemps, a doctoral student in English literature and library science at the University of Chicago, led the team on the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) that was responsible for authoring the vast and multifaceted historical survey *The Negro in Illinois*.³ For Bontemps, the origin and identity of the Chicago Black Renaissance was rooted in the Chicago-based unit of the FWP, the Illinois Writers’ Project (IWP). The “second phase of Negro literary awakening,” centered on Chicago’s South Side instead of Harlem, was a grassroots movement of writers on the Project who “wore the frayed overcoats and clinking galoshes and haunted the public libraries and churned out the copy, unlike the so-called talented tenth who comprised the movement’s first phase before the Great Depression.”⁴ For Richard Wright, who joined the IWP in 1936, the Chicago movement launched earlier that year with the founding of the IWP-affiliated South Side Writers’ Group. In addition to Wright, the group

² Robert Bone, “Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance,” *Callaloo* 28 (Summer 1986): 446–68.

³ *The Negro in Illinois* was completed in 1942 but left unpublished when the IWP shut its offices in 1943. It was reassembled from extant archival manuscripts and published in 2013. See *The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers*, edited by Brian Dolinar (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

⁴ Arna Bontemps, “Famous WPA Authors,” *Negro Digest* 8.7 (1950): 43–44.

included Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, Bob Davis, Edward Bland, Fern Gayden, Russell Marshall, Marian Minus, Theodore Ward, and others.⁵ In Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing," the South Side Writers' Group set the literary and philosophical agenda for the new renaissance, which was to produce a revolutionary political consciousness in black literature by combining techniques of realistic presentation, traditions of black folklore, and expressions of social protest.⁶ Here the Chicago Renaissance coalesced around a combination of grassroots organization, local institutions, and federal patronage. For Wright, the South Side Writers' Group and its agenda were profoundly shaped by the Chicago School of Sociology, which he encountered through his contacts at the University of Chicago, Robert E. Park and Horace Cayton. But where Wright's vision of the group's agenda centered on the Chicago School's sociological theory of black urbanization through contact, conflict, and eventual assimilation with other ethnic cultures, another of the group's members, Margaret Walker, would stress the connection between the IWP-affiliated group, the Washington-based leadership of the FWP, and the folklore scholarship that it sponsored. Among the national leaders of the FWP, the most influential for the Chicago Renaissance writers on the IWP were Sterling Brown, Editor of Negro Affairs on the Project, and John Lomax, an advisor for its Ex-Slave Narratives Project.

At the FWP in Washington, folklore scholarship was undergoing changes in theory and method that would shape how poets of the Chicago Black Renaissance approached folk culture, determining, in particular, their interest in the blues as an expressive mode and blues records as a

⁵ For accounts of the South Side Writers' Group, see Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius* (New York: Amistad Press, 1988), 71–81; Lawrence Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 58–76; and Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach, *Along the Streets of Bronzeville: Black Chicago's Literary Landscape* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

⁶ "The Negro writer who seeks to function as a purposeful agent within his race," according to Wright "[needs] a consciousness which draws from the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today." Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," reprinted in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 49.

medium. Those changes in folklore scholarship brought the field closer to the kind of sociology practiced by the Chicago School. Before he joined the FWP in 1936, Sterling Brown had been, like John Lomax a generation earlier, a student of George Lyman Kittredge at Harvard, where he would have learned the theory that oral transmission, more than communal origin, defined the character of folksongs. Brown had also been, since 1929, a colleague of folklorist Benjamin A. Botkin, who would become the folklore editor of the FWP in 1938. More than Lomax, Sandburg, and even Brown himself, Botkin dismissed entirely the question of origins and provenance in the study of folklore in order to focus instead, like those other students and followers of Kittredge, on folklore's transmission and diffusion as a living force within contemporary culture. To capture this shift in focus, Botkin and Brown developed a concept they would eventually call "living lore" or "living-people-lore," which had its roots in Botkin's earlier idea of "folk-say."⁷ For Botkin, "folk-say" shifted the axes of folklore study from origin and transmission to transmission and adaptation—or, in his words, diffusion and acculturation. Botkin wanted folklore scholarship to become the study of the "social and cultural history of folk groups," which meant tracing the processes responsible for the formation and transformation of group identities. If original group identities depended on locality and some degree of isolation, Botkin thought, then the transformations of interest to the folklorist came from migration, contact, and interaction.⁸ By positing folklore as an object of these social and cultural processes, Botkin pushed folklore scholarship into a sociological turn. By the late 1930s, folklorists at the FWP in Washington, like the sociologists of the Chicago School, were studying patterns of cultural

⁷ For Brown's definition of "living-people-lore," see Sterling Brown, Herbert Halpert, Alan Lomax, et al., "Conference on the Character and State of Studies in Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 59.234 (October–December 1946): 506–07.

⁸ B. A. Botkin, "American Folklore," reprinted in *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition*, edited by Simon J. Bronner (1949; Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 133–34.

change by recording interviews, collecting life histories, and conducting field studies. In pursuit of “folk-say” or “living lore,” folklorists were to trace the dynamic interactions not only between a group’s identity and its social reality but also between a group’s self-understanding and its modes of self-expression.⁹ As Brown said in 1942, collecting the “living speech of the people” was the way “to get an understanding of people...with some accuracy as to their life and character.”¹⁰

If folklore scholarship a generation earlier had been split between literary and anthropological schools, it was now bringing together literary and sociological practice. Brown was well-positioned to facilitate this convergence, which had its locus in Chicago. As a younger colleague of Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson, and having published early poems in *Opportunity* and *The Crisis* in the mid-1920s, Brown was a bridge from the Harlem Renaissance to the emerging generation of the Chicago Black Renaissance. He remained a close literary associate of the Chicago writers throughout the 1930s and 40s, when major events like the National Negro Congress (Chicago, 1936), the first League of American Writers’ Conference (New York, 1937), and the Negro Exposition (Chicago, 1940) allowed him to collaborate with and mentor Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and others.¹¹ In addition to the Chicago writers, Brown worked alongside the Chicago sociologists, joining the black intelligentsia who had studied American race relations under Robert Park. Brown had known Charles S. Johnson since 1928-1929, when they were colleagues at Fisk University, and he would collaborate with both Johnson and Horace Cayton as a fellow contributor to *An American*

⁹ About the term “folk-say,” Botkin reflected in 1958, “I had in mind what the folk-sayer has to say for himself in his own way and in his own words.” See B. A. Botkin, “We Called It ‘Living Lore’,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 14 (1958): 196–97.

¹⁰ Brown, Halpert, Lomax, et al., “Conference on the Character and State of Studies in Folklore,” 506–07.

¹¹ Jackson, *Indignant Generation*, 56, 73, 93–94.

Dilemma (1944), Gunnar Myrdal's controversial sociological study of race relations. Brown united the young black writers of the Chicago Renaissance, the young black sociologists of the Chicago School under Park, and the now federally sponsored study of folklore, and the link he created was a new conception of black folk expression. Under Park's direction, the Chicago sociologists had a long-standing interest in black folksong, but Brown turned this interest toward the blues. Park, writing in 1923, argued that black folksong embodied a latent "consciousness of race" for its singers while presenting a "faithful reflection of [their] inner life" for knowing listeners. But black folksong lacked self-consciousness: it took the evolution from oral culture to literary culture before black poetic expression could turn a latent "consciousness of race" into a manifest "race consciousness," or a critical self-understanding of race and its determinative role in black life.¹² Unlike Park, Brown understood the expression of racial self-consciousness to be an inherent feature of black folksong, particularly in the blues. For Brown, the blues was indeed a corpus of oral tradition that embodied, at the level of content, a deep and latent consciousness of race, as well as a form that mnemonically carried that consciousness through history. But for Brown the blues was more than content and form: as folksong *and* folk-say, the blues was also a style of expression and a way of saying.¹³ It was, like all folk-say, a vernacular idiom that constituted "what the folk have to say not only for but about themselves," combining self-expression with self-commentary.¹⁴ And if the blues was not only a reflection of black inner life,

¹² Robert E. Park, "Negro Race Consciousness as Reflected in Race Literature," reprinted in *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950), 292–94.

¹³ Writing in 1930, Brown argued that it was not subject matter that defined the blues but rather diction, which in the blues had a regional and racial character; it belonged to what he described as the Negro peasantry of the rural South (or transplanted to the urban North). "Blues will be found ranging from flood songs to graphic descriptions of pneumonia, from complaints about Volstead to such lines as 'I got a grave-diggin' feelin' in my heart.'" What united all these examples was their use of "folk parlance." "The diction of most of the Blues is immediately connected," Brown wrote, "with folk life." Sterling A. Brown, "The Blues as Folk Poetry," *Folk-Say* 2 (1930): 326.

¹⁴ Benjamin A. Botkin, "Applied Folklore: Creating Understanding through Folklore," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (September 1953): 201–02.

as Park maintained, but also the language of black folk speaking self-consciously and critically about all aspects of contemporary life, as Brown contended, then literary authors and sociologists—and not just folklorists—had a new phenomenon to unite their interests.

Brown, in his earliest folklore writings, tried to establish the race consciousness of the blues as a function of its poetic language and expression. He took a particular interest in topical songs, which had been carried into the blues from the various, ballad-rich repertoires of songsters like Lead Belly. For Brown, topical songs illustrated a general pattern in the blues: even songs that were not explicitly racial in subject matter could be inflected with race consciousness poetically, through the operation of “folk imagination” on “folk experience.” With their imaginative use of language, topical songs in the blues added a *racial* specificity of expression in the idiom (diction, imagery, and metaphor) to the *historical*, if not racial specificity of reference in the experience (event, place, and character). In granting this function to blues language, Brown was engaging directly with Park’s theory of black folksong. In his 1923 essay, Park had asserted that “Negro poetry is a transcript of Negro life.” According to Park, if the oral poetry of black folksong revealed a racially determined “scheme of life,” then the black literary poet had the tools to adopt a critical orientation toward this picture of life “as he felt it and saw it,” and to “reflect on his own experience and consciously...redefine the aims of his racial life.”¹⁵ In 1930, Brown rewrote Park’s assertion: blues songs, he specified, “are accurate, imaginative transcriptions of folk experience, with flashes of excellent poetry.”¹⁶ According to Brown, the blues rejoined what Park had thought were modalities separated between orality and literacy, not only representing experiences felt and seen “close to the earth,” in Brown’s words, but also

¹⁵ Park, 285 and 292.

¹⁶ Brown, “The Blues as Folk Poetry,” 339.

reflecting critically on those experiences through the alembic of imagination.¹⁷ Brown adduced many examples from phonograph records to show that, while the experience in the blues may have been *folk* experience, the imagination in the blues was nonetheless racial—because that imagination had a racial idiom.

In the topical blues, Brown suggested, this process of imaginative and poetic transformation was reflected in the song composition process itself, a process that he claimed to have witnessed firsthand. Brown wrote, just three years after the event, of the devastating 1927 St. Louis Tornado and the blues songs that it occasioned:

Happening to be in St. Louis in the immediate wake of the cyclone, the author believes that he was present at the genesis of many Blues. He remembers seeing in a second-story bedroom, with its front walls torn off, an old woman sitting in an old rocker, moaning and chanting, weaving from the tragedy her own Blues.

Soon after there were such phonograph records as the “St. Louis Cyclone Blues” and the “St. Louis Tornado Blues.”¹⁸

This account is Brown’s version of the anecdotes that Sandburg and Lomax would write to contextualize ballads and blues like “Dink’s Song,” but Brown’s version identifies a cyclical process that extends beyond origins. Evolving from folk experience to folk culture and then into popular culture, a topical blues like “St. Louis Cyclone Blues” transforms a local event into both a singular expression of grief (“her own Blues”) and a group idiom for subsequent variations (“moaning and chanting”), setting the pattern for a proliferation of songs that shape the national consciousness of the event according to the race consciousness of the blues interpretation. The topical blues expresses history as a particular people’s story through the function of an idiomatic telling. In the case of “St. Louis Cyclone Blues,” the power of that idiomatic telling is evident for

¹⁷ “With their imagination they combine two great loves,” Brown wrote of blues singers, “the love of words and the love of life. Poetry results.” That poetry expressed both “naïve wonder at life” and “irony, stoicism, and bitterness.... [t]he tragic sense of life.” *Ibid.*, 338–39.

¹⁸ Brown, “The Blues as Folk Poetry,” 329–30.

Brown in the song's popularity in the national race record market. First recorded in New York in October 1927 by the St. Louis-based blues singer Lonnie Johnson, "St. Louis Cyclone Blues" was recorded a month later in Chicago, for producer J. Mayo Williams and Paramount Records, by Elzadie Robinson.¹⁹ Mississippi Delta-born Robinson, who, like Ma Rainey and other female "classic blues" singers, performed in a combination of jazz and barrelhouse styles, drenches her version of "St. Louis Cyclone Blues" in the deep "moaning and chanting" that Brown heard on the scene. Her vibrato voice cracks into an outright cry on such deeply figurative, and deeply idiomatic, descriptions as this verse: "World was black as midnight, never heard such a noise before (Oh, Lord) / Like a million lions just turned loose they all a-roar." Johnson's version is more restrained in its idiomatic language and vocal style, but it speaks more directly for and about a community: "Poor people were screamin' and runnin' every which-a-way (Lord have mercy on our poor people) / I fell down on my knees, I started in to pray." Where Johnson explicitly invokes a class identification and class consciousness, only to push them toward racial identification and race consciousness ("poor people" becomes "*our* poor people"), Robinson lets her distinctive idiom do all the racial signifying. For Brown, it was by oscillating between these registers that the topical blues combined historical reference and racial expression.

Taking Brown's assessment of the topical blues a step further, the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance posited the blues and its related folk traditions as an expression not only of race-conscious reflection on historical experience but also of race-conscious social protest. Brown recognized protest against racial oppression as an important theme in both the religious and secular black folksong traditions that antedated the blues, and he could aver to scholarly

¹⁹ Lonnie Johnson, "St. Louis Cycle Blues," *Lonnie Johnson: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 3, 1927–1928*, Document Records DOCD-5065, 1990, compact disc; Elzadie Robinson, "St. Louis Cyclone Blues," *Elzadie Robinson: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 1, 1926–1928*, Document Records DOCD-5248, 1990, compact disc.

tradition to make the point: there were the spirituals that W. E. B. Du Bois had called the “sorrow-songs of slavery,” and, with more direct influence on the blues, there were the work songs and field hollers that John Lomax had called the “self-pity” and “complaining” songs of sharecropping and prison labor.²⁰ These traditions involved protest against particular oppressive institutions. For his part, Brown considered the blues “documents of humanity,” their expression of protest delivered in the more abstract form of disclosing the complex, fully human character of black psychic and social life. Tying the protest element of the blues to a humanist universalism, Brown articulated another version of the consensus that Lomax and Sandburg had reached about the political value of folksong in general and its “way into human interiors.” On behalf of the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance, Richard Wright posed a more radical definition of the blues that made it central to the Renaissance, in Margaret Walker’s words, as a “school of social protest.”²¹ In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright described black folklore, including the blues, as “channels” of “racial wisdom” and “materials” out of which “a human world be built.” It was also the necessary groundwork for black writers of a Marxist social militancy to stop “begging the question of the Negroes’ humanity” and to start “moulding the lives and consciousness of [the] masses” toward an actionable perspective on what “moves and directs the forces of history today.”²² Three years later, in his liner notes to *Southern Exposure* (1941), an album of “Jim Crow blues” by folksinger Josh White and poet Waring Cuney, Wright explained that the blues had always had a strain of “social militancy” due to its origins among rural black folk who migrated from Southern plantations and found adaptation difficult in urban-

²⁰ John Lomax, “Self-Pity in Negro Folk Songs,” *The Nation* 105 (9 August 1917): 141–45.

²¹ Margaret Walker, “The Life and Legacy of Horace Cayton,” TSS, 1993, Susan Cayton Woodson Papers (Box 9, Folder 54), Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

²² Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 43 and 49.

industrial society, both North and South.²³ Like Lomax, Sandburg, and Lloyd Lewis two decades earlier, who embraced the folksong as cultural opposition to “a civilization which was over-scientific, over-capitalized, [and] over-mechanized,” Wright identified the blues with “simple folk whose lives are caught and hurt in the brutal logic of modern industrial life.” In general, the blues was “concerned with every item of experience that disturbs and moves the imagination of a folk,” but there was also a particular substratum of the blues that “strikes at the environment” in a manner “as honest and direct as physical fact,” aiming at the same targets, Wright thought, as the anti-capitalist and anti-racist protests of the Depression-era Left: low wages and union busting, bosses and landlords, Jim Crow and lynching. Wright understood, as Brown did, that the blues achieved a special kind of public, even political, rhetoric when it was universal in imaginative scope and topical in subject matter. But for Wright the final purpose of the blues was not to expand the representation of black humanity but rather to express black revolutionary consciousness. In the typescript of his liner notes for *Southern Exposure*, Wright’s first and second drafts capture his sense of the interchangeability of revolutionary consciousness and action in what he called “fighting blues” protest: “under each melancholy wail” of the blues is “deepening consciousness” or, in the earlier version, “the threat of retaliation.”²⁴

For Wright, social protest was not only a subterranean strain in the blues from its very origins, but it was also the crux of an evolutionary logic whereby the blues would come to represent the increasing self-consciousness of black political expression. Just as Brown had disagreed with Robert Park’s premise that the oral traditions of black folksong lacked self-aware

²³ Joshua White, *Southern Exposure: An Album of Jim Crow Blues*, Keynote Recordings 107, 1941, 78 rpm.

²⁴ Richard Wright, “Note on Jim Crow Blues (Southern Exposure),” TSS, Box 6, Folder 25, Richard Wright Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

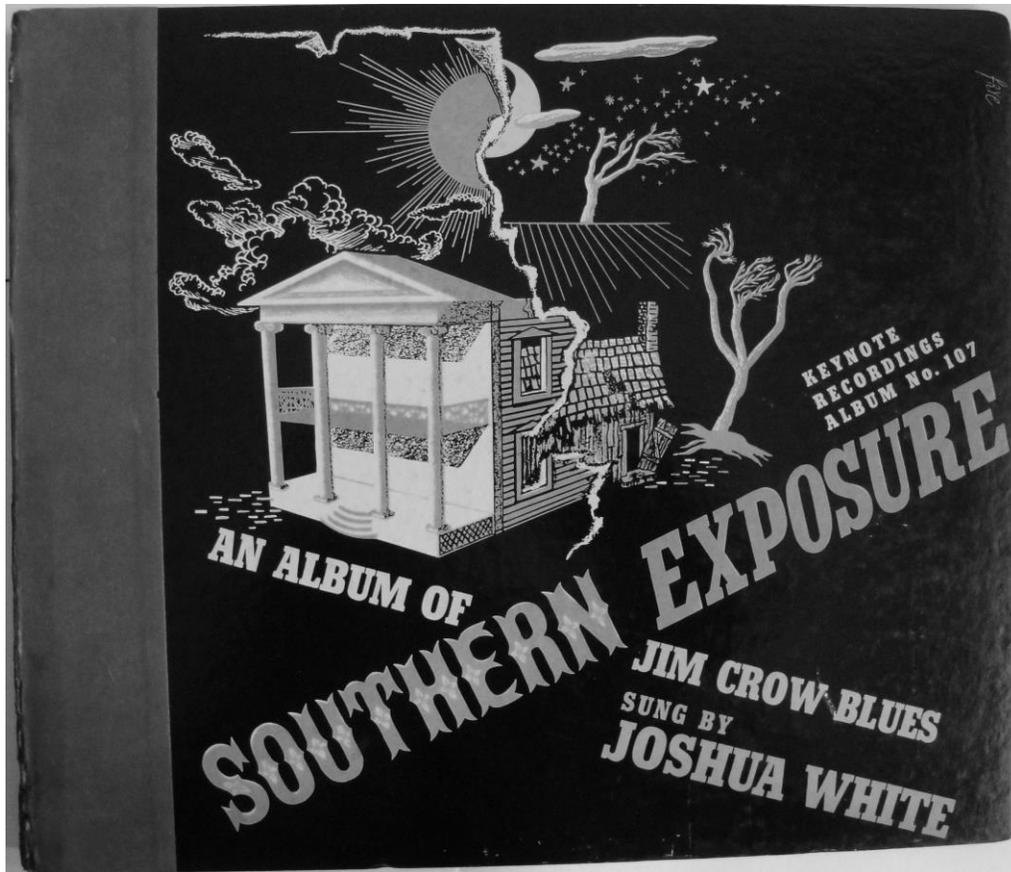


Figure 3. Cover art for *Southern Exposure: An Album of Jim Crow Blues* by Josh White and Waring Cuney. Artist unidentified (credited as "Frye"). Keynote Recordings 107, 1941. (Author's collection.)

race consciousness, so too did Wright depart from his mentor in the Chicago school of sociology when it came to the more specific question of black folksong and social protest. Where Park had maintained that it was the well-wrought art poetry of the Negro Renaissance in Harlem that had given rise to a strain of “rebellion and self-assertion” in black expressive culture, Wright argued that a verbal art of protest, highly self-conscious and sophisticated in its own right, was basic to the blues.²⁵ For Wright, the language and mentality of the blues were deeply and sharply ironic, and rose at their highest moments to the level of ironic critique. Irony set the blues in contrast to residual nineteenth-century notions of folksong as primitive, prosaic, and unselfconscious, as

²⁵ Park, “Negro Race Consciousness as Reflected in Race Literature,” 294.

John Stuart Mill had argued, and instead aligned the blues squarely with what Sandburg had called “lyrics of tough life.” In the first draft of his liner notes to *Southern Exposure*, Wright observed that the blues in its penchant for topical reportage embraced “[r]eflections and commentaries on our ‘democratic way of life.’”²⁶ The emphasis here fell equally on critical reflection and commentary in the blues and on its ironic framing of betrayed national democratic principles. As Wright understood it, then, the blues was also answering the call that James Weldon Johnson had made to poets of the Harlem Renaissance for a poetry with an expressive range beyond the two stops of humor and pathos.²⁷ The possibilities it opened for verbal displays or ironic self-consciousness and critique explain why Harlem Renaissance poet Waring Cuney adopted the blues and collaborated with folk musician Josh White on the protest songs of *Southern Exposure*. For Wright, recognizing and foregrounding this strain of protest in the blues, as he had done alongside Cuney and White, meant that folksong scholarship and black literary modernism were together becoming responsive to the political consciousness that already had been raised among the folk by the Depression and the New Deal—a process evidenced throughout the 1930s by such songs as Lead Belly’s “Mr. Roosevelt” and Big Bill Broonzy’s “W. P. A. Blues.”²⁸

By 1941, when the songs of *Southern Exposure* were released, the blues had married social protest and social realism in topical songs that indicted the many everyday injustices of Jim Crow racism, and did so in a language of ironic critique that had evolved into parody. The title and cover art of the *Southern Exposure* album prepared listeners for the subversive irony of

²⁶ Wright, “Note on Jim Crow Blues (Southern Exposure).”

²⁷ James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), xl.

²⁸ In his liner notes to *Southern Exposure*, Wright described the content of the blues as “concerned with every item of experience that disturbs and moves the imagination of the folk.” He noted that one of those affective registers, “social militancy,” was a feature of White and Cuney’s songs that put them in tune with a pervasive tendency in the commercial blues recordings of the Great Depression.

the songs inside: illustrating the pun of the title, the cover image depicts a plantation mansion with its front baked golden by direct exposure to an overhead sun, while the image itself peels back to expose the underside of the pastoral plantation scene as a dilapidated sharecropper's shack. Meanwhile, several of the songs coauthored by White and Cuney set original protest verses to familiar tunes that had been taken from either blues tradition or commercial blues records, reviving a centuries-long tradition of the topical broadside ballad and its usual paratext, "sung to a common air." White and Cuney's parodic use of this practice lends the authority of folksong tradition to urgent and topical protest, while suggesting that the solemnity of that tradition is always subtended, like the shack behind the mansion, by subversive truth-telling. Take "Southern Exposure," the title track of the album, which has White singing in the persona of a sharecropper to the tune of "Careless Love," a traditional song that had been enshrined in Sandburg's *American Songbag* and recorded by blues singers from Lead Belly to Bessie Smith.²⁹ With a song of lover's sorrow as his constant melodic allusion, White transforms the lament into a protest that turns on the sharecropper's self-awareness of the irony of his situation: "Lord, I work all the week in the blazing sun / Can't buy my shoes, Lord, when my payday comes." True to the blues idiom, this song uses concrete, particularized images to indict specific economic and political injustices, not only debt and indentured labor but also political disenfranchisement: "I ain't treated no better, Lord, than a mountain goat / Boss takes my crop and a poll tax takes my vote." In "Defense Factory Blues," White's guitar accompaniment borrows from the traditional Piedmont blues song "Crow Jane," while his vocal melody alludes to Leroy Carr's "How Long, How Long Blues," a song that was recorded in 1927 for Mayo Williams and Vocalion Records,

²⁹ Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, 21.

and that, with its small-band rhythm combo, became the prototype of the urban Chicago blues.³⁰ Like his mix of rural and urban styles, White's ironic narrative shifts the scene of economic injustice from the plantation system to the wartime defense industries: "Went to the defense factory / trying to find some work to do / Had the nerve to tell me / 'Black boy, nothing here for you'." The practice of parody and imitation in these wartime blues songs was a feature of folksong transmission and adaptation that greatly influenced Negro Renaissance poets in the 1930s and 40s. *Southern Exposure* impressed not only Wright but also Brown. Looking back in 1950 on two decades of increasingly self-conscious social protest in the recorded blues, Brown acknowledged that the songs of *Southern Exposure* were the work of "conscious propagandists, not truly folk." But he emphasized that White and Cuney's songs, more importantly, had been embraced by the folk, having expressed their frustrations and concerns and manifested explicitly the underground tradition of social protest that they were hearing ever more frequently on race records.³¹ In *Southern Exposure*, Brown found an exemplary expression of the folk-say thesis, where folk and literary forms are understood to be in constant interaction, and he approached White and Cuney's "propaganda" from the perspective of the FWP and the literary wing of the popular front: folk forms were highly evolved and sophisticated in substance and style, and they were, in Brown's words, sources of "pungency" for poets who wanted to create revolutionary art.³²

Though Brown himself upheld the status of social protest as genuine folklore, his "propaganda" argument about the social protest blues recalled unmistakably the eighteenth- and

³⁰ See "Blues Style: An Annotated Outline," in Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 217–24.

³¹ Sterling A. Brown, "Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs," reprinted in *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, edited by Mark A. Sanders (1950; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 261–62.

³² Sterling A. Brown, "The Blues," *Phylon* 13, no. 4 (1952): 292.

nineteenth-century discourse around the British ballad and the controversies around its authenticity. The original “scandals of the ballad,” in Susan Stewart’s phrase, were a familiar, even cautionary story to folklorists throughout the twentieth century, as Brown’s argument attests; and their legacy lives on in a line of suspicious critique among contemporary literary and cultural historians who understand folksong to perform social and political work for elites rather than any kind of folk themselves.³³ Among scholars of black folksong, and the blues in particular, an uncompromising version of Brown’s “propaganda” argument has taken hold: in the political field, expressions of social protest in the blues and its antecedent traditions are interpreted as evidence of ideological manipulation, in different periods, by sympathetic and crusading liberals, by motivated partisans of the leftist popular front, and, decades later, by activists of the nascent New Left.³⁴ This argument reinforces the hardening orthodoxy that the blues, like the ballad or the folksong in general, is either an ideological construct or a commercial invention created by elites and ventriloquized through the fictive voice of the folk, with references or appeals to the historicity of oral traditions dismissed as mystifications serving a cult of authenticity.

This line of critique, I argue, flattens and distorts the real literary, cultural, and intellectual history that produced the phenomenon of the blues and by the Second World War

³³ Though it coalesced in the work of David Harker and Georgina Boyes, as mentioned above, the suspicious reading of folksong as ideology has its roots, I would argue, in Richard Dorson’s critical concept of “fakelore,” which he posited in the 1950s as part of a reaction against the populist New Deal folklore of Benjamin Botkin. Dorson thought the Botkin school of folklore studies had allowed ideologically corrupt elements of popular culture to enter into the otherwise distinct realm of folklore. See Richard Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 3–5.

³⁴ See Cruz for a sociology of the Negro spiritual that emphasize the genre’s discursive construction as a vehicle for abolitionism and the liberal politics of Reconstruction. For a cultural history of black folksong in the interwar period that attempts to debunk the cultural front’s claims of discovering within it a living tradition of protest, with particular reference to Lawrence Gellert, a colleague of Sterling Brown’s, see Bruce Conforth, *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013). For a literary and cultural history of the postwar blues revival that views the idea of the blues as protest as an enabling myth for the political generation of the 1960s, see Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2008).

had shaped the concept of it, in Brown's words, as a "strong subterranean current of song coming out of...forbidden places."³⁵ I argue, moreover, that by returning to the Chicago Black Renaissance, and recuperating its ties to the New Deal's transformation of American folklore study, contemporary scholars will discover a cultural moment when the historical reality of black folksong tradition was understood to depend on its own arrival at historical self-knowledge.³⁶ For the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance and the folklorists of the FWP, who were often one and the same, the blues stood out among other forms of folk expression not as authentic specimens of a prior or disappearing culture but rather as credible documents of contemporary life, popular feeling, and collective memory. The Chicago School sociologists viewed commercial blues records, in Wright's words, as "indices of the state and quality of feeling among the Negro folk," sure to provide the kind of data, in their mass production for the black working classes, that would amount to a complete recording of a present popular mentality.³⁷ Following the sociologists' lead, FWP researchers on the music project in Chicago produced a databank of transcribed blues lyrics to identify systematic patterns and uncover what zeitgeist of its own an economically marginalized black urban society might harbor. Amassing what would have been a book-length study entitled *A History of Negro Music and Musicians in Chicago*, they organized their research around commercial genres and treated musical "crazes" like the blues in the 1920s and boogie-woogie in the 1930s as evidence that black Chicago musicians had created a distinct idiom that became widely popular as much for its modern sensibility as for its

³⁵ See *Freedom: The Golden Quartet and Josh White at the Library of Congress, 1940*, commentary by Sterling A. Brown, Alain Locke, and Alan Lomax, Bridge Records 9114, 2003, compact disc.

³⁶ "[W]hite 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," wrote Charles Keil of his own study of the blues in 1966. "I have, however, tried to keep my interpretations from straying too far from the views of the primary producers and consumers of the blues." The same could be said for the federally employed writers on the music project of the IWP in the 1930 and 40s. See Keil, *Urban Blues*, vii.

³⁷ Wright, *Southern Exposure: An Album of Jim Crow Blues*, liner notes.

folk roots.³⁸ Brown, himself a record collector since adolescence, and a discographer throughout his career for colleagues such as Alain Locke, also connected the modernity of black folksong to the popularity of the commercial race record: in a 1940 Library of Congress concert memorializing African American history since Emancipation through song, Brown pinpointed the contemporary stage of that history in the blues, the epitome of which was Josh White singing Leroy Carr's "How Long, How Long Blues."³⁹ These examples provide important context for my analysis below of three figures associated with the FWP, the Chicago Black Renaissance, and their joint legacy after 1950, and they also underscore the crucial flaw in the suspicious critique of inauthenticity in black folksong tradition. If political consciousness or commercial savvy seem to betray a modern origin and top-down authorship incompatible with folksong as such, it is because critics often presuppose as their standard of authenticity a Romantic conception of the folk as unlettered rustics. The generation of folklorists who emerged during the Depression and the Second World War dispensed with this particular idea of the folk and their lore, which was a relic of eighteenth-century anthropology that had had its twilight in the mid-career of John Lomax. This new generation understood signs of modernity, whether political or commercial, to be endemic to folksong. For them, folksong was the language that the working classes brought to mass culture out of their own hidden histories in their often agonistic interaction with larger historical and economic forces.

³⁸ Organized, supervised, and edited by Arna Bontemps, the "Negro Music in Chicago" project amassed dozens of manuscripts from a number of IWP writers, including folklorist Onah Spencer, journalist Robert Lucas, jazz and blues critic Fred Glotzer, W. A. Harrison, and Bontemps himself. While the project never materialized into the book that Bontemps had planned, some of the research was folded into the "Music" and "Rhythm" chapters of *The Negro in Illinois*. See Arna Bontemps, "Suggested Outline for a Study of Negro Music in Chicago," The Illinois Writers Project: "Negro in Illinois" Papers, Box 49, Folder 1, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

³⁹ See *Freedom: The Golden Quartet and Josh White at the Library of Congress, 1940*.

The writers I analyze in this chapter each thought that properly hearing the blues emanating from Chicago into the American soundscape, and properly channeling its lyric, testimonial, and narrative aspects into literature, would have definite cultural and political consequences. Brown's particular interest in the topical blues led him back into the rich tradition of black folk ballads, and he thought the primacy of portraiture in both forms could offer a fuller, more human representation of African American life and character. He also maintained that the blues and the ballad were resources from black folksong tradition that could strengthen American literature with their frankness and truth-telling, much in the same way, he thought, that British folksong tradition had infused Elizabethan literature with new lyric resources. While Wright envisioned the blues with its restless, fugitive spirit uniting an interracial proletariat, Margaret Walker's interpretation moved in another direction. Walker stressed the stock narratives and portraits of black folksong, and their rendering in a distinctively black idiom, as vehicles of racial pride. The blues she would have heard in Chicago and found useful for her fieldwork and poetry in the 1930s and 40s were the "bad man" ballads and tales that had become popular blues material on race records, where reportage of black outlaws and their exploits offered allegories of race heroes and their triumphs over state violence. In these race heroes, both on race records and in racial memory more generally, Walker found and celebrated a desire among those she hymned as "My People" for cultural and political self-determination. Her contributions to the Chicago Black Renaissance as a "school of social protest" went beyond the interracial proletarian literature of the period and set a precedent for the next generation in the cultural politics of Amiri Baraka. Attributing his early knowledge of the blues to Brown and his record collection, Baraka adopted the thesis of Brown and the Chicago writers that black folksong documented black history by bearing its weight. He understood the blues as a style of

expression that held together the identity of a people because it was determined by the inordinate historical pressure defining their experience of capitalist modernity. He also viewed the history of blues practice as a history of artistic insurgence: the blues was a way to invade and overthrow the standards of all Western aesthetics.

I

In 1930, after having placed literary ballads and blues in some of the leading New Negro publications, Brown published a series of formally complex folk poems in Botkin's journal *Folk-Say*, one of which was entitled "Ma Rainey."⁴⁰ This poem, a portrait of and ode to the self-styled "Mother of the Blues" Getrude "Ma" Rainey, would have been familiar in its basic topos to Harlem Renaissance audiences. Like Langston Hughes's germinal poem "The Weary Blues" (1926), Brown's "Ma Rainey" incorporates the idea of lyric as overheard utterance into the dramatic situation of the poem, in which the speaker is first an auditor drawn into speech by the inspiration of an intense musical experience. As such, "Ma Rainey" belongs to a particular poetic genre in African American modernism, one that has recently been called the "blues tribute poem."⁴¹ But Brown's poem also has deep roots in the Romantic lyric tradition, combining the ode and the ballad—and in this case the blues—into a hybrid genre that might be called the lyric of folksong encounter for its dialogism of (speaking) self and (singing) other, which makes it resemble ethnographic modes of cultural encounter.⁴² Brown's poem would have been striking to contemporary readers, though, for something immanent to the complexity of its form: the

⁴⁰ See Sterling A. Brown, "Dark of the Moon," a sequence including "Ma Rainey," in *Folk-Say* 2 (1930): 275–79.

⁴¹ Emily Rutter, "The Blues Tribute Poem and the Legacies of Getrude 'Ma' Rainey and Bessie Smith," *MELUS* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 69–91.

⁴² J. H. Prynne uses the term "field notes" to emphasize the ethnographic topos in this tradition of lyrical odes, which he traces back to William Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper." J. H. Prynne, *Field Notes: "The Solitary Reaper" and Others* (Cambridge, UK: Barque Press, 2007).

performance of a particular kind of intellectual work. “Ma Rainey,” like many of Brown’s poems on singers and other folk characters, makes use of poetic form to analyze a folklore tradition, delineate its historical growth, and reflect an image of the people involved in its transmission.

When J. Mayo Williams first recorded Ma Rainey in Chicago in 1923, the “Mother of the Blues” brought to Paramount’s race records the vocal traditions of Southern black tent shows and vaudeville theater from the prior generation. Rainey’s combination of minstrelsy and vaudeville with hot jazz and secular black folksong became known, even to Baraka in 1963, as the “classic blues.”⁴³ By making Rainey the subject of his poem, then, Brown constructs the topos of folksong encounter around a figure for the origin of the blues itself. Having both seen Rainey on stage and heard her on record, Brown takes up the trope of blues origins in a poem that pays homage to the singer’s theatrical popularization of the genre, but with a discographical folklorist’s interest in the deeper kinship of the blues with the ballad tradition. Indeed, the major set piece in “Ma Rainey” is a theatrical performance of a topical blues song with specific historical resonance for both the singer’s and the poet’s audiences. The poem’s first section establishes the setting of this performance with a scene narrated in a meaningful blend of ballad and blues verse forms:

When Ma Rainey
Comes to town,
Folks from anyplace
Miles aroun’,
From Cape Girardeau,
Poplar Bluff,
Flocks in to hear
Ma do her stuff

⁴³ Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, rev. ed. (1963; New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 81–94.

Counterpointing stanza and verse form, or poetic and musical measure, Brown's opening phrase creates what looks on the page like a double quatrain but sounds aloud like a single ballad verse. Because Brown writes in an accentual meter, with a prosody that is stress-based and organized around the duration of the musical phrase, the poem's lineation is an imperfect guide to its actual form. In "Ma Rainey" the surer guides are punctuation and rhyme: in this end-stopped unit of eight two-stress lines, the concurrence of end punctuation, end rhyme, and syntactic closure creates a perceptible phrasing that resolves into four lines of four stresses. In literary terms, the complete phrase is close to the common ballad measure; and in musical terms, it is close to the eight-bar verse of many sung ballads. But for the poem overall the crucial principle established here is the four-beat unit as a generative structure. Parsed accordingly, the next phrase in the poem's first stanza resolves into a truncated half of a ballad verse. "Folks," the narrator says:

Comes flivverin' in, | Or ridin' mules,
Or packed in trains, | Picknickin' fools."

The poem has set a metrical pattern but creates increasing prosodic variation with differences in phrasing, duration, and quantity. With the four-beat structure becoming reiterative, Brown's snatches of ballad begin to resemble a different song form. Take the next phrase, again lineated for measure:

That's what it's like, | Fo' miles on down,
To New Orleans Delta | An' Mobile Town,
When Ma hits | Anywhere's aroun'.

This phrase has the underlying form of a triadic blues verse, with caesura and segmentation producing three lines of equal measure. In a performance where caesura would signal rest, this blues phrase would occupy the same approximate duration as the eight-bar ballad phrase above. It is as if the entire stanza has unfolded through the contraction of the ballad, its morphing into the blues, and their coming to rest in interchangeable measures, with difference due to prosodic

phrasing. At the level of form and prosody, Brown's poem makes the argument that the ballad and the blues emerge historically out of the same basic musical pattern or matrix.

Readers may wonder why Brown uses a visual pattern in the poem that partially obscures its musical or sonic pattern, as if lineation were perfunctory to the intended phrasing of the poem's performance. There are several related reasons. First, getting the visual and sonic patterns of the poem to clash is Brown's method of dramatizing the process of making a literary text the medium of a musical idiom. Brown gets musical forms into the poem not by imitating or translating them, a method that other Negro Renaissance poets tried to perfect, but rather by creating new hybrid forms that comment immanently on the multifaceted history of black folksong tradition. Second, the visual-sonic or print-oral nexus is crucial for Brown because he is commenting in part on black folksong's relationship to prior histories of mediating oral poetry in print. By starting from the visual form of the quatrain, exploding it into triadic and other forms, and foregrounding a constant musical pattern based on stress and caesura, Brown is connecting the blues and the ballad and making perceptible in both of them the same pulse that animates literary history's textual remnants of Anglo-Saxon accentual verse. Composing according to the musical phrase, he is bringing black folksong tradition into the wider field of quantitative, cadence-based verse forms that modernist free verse purported to recover from ancient sources. He is, from the perspective of Mark Sanders, working out an "Afro-modernist" poetics, applying modernist techniques to the proper representation of African American musical forms. Or he is, from the perspective of John Edgar Tidwell, "bluing" the American poetic canon, changing what counts as modern and American in the national literature by suffusing its pluralism with black

folksong.⁴⁴ But in either case Brown is counterpointing visual and sonic patterns in his poem to formulate what I argue is a non-essentialist black modernist poetics: what matters to him is that black folksong become a new force in the largely Euro-American tradition of using poetry to stage encounters between folk and elite culture.⁴⁵

What also matters to Brown is staging the folksong encounter in ways that use the inscription of voice as the figurative but non-pictorial means to create portraits of race men and women. The third reason that Brown upholds the tension between the poem's visual and sonic patterns is precisely because his poetry aspires to portraiture by means more multidimensional than graphic description. If picturing the black human image had been for much of American literary history a matter of "caricature and contempt," as Brown argued, then realism in portraiture—whether for race pride or basic human dignity—might require that the burden of visual representation be borne by sound instead.⁴⁶ Staging the poem as a drama of black folksong's historical evolution is for Brown one way to represent a racial figure like Ma Rainey with historical realism. The fourth, related reason is that crossing visual and sonic patterns supports Brown's realist portraiture by subtending a new way of recording the idiom of black music *and* speech. Brown's way of lineating "Ma Rainey" does make its musical phrasing less visible, but it also makes the prosody of certain idiomatic expressions more audible. For instance, subdividing the four-beat phrase into shorter lines by half allows an expression like the "flivverin' in" of Rainey's audiences—slang specific to the age of the Ford Model T—to stand

⁴⁴ Mark A. Sanders, *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 7; Steven C. Tracy, *Hot Music, Ragmentation, and the Bluing of American Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 300–04.

⁴⁵ This project of Brown's is one reason why his essays on the music routinely include comparisons between the blues and the foundational texts of the English literary canon. For instance, in 1952 Brown wrote that the blues in their oldest form had a "broad and frank" manner of speaking that made them "Chaucerian" at heart. See Brown, "The Blues," 292.

⁴⁶ Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction / Negro Poetry and Drama*, reprint edition (1938; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 105.

out in a state of rhythmic suspension, commanding the attention it might lose in a line shaped by the full uttered phrase. This visual patterning also allows the expression to resonate more clearly with its counterpart later in the phrase, “Picknickin’ fools,” which also commands a line of its own; and it adds delicacy and subtlety to nonstandard grammar and syntax (the full sentence is “Folks... / Comes flivverin’ in”) while emboldening them as defining features of dialect. Brown’s use of visual and sonic patterning to elevate those features of black speech that he considered truly idiomatic would become consequential for his critical assessments and prescriptions, as poet and ethnographer, about recording dialect.

The appearance of “Ma Rainey” in *Folk-Say* was no accident: Brown’s poem is a literary manifestation of the folk-say thesis and method. It uses poetic technique not only to analyze but also to rearticulate and transmit folk sources, entering itself in the stream of a folksong tradition to show that its forms are changeable according to the ways of saying and the ways of picturing that subtend them. In “Ma Rainey,” the third section of the poem is where musical form, dialect, and portraiture begin to coalesce:

O Ma Rainey,
Li’l an’ low;
Sing us ’bout de hard luck
Roun’ our do’;
Sing us ’bout de lonesome road
We mus’ go. . .

Formally, the two stanzas of this section, including the one above, settle temporarily into the six-line, triple-phrase structure that emerged earlier in the poem as a blues pattern. In dialect, they display Brown’s preference for signifiers of spoken idiom that rely on inventive grammatical and syntactic constructions (“Sing us”) and acoustically perceptible, rather than merely orthographical, phonetic differences (“Li’l, “’bout”). And in picturing the racial figure of Ma Rainey, these stanzas subordinate visual imagery—neutralizing the possibility of racial

caricature—in favor of tropes of voicing, particularly apostrophe and prosopopoeia: “O Ma Rainey // Sing us” addresses an absent figure as if present, and endows her with a capacity for utterance that the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition understands as a making or a giving of face. Brown’s crucial gesture here is to insert the first-person plural into this invocation, so that by calling on Rainey to sing, the poem presences its own voice as hers and her voice, in turn, as that of a racial “us.” Linking portraiture and song, Brown does make the “face of the race” an effect of his “recording of the black voice,” in Henry Louis Gates’s formulation, but he also presents that voice as the effect of a prior figurative representation, blurring the distinction between its literary and indexical manifestations.⁴⁷ As a recorder of folk-say, he accomplishes that maneuver here by establishing a persona for the folk tradition on the tropes of the classical and Romantic lyric tradition.

For “Ma Rainey,” another way to describe the poem’s status as folk-say is that it uses certain structures and tropes to stage and then to read its own location in culture. In a 1973 lecture, as Gates famously tells the anecdote, Brown responded to a line in Robert Penn Warren’s poem “Pondy Woods” (“Nigger, your breed ain’t metaphysical”) with an instructive parody: “Cracker, your breed ain’t exegetical.”⁴⁸ Denied access to the universalism of Western philosophy and aesthetics, Brown suggests, black thinkers and artists should try an end-route through interpretation and commentary on their own traditions. “Ma Rainey” is exegetical in this sense, mining and drawing out the history and meaning of its sources. The poem is both embedded in and learned about the vernacular culture of the blues. It repeatedly stages the unique discursive function of folk-say, where the folk speak not only for but also about

⁴⁷ Henry Louis Gates, “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985), 11.

⁴⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford and New York: University of Oxford Press, 1987), xix; Gates, *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford and New York: University of Oxford Press, 1988), 132–33; Sanders, *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics*, 1–5.

themselves, and it does so through folk-say's defining mode of transmission: the poem's voice is predicated on the seamless interaction between oral and written traditions. By articulating the folk-say of Ma Rainey and her audience through a sophisticated system of forms and tropes, Brown underlines in the blues what Botkin described as the "touch of the sophisticated and even synthetic" in American folklore writ large, which had grown up in an age of mass print that for Botkin facilitated unprecedented reciprocity between lore and literature. Understood as dual aspects of folk-say, lore and literature were "folk" insofar as they shared the basic function of communicating local history and legend, whether in songs and stories or anecdotes and proverbs.⁴⁹

The reciprocal exchange enabled by folk-say, as Botkin and Brown understood it, traded on the idiom of the lore's performance and communication, or what Botkin called the "oral, linguistic, storytelling aspect" of historical and legendary narrative.⁵⁰ Such exchanges created a continuum of lore and literature in which they both served the diffusion of culture "from the bottom up" and "from above downward."⁵¹ For Brown, that kind of exchange was the point of the lyric of folksong encounter. In "Ma Rainey," three narratives converge in the mythic portrait of the blues singer: Ma Rainey's topical song (the poem's action), the audience's reception of the performance (the poem's dramatic situation), and Brown's own historical encounter with Rainey (the poem's occasion). The poem's fourth and final section renders a dramatic climax in an eye- and earwitness mode, staging a Ma Rainey performance of the classic "Backwater Blues" through the reported speech of an audience member: "I talked to a fellow, an' the fellow say, / 'She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway. / She sang Backwater Blues one day.'" This triadic

⁴⁹ Botkin, "American Folklore," 137–38.

⁵⁰ Botkin, "We Called It 'Living Lore,'" 198.

⁵¹ Botkin, "American Folklore," 137–38.

verse, blues in character except for the missing repetition of lines, is followed by a transcription of three verses from “Backwater Blues,” still in the voice of the first-hand witness:

It rained fo’ days an’ de skies was dark as night,
Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.

Thundered an’ lightened an’ the storm begin to roll
Thousan’s of people ain’t got no place to go.

’Den I went an’ stood upon some high ol’ lonesome hill,
An’ looked down on the place where I used to live.

With slight alterations to syntax and diction, these quoted verses come from the original 1927 recording of the song by Bessie Smith, who is also customarily credited as the song’s author. Turning the song into a set piece, Brown eliminates repeated first lines and renders the triadic verses as couplets, as he regularly did for blues transcriptions in his folklore essays. The following stanza is the poem’s only normative blues verse: describing in the voice of the first-hand witness how other audience members “bowed dey heads an’ cried,” “shet dey moufs up tight an’ cried,” after Rainey ended her performance and “followed some de folks outside,” it evokes an indigenous specimen of the oral tradition. The section’s final stanza both recapitulates and reframes the first, supplying for the section as a whole the kind of altered repetition and clinching closure that defines the blues pattern: “Dere wasn’t much more de fellow say,” ends the informant report, “She jes’ gits hold of us dataway.” The poem’s return here to the opening lines of the section mirrors another recursion: the elaboration of a blues structure around “Backwater Blues,” which allows Brown to make the poem exegetical. By attributing “Backwater Blues” to Rainey, Brown may be pointing to the commercial song’s derivation from or assimilation into oral tradition, in the manner of folk-say; he may also be suggesting that Rainey and her repertoire stand behind the popular success enjoyed by Smith, onetime an understudy to the “Mother of the Blues” in theatrical appearances like the one described in the

poem. Above all, identifying “Backwater Blues” with Rainey may be Brown’s way of linking the song’s topic with the poem’s occasion. Long considered a testimonial document of the 1927 Mississippi River Flood, “Backwater Blues,” as David Evans has shown, was most likely a response to the 1926 Cumberland River Flood in and around Nashville, the city where Smith was performing at the time of the disaster.⁵² It was also where Brown saw Rainey perform two years later, in 1928.

Brown was based in Nashville for the academic year of 1928-1929 as an instructor in English literature at Fisk University. In addition to Charles S. Johnson, the Chicago school sociologist, Brown’s colleagues at Fisk included musicologist and folklorist John Wesley Work III, who took Brown to a local Nashville club one night to see Ma Rainey. “She was very simple and direct,” Brown said of Rainey in an interview thirty-five years later; “she was a person of the folk.” Rainey’s direct manner of communication, Brown joked, was partly libidinous. He and Work were folklorists interested in interviewing the singer, but Rainey was Mother of the Blues: “We just wanted to talk, but she was interested in other things.” Her direct manner of communication was also social. In it Brown saw the folksinger’s art, as Sandburg had described it, of reaching across and into the interiors of her listeners: “Ma Rainey was the greatest mistress of an audience.... She wouldn’t have to sing any words; she would moan, and the audience would moan with her.”⁵³ If an essential feature of Rainey’s singing were its nonsemantic, purely expressive function, as Brown suggests, readers of the poem may wonder about the importance of giving her voice through a topical song like “Backwater Blues.” Brown helped initiate an enduring consensus in folklore studies for which meaning in the blues was contingent on the

⁵² David Evans, “Bessie Smith’s ‘Back-Water Blues’: The Story behind the Song,” *Popular Music* 26, no. 1 (January 2007): 106–14.

⁵³ Sterling Brown interview with Paul Oliver, qtd. in Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (New York: Stein, Day, 1970), 42.

particularity of its social reference or content; “reference determines value,” as Amiri Baraka would write thirty years after “Ma Rainey.”⁵⁴ But Brown’s folklore scholarship also established a *functional* source of musical style in the blues by tracing it back to the work song, which Baraka would later anatomize into the moan, the shout, the holler, and other vocal effects.⁵⁵ In Baraka’s musicology of the blues, as we will see, it became crucial to see not only how social reference determined aesthetic value but also how social function, in turn, subtended social reference. Brown makes this connection visible in using “Backwater Blues” as a source of the same communicative efficacy in “Ma Rainey” that he said the singer could command through the blues moan itself: “Ma really *knew* these people,” said Brown, and part of that familiarity was a mutual understanding of the historical experience that was latent in the wordless lament and manifest in the narrative testimony. By suggesting that the blues moan could be interchangeable with the topical blues narrative, that the social function of the blues was the animating center of its social reference, Brown framed his poem as part of a larger argument that would emerge more fully with Baraka about the processual character of the blues. Less a form or an artifact than a crystallized social process in its own right, the blues song was the result and the expression of the life and world of the people who knew and communicated in its idiom.

It was significant that Brown heard Rainey during his time at Fisk and in the company of John Work III. Brown credited his colleagues at Fisk with deepening his critical interest in the representation of African Americans in American literature and his desire for a corrective portraiture. At Harvard he had written about the treatment of Irish and Jewish characters in English drama, and after Harvard he had studied the “sociological criticism” on representations

⁵⁴ Baraka (Jones), *Blues People*, 7–8.

⁵⁵ See Brown, “Negro Folk Expression,” 257–62.

of the working class in American literature; but it was at Fisk, he said, “where I started on *us*.”⁵⁶ Especially influential on Brown was Johnson’s then work-in-progress *The Negro in American Civilization*, an “encyclopedia of the Negro,” in Robert Park’s words, which aspired to be a comprehensive history of blacks in America since European contact, a fact book for social workers in all areas of black life, and an investigation of “racial attitudes,” or what Brown would have called “racial stereotypes.”⁵⁷ In John Work III, Brown met a scholar who could take this search for a truthful account of the deep roots of black social and cultural existence and apply it specifically to folksong. Work’s major contribution to the study of African American folksong was to oppose a hardening consensus of the 1920s and 30s and argue for the African origins of the Negro spiritual. (While he contended that call-and-response was the African song form at the basis of the spirituals, Work’s field recordings give evidence that it was melismatic singing in the spiritual—the moan—that contributed to the rise of the blues.)⁵⁸

A decade after Brown and Work encountered Rainey in Nashville, the Afrocentric account of black folksong had taken hold in Chicago. Under Brown’s direction as the FWP’s Editor of Negro Affairs, the IWP and its researchers on the *Negro Music in Chicago* project embraced the Afrocentric account but from a pluralist perspective, emphasizing both the African “heritage” of black folksong and its vital role in American cultural modernity. In an unpublished essay titled “The Negro’s Musical Heritage,” W. A. Harrison articulated the IWP’s view of the blues as an expression of “the racial life of the Negro,” drawing a connection to the laments, spiritual and secular, that had emerged as instruments of survival under slavery; yet the defining

⁵⁶ John Edgar Tidwell, John S. Wright, and Sterling A. Brown, “‘Steady and Unaccusing’: An Interview with Sterling A. Brown,” *Callaloo* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 816.

⁵⁷ Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in American Civilization: A study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research* (New York: Holt, 1930); Robert E. Park, “The Negro in American Civilization,” *Ethics* 41, no. 3 (April 1931): 367–70; Tidwell, Brown, and Wright, “‘Steady and Unaccusing,’” 816.

⁵⁸ John W. Work, III, *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular* (New York: Crown, 1940), 14–27; John Work, III, *Recording Black Culture*, Spring Fed Records 104, 2008, compact disc.

topos of the blues, Harrison suggested, was the mixture of self-pity and heroic pride that it drew from the racially hybrid tradition of the bad man ballad.⁵⁹ In another unpublished essay, “The Blues Language,” IWP researcher Fred Glotzer described a grassroots, working-class blues idiom that was both “insular” to the “music of a people” and “dispersive” (because of the phonograph) to the culture on a national scale; the blues was “an event in our language” that did for American English what James Joyce’s “propagation of the new word” had done for British English.⁶⁰ Brown argued too that black folksong was always evolving a language of verbal wit, linguistic innovation, and responsiveness to contemporary life. For Brown the FWP editor and supervisor, picturing the race with facticity as he had learned at Fisk depended on decisions at writers’ projects like *Negro Music in Chicago* about how to transcribe speech as an ethnographer or discographer but with a poet’s ear for folk expression.

At the FWP, Brown approached this problem of recording speech from the perspective of a literary artist and literary folklorist whose work had been part of a debate within the New Negro movement about the stakes of representing black idioms (and black life) by writing in dialect. In 1921, in his preface to one of the movement’s defining anthologies, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson had applauded modern black poets’ break from the tradition of Dunbar, a tradition of writing in nonstandard orthography to evoke the phonology of black dialect. For Johnson, dialect writing was the medium for what Brown would later call racial stereotyping, and breaking away from it meant that poets, particularly those in Harlem, could begin searching for “a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather

⁵⁹ W. A. Harrison, “The Negro’s Musical Heritage,” TSS, undated, The Illinois Writers Project: “Negro in Illinois” Papers, Box 48, Folder 3, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

⁶⁰ Fred Glotzer, “The Blues Language,” TSS, 1940, The Illinois Writers Project: “Negro in Illinois” Papers, Box 52, Folder 2, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation.”⁶¹ More compatible with Johann Gottfried von Herder’s eighteenth-century concept of *Volksgeist* than with Botkin’s folk-say, Johnson’s valuation of “symbols from within” the “racial spirit” was arcane and obscure as an indication of what a viable alternative to the dialect tradition might be. Johnson clarified the point a decade later, distinguishing between two modes of dialect. In his preface to Brown’s volume of poems *Southern Road* (1932), Johnson noted that Brown had not rejected dialect outright like other poets of the Negro Renaissance but had instead separated the “minstrel traditions” of “conventionalized” dialect from the “raw material” of “genuine characteristic” dialect, or what he called the “common, racy, living speech of the Negro in certain phases of *real* life.”⁶² Johnson was distinguishing not only between inauthentic and authentic dialect but also between dead and living dialect. In the sonic reduction of speech to print, it could be difficult to assess which forms of dialect had a greater or lesser purchase on the reality of speech; but a critical standard could be established on the basis of contemporaneity or the link to a vital tradition. For Johnson, curiously, that standard could be applied less readily to language than to character. He knew that Brown’s form of dialect was close to “living speech,” for instance, because Brown wrote about the folk heroes of such ballads as “Stagolee,” “John Henry,” and “Casey Jones.” For Johnson, in other words, dialect could be renovated and reclaimed by black poets seeking to write the vernacular only if the connection between recording the voice and picturing the race were made immediate.

If Johnson seemed to suggest that a new standard in racial portraiture could overwrite the old cultural significations of dialect in poetry, then Brown saw the process of renovation moving

⁶¹ Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, xl–xli.

⁶² See James Weldon Johnson, “Introduction to the First Edition of *Southern Road*,” in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, edited by Michael S. Harper (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1980), 16–17.

in the opposite direction: more nuanced techniques for inscribing black vernacular speech patterns would determine new possibilities of racial portraiture outside the mold of stereotyping. As the master tropes of “Ma Rainey” demonstrate, what counted for Brown as inscribing the voice exceeded orthography and phonology, or “spelling and pronunciation,” in Johnson’s formula, and encompassed figures of speech in a rhetorical sense. From a perspective oriented by the theory of folk-say, Johnson’s notion of a black poetry based on “symbols from within” the “racial spirit” would not have necessarily meant a poetry based on racial character or race figures; more likely it would have meant a poetry defined by those idiomatic features of vernacular language that were left out of dialect poetry’s traditional emphasis on phonology. An exemplar of such a poetry was the blues. For Brown, as I have shown, the blues constituted itself not primarily as a song form but rather as a vernacular idiom, and the most distinctive features of its idiom were not phonological but instead ranged from diction and imagery to rhetorical devices and prosodic patterns. So the blues posed one solution to the problem of recording black speech that Brown inherited both as a poet and as a folklorist. If the poet and folklorist working on the black vernacular had to determine how to write black speech—how to represent black orality—without reinforcing “minstrel traditions” and stereotypes and the standard of white hegemony that they supported, then the blues and its idiomatic range embodied a new possibility: a deep well of vernacular expression seemingly untouched by minstrelsy in performance and the plantation tradition in literature.

When Brown became an editor of the FWP, his poetic experiments with dialect informed his editorial policies to Project writers about related techniques in ethnographic fieldwork, such as the transcription and adaptation of interviews and performances. At the same time, Brown’s position in the debate framed by Johnson around the problem of recording black speech likewise

informed the conversations he had about dialect as an ethnographic technique with colleagues at the FWP and Library of Congress, the Project's national headquarters and repository. Of direct consequence for editorial policy were Brown's conversations with John Lomax, which shaped the official directives for fieldworkers on the Ex-Slave Narratives Project and for writers of the regional histories and state guides. On the question of dialect, the policy recommendations from Brown and Lomax were nominally in agreement but fundamentally in conflict, as the Library of Congress's administrative records show. In recommendations authorized to state directors by John Cronyn, associate director of the FWP, Lomax chose as exemplars of proper transcription technique two ex-slave narratives from Georgia that had been rendered in dialect: "All the interviewers should copy the Negro expressions," wrote Lomax in an April 1937 memorandum, indicating the need for consistency in orthography and a preference for certain spellings of stock terms.⁶³ In his cover letter Cronyn summarized Lomax's recommendation this way: retain dialect but simplify the spelling. The objective was practical; no theory was brought to bear on method. Simplification, wrote Cronyn, "does not mean that the interviews should be entirely in 'straight English'—simply that we want them to be more readable to those uninitiated in the broadest Negro speech."⁶⁴ Lomax, with the backing of his supervisor, wanted dialect to produce authenticity as its key orality-effect but not to interfere with a historical narrative's legibility to a general (white) readership. Brown agreed with the practical objective; like Lomax, he favored uniformity and restraint in the orthography of dialect. His basic recommendation, as he wrote in a memorandum two and a half months later, was "simplicity in recording the dialect" rather than

⁶³ "Copy of Memorandum from John A. Lomax to George Cronyn, April 9, 1937," in Federal Writers' Project, *Slaves Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves: Typewritten Records*, edited by B. A. Botkin (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1941), microfilm, reel 1, xv. All subsequent citations of the Ex-Slave Narratives Project administrative files refer to this volume.

⁶⁴ "Copy of Memorandum from George Cronyn to Edwin Bjorkman, April 14, 1937," in Federal Writers' Project, xvi.

“exact phonetic transcription.”⁶⁵ Brown’s views on method, though, had theoretical underpinnings; he cared not only about the legibility of the text but also about the individual and collective portraits of ex-slaves—and the grand narrative of the institution of slavery itself—that it would serve.

Brown’s theoretical grounds for the practical recommendation of simplicity reflected the ethos of folk-say: “I recommend that truth to idiom be paramount,” he wrote in his memorandum, “and exact truth to pronunciation be secondary.” For Brown, what Lomax had called “Negro expressions” were significant primarily for what they disclosed in their rhetoric about the mentality of a people, and the key orality-effect that recording them could produce was a sense of access into the material and inner worlds behind the speech. Brown used a common example to explain what he meant by the “idiomatic” aspects of dialect that he wanted interviewers to favor: “The words ‘whafolks,’ ‘whufolks,’ ‘whi’folks,’ etc.,” he wrote, “can all be heard in the South. But ‘whitefolks’ is easier for the reader, and the word itself is suggestive of the setting and atmosphere.” Brown makes an appeal here to legibility, not in its own right but in the name of “truth to idiom”: the text should not call attention to the strangeness of its own surface but to the semantic specificity of the regional and racial diction beneath it. To that end, Brown proposed a list of priorities in the recording of dialect. Of primary importance, he wrote, was recording “turns of phrase that have flavor and vividness,” for which he provided examples, such as “piddled in de fields” and “skit of woods”; next was recording words with unique “local meaning”; and of only tertiary importance was recording words with non-standard pronunciation “as heard.” With this detailed account of “truth to idiom,” Brown was using the theory of folk-say to supply Lomax’s recommendations with a theory of a life world encoded in language—in

⁶⁵ “Copy of ‘Notes by an Editor on Dialect Usage in Accounts by Interviews with Ex-Slaves, June 20, 1937,’” in Federal Writers’ Project, xxviii–xxix.

this case, of the life world of slavery that interviewers could recover in the language of ex-slaves. Greater attention to the world latent in this particular language would entail reckoning with beliefs and their ideological underpinnings.

Issued as an addendum to Lomax's recommendations on writing dialect, perhaps at the request of Botkin, chief editor for the Ex-Slaves Narratives Project, Brown's memorandum had the authorization of FWP director Henry Alsberg and addressed the contradictions that could be found in Lomax's dispatches. Lomax and Brown each composed a list of dialect spellings that they advised interviewers not to use. Many of these were spellings that exaggerated slight phonetic differences or created an image of phonetic difference without acoustic reality; some examples of this tendency Lomax and Brown even agreed specifically to proscribe, such as *ah* for *I* and *wuz* for *was*. Moreover, Lomax and Brown both proscribed words that made little phonetic difference but evoked caricatured literary versions of dialect instead of ethnographic rigor: Lomax rejected *yo'* for *you*, while Brown rejected *ebry* and *ev'ry* for *every*. For Lomax and Brown, however, not every kind of dialect was equivalent. But because Lomax lacked Brown's interpretation of the folk-say theory and his more expansive idea of idiom, his ideal form of dialect was based less on diction, rhetoric, and syntax than on sometimes arbitrary preferences for certain spellings of standard dialect words over others. (For *going to*, for instance, he wanted interviewers to use *gwineter* rather than *gwainter*.) It was in this area of judgment that ambiguity, inconsistency, and contradiction could enter into the policies on writing dialect. In addition to his recommendations and proscriptions, Lomax offered as an exemplary text to fieldworkers the narrative spoken by Lula Flannigan of Athens, Georgia.⁶⁶ The text titled "Lula Flannigan," oddly, is replete with the kind of exaggerated, masticated, and caricatured dialect words that

⁶⁶ "Supplementary Instructions #9-E to the American Guide Manual, April 22, 1937," in Federal Writers' Project, xx-xxv.

Lomax proscribed: “Mos’ en lakly, somebuddy gwint’er de daid in dat house fo’ long, if us woan quick ’bout fixin’,” writes Lula’s narrator, hitting Lomax’s preferred rendering of *going to* but missing his proscriptions on nonstandard orthography when phonetically inconsequential. The text also uses its narrator to ventriloquize sentimental myths of slavery: plantation owners and the enslaved alike are seen defending the Lost Cause against tyrannical Yankees, and treatment under slavery is said to have been benevolent, paternal, and a privilege lost to emancipation.

Brown was suspicious of the “excessive editorializing” that would present such a narrative as representative of black popular consciousness and historical memory and use exaggerated phonetic dialect to mark it as “authentic.” He understood and shared Botkin’s objective for gathering first-hand interviews with non-elite subjects and writing American history from an African American perspective. In his introduction to the project’s administrative files, Botkin gave one of the earliest descriptions of oral history, though his own terminology derived from the theory of folk-say:

The narratives belong to folk history—history recovered from the memories and lips of participants or eye-witnesses, who mingle group with individual experience and both with observation, hearsay, and tradition. Whether the narrators relate what they actually saw and thought and felt, what they imagine, or what they have thought and felt about slavery since, now we know why they thought and felt as they did. To the white myth of slavery must be added the slaves’ own folklore and folk-say of slavery.⁶⁷

In this account, folk-say and folk history are mutually constitutive: patterns that define a people’s thought and feeling about their history shape certain ways of saying that history to themselves and others, producing a body of knowledge and a structure of feeling that are held together by expression and, for observers, are inextricable from expression itself. At stake in Brown’s recommendation of “truth to idiom,” then, is the possibility of recovering a black counter-memory of antebellum history. What the fieldworker records in recording idiomatic dialect, the

⁶⁷ B. A. Botkin, “Introduction,” in *Federal Writers’ Project*, ix.

higher functions of which Botkin calls “observation, hearsay, and tradition,” is the raw material for a mythic counter-narrative to the then-dominant “white myth of slavery” as the South’s Lost Cause. From this perspective, it would make sense that the “white myth of slavery” would find a ready vehicle in an ex-slave narrative like “Lula Flannigan,” Lomax’s exemplary case, whose “authenticity” was an effect of dialect bordering on the plantation tradition: even bracketing the suspicious reading of such texts as projections of white fantasy, it would still require more than a monologue in nonstandard pronunciation to offer a new kind of historical knowledge and sensibility to the folk historian. Texts in dialect expressing many different versions of history could be genuine, but editors like Brown and Botkin with theoretical commitments to folk-say and folk history would look first for “turns of phrase that have flavor and vividness,” in Brown’s words, and trust that texts possessing such expressions in abundance would be a source of knowledge and belief impossible to find wherever the clichés of stock-in-trade dialect still shaped the thinking.

Precisely in this theoretical commitment to folk-say, folk history, and “truth to idiom,” Brown, it could be said, made the same kind of recommendation about dialect writing to fieldworkers that Johnson had made to poets: search for a new idiom to replace “conventional” phonetic dialect because whatever strengths it has are corrupted by its stereotypical valences. Of course, Brown’s own poetry embraces phonetic dialect to a greater extent than his fieldwork policy here would suggest. This incongruity raises an important question. If the case Brown makes in his poetry for reviving and renovating phonetic dialect holds, then we should ask what the purpose or value would be of poems—like ethnographic fieldwork—that subordinate phonetic dialect to idiomatic vernacular. At stake for Brown here, I contend, is the possibility of raising the blues idiom to a privileged status as the stuff of “folk poetry”—the same status that

the Anglo-American literary tradition had historically awarded to the ballad form. Applying a modernist economy of means to phonetic dialect, Brown can place the blues on the same perch as the ballad by making the blues as *impersonal* as the ballad was supposed to be, according to folksong scholarship since Child and Kittredge. For Sandburg, another student of this school, achieving the impersonality of the ballad for other, sometimes non-narrative types of folksong had meant adapting them as dramatic monologues. Dialect employed as a means of “exact phonetic transcription,” as Brown put it, would achieve a similar result for folk-say. But in the process of assimilating the dramatic monologue, it would also mitigate that form’s impersonality: predicated on “exact truth to pronunciation,” the dialect poem would capture the sonic details of an utterance and become in effect the record of an individual speech act, not a form holding together a multiplicity of adjacent subject positions.

As such, Brown required an additional device to achieve for the folk-say of the blues what Sandburg had done with a range of folksong forms: to unite its personal, lyric aspect with the impersonal, collective mode of expression identified with the ballad. Brown’s emphasis on “truth to idiom” was an investment in the value of formulaic language to articulate collective identity. To pitch the blues idiom at a level of impersonality, I argue, Brown chose as the requisite device a similar reiterative structure: the incremental, modular structure of the work song. As Brown argued in his own folklore essays, the work song was a main tributary of the blues. It had given the blues its unique elliptical narrative pattern, where floating verses are used to build up a series of scenes. This incremental, modular structure mirrored the composite character of the ballad: Fred Glotzer, writing for the IWP, even called this pattern in the blues its “ballad technique” of composition. Whether its own source were the Anglo-American ballad tradition or the call-and-response pattern basic to the African American song and sermonic

tradition, the refrain-based structure of the work song added a choral dimension to the singularized voice that the blues had derived from the field holler, an aspect of the work song that Amiri Baraka would later prioritize in his account of the blues idiom.

If Brown used formulaic language and formulaic structures to achieve impersonality in his poetry, then the drive toward impersonality itself had important consequences both for his version of the blues idiom and for the entire meaning of dialect *as* idiomatic expression. The purpose of impersonality in the poetry was to instantiate a system of meanings, in the manner of folk-say, shared by the group and the individual—or in Botkin’s words, to “mingle group with individual experience.” Brown’s use of formulas for this purpose did not mean that he abandoned the monologue form but rather that the monologue itself, now combined with dialect, could only produce the effect of impersonality with the addition of precisely what formulas had to offer—a storehouse of oral tradition on which the first-person lyric could operate, and through which it could sublimate itself into collective expression. In Brown’s poetry, the storehouse of oral tradition included the choral refrains of the work song and the archetypes of folk narrative. Take the poem “Odyssey of Big Boy,” equal parts work song and blues ballad, which Brown based partly on the performances of Calvin “Big Boy” Davis, an itinerant songster he knew in Lynchburg, Virginia in the early 1920s.⁶⁸ The poem is a personal chronicle of exploits delivered in the first-person singular, but it is also a typological narrative structured by epic invocations to the heroes of folk tradition. As Mark A. Sanders argues, the poem’s speaker “embarks on a personal odyssey” but “his aspiration for immortality is a collective one rather than individual.”⁶⁹ Big Boy’s potentially interminable narrative—describing a panoramic life of various work from

⁶⁸ Republished as the lead poem in *Southern Road* (1932), “Odyssey of Big Boy” first appeared in *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by American Negroes*, edited by Countee Cullen (New York: Harper, 1927). See Brown, *Collected Poems*, 20–21.

⁶⁹ Sanders, 42 and 45.

Kentucky to Georgia to New York, and of various loves from Arkansas to New Orleans to Washington, DC—seems less like an informant’s autobiography and more like a patchwork assembled from a people’s collective experience of migration, not unlike the Boll Weevil’s episodic travels. In its form, the poem does share the stanzaic pattern of ballads such as “John Henry,” as Sanders notes, but the reduplicative final couplet of each stanza creates a pattern of refrains like those that made such ballads ideal work songs for gangs of laborers:

Lemme be wid Casey Jones
Lemme be wid Stagolee
Lemme be wid such like men
When Death takes hol’ on me,
When Death takes hol’ on me. . . .

This pattern of refrains creates a structure of anticipation. Within the stanza, the private lyric voice sends out a call and awaits a choral response fulfilled in the next line; from stanza to stanza, this call-and-response helps build the poem’s pattern of incremental repetition, which imitates the work song’s constant invitation of interpolated verses from voices emerging out of the chorus. The anticipation of these repetitions and accretions draws the poem further and further away from singularized utterance toward the general corpus of oral tradition. The invocation of folk heroes has a similar effect, drawing the lyric speaker into the personae of stock characters. The poem achieves impersonality by what it takes “truth to idiom” to mean: not fidelity to a speech act, but rather belonging to a speech community, demonstrated by distinctive ways of signifying on common cultural material.

If we take signifying here to mean folksong’s vernacular style of troping—the reuse, redoubling, and recombination of stock symbols, motifs, and narrative elements—then one of the major ways that the signifying function of idiom invokes a speech community in Brown’s poetry is through protest. Like the Popular Front folksongs of Josh White, Brown’s poems of social

protest signify on the vernacular storehouse of oral tradition and popular song, deploying stock narratives and characters in a new discursive context, often in the topical blues idiom. In these poems, Brown's style of troping is a vernacular version of the high modernist "mythic method," using archetypes to blend the poem's voice seamlessly into the impersonality of oral tradition. In "Frankie and Johnny," Brown adapts the classic blues ballad of infidelity and revenge (also commonly known as "Frankie and Albert") into a story of miscegenation and lynching.⁷⁰ The poem takes the song's famous opening line and uses it as the climactic turn toward the concluding scene of violence:

Frankie and Johnny were lovers; oh Lordy how they did love!
But one day Frankie's pappy by a big log laid him low,
To find out what his crazy Frankie had been speaking of;
He found that what his gal had muttered was exactly so.

Antecedents of "Frankie and Johnny" in this particular genre of anti-Jim Crow protest, such as Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," also aspired to impersonality with certain rhetorical and formal devices: the breadth of the first-person plural, and the rationality of the sonnet form. But Brown substitutes the voice of invective altogether for the objectivity of a third-person narrative, whose effect depends on the friction and fit of two distinct frames of reference: the anti-lynching literary topos and the popular murder ballad. In "He Was a Man," another literary ballad modeled on the topical blues, Brown adapts the refrain from the same source as "Frankie and Johnny" ("He was my man, and I shot him down") and uses it as its own, in a direct statement of the motive of the lynch mob ("He was a man, and they laid him down").⁷¹ A kind of anti-bad man ballad, the poem portrays a character named Will who kills a white man in self-defense and is lynched for asserting his own humanity:

He wasn't no quarrelsome feller,

⁷⁰ Sterling A. Brown, "Frankie and Johnny" (1932), reprinted in *Collected Poems*, 44.

⁷¹ Sterling A. Brown, "He Was a Man" (1975), reprinted in *Collected Poems*, 146–47.

And he let other folks alone,
But he took a life, as a man will do,
In a fight for to save his own,
He was a man, and they laid him down.

The poem's social protest hinges on a notion of fundamental human rights, which underlines precisely what was at stake for Brown in using stock narrative material from the storehouse of oral tradition for the sake of impersonality: by making the blues idiom impersonal, he could express its subterranean element of protest in the same language of universal human values that English literary tradition had predicated on the rudimentary moral intelligence of Anglo-American balladry.⁷² This was Brown's way of being both exegetical *and* metaphysical in his poetry.

James Weldon Johnson thought that the dialect of Brown's poetry was discernable less in the texts themselves than in their sources, particularly in the characters that Brown borrowed or adapted from African American blues balladry. But Brown worked out a vernacular poetic idiom whose connection to black folksong tradition went even deeper. His poems of social protest, as we have seen, communicated to their audiences by signifying on a body of traditional and popular song material. In the commercial blues of the same period, the singers of that traditional and popular song material—like Ma Rainey herself—had made a folk culture of the race record industry precisely by engaging in this signifying, often parodic form of adaptation and variation. In "Stack O' Lee Blues," recorded in Chicago in 1926, Ma Rainey blends the bad man blues ballad of Stagolee with the story and tune of "Frankie and Johnny," narrating it from the first-person female perspective of Frankie.⁷³ As Rainey sings it, the man who shot Billy Lyon over a Stetson hat, "a bad man, everybody know," is now a bad man in another sense, too: he is a

⁷² Child, "Ballad Poetry," 214.

⁷³ Ma Rainey, "Stack O' Lee Blues," *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Yazoo 1071, 1990, compact disc.

cheating lover, or a pimp, or both. By using the “Frankie and Johnny” topos to signify on “Stack O’ Lee,” Rainey produces a narrative that is composite, fragmented, and elliptical, its temporality warped around a double ending:

Stack O’ Lee, Stack O’ Lee was so desperate and bad
He’d take everything his women would bring and everything they had
He was my man, but he’s done me wrong

[...]

Stack O’ Lee’s in jail now, with his face turned to the wall
Thirty women and old corn whiskey was the cause of it all
He was my man, but he’s done you wrong

A hundred-dollar coffin and a eighty-dollar hack
Carried him to the cemetery, but it did not bring him back
He was my man, but he’s done me wrong

Rainey combines the legend of a bad man famous for violence toward other men with that of a bad man made famous, here, for abusing women. Consequently, her song takes on a moral logic that picks up where the narrative logic fails: a bad man *that* bad must be punished twice, with imprisonment and death, while the testifying refrain must expand to address a community of women (“he’s done *you* wrong”). The female subject of the blues lament as a heroine who supersedes the anti-hero—Rainey had added to the lexicon by compounding existing formulas. And as her example shows, Brown had taken for his own poetry not only the material but also the technique, the distinctive way of saying, from the vernacular culture of the blues. This was perhaps the truest meaning of “truth to idiom” and a full realization of folk-say: to make poetry the vehicle of an oral culture, not by writing with an accent but by extending a singular pattern of signifying practices.

II

Margaret Walker drew from a similar well of folk culture and popular song material—as a gifted adolescent writer in New Orleans, she kept a scrapbook of articles from the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* on classic female blues singers such as Ma Rainey—but she channeled it into different ways of modifying dialect writing and adapting black folklore to the literary ballad.⁷⁴ Reclaiming phonetic dialect to a greater degree than Brown ventured in his own poetry, Walker embraced the dramatic monologue in her adaptations of the mythic and legendary topoi of race heroes and bad men. Before moving to Chicago in 1932 to attend Northwestern University, Walker was deeply informed by the elocutionary and musical traditions of the black church and by the recitation styles of James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, whom she heard perform at New Orleans University, where her parents were instructors.⁷⁵ Walker’s poetry would combine the dramatic, oratorical art into which Johnson’s work was appropriated (his 1927 poem sequence *God’s Trombones* was quickly becoming a standard text in black elocution) with the imitation of black musical forms in Hughes’s blues and jazz poetry. In Chicago, Walker became one of the original members of the South Side Writers’ Group, attending its first meeting on South Parkway Avenue in February 1936, and would by her own account help Richard Wright author the early drafts of “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Two months later, she joined Wright and other members of the all-black South Side Writers’ Group on the interracial writing team of the IWP.⁷⁶ Walker worked on the *Illinois Guide Book* and was assigned to write about modern art exhibitions, radical writers’ organizations, and the history of the black press in Chicago. In 1950, Walker would write that for her literary generation the key consequence of the IWP was interracial alliance: “a new school of black and white writers mushroomed over-night

⁷⁴ Margaret Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham (New York: Feminist Press, 1990), 17.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁶ Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 71–81.

into being.”⁷⁷ Between 1936 and 1937, Walker learned from Wright about the labor movement, the theory of class struggle, and the Communist Left. For the IWP, she covered a meeting of the former John Reed Club where the writers in attendance, including the South Side Writers’ Group, pledged themselves to a “struggle against fascism” and planned a magazine that would oppose the “reactionary forces” of the Hearst newspaper syndicate.⁷⁸ Prefiguring her later advocacy for independent black institutions, Walker editorialized in a report on the *Royal Messenger*, a black newspaper in Chicago, about the “spineless attitude of many hopelessly bewildered Negro People who fail to show any militance for further emancipation.”⁷⁹ In the mid-1930s, however, guided by Wright, the South Side Writers’ Group, the IWP, and her own upbringing among the black bourgeoisie, Walker argued that “the Negro must fight for his own freedom and support all liberal bodies and individuals who fight for and with him.”⁸⁰

In addition to Wright, Walker’s colleagues on the IWP included Fenton Johnson and Nelson Algren, who reportedly inspired her signature poem “For My People.”⁸¹ Written in 1937, this poem, with its long lines of vatic free verse, bears the imprint not only of her and Wright’s reading of Sandburg (*The People, Yes* was a source of inspiration) but also of the full range of her influences up to that point: the elocutionary training, the racial uplift morality, the fellow-traveler Marxism, the race pride, and even the childhood scrapbook of blues singers. According to Walker, Algren asked her, “What do you want for your people?” And the poem she issued in response makes the interracial Left’s aspiration for a radically reorganized society coeval with the intraracial vision of a “further emancipated” people: “Let a new earth rise. Let another world

⁷⁷ Margaret Walker, “New Poets,” *Phylon* 11, no. 4 (1950): 346.

⁷⁸ Margaret Walker, “The Midwest Federation of Arts and Professions,” TSS, 1936, Federal Writers’ Project Papers, Box 72, Folder 12, Manuscripts Collection, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

⁷⁹ Margaret Walker, “The Negro Press in Chicago: Metropolitan Post,” TSS, 1939, Federal Writers’ Project Papers, Box 200, Folder 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee*, 17.

be born.... Let a race of men now rise and take control.”⁸² This poem was a statement of the “new school,” recognizable by its “cry of social protest.” Walker may have understood the school as black and white in character, but for her its leading poets were the new generation of the New Negro Renaissance. According to Walker, the first poet of this generation, and the poet “at the vanguard of the social protest school,” was Sterling Brown. She met Brown in 1936 at the first meeting of the National Negro Congress in Chicago. As she would make clear decades later, she valued his poetry both for its rhetoric of protest and for the folk idiom he developed into an expressive medium for it. “The pattern of the ‘blues,’” wrote Walker, was “the first new Negro idiom introduced into American poetry since Paul Laurence Dunbar.” And if Brown could not be solely credited for that idiom, he had to be credited for introducing into American poetry the idiom of “the roustabout, the Black worker, and the strong Black hero in legend and fact.”⁸³ From Walker’s account of her association with Wright during their IWP years, it is clear that her own thinking about racial and working-class idioms in poetry drew from early discussions of dialect writing similar to those unfolding concurrently at the national offices of the FWP. In 1940, when Walker took “For My People” and the materials she had gathered in Chicago as an IWP fieldworker to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she was encouraged by Stephen Rose Benet to elevate the folk idiom and folk history recorded in her papers into the form of the literary ballad.

In *For My People* (1942), her first collection of poetry, Walker gathered a number of literary ballads that she based on the folk ballads and folktales of bad men. Like Sterling Brown and Ma Rainey, she worked on the traditional oral narrative of Stagolee, signifying on the material with a number of self-reflexive and “exegetical” interpolations. Formally, her version of

⁸² First published in *Poetry* 51.2 (November 1937), this poem later became the title poem of Walker’s collection *For My People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942).

⁸³ Walker included these comments in an expanded version of the “New Poets” essay, which she published in 1990. See Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee*, 104 and 74–75.

the narrative, titled “Bad-Man Stagolee,” takes up the literary ballad and conservatively adapts its common meter and stanzaic pattern: its one long verse paragraph is segmented by phrasing into six quatrains that in turn break down into rhyming couplets of four beats per line.⁸⁴ Rhetorically, the poem follows the tradition of the bad man ballad by announcing its own genre and topos early on (“Bad-Man Stagolee” may be an allusion to the refrain of Mississippi John Hurt’s 1929 recording of the ballad), while commenting on the traditional status of the narrative and its previous tellings. Walker enables this kind of signifying practice by connecting the ballad form to the rhetoric of the dramatic monologue. Her Stagolee is a cop-killer, and her dramatic persona situates him within a living oral tradition of many Stagolees:

Oh I ’speck he’d done some too-bad dirt
Wid dat blade he wore unnerneaf his shirt
An’ it ain’t been said, but he coulda had
A dirk in his pocket ’cause he sho was bad
But one thing’s certain and two things’s sho
His bullets made holes no doc could cyo.
And that there cop was good and done
When he met Stagolee and that blue boy’s gun.

The speaker can imaginatively proliferate episodes of violence for the anti-hero of the ballad because he is not just Stagolee but “*That* Stagolee” (emphasis mine), an archetype instantiated in this and other particular characters. “Stagolee,” as Cecil Brown has shown, emerged from the earliest ballads about the historical Lee Shelton (alias Stack Lee) as the name for a general class of bad men and a certain rebellious male ethos in black oral culture.⁸⁵ Stagolee is also an archetype instantiated in this and many other iterations, a fact of oral transmission that Walker’s speaker makes a self-reflexive feature of the poem. The speaker sets *her* telling of *this* Stagolee’s story against the backdrop of prior versions: as a locution, “it ain’t been said, but...” is a kind of

⁸⁴ Margaret Walker, “Bad-Man Stagolee,” reprinted in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (1942; Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 28.

⁸⁵ Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

performative utterance by way of rhetorical negation, adding to the storehouse of oral tradition by pointing to a gap within it. The dramatic speaker's rhetorical function here is crucial. Walker, like Sandburg, uses the dramatic monologue to introduce self-consciousness into the ballad form. Casting the speaker of the ballad as a character, too, and a self-conscious one at that, allows Walker both to present her text as a specific performance of an oral tradition and to open up within it new subject positions that make irony and complexity basic features of the teller's relation to the tale.

Because Walker sees value in the rhetorical effect of fidelity to a speech act, she pursues something that appears like the "truth to pronunciation" that Brown disfavored in poetry and fieldwork alike. But because the value of that rhetorical effect for Walker is self-consciousness and irony, she also finds new directions to take "truth to idiom"—sometimes toward deliberate mistruth. To give the speaker of "Bad-Man Stagolee" determinate character and the semblance of a unique spoken utterance, Walker embraces the dramatic monologue in tandem with phonetic dialect. In the "sho / cyo" rhyme above ("But one thing's certain and two things's sho / His bullets made holes no doc could cyo"), Walker shifts substantially out of standard orthography to capture a difference in pronunciation that is salient but small in proportion to the spelling change—the creation of an entirely new lexeme ("cyo"). The poem, Brown might have objected, gives "truth to pronunciation" primary importance; but more than that it shows Walker's willingness to make over the entire visual character of the text when a salient, though possibly minute, fact can be adduced for its status as determinate speech. In remembering early conversations in Chicago with Wright, Walker used the term "sight dialect" rather than phonetic dialect for this kind of strategy. (Wright, she said, determined to abandon it; she did not.)⁸⁶ The

⁸⁶ Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee*, 39-40.

term “sight dialect” points to Walker’s awareness of the visual strangeness that scrupulous fidelity to phonetic detail could produce, but it also implies the recognition of another, non-visualized form of dialect. Having her speaker declare that the cop Stagolee killed “was good and done / When he met Stagolee and that blue boy’s gun,” Walker pivots her use of dialect on the idiom of “blue boy,” whose truth lies deeply enough within black subculture that fidelity to speech here becomes indexicality to culture.⁸⁷ Conversely, when she has her speaker speculate that Stagolee “coulda had / A dirk in his pocket ’cause he sho was bad,” Walker reframes “truth to idiom” with an ironic touch, laying special emphasis on “dirk,” an historically and culturally incongruous term for a blade weapon. Walker’s diction connects the rebelliousness of the African American bad man with the signature weaponry of the Scottish Highlander, blending two distant figures out of two different ballad traditions into one archetype of race pride and cultural nationalism. Walker manipulates idiom in this way as the sign of a self-conscious ballad speaker who intervenes in the oral narrative not only as performer but also as character—and with a particular attitude toward the traditional material.

In its approach to the theme of race pride, Walker’s “Bad-Man Stagolee” is heroic rather than mock-heroic, even with its self-conscious irony. But it is also burlesque. If Stagolee’s importance to the mythography of black oral tradition is the rebellion he symbolizes to white-supremacist authority, then the poem’s climax is Stagolee’s escape from white retribution for it:

But the funniest thing about that job
Was that he never got caught by no mob
And he missed the lynching meant for his hide

⁸⁷ Other than Walker’s poem, the only similar usage of the term “blue boy” of which I am aware is the title of William Demby’s novel *Blueboy* (New York: Knopf, 1980). Demby also gives the best available account of this obscure term. “When I was going to college at Fisk,” Demby said in a 2013 interview, “‘Blueboy’ was a name we often gave to a young guy who was very black and kind of doltish. I imagined this character [in the novel] coming out of a reform school being something like that.” Walker’s usage picks up on the delinquent and law-breaking, even incorrigible, connotations of the name, and perhaps also on its association with maligned racial (“very black”) identity. See Steve Kemme, “A Writer’s Life: William Demby,” *Mosaic* 20 (Fall 2007): 34.

'Cause nobody knows how Stagolee died.

Walker's ballad seems to be setting itself up as a protest poem by other means: rather than picturing the barbarity of the lynch mob and indicting the system of injustice it enforces, the poem negates the entire trope by showing how Stagolee triumphs over it. The poem's ending, however, is incongruous. It presents Stagolee's afterlife—and his role in oral tradition—in images that palliate his rebellion and defiance:

Bad-man Stagolee ain't no more
But his ghost still walks up and down the shore
Of Old Man River round New Orleans
With her gumbo, rice, and good red beans!

This incongruous ending is the poem's element of the burlesque. "Bad-man Stagolee ain't no more": his part is now played by a spirit whose presence in black oral culture is as benign and salutary as the stuff of Creole foodways. Walker's ending does not deflate but rather transmutes the violent spirit of Stagolee. Her version of the Stagolee narrative exemplifies a basic pattern of her work on black folklore, emphasizing the theme of race pride but recuperating it inside alternatives to the symbolism of masculine power it assumes in its typical associations with tropes such as the bad man. For Walker, to connect bad-man Stagolee with Creole cooking is to reclaim race pride as the preserve not only of women's culture but also of Afrocentric culture.⁸⁸

In Walker's poetry, the idea of race pride is connected not to Johnson's metaphysical concept of "racial spirit" but rather to the psychological concept of racial identity. Like "Bad-Man Stagolee," Walker's ballads in general evoke racial feeling by taking up the individual

⁸⁸ In a 1976 essay titled "Southern Black Culture," Walker described "Southern cooking" as the fullest manifestation of a deep "acculturation process through which African culture has become a part of American culture." Southern cooking, as Walker described it, is both a Creole culture—African American and Euro-American—and a Diasporic culture. "[M]ixed with the Native American, the Spanish, and the French influences," wrote Walker, "is the unmistakable African element in southern cooking.... Gumbo, like okra, is African, and what we did not bring directly from African shores we brought from the West Indies islands." Margaret Walker, "Southern Black Culture," in *On Being Female, Black and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932–1992* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 83.

viewpoint on a common oral culture. Walker's special emphasis on individuality is perhaps the reason why her ballads seem so comfortable with "symbols from without...the racial spirit," as Johnson said of dialect, or so invested, as Brown might have described them, in truth to the inflections of a singular utterance. Like Sandburg, Walker wants readers to understand each poem as a role. Yet her goal is to draw the ballad *away* from impersonality; her technique is impersonation without impersonality as its intended effect. Unlike Brown's staking of the poem's voice on patterns and figures of collective expression, then, Walker's use of dialect together with the dramatic monologue establishes a personality for the text, underwriting a concept of race in which identity subtends forms of collectivity and community—whether constituted as black proletarian class-consciousness, Afrocentric black nationalism, or even interracial, universal humanism, as I discuss below. Walker in her poetry is not just signifying on common cultural material but also impersonating a complex of psychological attitudes toward it. As such, she is not looking *up to* the ballad, like Brown, but rather *looking out* from the ballad toward other signifying practices. In "Bad-Man Stagolee," for instance, the ballad verges in its form and tone toward the African American toast, a chanted narrative in rhyming couplets that relates heroic events in a comical, often Rabelaisian manner. Though she never adapted the blues specifically in her poetry (it appears throughout her work as a trope for black oral culture), Walker did concentrate on the basic signifying practices common to the blues, the toast, and other genres of oral narrative: testimony and testifying.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ For scholarly accounts of toasts and other genres and signifying practices in the "urban folklore" of African American street culture, see Roger Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*, rev. ed. (1964; Chicago: Aldine, 1970); Bruce Jackson, *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: African American Narrative Poetry from Oral Tradition*, rev. ed. (1972; New York: Routledge, 2004); Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977); and Elijah Wald, *The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mamma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See the following chapter for my discussion of the vernacular signifying practices involved in the emergence of soul music.

Walker's interest in testimony and testifying was galvanized by her fieldwork for the IWP. For Walker, the model for combining dialect and dramatic performance into oral narrative was the interview situation. In 1942, Walker published another literary ballad on the bad man theme, "Yalluh Hammuh," which was based on a prose manuscript she had composed as a writer on the IWP and then submitted to the Folklore Project in Washington, where it was filed in the "life histories" section.⁹⁰ Likely gathered as part of the Living Lore unit established in Chicago by Botkin, the Folklore Project's editor, the "Yalluh Hammuh" manuscript would have had to meet his standards for folk-say.⁹¹ The manuscript is a transcribed oral interview with an unnamed female informant, produced when Walker was living in the Woodlawn neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. Yellow Hammer, the eponymous subject of the interview, could have been described in the idiom surrounding such bad-man characters as "just another Stagolee." Walker's informant has been described by Cecil Brown, whose brief account of the manuscript is the only published record of it, as an ex-slave from the Deep South whom Walker interviewed on Chicago's South Side; the connection to the Ex-Slave Narratives Project, however, is uncertain.⁹² As a life history, the manuscript is entirely given over to the narrative of Yellow Hammer. It begins as a dialogic interview but quickly becomes a folktale:

Is ah evah telled you bout mah cousin, Yallah Hammuh? Well, man dat wuz one moah bad guy. Dat guy so bad de sharef scairt ta go nigh his house. Yalluh Hammuh do all his devilment an den go home an pretty soon de sharef cum up clost ez he [d]are off in de trees summers wid bofe his guns drawed an he say,
"Yalluh Hammuh!"
an Yalluh Hammuh say,
"Whut?"
an de sharef say,

⁹⁰ Margaret Walker, "Yalluh Hammuh" (1942), reprinted in *This Is My Century*, 33–34; Margaret Walker, "Yalluh Hammuh," TSS, Folklore Project, Life Histories, US Works Progress Administration Records, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Box A708. All subsequent references to the "Yalluh Hammuh" prose manuscript refer to this archival collection.

⁹¹ On Botkin's Living Lore units, see Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 34.

⁹² Cecil Brown, 148–49.

“Dey wants you in town,”
an Yalluh Hammuh say,
“Aw, all right, ahll be in attuh while. Gone back down dere an tell em ahm
cummin.”
Das jes his jive, but de sharef he know he healthy ta fergit Yalluh Hammuhs jive.

After a long digression on the townsfolk ritual of dredging the local canal in search of Yellow Hammer’s victims, the tale centers on Yellow Hammer’s near death in a barroom brawl with Pick-Ankle Slim, “a bad bad guy...bad as Stagolee,” and his eventual vindication in a fight on the bank of the canal. Walker’s transcription includes the discursive context of the interview situation as an opening frame (the direct address, “Is ah evah telled you bout mah cousin, Yallah Hammuh?”), which then dissolves into the telling of the tale itself (beginning with the oral formula, “dat wuz one moah bad guy”). Walker’s use of phonetic dialect to capture the informant’s words is heightened visually and absolute sonically (for instance, the elision of “go on” into one diphthong is registered in the single word “gone”). The manuscript includes many instances of dialect orthography that Brown would have listed not only under “truth to pronunciation” but also under his prohibited usages (for instance, *wuz* for *was*, *cum* for *come*, and even perhaps *sharef* for *sheriff*). Had Brown’s FWP memo on dialect recording been issued and available to Walker when she produced the manuscript, surely it could be said that she did not follow his guidelines. Most importantly, the prose manuscript of “Yalluh Hammuh” introduces an idiom that would become crucial for Walker’s poem of the same name and for her interest in folklore as monologic telling. It is an idiom for a particular way of using idiom—“jive”—and in each version of “Yalluh Hammuh” it means efficacious talk that is unique to the speaker and operates on its listeners with deceptive control.

Walker submitted the prose manuscript of “Yalluh Hammuh” to the Washington office of the FWP sometime between 1936 and 1938; in 1939, having been sent to the Folklore Project, it

was annotated by an editor with the heading, “AMERICAN FOLK STUFF.” This inscription is telling. It suggests that Walker’s interview text might have been designated by the Folklore Project as a candidate for publication in an FWP literary anthology. *American Stuff* was the title of a 1937 anthology edited by FWP general director Henry G. Alsberg, and published by the modernism-touting Viking Press, that integrated ethnography conducted by state project workers with the social realist literary writing their coworkers and colleagues authored on and off “project time.” *American Stuff* was extended into a series with a 1938 special issue under that title of the New York art and literature monthly *Direction*.⁹³ These publications featured work by Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Robert Hayden, as well as prison songs and ex-slave narratives collected by various members of the Lomax family, but neither publication included Walker’s “Yalluh Hammuh.” Classified as “American Folk Stuff,” perhaps Walker’s interview text was placed under consideration as a folktale for a later, never-realized installment of the *American Stuff* series. “Yalluh Hammuh” met precisely that kind of deferral when Walker submitted a revised version of the manuscript to *New Challenge*, the African American literary quarterly edited in New York by Dorothy West. It was slated for publication in the never-realized second issue of the quarterly, intended for publication in 1938 or 1939, which also would have included work by Marian Minus, a fellow member of the South Side Writers’ Group.⁹⁴ Given the manuscript’s circulation as both an ethnographic and a literary text, it could be said that “Yalluh Hammuh” is itself an embodiment of folk-say. In it Walker blended oral history and oral narrative, autobiography and folktale, and by presenting it as a monologue she foregrounded the storyteller’s signifying talk—both for *and* about herself, as Botkin wrote.

⁹³ Federal Writers’ Project, *American Stuff: An Anthology of Prose and Verse by Members of the Federal Writers’ Project* (New York: Viking Press, 1937); *Direction* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1938).

⁹⁴ Lawrence Jackson, 81.

When Walker finally did publish “Yalluh Hammuh” as a literary text, in the ballad of the same title, it showed precisely what kind of dialect poetry she had evolved from combining the dramatic monologue, oral storytelling, testimony, and a new kind of vernacular idiom, which folklorists advancing the sociological turn further in the 1960s and 70s would call by various names, including street talk.⁹⁵ Insofar as it reprises “jive” as its principal theme, “Yalluh Hammuh” the ballad takes signifying as both its style and its subject. The poem’s balladic condensation of narrative emphasizes a new dramatic conflict—between Yellow Hammer and May, Pick-Ankle’s lover—and makes its outcome both a climax and an ironic reversal of fortune for the protagonist. Meanwhile, the poem’s dialect supports the irony of the plot with the dramatic speaker’s abundance of ironic, signifying talk. What had been in the prose manuscript a heroic narrative of one bad man’s triumph over another, with a female character caught in between as a proxy to their conflict, becomes in the ballad’s ironic turn the story of a female trickster’s supremacy over the world of masculine violence. In the ballad, “jive” is understood as efficacious speech, bringing into modern urban street culture the belief of earlier oral cultures in the power of the word as a form of magical speech or incantatory spell. The female informant of Walker’s prose manuscript returns here as the dramatic speaker:

Old Yalluh Hammuh were a guy
I knowed long time ago
I seen him pile the san’bags high
An’ holler back fuh moah.

I seen him come on inta town
Manny a Saddy night
Ridin’ high with his jive
An’ clownin’ leff an’ right.

[...]

⁹⁵ In addition to Abrahams, Jackson, Smitherman, and Wald, see Thomas Kochman, ed., *Rappin’ and Stylin’ Out: Communication in Urban Black America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972) and Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

Old Yalluh Hammuh lay his jive
On mens on every side
And when it comes to women folks
His fame was far and wide.

Yellow Hammer wins a kind of “fame” with his jive that, for the bards of the Anglo-Scottish ballad tradition, as Maureen McLane and Celeste Langan have shown, was supposedly rooted in the metaphysical power of their performances to influence the perceptions and behavior of others.⁹⁶ Yellow Hammer’s jive is doublespeak that can both praise and disparage, seduce and enrage. Walker’s speaker engages in her own form of doublespeak, which ironizes the bad-man narrative of her oral informant:

Now Yalluh Hammuh was so bad
He killed his Maw of fright
He swaggered through the county seat
All full of lip and might.

But Yalluh Hammuh met his match
One Saddy night, they say,
He came in town an’ run into
Pick-Ankle’s gal named May.

Yellow Hammer’s jive makes him a bad man, not a bard, the speaker tells us, and she sets up the expectation of a confrontation with perhaps an even badder man: “Yalluh Hammuh met his match.” But the speaker reverses this expectation in the stanza’s last line: Yellow Hammer’s “match” is not in fact the second bad man, Pick-Ankle, but “Pick-Angle’s gal named May.” May’s trickery and defeat of Yellow Hammer are foreshadowed by the speaker’s ironic wit: “Well this time Yalluh Hammuh’s jive / Went to town wid his pay.” Yellow Hammer’s jive may be formidable, but he puts too much at stake when he bets his payday earnings on it. What

⁹⁶ McLane, for instance, refers to the “wizardly poetics” of minstrelsy in Romantic poetry, while Langan points to the figure of the “glamorous” word in Sir Walter Scott. McLane, *Balladeering*, 153–60; Celeste Langan, “Understanding Media in 1805: Audiovisual Hallucination in *Lay of the Last Minstrel*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 49–70.

happens in the climactic and ironic turn of the ballad is that Yellow Hammer's jive comes up against, and is outdone by, May's jive. May's false amorousness encourages Yellow Hammer in his confrontation with Pick-Ankle, and when shots are fired and the lights go out, May is "gone with his pay." May's jive—"Ole May was having fun"—wins out, and the ultimate effect of jive's efficacious speech is a gendered power reversal and the bad man's deflation.

Behind that deflation and its ironic humor is dialect: "Yalluh Hammuh" is saturated in the idiom of a language game in which the bad man loses badly. Like the prose manuscript, "Yalluh Hammuh" the ballad shows Walker's departure from her contemporaries—and from the emerging critical consensus of the period—in her commitment to phonetic dialect as the means of representing black speech in literary writing. In the ballad, however, Walker balances "truth to pronunciation" with "truth to idiom." Dialect is represented less exactly by orthographical means—the visual signifiers of "sight dialect"—because dialect here encompasses a larger domain of style than simply pronunciation. Walker's speaker, for instance, offers no exposition that includes the region or town where Yellow Hammer's story is set. Instead, she establishes the setting by saying, "I seen him pile the san'bags high," which relies on diction to locate Yellow Hammer and his story: the single term "san'bags" suggests that he is a levee builder in the Mississippi River Delta region. Here the poem's dialect is a direct example of idiom's capacity, as Brown claimed, to index a geographical locality and social group in the language itself as spoken *or* written. Still, Walker's spelling of "san'bags," which drops a terminal consonant that is commonly left unspoken even outside black dialect, suggests the tenacity of her fidelity to the poem's status as utterance. But it also marks the consistency of a general pattern in the poem that includes instances of significant verbal difference (e.g., "Ridin' high with his jive"), which points to the status of dialect as a set of stylistic patterns of speech, such as the general softening

of terminal consonants and the muting of unstressed syllables. (Like Brown, Walker routinely renders the unstressed conjunction “and” as “an’.”) With the introduction of street talk into the poem’s dialect, what counts as *style* for Walker exceeds not only pronunciation but also the range of figurative language that Brown and Botkin classed under the *idiom* of folk-say. As the example of jive suggests, dialect as style encompasses not only a system of underworld slang but also a folk theory about language’s practical relationship to the world of actions.

Compared to the prose manuscript of her IWP field interview, Walker’s ballad version of “Yalluh Hammuh” is less of a “distressed artifact,” in Susan Stewart’s terminology, its textual surface not so striated to mark its status as an object collected from oral tradition.⁹⁷ It is nonetheless a text that inscribes a specific voicing of the poem’s prosodic patterns. Rather than the transcript of an actual utterance, then, the text functions as the score for a potential performance—much like Johnson’s *God Trombones*, which Walker recited frequently, including on phonographic record at the peak of the Black Arts Movement.⁹⁸ By treating the text as a score, Walker enhances the status of her ballads as *dramatic* ballads. Closer to the original composition of “Yalluh Hammuh,” Walker performed the companion poem “Bad-Man Stagolee” in 1954 (under the title “Stackalee”) for Moses Asch’s *Anthology of Negro Poets* on Folkways Records, one of the first long-playing recorded poetry albums.⁹⁹ Edited and annotated by Arna Bontemps, the album also features readings by Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sterling Brown, including his early-1940s performance of “Ma Rainey.” Where Walker uses the phonographic medium as a platform for dramatization, Brown performs “Ma Rainey” in a modernist style of impersonal recitation. Brown delivers the poem in

⁹⁷ Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, 67.

⁹⁸ Margaret Walker, *Margaret Walker Alexander Reads Langston Hughes, P. L. Dunbar, and J. W. Johnson*, Folkways FW 09796, 33 rpm, 1975.

⁹⁹ Arna Bontemps, ed., *Anthology of Negro Poets*, Folkways FL 9791, 33 rpm, 1954.

a style derived from what Mark Morrisson has called the “pure voice” of late Victorian and Edwardian elocution, which informed the early Anglo-American modernists in their hopes to “purify the dialect of the tribe.”¹⁰⁰ When Brown recites, “O Ma Rainey, sing yo’ song,” in the poem’s third section, his voice sounds like nothing so much as T. S. Eliot intoning “Come in under the shadow of this red rock” in his well-known 1946 recording of “The Waste Land.”¹⁰¹ Brown’s pitch is monotone and his tempo deliberate, slow, and constant. He does lower his vocal range to a slightly deeper monotone for the invocation of Rainey in section three, elongating the syllables and equalizing the intervals between them to deliver the invocation in the vatic style of a chant. This momentary stylizing of the performance only raises its aspiration to impersonality. There is little sonic differentiation otherwise among the poem’s various voices—the speaker, the informant, and Rainey herself. When Brown recites the passages from “Backwater Blues,” he slips between his own monotone and the deeper monotone of the chant. Insofar as his performance involves any attempt to get the blues idiom into the realized poem, that blues idiom is delivered in a style from a different tradition altogether, one that subtracts individuality and personality from the voice.

Walker’s recording of “Bad-Man Stagolee,” conversely, is delivered in the voice of a theatrical performer who inhabits the poem as a role and dramatizes the shifting moods and attitudes of its speaker. Her performance emerges from a dramatic style of recitation and elocution in the African American tradition that Derek Furr has called “voice impersonation” for its use of vocal style to interpret and communicate a character.¹⁰² Her performance style mixes

¹⁰⁰ Mark Morrisson, “Performing the Pure Voice: Elocution, Verse Recitation, and Modernist Poetry in Prewar London,” *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 3 (September 1996): 26–31.

¹⁰¹ T. S. Eliot, *T. S. Eliot Reading His Own Poems, 1946*, Library of Congress PL 3, 33rpm, 1953.

¹⁰² Derek Furr, *Recorded Poetry and Poetic Reception from Edna Millay to the Circle of Robert Lowell* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 116.

features of declamation, spoken monologue, and—through her impersonation—street talk. It also reflects the oral art of a storyteller, bringing a character and a plot into vivid reality in the telling itself. In performing “Bad-Man Stagolee,” as she does generally in recordings of her dramatic ballads, Walker impersonates the character of an elder storyteller in a voice that she ages with a heightened vocal range, wildly fluctuating pitch, rapid attitudinal shifts, and a crackling, shrill-sounding timbre. (If Walker’s informant for “Yalluh Hammuh” had in fact been of the antebellum generation, then it might be supposed that her voice is the one in which Walker delivers “Bad-Man Stagolee.”) Despite the ballad’s metrical regularity, Walker gives the lines the cadences and inflections of speech. For instance, in telling how “Stagolee just up and slew / A big policeman on ’leventh street,” Walker inserts a long medial pause before the phrase “on ’leventh street,” as if to dramatize the speaker’s mental act of recalling narrative details. To indicate the speaker’s attitudes toward such narrative details, moreover, Walker makes heavy use of gliding intonation in her voice. In telling that Stagolee “never got caught by no mob,” and to underscore the shift to the poem’s incongruous, burlesque ending, Walker intones “mob” with a rising-falling pitch contour that signals a mix of wonder and wry skepticism. Her voice finds the stylistic cue to match a moment for which the text prescribes ironic reflection. Finally, in the poem’s ending, she doubles the line “Stagolee ain’t no more,” heightening the suspenseful tension—and deepening the comedic catharsis that follows—between Stagolee’s earthly demise and his return, reappropriated, as a fixture in women’s lore.

In no small part because of their role in twinning performance and phonography in the African American poetry of the 1950s, Walker and Brown were both embraced in the following decades by the poets of the Black Arts Movement. Both experienced a revival of their publishing careers in the 1960s and 1970s, spearheaded by the major national black-owned publishing house

of the period, the Broadside Press of Detroit, whose purpose, according to publisher Dudley Randall, was to “bring poetry to the people,” and by building a black audience for black poetry, to create “pride in black people.”¹⁰³ Walker and Brown, then, saw their work revived by a press whose commitment to a popular, race-conscious audience for poetry led them into an expanded media ecology—broadsides, pamphlets, and audio recordings—and with it to a new public attuned to the politics of race pride. Walker, for instance, published with the press her poem “Ballad of the Free” first as a broadside in 1965 and then in the 1970 pamphlet *Prophets for a New Day*, which included this and other poems combining balladry now with heroic verse to narrate the achievements of slave rebellion leaders, abolitionists, Civil Rights leaders, and other race heroes. Meanwhile, in 1975, Brown brought out with the press his first book of poems in over thirty years, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill*, a collection specifically of bad man ballads that met the Black Arts emphasis on poems built from street language by matching, particularly in the title poem, Walker’s precedent of stretching balladry toward the rhyming, signifying talk of the toasts.¹⁰⁴ But where Brown’s relationship to the Black Arts Movement, given his academic credentials, became that of an elder statesman of African American letters, Walker became more directly involved in the movement. Her connection was different for two reasons. First, her dramatic style of recitation eclipsed Brown’s impersonal style as a touchstone for the dramatic, choral performance poetry of the Black Arts Movement, as the next chapter will examine. Second, like Brown’s poetry and criticism, Walker’s work promoted race consciousness while pointing to a universal humanism—only her universal humanism was predicated on a deep

¹⁰³ Dudley Randall, qtd. in Julius E. Thompson, *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960–1995* (London: McFarland Press, 1999), 28–29.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Walker, *Ballad of the Free* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1965), broadside; Margaret Walker, *Prophets for a New Day* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970); Sterling A. Brown, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975).

Afrocentric concept of cultural development that echoed in the cultural politics of the Black Arts Movement. “The nature of black culture is both spiritual and humanistic in its philosophical depths,” Walker said in 1976. “Black Americans must understand as all Americans should that black culture is a springboard for new world achievement, new world understanding and philosophy, world peace and freedom, and a greater dignity for all mankind.” Walker was speaking about the civilizational contributions of black culture at a US Bicentennial celebration, but when she described black culture as “endemic to all that is natural, free, and real,” she was proposing a concept of culture that could be seen as a counterweight to imperialistic global capitalism, which she described as “completely mechanistic,” with “no humanity, no spiritual value, and no moral, ethical, or cultural viability.”¹⁰⁵ As Richard Wright had done specifically with the blues, Walker associated black culture as a whole with a realism that was meant to oppose the “over-scientific, over-capitalized, [and] over-mechanized” Western industrial civilization decried decades before by the Chicago folksong salon. Brown, for his part, showed the leaders of the Black Arts Movement where in black folksong tradition the sources of such opposition might be found.

III

In a 1940s-essay titled “Old Buck,” named after one of his former students at Lincoln University in Missouri, Sterling Brown describes a secondary origin of the poem “Ma Rainey,” one far removed from the Nashville club where he heard her perform. Brown would regularly invite his students to his home, where they would listen to his collection of blues records together and exchange personal memories of black life throughout the South. The students came to him,

¹⁰⁵ Margaret Walker, “Black Culture,” in *On Being Female, Black, and Free*, 71–75.

Brown said, because of the quality of his phonograph machine: “I had a Brunswick portable phonograph with a full tone for those days.” The machine’s high fidelity seems to have opened up the music extraordinarily to Brown and his assembled guests, giving them (in the words of Sandburg’s musicology assistant) “depths and distances” to explore in their personal and critical reflections on the music. Brown’s account of the listening sessions transposes the topos of folksong encounter from the performance of song to the reproduction of sound. They discussed the leading “race artists” of the day: Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Jim Jackson, and so on. One student, nicknamed “Fats,” shared a recollection of Ma Rainey in her traveling tent show, offering a vivid image that Brown would use in his poem: Rainey “sang up and down the Mississippi River Valley bringing the people out in droves.” Fats’s recollection sparked a long conversation about black life in the flood regions, and about the many “tales about floods” in the blues. It may have even been this conversation that linked Ma Rainey in Brown’s mind with the topical song she sings in “Ma Rainey.” “[W]hen Bessie Smith’s ‘Backwater Blues’ came out in that bad flood year of 1927,” Brown reflected, “we solemnly agreed that this [blues] was the best.”¹⁰⁶ It was these conversations with students over his record collection, growing steadily as new historical events produced new topical songs, that helped open up for Brown the social reality contained in the blues.

Two decades later, at Howard University, one of those students was LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka). Reflecting on his student years at Howard (1952–1954) and what he learned there about African American musical traditions, Baraka would write that it was Brown who changed him from one of Howard’s “classic submature campus hipsters” into a student of the music with an insight, as he put it, that “dug a hole in my static absolutes” and became a

¹⁰⁶ Sterling A. Brown, “Old Buck,” in *A Negro Looks at the South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37–39.

“fundamental philosophical feature of my seeing and understanding.” Baraka’s worldview was punctured by the lore contained in Brown’s records, and the result was an opening to appreciate new possible forms of knowledge. He and A. B. Spellman were classmates in Brown’s course on Shakespeare. “Sterling ‘signified’ to A. B. & me that we wasn’t quite as hip as we think, even as self-proclaimed young Boppers,” Baraka remembered. Their pretense of knowledge needed to be refracted through the ironic reflection of Brown’s “signifying,” which made them self-conscious of their need for deeper knowledge:

I imagine this must have incited Sterling to grasp us lovingly and metaphorically by the scruffs of our conceits and invite us to his crib! And man, there in a center room was a wall, which wrapped completely around our unknowing, of all the music from the spasm bands and arwhoolies and hollers, through Bessie and Jelly Roll and Louis and Duke, you know? And we watched ourselves from that vantage point of the albums staring haughtily at us, with that “tch tch” sound such revelations are often armed with.... “This is the history. This is your history, my history, and the history of the Negro people.” That was the phrase that lifted me, lifted us both, I’d say...¹⁰⁷

Through Brown’s record collection, Baraka became grounded in what he would identify in his groundbreaking study *Blues People* as the origins of the blues (an “arwhoolie” was a type of cornfield holler) and of jazz (“spasm bands” were New Orleans street bands). In Baraka’s anecdote, he and Spellman see themselves and their history in a reoriented perspective, one that is ascribed to the records themselves, which are cast as the source of “revelations.” Brown had been the discographer of the New Negro Renaissance: it was Brown’s list of essential records that supplied the blues discography for Alain Locke’s *The Negro and His Music* (1936), and Brown’s papers at Howard contain the traces of significant discographical work, whether for his colleagues or his students.¹⁰⁸ For elder and younger generations alike, his contribution was the

¹⁰⁷ Baraka (Jones), *Blues People*, viii–ix.

¹⁰⁸ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 28–35. Brown’s papers include the undated manuscript of an extensive annotated blues, gospel, and jazz discography, including Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Josh White, and many other artists. The purpose or intended recipient of the

idea that black history was sedimented into black music, or the idea—as Baraka put it—not only of black music as historical but of “history as black music.” In his critical writings of the 1960s, Baraka would turn this idea into a “fundamental philosophical feature” of the Black Arts Movement, captured in his famous statement of black identity: “The song and the people is the same.”¹⁰⁹

Baraka’s equation of black expressive culture and black people—embodied in the very title of *Blues People*—is a statement of essential identity, paradoxically, that defeats essentialism. Two of Baraka’s key arguments in *Blues People* are, first, that the blues is a socially determined music, and two, that the blues is a functional music. As we have seen, Baraka’s notion that “reference determines value” in the blues owes much to Brown and the historical link he posited between the blues and the work song. According to Baraka, the historical evolution of moans, shouts, hollers, and ballad-like chronicles into what he called the “primitive blues,” and then into the “classic blues” and beyond, could be graphed and charted at each stage with direct reference to a defined set of factors in African American social history. “Each phase of the Negro’s music,” Baraka wrote, “issued directly from the dictates of his social and psychological environment.”¹¹⁰ If Baraka’s language of social and environmental determinism echoes the Chicago school of sociology, it is because he was in tune with the sociological turn in folklore that Brown and Botkin had instigated at the FWP. But by arguing that behind the social determination and social reference of black folksong was its functional character, Baraka was taking the sociological turn in a new direction. For Baraka, folksong was imbricated not only with “social and psychological environment” but also with culture in its

manuscript is unknown. Untitled, Sterling A. Brown Papers, Box 51, Folder WPA Arts, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

¹⁰⁹ Baraka (Jones), *Black Music*, reprint ed. (1967; New York: Akashic, 2010), 213.

¹¹⁰ Baraka (Jones), *Blues People*, 65.

totality, from art and expression to religious practice and the behavioral patterns of practical life. “It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact,” Baraka wrote, “and a man’s life or his worship of the gods.”¹¹¹ If Brown had shifted the study of the blues from a focus on forms to a focus on idioms, then Baraka was positing a more fundamental break as essential to the character of the blues and its related traditions: they were not a collection of artifacts, understood formally or otherwise, but rather part of a continuum as interrelated modes of expression. For Baraka, the subterranean and subversive character of black folksong within white culture was its recasting the notion of culture itself as a process, which meant that its essence was mobility and motility—an anti-essence. Black expressive culture was identical and continuous not only with black people but also with black life.

The importance of Baraka’s folklore to the Black Arts Movement was its transvaluation of aesthetic values: standards of beauty would no longer inhere in aesthetic artifacts but instead would evolve out of expressive styles. To move towards this formulation of a “Black Aesthetic,” as Hoyt W. Fuller famously put it, Baraka took in not only Brown’s notion of the blues as an idiom or style but also Walker’s suggestion and display of a black vernacular style as such in verbal art.¹¹² From idiom as style to style as such—this subtle but important shift is an enabling theoretical undercurrent of Baraka’s thinking about song. It accounts for the slipperiness of his terminology for genre and tradition: the blues, black folksong, and black music flow into one another, forming a circular continuum rather than a part-whole relationship. For Baraka, the blues was indeed a specific idiom in black folksong and black music, encompassing the

¹¹¹ Ibid., 28–29.

¹¹² Hoyt W. Fuller, “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 3–12.

evolution of the work song into solo singing (the individual worker's holler, shout, moan, etc.) and then into the lyric poetry of African American life.¹¹³ But the blues for Baraka also named a general pattern of interrelated expressive and social functions that served as part of the underlying system of all African American song and instrumental music. According to Baraka, the blues was one of two "musics" in the African American tradition to embody such a pattern—in the blues, as Baraka defined it, melismatic singing as testimony of an intense individual emotional state. The blues, along with bebop, was a "roots" music. "They sit autonomous," he wrote. "Blues is a beginning. Bebop, a beginning. They define other varieties of music that come after them." What made them "roots" or "musics" and not just other "varieties of music" was the fundamentality of their expressive and social functions—their web of "emotion" and "intent," as Baraka put it.¹¹⁴ To describe these fundamental and systemic stylistic patterns in African American music, Baraka used a language of primordality—"roots," "beginnings," "origins"—that also pointed up their Afrocentric character. But in the ethnomusicology of the 1960s, "style" itself would take on this descriptive and explanatory power, as it assumed conceptual fixity as a term for the deep structures subtending entire musical traditions and linking what Baraka called their "expression" and their "life."

The theoretical shift from idiom as style to style as such, then, underlies a second phase of the sociological turn in folklore scholarship since the 1930s, which would pivot in the 1960s toward a revamped anthropological folklore, as the next chapter will explore. With his social graphing of African American song traditions, Baraka was at the cusp of this second turn. But the use of the term "style" as a category of social scientific description would be promoted most heavily among folklorists by a song collector who grew up intellectually under the Folklore

¹¹³ Baraka (Jones), *Blues People*, 50.

¹¹⁴ Baraka (Jones), *Black Music*, 83–85.

Project of the FWP, Alan Lomax. In doing so he was helping to establish a broad intellectual movement embraced by Baraka and others, bringing New Deal folklore into line with ethnomusicology and sociolinguistics. This increasing merger of folklore with social science in the 1950s and 60s established a place in the academy for a new field called the ethnography of communication, or ethnopoetics. Ethnopoetics would specialize in the study of what Lomax called “folk song style,” devising methods of transcribing oral poetry that would include features of the performance in the text itself, and producing artifacts of study in this way that, by rejoining what Baraka called “expression” and “life,” would still preserve what he considered the functional character of non-Western music and verbal art. With Baraka’s *Blues People* as an early signal, ethnopoetics would have one of its key objects of study—and one of its greatest exemplars—in the Black Arts Movement. In the new ethnographic study of black folksong, another capacious and multifarious genre would replace the blues as a cultural dominant, particularly in the school of criticism formed around the Black Arts. It would be called soul.

Chapter 3: Soul Poets of the Black Arts Movement

Negro music alone, because it drew its strengths and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the lowest classes of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class.
—Amiri Baraka, “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’” (1966)

Listen to James Brown scream. Have you ever heard a Negro poet sing like that? Of course not, because we have been tied to the texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would be hurt in the least by it. The key is in the music.

—Larry Neal, “And Shine Swam On” (1967)

O Miss Fine Brown Soul!

—Amiri Baraka and The Spirit House Movers,
Black & Beautiful Soul & Madness (1968)

It's very hard in fact to decide precisely what are the boundaries of “primitive” poetry or of a “primitive” poem, since there's often no activity differentiated as such, but the words or vocables are part of a larger or total “work” that may go on for hours, even days, at a stretch. What we would separate as music & dance & myth & painting is also part of that work, & the need for separation is a question of “our” interest & preconceptions, not of “theirs.”
—Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968)

If Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and the Chicago Black Renaissance stood behind Amiri Baraka's thinking about poetry and vernacular music in the years before the launch of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), perhaps the most immediate sign was that he could still use the term “blues” as shorthand for an entire conception of song in the black tradition as a medium for expressive style and lifestyle. By 1966, however, *Blues People* had become *soul* men and women. The shift in terminology reflects the extent to which community identity would be at stake in the new poetics, the explicit gendering of “soul” suggesting a major topos in the poetry

and music of the BAM period that will be my focus later in this chapter. But alongside the question for Baraka, Larry Neal, and others of a racial art's capacity to contain conflict and cultivate solidarity between the sexes, the emergence of "soul" as a critical concept reflects a more fundamental question for BAM and its allied movements in the period: in the shift from song form to song style, how far had the poets of folk tradition in the Black Renaissance era actually come toward performance, and in so doing, what had they achieved in the direction of founding an entirely new culture (anti-capitalist, if not anti-Western) on a new model of how poetry could remake its audience as a community? Like Baraka, Neal continued to think through this question on the grounds of poetry's relationship to music. But the signal importance of Neal's 1967 essay "And Shine Swam On" was precisely the instability of its terms: taking his title from an African American "toast," part of the oral tradition that Margaret Walker, in her embrace of "jive," had put at the center of a new style-based black vernacular poetics, Neal addresses black music in general but also one specific development in the tradition—emblemized by James Brown's scream—as the fertile substratum of an *even newer* new black poetry. For Neal, the sound of James Brown represented precisely the shift implicit in Baraka's turn from blues to soul. This was an advance on the notion of poetry as style: not style simply as idiom and inflection, bearing and comportment, but rather style as the entire enunciative apparatus and communicative situation of the poet-singer's art. How the term soul came to embody this idea of poetry and its relationship to song is a story not only of BAM and its musical poetics but also of the distinctive, dual engagement with popular culture and ethnography in the broader poetic avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s.

The proposition that music holds the "key" for an authentic black poetry, as Neal put it, remains one of BAM's most recognizable cultural arguments. Less well known is the deep

anthropological sense that Neal's version of the argument brings to the idea of poetry as a kind of musical performance. In Neal's essay, musical performance is *ritual* performance—even ritual theater. That ritual dimension of music, meanwhile, is poetry's necessary "context." It is a "usable" set of resources that, for Neal, are necessary to black poets precisely if they are to take their works beyond the "text," an aesthetic and ideological reification where bourgeois literature (black and white) sinks into "useless, dead ideas." Ritual is the basis of black music, and according to Neal it must be the basis of a black poetry that seeks to overcome bourgeois individuality and tap into "the collective psyche." And if black poets "must learn to embellish the context in which the work is executed," as Neal argues, then the purpose is to expand the work into a *ritual* context where both song and dramatic enactment give it a special type of power. Black poets, Neal says, "must learn to sing, dance and chant their works." They must do so for precisely the reason that Neal points to James Brown as their model: "a kind of priest, a black magician," Brown shows that there is a power both psychological and practical in a poetry of ritual performance. Such a poetry acts not only on an audience's "collective psyche," "tearing into the substance of their individual and collective experiences," but also on the world of events, "working juju with the word on the world."¹ A poetry of ritual performance, then, is a poetry of efficacious speech. It is what Margaret Walker called "jive," and what Neal and Baraka describe as the soul singer's art.

This poetry of efficacious speech is also what Jerome Rothenberg described in terms of the Mesoamerican shaman's art. Rothenberg emerged in the poetic avant-garde of the 1960s as a leader of the ethnopoetics movement, which brought together figures from the Beat movement, the Black Mountain School, the New York School, and other wings of the New American Poetry

¹ Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 653–55.

around a common interest in the oral traditions of what Rothenberg called premodern, tribal societies. Ethnopoetics, like the field of folklore itself throughout the twentieth century, had both its literary and anthropological schools. As a leader of the literary school, Rothenberg's thinking about shamanism was profoundly shaped by innovative scholarship within the anthropological school, or what Dell Hymes called the ethnography of communication. If ethnopoetics followed the turn toward style with a turn toward communication in the study of folklore and oral tradition, it was part of the field's second sociological turn, and in Hymes's own work it was a turn specifically toward sociolinguistics: describing all language use as part of the "system of communicative acts characteristic of a group," Hymes promoted a study of oral performance traditions that approached them as "ways of speaking," looking both to the event of speech and to the communal, ritual contexts in which they took on social functions.² It was the contextual, functionalist approach in the ethnography of communication that subtended Rothenberg's concept of shamanism. According to Rothenberg, a shaman is a "technician of the sacred," a poet-seer who extends the human voice through a complex of technical means (music, dance, symbolic signs, and myth) to create transformative ritual events. In the epigraph above, Rothenberg posits a concept of the efficacious ritual as a "total 'work'" that combines speech and behavior into a communicative situation, not only baffling the modern Westerner's expectation that art remain separate from social activity but also restoring something like the aura of the artwork, as Rothenberg writes elsewhere, on a principle of sacred consecration: "a setting-apart-by-the-creation-of-special-circumstances."³ It was on these grounds that

² Dell Hymes, "Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication," *American Anthropologist* 66, no. 6 (December 1964): 3. See also Dell Hymes, "Ways of Speaking," in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, edited by Richard Baumann and Joel Scherzer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 433.

³ Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania*, 2nd rev. ed. (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xxvi and 457–58.

ethnopoetics, as this chapter will show, addressed BAM both as an object of study and as a group of aesthetico-political fellow travelers: both movements shared a belief that poetry performed as sacred ritual could be an instrument of social and political transformation, and underlying this shared belief was a common anthropological theory of verbal art as social communication. What ethnopoetics posited as the basic principle or the roots of poetry as such, BAM sought to harness as the radical foundations of a race-conscious black poetic tradition.

If it was ritual performance that attracted Neal to James Brown as a model for the new black poetry, then it was ritual performance with a specific array of stylistic elements and rhetorical features. And though Neal called on poets not only to sing and chant but also to dance their poems, he found an exemplary case in Brown precisely because the sonic and kinetic aspects of the singer's performance style were encapsulated in the apparatus of the voice. Indeed, it was Brown's ability to deliver a sonic representation of efficacious speech that made him an exemplar of "soul" and the new style it came to designate in the rhythm-and-blues music of the late 1950s and 1960s. Consider the debut recording of James Brown and His Famous Flames, "Please Please Please" (1956), which reached hundreds of thousands of black listeners in the postwar counterpart to the race-record market. The performance holds together initially in the song form of a jilted lover's complaint, borrowing standard verses equally from the blues ("Baby, you done me wrong / Took my love and now you're gone") and the popular song of jazz's blues-based swing era ("Baby, take my hand / I want to be your lover man"). But the phatic redundancies of its opening plea ("Please, please, please, please! / Plee-ease, plee-ease, plee-ease!") tell its listener that this utterance is a speech act. Gradually, performance style overtakes song form, and the song itself disintegrates into the increasingly direct and insistent speech act of pleading. Brown's performance deploys a range of vocal techniques to deliver the

message and drive the action of this speech act, from melisma to a reverberating stutter, but style is not all. Brown embellishes the context of the recorded performance, as Neal might say, by adopting a self-reflexive attitude toward the rhetorical situation of the plea:

I just want to hear you say
I, I, I, I,
I-hhh, I-hhh, I, I,
I-hhh, I-hhh,
Honey, please
Don't ohhh
Oh yeah
Oh! I love you so⁴

Brown's direct address to the absent lover turns at this point into apostrophe: by insisting that she become the speaker and projecting himself as the listener (he just wants to hear her say, "I"), Brown constructs a fictive drama of subjectivity emerging into self-expression and acceding to communication. Fictive, self-reflexive dramas of expression and communication like this one, as this chapter will show, came to define soul music and the black poetry that used it as a model.

Increasingly that poetry was reaching its audience, like the explosion of soul music itself, through the medium of recorded sound. Take Baraka's own apostrophic exclamation, "O Miss Fine Brown Soul!" Part of an answer to Neal's call for poets to become singers, Baraka's exclamation occurs in a series of performances he recorded in 1968 with The Spirit House Movers, a musical group comprised of a vocal harmony quintet called The Jihad Singers and a small backing jazz combo. (The group was named after Spirit House, the performance theater and political forum that Baraka and his wife Amina had built in their home in Newark, New Jersey, after the demise of the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem. The group's members were all local Newark musicians.) Issued as a long-playing record album with the title *Black &*

⁴ James Brown and His Famous Flames, *Please Please Please*, reissue edition, Polydor CD-31453 1016-2, 1996, compact disc.

Beautiful Soul & Madness, this series of performances included “Beautiful Black Women,” a song and chanted poem in which Baraka and the group adapt the soul ballad “Ooo Baby Baby” by Smokey Robinson and The Miracles as a paean to black female identity and power. Like Sterling Brown and Josh White, who each in their own way turned the blues into a vehicle for an anti-Jim Crow protest literature, Baraka and the group find an impulse within soul music that can carry a statement on the sexual politics of Black Power.

What “Ooo Baby Baby” offers Baraka and the group are a musical synthesis and a drama of expression and communication as complex as James Brown’s. As the choral refrain quoted in the song’s title suggests, “Ooo Baby Baby” takes the cry or holler that Baraka had posited as the generative core of the blues and synthesizes it with the sentimental ballad of the Tin Pan Alley popular song tradition. Meanwhile, the song not only takes up the blues cry (and elevates it, in the style of doo-wop, to the vocal art of a soaring falsetto) but also amounts, in the end, to an extended self-reflexive commentary on the cry itself. The song is a lover’s lament that expresses regret for a squandered romantic union. Its choral refrain establishes a sonic representation of an emotional state on which the persona of the lead singer, Smokey Robinson, unfolds a framing discourse addressed directly to the lover. The song packages a vocal effect as an emotional statement and delivers it to the addressee with an explicit heading about its function and intended effect:

I’m just about at the end of my rope
But I can’t stop trying
I can’t give up hope
Because I feel that one day I’ll hold you near
Whisper in your ear
Until that day is near
I’m crying...

OOO-WOO-OOO
Baby, baby

OOO-WAHA-OOO-HOO-OO-OO
Baby, baby⁵

In turning to this song, Baraka and The Spirit House Movers find the pattern of a rhetorical and communicative situation that would become standard for soul, where the lyric inwardness of the cry is framed within an extended direct address and sent out to move or transform its fictive—and sometimes actual—listeners. (In perhaps the most hyperbolic example, from the 1966 local release “Moaning and Crying” by the Chicago-based Dontells, the pattern is set as a call and response between lead singer and chorus and invokes a commensurate response from its addressee: “Listen to me moan at you / OOOOOO-HOO-OOOOOO.”⁶) As “Ooo Baby Baby” and its many imitations show, essential to the pattern that would define the soul style is the coupling of style itself with superadded layers of communication: not just the cry, the moan, or the call alone, but also a meditation on that event of pure expression and the dramatization of it as a communicative act.

In adapting “Ooo Baby Baby,” Baraka and The Spirit House Movers take both the musical synthesis it represents and the communicative situation it establishes and put them in a sanctified ritual context. In “Beautiful Black Women,” Baraka and the group adopt the eponymous refrain of their source, make it a strictly choral, constant background refrain, and add a four-part harmony that darkens the minor key of The Miracles’ original with a second tenor voice, nuancing the counterpoint on the bottom end. Just in the vocal performance of The Spirit House Movers, then, “Black Beautiful Women” evokes a ritual context in a soundscape saturated with the kind of harmonies that the earliest white ethnographers of African American sacred

⁵ Smokey Robinson and The Miracles, *Going to a Go-Go* (1965), reissue edition, Motown Records MOTD-5269, 1986, compact disc.

⁶ The Dontells, “Moaning and Crying,” *Eccentric Soul: Sitting in the Park*, reissue compilation, Numero Group N-063, 2015, compact disc.

song called weird and haunting: it takes the soul sound from rhythm-and-blues back to the spirituals.⁷ (Like the call-and-response of The Dontells, the vocal harmony of The Spirit House Movers is a sonic allusion to the musical traditions of the black church.) If the chorus of “Black Beautiful Women” evokes a ritual context, then Baraka’s chanted poem uses it as the substrate and channel of its communication. The performance begins with an a cappella overture of the choral refrain, mixing scat syllables with the pure expressive cry (“LA LALALA LA / LA LA LA LA / OOO-WEE-OOO / Baby, Baby), and then overtop of this background launches into Baraka’s statement of the theme:

Beautiful black women
fail / they act
Stop them / raining
They are so beautiful we want them with us

Baraka’s poem hangs a didactic message on an elliptical image complex: this is a vision of intraracial unity figured in the terms of romantic union, and while it is clear that strength and frailty are equally important grounds for that union (“fail / they act”), the image for feminine frailty (“raining”) has no clear referent initially. That image develops incrementally, ballad-like, with the appearance of Ruby Dee, a cultural icon of the Civil Rights Movement, as its anchor: “Ruby Dee weeps at the window / raining,” says Baraka, “Being what we all will be / sentimental, bitter, frustrated, deprived of her fullest life.” A kind of objective correlative for the feelings of an oppressed people, this image becomes the key of the poem, establishing a dramatic situation (Ruby Dee at the window, watching the rain) and linking it to the ritual elements of an unfolding communicative situation. To make the image perform this function, Baraka ultimately

⁷ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1869), qtd. in Cruz, 142-49.

flips its reference altogether. And to bring it from a dramatic situation into a communicative situation with a ritual context, he shifts from propositional statement to direct address:

Beautiful black women,
it is still raining in this terrible land
We need you
We flex our muscles
turn to stare at our tormenters
We need you
reigning
We need you reigning, black queen⁸

The poem has become a speech act, an invocation and a call for unity in a common cause. And with the homophonic shift (from “raining” to “reigning”) in the poem’s key image, that call brings together the secular and the spiritual, the romantic and the political, to visualize a revolutionary kind of Biblical prophecy: after the Flood, the Kingdom of a chosen people will reign on Earth—as long as black men and women can get themselves together. The poem builds a communicative situation (direct address, straight talk) to support this exalted vision, as though romantic invocation were the precondition for ritual evocation. While the poem’s key image has shifted the balance from feminine frailty to female power, its pragmatics of speech has performed a parallel shift from male desire to male supplication (“We need you reigning”), making the real ritual act of this performance not just the worship of black female beauty but also the devotion to a political ideal of equality.

For Baraka, “Black Beautiful Women” sacralizes the feminine as a way of transforming the entire field of social and political relationships in which Black Power could operate. Its blending of sacred ritual (spirituality), romantic plea (romantic love), and political insurgency was central to his understanding of the new black vernacular music called soul. “In our mind we

⁸ Amiri Baraka and The Spirit House Movers, *Black & Beautiful Soul & Madness* (1968), reissue edition, Sonboy Records 003CD, 2009, compact disc.

wanted to create word-music that reflected the Motown vibe so popular in the late 60s,” Baraka recalled in 2009, referring to the recording company in Detroit that made a global export of the soul sound honed by such groups as Smokey Robinson and The Miracles. But also, Baraka noted, “we thought of ourselves as cultural workers, revolutionary artists ‘pushing the program,’ as some of our cultural nationalist comrades were want to say.” The music and poetry of “Black Beautiful Women” offered “a clear vision of what we wanted to say regarding the Afro-American struggle for equal rights and self-determination.”⁹ Baraka and The Spirit House Movers certainly found a powerful medium of communication for that vision in the soul style. In the original liner notes for *Black & Beautiful Soul & Madness*, signed by the Harlem-based arts collective Weusi, soul is described as “blues expanded made more deadly [sic].” What makes soul “deadly” here is the use of the contemporary rhythm-and-blues song to perform the ritual unconcealment of the liberationist political message that the spirituals had used Biblical imagery to render esoteric—a blending of the vulgar and the sacred that was “dangerously contemporary.”¹⁰ If its purpose was to sacralize a contemporary social and political movement, Baraka and the group certainly found a clear enough vehicle for that synthesis in the imagery as well as the style of soul: “We are still trapped and weak but we build and grow heavy with our knowledge,” Baraka chants in the poem, and it is the contemporary icon Ruby Dee who holds the key to this tower rising outside “the gray cold buildings of our entrapment.” But the political vision that Baraka and the group used their soul singing to convey was far less transparent than his description of it as a kind of propaganda would suggest. In the elaborate, even ritual dramas of communication that it established, was soul a vehicle of expression for racial equality, for

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Weusi, “Black and Beautiful...Soul and Madness,” in Amiri Baraka and The Spirit House Movers, *Black & Beautiful Soul & Madness*, Jihad Productions 1001, 1968, 33 rpm.

political self-determination, or for a completely separatist cultural nationalism? The tendency of the music and poetry of soul both to galvanize and to exceed the singularity of a cultural and political project is the central problem addressed in this chapter.

The scholarly consensus on the Black Arts Movement has long been that it took up aesthetic practices as instruments for promoting a politics of black nationalism. Like the argument that music, and vernacular music in particular, holds the “key” for poetry and other aesthetic practices in BAM, this characterization of the movement’s political orientation has a presence both in some of its own critical statements and in the scholarship that has followed in their wake. In an influential scholarly account based on this premise, James Smethurst has argued that not only the origins but also the afterlives of BAM are poorly understood in literary and cultural history precisely because the institutions of African American studies that the movement helped to initiate have not been able to work through what Smethurst identifies as the movement’s deep nationalist underpinnings.¹¹ Smethurst’s premise is typical.¹² What matters to him are the consequences: taking the black nationalism of BAM back to its roots, he argues, puts it in the tradition of such Leftist promoters of proletarian-folk national traditions as Sterling Brown, B. A. Botkin, and Alan Lomax, while it also reveals BAM’s continuing influence as the surprisingly radical source of contemporary multiculturalism and minority literatures.¹³ Indeed, BAM should be understood as the point of confluence in this long continuum. But its cultural and ideological underpinnings, I argue, cannot be reduced to black nationalism alone. In their

¹¹ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 70s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6–7.

¹² It has now, in fact, been codified into the canon. In the textbook *SOS: Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, the editors (including Smethurst), put it this way: “BAM cannot be comprehended outside the context of the rise of Black nationalism in the 1960s.” See *SOS: Calling All Black People*, edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 4.

¹³ Smethurst, 24–26.

polemic statements, the architects of BAM and their counterparts in the Black Power Movement adduced a range of arguments that predicated a philosophy of black identity, unity, and pride on folk or vernacular culture, but only one of those arguments was the thesis of black nationalism—that is, black cultural and political independence from both the American mainstream and other American subcultural traditions. What unifies the cultural arguments of BAM, in fact, is a specific rearticulation of early twentieth-century American cultural pluralism: when the “black nation” serves as the image for the kind of intraracial union that Baraka calls for in “Beautiful Black Women,” it is one that belongs to Walt Whitman’s “teeming nation of nations” and Randolph Bourne’s “trans-national America.” What is crucial here is that even BAM’s explicitly nationalist arguments belie the tendency of cultural nationalism itself to merge with and reinforce the political aims of cultural pluralism, as Dean Robinson has argued.¹⁴ This is a problem of description with consequential stakes. When scholars align the cultural politics of BAM with black nationalism but neglect its ties to the liberal tradition of American pluralism, it conceals the tensions within BAM between an antiracist critique of the American capitalist class structure—often, as discussed below, the movement’s avowed stance—and an antiracist politics more amenable to the postwar liberal mainstream.

The implications of this claim should not be taken as reasons for treating BAM’s own cultural arguments as mystifications or bad-faith gestures in need of critical debunking. In fact,

¹⁴ Robinson argues that the so-called black nationalism of BAM, like that of its counterpart Black Power, was synonymous with a new account of pluralism articulated by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963). What Robinson calls “ethnic group pluralism” combined cultural pluralism with political pluralism, arguing, in essence, that groups connected by shared descent and cultural identity would behave in the political sphere as united interest groups vying for their share of control over goods and services. In Robinson’s view, it is BAM and Black Power’s embrace of ethnic group pluralism that made it compatible, ultimately, with liberalism. See Dean E. Robinson, “Black Power Nationalism as Ethnic Pluralism: Postwar Liberalism’s Ethnic Paradigm in Black Radicalism,” in *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought*, edited by Adolph Reed, Jr., and Kenneth W. Warren (Boulder, CO and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 191–93.

BAM's underlying alliance with cultural pluralism had some important and salutary consequences for its own cultural politics. As Smethurst suggests, BAM certainly belongs in the tradition of Brown, Botkin, and Alan Lomax, who united literary folklore with anthropological folklore. This tradition, though, was fundamentally committed to cultural pluralism, as the preceding chapters have highlighted. It is precisely BAM's connection to this pluralist tradition, moreover, that the hybridization of poetry and music remained among the movement's key cultural arguments: the argument over pluralism in American literature and folklore had been launched in an even earlier era, by Sandburg and John Lomax, and the ground of their argument had been the lyric subjectivity of folksong. BAM entered the argument in a new era of cultural work that united literature, folklore, and anthropology. In the process BAM became something other than the dangerous specter of black nationalism lurking behind, and as Smethurst suggests, "haunting" the contemporary liberal consensus that embraces multiculturalism and identity-based literatures: the seeds of multiculturalism were planted deep in the center of BAM's own pluralism.¹⁵

That the language of black nationalism emerged only as a feature of a more fundamental politics in BAM is borne out by the statements of movement figures themselves. The traces of an avowed nationalism in BAM are undeniable. Recalling *Black & Beautiful Soul & Madness*, as mentioned above, Baraka compared the cultural work of The Spirit House Movers to that of their "cultural nationalist comrades." And in another retrospective essay, written in 1994, Baraka

¹⁵ Robinson argues that the centrality within Black Power of "black capitalism" or "black economic development," the creation of black-run businesses as a means of greater black political sovereignty, ensured that any political gains made by the movement in the 1960s and 70s flowed to "a cohort of mainstream black functionaries." Meanwhile, Reed points to what he calls "the unitarian mythology of late 1960s black nationalism," connects it to "a pluralist orientation that construes political issues solely in terms of competition over distribution of goods and services within the bounds of fixed system priorities," and argues that the strategy of representing the black community as a unitary, collective subject succeeded only in producing "a new elite" in the black professional class. See Robinson, 199–200 and 204–206, and Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 55–58.

summed up BAM's aesthetico-political campaign as a "War for Self Determination, Self Respect and Self Defense [sic]," echoing the words of Malcolm X.¹⁶ Decades earlier, in one of the founding documents of the movement, Neal, for his part, made the point more explicitly: "The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood." One may wonder here about the philosophical distance bridged by the copula in "self-determination *and* nationhood" (emphasis mine). Neal instead moves quickly to what is for him the crux of the political situation framed by Black Arts and Black Power: "The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas—one black, one white." But in linking the two movements on these grounds, and in asserting famously that "Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept," Neal's essay raises a deeper question for contemporary scholars about BAM's interpretation and arrogation of black radical politics at the end of the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁷ Was Black Power itself univocal in the embrace of a black cultural nationalism, and if not, what political vision was BAM drawing into its own orbit by aligning itself with Black Power? Written for Baraka and Neal's germinal 1967 *Black Fire* anthology, Stokely Carmichael's essay "Toward Black Liberation" brackets nationalism out of political self-determination altogether. Neal might have considered his "two Americas" thesis a cornerstone of Black Power, but for Carmichael the turn away from integration it underwrote was a tactic with a very different endgame. Envisioning a truer form of integration for black and white America on the basis of shared social and political power, Carmichael proposed a particular form of pluralism:

Traditionally, for each new ethnic group, the route to social and political integration into America's pluralistic society, has been through the organization of their own institutions

¹⁶ Amiri Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," in *SOS: Calling All Black People*, 17–18.

¹⁷ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 29–30.

with which to represent their communal needs within the larger society. This is simply stating what the advocates of Black Power are saying.¹⁸

Carmichael's account of Black Power's political concept might be called civic or municipal pluralism. It first posits blackness as an ethnic category and black Americans as an ethnic group. It then imagines this ethnic group forming its own identity and articulating its own interests through the establishment of independent intraethnic institutions, before entering into possible coalitions and alliances in a civil society and body politic that comprises an array of similarly constituted ethnic groups. Based on the alignment of ethnic groups with representative civic organizations, and proposing a federation of such groups and organizations on the basis of adjudicated needs and interests, it is a political concept modeled on the large multiethnic cities of mid-twentieth-century America. It assesses the current circumstances of the ghettoized black communities in these cities and imagines what it would take to forge a place for them in the municipal halls of power where, by 1967, white ethnic groups had consolidated their own influence.

Carmichael's account puts the statements by Baraka and Neal in a different light. While black nationalism might have been a useful language for expressing black solidarity, particularly with the popularity of Ron Maulana Karenga's Kwaia philosophy, underneath it the real driving force of BAM—and the reason for black solidarity in the first place—was an intensified version of a project it shared not only with much of the countercultural postwar avant-garde, but also with such older aesthetico-political formations as the Chicago folksong salon: to move beyond—and, in the case of BAM, to dismantle—the aesthetic and epistemic foundations of the West. In BAM, this was a project that took aim at white supremacy as an instrument of

¹⁸ Stokely Carmichael, "Toward Black Liberation," in *Black Fire*, 122.

inequality and injustice by indicting it under a variety of names. (It also described whiteness itself as a construct that oppressed not one nation but a multitude of ethnic groups and nationalities by according disproportionate power to only a minority of the global population.¹⁹) Baraka in his 1994 essay argued that what he called the war for self-determination in BAM was predicated on a “broad credo” of “equal rights and democracy,” and that this credo remained constant from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, when the cultural nationalism in which “we had initially cloaked our call to battle” was abandoned. But Baraka’s “broad credo” also reflected the larger project of BAM, casting its anti-Western animus in terms of class rather than race: “at the root our most profound feeling was that it was the social context and practice of petty bourgeois Liberalism that we wanted to flee.”²⁰ For Baraka, it was opposition to the class structure of European capitalist modernity, rather than national identity, that unified BAM. Still, such anti-capitalist rhetoric only underscores the fundamental tension in BAM’s cultural politics. While it might have used pluralism to levy a successful critique of Western culture as such, BAM’s efforts to do the same in its stance toward capitalism ran up against the reality that the fundamentally pluralist formations with which it had allied itself, such as Carmichael’s brand of Black Power, operated as interest groups seeking a greater share of political power for their own elites, as Robinson and Adolph Reed have argued, but at the expense of more radical calls for restructuring the underlying economic system on which this politics rested.

Like Baraka, Neal also came to the conclusion that a more fundamental line of ideological opposition subtended BAM’s political philosophy. In Neal’s account, the project of dismantling the dominance of Europe and the West politically started with aesthetic and

¹⁹ Askia Touré, “Poetry and Black Liberation: Freedom’s Furious Passions,” in *SOS: Calling All Black People*, 25.

²⁰ Baraka, “The Black Arts Movement,” 17–18.

philosophical norms and perhaps for that reason operated in terms of race: “The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.”²¹ Neal’s reference here to the “white thing,” which suggests both (un-) hip style and metaphysical substance (i.e., “doing your thing,” but also the sovereign philosophical reality of whiteness), should prompt scholars to take up a different reading of his “two Americas” thesis: where race is about norms and ideals first and about their influence on group identities second, the distinction between a white America and a black America has more than sociological meaning. Neal makes explicit an aesthetic and philosophical rejection of whiteness in BAM that is less directly connected to the particularities of ethnic identity in America that inform Carmichael’s civic pluralism, but the consequences of Neal’s argument are similar nonetheless. His “two Americas” thesis, I would argue, should be read through his own anthropological lens: underneath the white America of aesthetic and philosophical norms derived from Greco-Roman antiquity and their various European classical revivals, there is, according to this reading, another, subterranean America that exists apart from Western hegemony in all its forms because it survives within the cultural traditions that originated with a global subaltern population. Neal’s thinking is suffused with a kind of postcolonial transnationalism. Because it was Western universalism that had justified the subordinate social, political, and economic status that he interpreted as black Americans’ common lot with the currently or formerly colonized peoples of Africa, Asia, and the New World, Neal thought, it would be on aesthetic and philosophical grounds that BAM would fight for independence and equality. According to A. B. Spellman, BAM posed the following question: “in a plural world, must there [not] be plural

²¹ Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 30.

conceptions of excellence and beauty?”²² Neal’s own affirmation of this aesthetic pluralism, it could be said, was his provocation for writers and artists to do the non-white thing.

This chapter looks to the poetry and music of soul for the richest evidence of BAM’s commitment to a cultural program of pluralism and hybridity. In the soul style, the new black poets and performers of the BAM era found both a vehicle for articulations of black identity and a poetics that joined them to a larger countercultural project of the postwar American avant-garde, where alliances could be formed among those who were exploring the roots and substrata of expressive cultures transnationally for their own understanding of the grounds of expression that subtend collective life. And in the major tropes of soul, the new black poets and performers found contemporary, community-specific models for a cultural program that used collective expression in its aim to organize a collectivity among collectivities—or a “nation of nations,” to return to Whitman’s formula of pluralism. This chapter begins by providing a genealogy of soul that supplies context for what emerges as its master trope: as the work of Baraka and *The Spirit House Movers* suggests, it is the figure of the romantic union as a site for strengthening intraracial bonds. As part of this genealogical account, I focus on the early commercial recordings of soul singer Millie Jackson, who was distinctive for a performance style that combined oral discourse and dramatic speech with the cry and holler of the rhythm and blues. An ideal sound for the BAM era, Jackson synthesized the “hip” style of the Northern black ghetto with the “rootsy” style of Southern black secular and spiritual music. What this account shows is that soul supported the kind of signifying, efficacious speech that Margaret Walker called jive and that the soul poets of BAM would come to call rap. Next, I turn to the work of one of the major poets of BAM in Chicago, Carolyn M. Rodgers, whose poetry, I argue, consciously adapts

²² A. B. Spellman, “Introduction to Theory/Criticism,” in *SOS: Calling All Black People*, 24.

the discursive and dramatic style exemplified by singers like Jackson into dramas of communication typical of what I call soul poetry. In poems that she describes as “signifying” and classifies as “raps,” in part because they downplay poetic form and emphasize a rhetoric of real effects on listeners, Rodgers takes up soul’s master trope and expands it to include not only the romantic union but also intergenerational unity as figures for intraracial collectivity. Finally, the chapter concludes with an extended addendum to the genealogy of soul, which places both the music and the poetry in the broader intellectual context of folklore studies and ethnomusicology in the BAM era. Here I examine Alan Lomax’s *Black Identity Project*, a multimedia popular ethnography of black vernacular music, and argue that this Rockefeller-funded project appropriated aspects of the cultural program of BAM to address a liberal political establishment’s concerns about the state of American race relations at the end of the Civil Rights Movement. In its ultimate proposition that black identity be understood within what he calls an “American Patchwork,” Lomax’s ethnographic project illustrates the commonality of BAM’s cultural program with the long tradition of twentieth-century American pluralism.

By reexamining the cultural politics of BAM, this chapter’s argument has consequences for scholarly narratives of African American literary history. It suggests a new way of understanding the response to the end of Jim Crow in the US and to the rise of independence movements in the diaspora as a return to a fundamental orality as the basis of cultural production. But in this respect the chapter’s argument also has broader consequences for the literary history of the postwar avant-garde as a whole. If it can be said that BAM converged with the ethnopoetics movement in its search for a functional art predicated on a fundamental orality, then it is because both movements were subtended by a theoretical shift in the fields of literary and anthropological folklore that in itself reflected the major unifying aesthetic philosophies of

the postwar avant-garde: from the unification of art and life on the basis of style to the redefinition of art as praxis on the basis of communication. And if the aesthetic philosophies of the postwar avant-garde always implied a rejection of the standards and canons of Western art, then this chapter suggests that the convergence of BAM and ethno-poetics revived the oldest civilizational theories of folklore and reshaped them into a radical skepticism of Western civilization as such. Rothenberg's call in 1983 for "new communalistic and anti-authoritarian forms of social life" belongs to a larger description of ethno-poetics as a "countermovement... [within] the West itself," and the political vision it shares with BAM (the pluralism of "small and integrated, stateless and classless societies") means that literary historians should understand both as part of a post-Eurocentric moment in the poetry and poetics of the US postwar period.²³ By focusing on this moment's decisive turn toward a poetics of song, this chapter also has consequences for contemporary theories of the lyric. The soul poets of BAM turned to song not because they believed it to be expressive of a separate national identity but rather because, like the "shaman proto-poets" of the ethno-poetics movement, they believed it granted access to a fundamental orality that could express "primary human values" in the face of "mindless mechanization" in the modern West.²⁴ The songs and performances analyzed in this chapter often foreground precisely those rhetorical devices that in recent years have been proposed and contested as definitive of the lyric as such. This is the reason that they were embraced by the theorists of BAM and ethno-poetics alike: whether or not apostrophic address, self-reflection on the event of utterance, or the hyperbolic presence of the self can be established as part of a credible transhistorical theory of the lyric, they play an evocative role in a poetics such as soul

²³ Jerome Rothenberg, "Pre-Face," in *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse toward an Ethno-poetics*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), xi–xii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

that concerns itself with dramatizing the act of communication and its putative origins in ritual. Nurtured by a structuralist anthropology, BAM and ethno-poetics shared the same desire to locate the deep “generative structures” of poetry that informs contemporary lyric theory.²⁵ That these deep poetic resources could also be described as part of a largely Western lyric tradition suggests the complex formal argument that BAM and ethno-poetics have left for contemporary theorists to assess: that ideas of what poetry is and does can serve not only as a vehicle for ideology but also as a way of rendering a dominant culture alien to itself.

I

In a 1973 article for *Black World* magazine, Bernard W. Bell framed a discussion of new developments in contemporary African American poetry by posing the question, “What is soul?” The question took Bell from poetry to speech, and from speech to music, and finally from music to spirit: he was in the domain of culture as such. For Bell, soul was both a master trope and a suprageneric category for black expressive culture as a whole. It had its basis in something specific, “street language,” but its meaning was capacious. The expression of soul could be concentrated in particular stylistic genres, such as genres of speaking, but soul as such in Bell’s view encompassed all the ways the members of a culture moved through the world and interacted with one another.

²⁵ See Culler, 34–38. Proponents of historical poetics such as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins argue that the idea of the lyric as an ancient genre and the originary form of poetry is a “post-Enlightenment idea” and a “critical construction” that we owe to literary thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My claim is that the modern idea of the lyric has a different basis in folklore and anthropology: neither a transhistorical tradition in its own right nor a product of reading practices in the twentieth-century classroom, it plays a role in many accounts of the oral poem, whether it stands for the dimension of subjective inwardness in the communal tradition of the ballad (Sandburg) or for the singularity of the communicative act emerging from the collective voice of the chorus (Baraka). See Jackson and Prins, 1–4.

Soul music, for the first musicologists and critics to look back on its ascendancy during the 1960s and 70s, represented something more definite, but also something historic: a grand synthesis within black musical culture, one that blended its main religious and secular song traditions. That this synthesis both enthralled and scandalized its original audiences—and could inspire a similar ambivalence in those who later studied the music—was an early theme in the scholarship and criticism. In 1987, Alan Lomax described this aspect of the music as the source of an “uncomfortable conundrum with which soul performances had often confronted me.” This music was based on a sacred tradition that had commanded his awe and appreciation since youth, when field recording trips with his father John Lomax exposed him to spirituals and folk sermons in Southern black communities, but soul took the “church-house preaching style” and fused it with “pop love ballads.” Hearing the spirituals brought “into the courtship scene” was vexing. Lomax was able to break through this conundrum in his thinking by remembering the “here-and-now content of the churchly style” itself and identifying in it what he called the “social soul of black soulfulness—the healing river of group life.” In Lomax’s account, soul had adapted what he called sacred “performance symbols” to serve the social needs of group life under new, urban-industrial conditions, an account I will discuss in more detail below.²⁶ The social function that soul derived from the spirituals, by way of gospel, was also at the crux of soul itself for Gerri Hirshey, one of the first music critics to write a major study of soul music. She placed an intermediary step before soul’s fusion of popular love songs and spirituals: a prior synthesis of the blues shout and “hoodoo spiritualism” in the songs of such rhythm-and-blues artists as Screamin’ Jay Hawkins. For Hirshey, this prior synthesis introduced an alterity into popular music that James Brown and other soul artists carried into a style of performance

²⁶ Alan Lomax, “Urban Soul,” in *Urban Strain: Groundwork*, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004: 11-1/17), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

charged in equal parts by religious and sexual fervor. Nevertheless, in Hirshey's account the relation between soul and the spirituals, understood as its bedrock tradition, was still paramount. In a version of the origin stories that Carl Sandburg and Sterling Brown had told about ballads and blues, respectively, Hirshey relayed Ray Charles's story about composing his germinal soul song, "What'd I Say," in a manner that she and a fellow music critic linked to the spirituals and the theory of their communal authorship: performing in a dance hall near Pittsburgh in 1959, Charles played the part of the preacher while his audience played that of his congregation, improvising together the verses of the song incrementally through call and response.²⁷

By tracing soul music not just to the spirituals, but more specifically to the institutions and scenes of social life the spirituals were supposed here to express, these accounts from Lomax and Hirshey reflect the broader resonances of the term soul within the Black Arts Movement. In Bell's answer to the question of what soul is, he charts a fluid interchange between an expressive style, the person using it, and the community that recognizes it:

As the brother on the block would say, to have soul is knowing how to walk that walk and talk that talk; how to get down to the nitty-gritty and work with the grits and greens; how to tell it like it is and keep on pushing; how to be what you are and believe in what you do. To have soul is getting your thing together and sharing it with your brothers and sisters—those who have paid their dues, Black or white, and are delivering the news. In other words, soul power is the primal force of human nature, tempered by a common experience of suffering and struggle for survival that manifests itself through shared modes of perceiving and expressing that experience.²⁸

Bell's account of soul posits a correlation between personal identity and group solidarity that may be as close as he gets to a definition of the term itself ("getting your thing together and sharing it with your brothers and sisters"). But this correlation only makes sense in Bell's account within a larger series of equivalences: between identity and action ("how to be what you

²⁷ Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 4–6 and 50–51.

²⁸ Bernard W. Bell, "The Debt to Black Music," *Black World* 12, no. 5 (March 1973): 85.

are and believe in what you do”), between speech and behavior (“how to walk that walk and talk that talk”), between being and perceiving, and between perceiving and expressing (“human nature, tempered by a common experience,” along with “shared modes of perceiving and expressing that experience”). For Bell, soul originates in an intuitive or instinctive knowledge with roots in historical trauma and manifests itself in the first instance in a particular style of verbal communication: “Street language” is the linguistic system to which it belongs, but “[j]iving, bopping, rapping, signifying, [and] sounding” are the speech acts through which it operates. Each of these terms refers to a type of efficacious speech, from ritual verbal assault (“jiving,” “signifying,” “sounding”) to intimate monologue (“rapping”) and nonsemantic musical patterning (“bopping”). As this list of particular speech acts reveals, however, soul as a stylistic concept in fact extends from verbal to non-verbal communication. What unites these speech acts is a model of communication that encompasses both language and behavior, ranging from the most direct, immediate use of speech (“tell[ing] it like it is”) to a repertoire of signifying practices in a larger sense than the linguistic (“delivering the news”). And what unites this expansive model of communication is an equally expansive concept of style: soul exists for Bell somewhere in the conjunction of verbal style (“talk that talk”) and lifestyle (“walk that walk”). Bell’s account of soul is more performative than it is postulative: it is put forth as the reported speech of an anonymous “brother” in a black neighborhood, and its rhetorical strategy is a metonymic accretion of signifiers for soul derived from popular culture (“nitty gritty,” “grits and greens,” “keep on pushing”). Bell was less interested in producing a definition of soul than he was in producing a sense of recognition on the part of his readers, and the reason is that in the context of BAM the meaning of soul was itself about the power of style to generate community rapport, an idea that this chapter discusses in more detail below.

Nonetheless, Bell moves seamlessly from a description of the concrete particulars of the soul style to a claim about the deep, essential reality of the soul concept, which he posits as a special aspect of the “primal force of human nature.” Bell’s detour into the metaphysics of soul is significant because it illuminates the connection between the BAM-era discourse about soul and the earliest nineteenth-century writings on the spiritual, where defining this form of expression also became a matter largely of the audience’s role. Cruz argues that the spiritual itself was defined in the immediate antebellum and postbellum periods through a history of listening. Understood by white cultural elites as “emotional noise” prior to 1860, by the time of the Civil War the spiritual was being heard by Northern abolitionists as “pathetic expression.” The difference, Cruz posits, was a mode of listening that he calls “ethnosympathy,” where the song’s performance offered its listeners “an inner black (slave) phenomenology that spoke simultaneously to social structures.” According to Cruz, the spiritual first had to be understood as meaningful sound—as a signifying practice—before it could be heard as the “testimony” of an enslaved or formerly enslaved person’s inner life, which is how Frederick Douglass offered it to his readers in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. The spiritual would go onto become yet again something else entirely, in Cruz’s account: for liberal humanists, a source of cultural refinement and a good in itself, and for proto-social scientists, a mechanism for various forms of social management.²⁹ Yet Douglass’s description of the spiritual as a form of testimonial utterance remains for Cruz a lost ideal of black expressivity as a medium of collective social and historical consciousness, just as it provides the implicit basis, I would argue, for the mode of expressivity and performativity that Bell calls soul. For Douglass, part of the testimonial nature of the spiritual is that its meaning depends on the mediation of the listener.

²⁹ Cruz, 39–40, 46–47, and 167–177.

Early in his *Narrative*, Douglass explains that when his fellow slaves were sent by their plantation owner from the out-farms to the home plantation, they considered this a privilege and would sing on their journey, though the sounds of their voices revealed what Douglass would eventually recognize as a much more complex range of emotions:

While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness.... I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.³⁰

Just as Bell would come to argue that soul is both phenomenological and expressive, its performativity embodying a shared knowledge and experience of suffering, Douglass suggests in this passage that the spiritual—the tradition of “those rude and apparently incoherent songs” of the enslaved—is indexical of the true conditions of slavery and is capable of communicating this truth more effectively than discourse to social groups remote from it. Moreover, when Bell describes soul as a form of direct, transparent, and sincere speech, or “telling it like it is,” echoing in his words is Douglass’s account here of the spiritual as a mode all at once of narrating, testifying, and protesting in the face of oppression, injustice, and cruelty. But the link between the spiritual and soul extends to the role played by the listening audience. Douglass says that there is a “deep meaning” to the spiritual that is accessible only to those who hear it as meaningful but also stand outside the “inner circle” of its immediate function and resonance; this

³⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 2nd edition (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845; Dublin: Webb, Chapman, 1846), 13–14.

outsider audience encompasses both the future self of a figure like Douglass and sympathetic white listeners, a duality that is reflected in Cruz's account of the spiritual as a medium of ethnosympathy. And while the interplay between black expressivity and white pathos involved in ethnosympathy may be a dynamic that soul in an account like Bell's seems to reject, it is a feature of the discourse about the spiritual that often resurfaces in the soul concept: even in the relay between personal expressive style and group solidarity that Bell describes as soul's circuit of communication, it is "those who have paid their dues, Black or white" who count as "brothers and sisters."

In fact, from the Reconstruction period through the New Negro Renaissance, the concept of soul regularly exhibited this tension between a Romantic humanism based on intersubjective communication across racial lines and one based on race consciousness. These two tendencies might be represented, on the one hand, by Douglass's "prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish," and on the other hand, by W. E. B. Du Bois's "souls of black folk." Both tendencies depended on the notion that the substance of song is performativity and sonic expression. In Cruz's historical account, they are both neutralized by the project of liberal cultural elites in the postbellum period to preserve black religious song as a cultural heritage, which in his view required "artifactualizing" the spiritual. By 1867, with the publication of *Slave Songs of the United States*, the foundational anthology collected by three Northern educators working for the Freedman's Bureau on the Georgia Sea Islands after the Civil War, the process had already begun, Cruz argues, of reproducing the spirituals as cultural artifacts and deracinating them from their performance contexts and their social and human determinants.³¹ In Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who had led a regiment of black Union soldiers and preempted

³¹ See Allen, Ware, and Garrison, and Cruz, 163.

Slave Songs with his essay “Negro Spirituals” in early 1867, the imperative to preserve a set of cultural objects was emergent and tempered by other imperatives, Cruz argues. Higginson is significant for registering some of the dominant themes that would characterize thinking about black folksong and vernacular music for the next half century. “Nothing but patience for this life,—nothing but triumph in the next.... The attitude is always the same,” Higginson says of the spirituals he heard in his army camp on the Georgia Sea Islands, “and, as a commentary on the life of the race, is infinitely pathetic.” Higginson anticipates the arguments from Robert Park and Richard Wright that black folksong, religious and secular, is by turns a documentary record and a critical reflection of black life. In this respect he lays some of the groundwork for the emphasis on race consciousness that thinking about the spiritual would contribute to the concept of soul. And while his stress on the imperative to record and preserve spirituals after the end of chattel slavery gave fodder to the liberal humanists who Cruz argues “artifactualized” the spiritual, his version of the claim made the entire value of the spiritual dependent on ethnosympathy, or the shared experience of a “pathos...almost too sad to dwell upon.”³² The artifactualization of black expressive culture that Cruz critiques was, I would argue, relatively short-lived. With the advent of phonography, the spiritual would be demediated out of its textuality and back into the affective circuitry of listening and feeling that early recording artists like Sandburg explored in their adaptations of the tradition. And with the synthesis of religious and secular song traditions later inaugurated by soul music, the commercial classification of black folksong into such genres as blues and gospel gave way to a new appreciation of the continuum of signifying practices

³² Higginson’s 1867 essay “Negro Spirituals” was republished in his memoir of the Civil War in 1870. See Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 2nd edition (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1870; Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), 276 and 299–300.

uniting these various modes. This is why Bernard Bell could use the word soul and define it with no greater specificity than as talk and attunement.

While Higginson hinted at the idea, it was the publication of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1904) that made race consciousness a perennial valence of the term soul, both for Bell's generation of thinkers in the BAM era and for the earlier New Negro Renaissance. For Du Bois, the spiritual remained the central emblem of black expressivity; the use of transcribed and notated "sorrow songs" as prefatory and interstitial passages is still among the most recognizable features of his text. But the term soul connected expressivity with the larger domain of cultural identity. In the chapter "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois makes clear that the "souls of black folk" are the site not just of racial self-expression but also of the struggle for a self-consciousness resolved out of that other signature feature of the text, the phenomenology of "double-consciousness." According to Du Bois, "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," the essence of double-consciousness, cleaved the soul of the race in two; the corrective, after Reconstruction, would be a long process of literacy and learning, with emancipation as the teleological endpoint in the form of a soul with "dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect." Soul here becomes part of a liberal-progressive narrative of the race's "spiritual striving" through education and culture. It culminates, in one of Du Bois's most influential passages, in an autonomous, self-conscious conception of racial identity:

In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.³³

³³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, critical edition, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Terri Hume Oliver (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903; New York: Norton, 1999), 10–11 and 14.

In Du Bois's elaborate metaphor, soul is the metaphysical substance that becomes the object of inward contemplation for the race as it rises to self-consciousness; it is seen through the "veil" that still filters authentic race consciousness with the prejudice of the white "outer world," but it also radiates the "power" and sense of "mission" that will eventually penetrate the veil. As the crux of a liberal-progressive narrative that belongs to a larger civilizational theory, soul in Du Bois's account opposes versions of the same narrative from such nineteenth-century scholars as John Stuart Mill and Francis James Child who take the ballad and folk culture more generally as the primitive origins rather than the self-conscious attainment of civilization. It is even possible to see in Du Bois's account of soul a precursor to Sandburg's account of folksong as embodying the insurgent self-consciousness of the peasantry-proletariat. Particular to Du Bois's account is the strain of philosophical idealism in which race consciousness subtends world-building as well as identity: the emancipatory and empowering "mission" that Du Bois plots for soul is about the race's "place in the world."

Du Bois's use of the term "soul" suggested the formative power of a racial "genius" to create spaces of freedom in the realms of imagination and judgment. In this respect it exerted a crucial influence on what the term "soul" meant in the Harlem phase of the New Negro Renaissance, though figures in this movement would extrapolate from the term a more pronounced notion of racial essence and the expressivity of race itself. This move would open them to the familiar critique of exoticism first levied by the later Chicago-based phase of the Renaissance. Langston Hughes, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," his famous 1926 riposte to George S. Schuyler in defense of a racial theory of black art, predicted that "within the next decade I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world."

Hughes's portmanteau concept of a black "soul-world" reflected a synthesis of existing concepts about black aesthetic expression. His proposition that a different "world" is the proper content of black art stems from a prior belief that black art should be realist art, governed by the idea—not unlike the sense behind Neal's "two Americas" thesis—that black life in America is determined by unique social and economic realities. "Most of my poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know," writes Hughes, making explicit the link between racial art and realist art that is implicit in the expression "soul-world." At the same time, in Hughes's expression the operative meaning of the term "soul" rearticulates an idea of racial identity derived from Du Bois ("he must be himself, and not another") as a matter of personal identity and style. Hughes's term is not racial identity but rather "racial individuality": "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame," and to reject, Hughes writes, "the desire to pour our racial individuality into the mold of American standardization." But the "soul" in "soul-world" was no less metaphysical for Hughes than it was for Du Bois. In Hughes's usage it suggests a deep essence to the category of race, which leads his description of "racial individuality" into tropes that would be criticized by his contemporaries as minstrelized stereotypes of black art and its purported racial characteristics. For Hughes, the "soul" of "racial individuality" was "the Negro artist[']s...heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears."³⁴

Writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance aimed to deepen the element of literary realism that Hughes had brought to the concept of soul but to separate the element of racial self-expression from what they considered a tendency toward self-display for white audiences

³⁴ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122, no. 3181 (23 June 1926): 692–94.

seeking exotic racial portrayals. Their critique of this tendency in Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance more broadly had been anticipated by James Weldon Johnson, who could have been paraphrasing Hughes's account of the blues when he criticized minstrelized representations of the race for a range of expression that was limited to "humor and pathos."³⁵ In 1944, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote to Elizabeth Lawrence, the editor who would help to see Brooks's first volumes of poetry *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949) into the mainstream white press, that her goal as an African American poet was "to prove to others (by implication, not by shouting) and to such among themselves as have yet to discover it, that they are merely human beings, not exotics."³⁶ By Brooks's account, the alternative to a superficial exoticism was a turn to the deep interiority of black subjects through the same kind of universal humanism that saturated the spirituals in the discourse and experience of ethnosympathy, only this time on the grounds of a more basic realism: her poetry would "prove to others," on both sides of the color line, the full humanity of black subjects, and it would do so through "implication," or the suggestive power of concrete images arranged by the logic of metonymy. Knowingly or not, Brooks was echoing comments that Richard Wright had offered almost concurrently in support of *A Street in Bronzeville*. "She takes hold of reality as it is and renders it faithfully," Wright said of Brooks. "There is not so much an exhibiting of Negro life to whites in these poems as there is an honest human reaction to the pain that lurks so colorfully in the Black Belt."³⁷ Like Brooks, Wright does not use the term itself, but his comments register the evolution of the metaphysical-racial concept of soul in the tradition of Douglass and Du Bois into the stylistic-cultural concept

³⁵ James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 2nd edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), xi.

³⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks to Elizabeth Lawrence, 28 September 1944, qtd. in George E. Kent, *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 64.

³⁷ Richard Wright to Edward Aswell, 18 September 1944, qtd. in Liesl Olson, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis* (New Haven, NH: Yale University Press, 2017), 235–36.

of soul that would become dominant in the BAM era. The turn away from exoticism (“an exhibiting of Negro life to whites”) is still a turn inward, on the one hand, to the communication of sympathetic feeling and, on the other hand, to the truthful self-representation of black life. At the same time, inwardness and depth for Wright (as opposed to superficial display) is largely an effect of the style of presentation: little distance separates Wright’s “[s]he takes hold of reality as it is” from Bernard Bell’s “telling it like it is,” which itself, as noted above, rearticulated Douglass’s idea of the spiritual as a testimonial record of black life for a generation familiar with a broader set of signifying practices than song. Agreeing with Wright’s assessment decades later, Brooks’s biographer George E. Kent argued that the poet’s embrace of deep reality over superficial display, like the realism of the Chicago Black Renaissance as a whole, involved a critical engagement with what he called “the exotic vein of the Harlem Renaissance.” He also suggested that this critical engagement turned on ideas of racial essence that the earlier movement had attached to terms such as soul: what Brooks criticized in the Harlem Renaissance, he said, was “the celebration of unique racial values, such as defiance of social proscription through emphasis upon joy and soul.”³⁸ At the midpoint of the twentieth century, the African American literary vanguard was carrying on a critical conversation about authentic racial identity, realistic racial representation, and sympathetic communication across racial lines—a conversation that Douglass and Du Bois, with their competing Romantic humanisms, were the first to put forth in terms of soul. One outcome of this conversation for the Chicago Black Renaissance, and a part of its legacy for BAM, would be an account of soul not as an inherent racial character or personality seeking some vehicle of expression, but rather as a style of cultural expression that touched on all facets of black life.

³⁸ Kent, 66.

The later writing of Chicago School sociologist St. Claire Drake illustrates this point. In 1966, nearly a quarter century after the publication of his and Horace Cayton's landmark study *Black Metropolis* (1945), Drake published an updated essay on the social and economic life of contemporary urban black communities in cities such as Chicago. In the essay, his focus turns to expressive culture, and in particular to the sounds of contemporary rhythm-and-blues and gospel music, as he listens for signs of dynamic processes in the soundscape at street-level: "The beat of the 'gut music' spilling into the street from ubiquitous tavern juke boxes and sound of tambourines' rich harmony behind the crude folk art on the windows of storefront churches give auditory confirmation to the universal belief that 'We Negroes have "soul."'"³⁹ Drake was listening, in colloquial terms, for the heartbeat of the community, the basic rhythm subtending the organizing patterns of its social behavior, and he heard it in a particular imbrication of sounds—secular song mixing with religious song—that he offered as the meaning of soul. Before the implicit idea here of a comprehensive synthesis of black musical culture took hold first in the criticism and then in the scholarship on soul music, Drake's prior notion of a collective dynamic to everyday behavior in urban black ghettos, one that could be *felt* as a spiritual center of secular life, was gaining currency in the way the new generation of black intellectuals of BAM were themselves using the term soul. For Lerone Bennett, Jr., soul meant "spirit," which he defined in 1964 as "a certain way of feeling, a certain way of being." The soulful approach to life, in his description, was "relaxed and non-competitive," and marked by "a complex acceptance of the contradictions of life."⁴⁰ Bennett makes the term spirit here almost synonymous with style; his "certain way of being" is the metaphysical counterpart to Bernard

³⁹ St. Claire Drake, "Social and Economic Status," in *The Negro American*, edited by Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 9–10.

⁴⁰ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Negro Mood and Other Essays*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1964; New York: Ballantine, 1965), 89.

Bell's "knowing how to walk that walk and talk that talk." It is unsurprising, then, that music was the primary vector through which the writers and artists of BAM would observe the fundamental realities—the "soul"—of contemporary black life.

In BAM's rearticulation of the soul concept, a pattern emerged in which the notion of deep essences that the earliest phases of the New Negro Renaissance associated with soul gave way to a notion of deep cultural patterns. As early as 1961, Bennett himself was reporting for Chicago-based *Ebony* magazine on what he called "an extraordinary movement in contemporary jazz," marked by a "return to roots" in the form of gospel and the blues, and, he said, "labeled Soul Music by publicists." Bennett embraced the term and what he thought it stood for. "The soul-sayers take a stand against pretentious experimentalism, but they are by no means conservative," he claimed. "They believe that jazz should advance by exploiting the natural resources inherent in the music rather than by a forced 'blue-printed development.'" Thus the "rage for roots" that made soul music a "soul movement," by Bennett's account, emerged as part of what was originally considered a counter-revolution within the African American cultural avant-garde, one that its proponents described as challenging the propulsive logic of ceaseless rupture and linear progress that characterized the thinking of Europe's historical avant-garde. Here soul represented a different kind of vanguardism, defined by its alliance with tradition, and with a movement into the future that was also supposedly not so much backward-looking as it was downward-penetrating, committed to mining the "natural resources" of a tradition to determine the grounds on which expressive culture can communicate with and bind together its audience with feeling. This account of soul preceded the emergence of BAM and its cultural politics, but Bennett was already asking whether the "rage for roots" in the music reflected a yearning for racial or cultural origins. He entertained both sides of the question but settled on the

latter. “There is in the music a new note of racial pride, a celebration of ties to Africa and a defiant embrace,” he wrote, “of all that middle-class America condemns.”⁴¹ The music may have had a racial feeling for Bennett and the musicians he profiled, but the real target of its forward attack was understood to be, as all of BAM would be for Baraka, the class system—and, in particular, everything bourgeois—in postwar America.

In the late 1960s, as soul music and the soul concept were taken up explicitly as vehicles for the cultural politics of BAM, the “rage for roots” deepened into a study of the unity of black musical traditions. Meanwhile, the special vanguard position that tradition itself had acquired, along with the racial feeling that it had stoked, according to Bennett’s account, took firmer hold as part of the movement’s polemics against white supremacy. By 1969, Phyllis (“Phyl”) Garland, a journalist for *Ebony* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, could already say that soul music “often has been defined...[as] a fusion of blues, jazz and gospel.” Garland took up and elaborated on the now-standard roots metaphor to describe what she considered a reunification of black musical traditions in soul: “while the various types of black music developed from similar roots, they shot off in different directions, and,” she claimed, “all of these forms later came to overlap, in the soul music of today.”⁴² In 1971, poet A. X. Nicholas, a self-described chronicler of “soul literature,” put a finer point on the idea of soul’s historic function as a unifier of tradition. Picking up on Drake’s suggestion and anticipating Lomax’s and Hirshey’s later studies, Nicholas defined soul music as a totalizing synthesis of black musical tradition, encompassing both a return to roots and an embrace of all branches: “work songs, field hollers, spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, and rhythm and blues, all mixed into one.” The musical synthesis evident in soul was

⁴¹ Lerone Bennett, Jr., “The Soul of Soul,” *Ebony* 12, no. 2 (December 1961): 112, 116, and 120.

⁴² Phyl Garland, *The Sound of Soul* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969), ii and 64.

the necessary and sufficient condition, in Nicholas's account, for what the term soul itself had become in the 1960s, which he described as "encompassing all facets of Black culture from chitlins to rap sessions," hinting at soul's even more capacious inclusion of song- and speech-based signifying practices. The soul concept in this account is a principle of intraethnic integration and assimilation, and it is both compensatory and affirmative: for a group systematically separated from its cultural origins by the institution of chattel slavery, Nicholas suggests, soul supplies an ex-post-facto symbol of cultural heritage that can serve as a source of pride. For Nicholas, soul music was therefore an obvious vehicle for militant political messages. "[T]he soul singer is saying something loud for all of us to hear, and relevant to the protracted struggle of Black people for liberation," he claimed. Soul songs were "the poetry of the Black Revolution," that is, "the expression of the Black man's condition in fascist Amerika—his frustrations, his anger, his pride—a ritual in song that we, as Black people, can identify *with* and participate *in* collectively."⁴³ Nicholas goes one step further than Larry Neal's admiration for James Brown: soul music not only offers the raw material for what poets must make into an art of ritual drama; rather, it is itself the realization of that art form. The content as well as the practical consequences of this "ritual in song," for Nicholas, are both a heightened feeling of racial identity and, perhaps more importantly in his view, a model of racial solidarity.

Not every black critic responding to the popularity of soul music in this period agreed with Nicholas's assessment. While soul music for Nicholas was "the poetry of the Black Revolution," for Garland it had evolved by the end of the 1960s into the sound of an interracial counterculture. In Garland's account, soul music originated as the cultural expression of African American ethnic identity: "the making of the music" came from "ethnic forces" animating "the

⁴³ A. X. Nicholas, ed., *The Poetry of Soul* (New York: Bantam, 1971), xiii–xxiii.

color and feeling of that special society-within-a-society” that militant critics such as Nicholas conceived of as a separate black nation. The particular feeling that black people in America held for soul music, as Garland described it, might have supported a black nationalist politics, too: the “soulfulness” of soul was *felt*, she acknowledged, as “an inner property that is jealously guarded.” But soul linked “social identity” to a particular “sound and style,” Garland argued, and “its sound and its style have been adopted by others who react to it from their own nuclei of fundamental feeling.” As a consequence, Garland put aside the question of what soul might mean for black nationhood and asked instead what it could mean for the nation as a whole as the symbolic value and affective resonance of the style—and the idea—extended beyond any racially or ethnically specific “society-within-a-society.” What she found in the increasing circulation of the term “soul” was a kind of shibboleth for nonconformity that appeared to be making a united in-group out of all those in the youthful generation of the 1960s who had rejected the “society-at-large”:

Ever since the terms “soul brother” and “soul sister” were impressed upon the national consciousness through reportage on the 1965 racial uprisings in the Watts district of Los Angeles, the word “soul” has taken on a connotation of social identity linking those rebels who find some revitalizing sustenance within its aura with those of a similar bent—regardless of color—and thereby separating them from others who would willingly perpetuate the society-at-large as it is. Thus the identification linked with racial rebellion has been broadened to embrace iconoclasts identified with social rebellion, and at its purest level the terms of soul and soulful have been willingly proffered by some blacks to whites who openly reject prevailing social values.⁴⁴

Here Garland combines the two lines of thought about soul that had developed out of Du Bois and Douglass: it is race consciousness that makes soul what it is, an expression of identity with an “aura” of “revitalizing sustenance” for the self-identifying group, but it is the possibility of sympathetic identification under the aegis of that “aura” that allows racial identity to extend into

⁴⁴ Garland, i–ii, 9, and 27–28

“social identity...regardless of color.” Garland’s image of this affective bond and exchange, it should be noted, inverts the implicit hierarchy within the typological scenes of ethnosympathy in Douglass, Higginson, and their followers, where a white listener overhears the performance of black expressivity and absorbs its pathos: here instead the “revitalizing sustenance” of soul is “willingly proffered by some blacks to whites.” This inversion might be read as a gesture that attempts to position soul as a new cultural norm in its own right, an autonomous standard to which the counterculture must be granted access if it is to subvert and replace the existing norms of the dominant society. And in this respect Garland might be understood to agree with Nicholas’s description of soul as a collective expression of opposition to the “dominance of white culture,” insofar as that opposition is itself understood as an entire society’s efforts to adopt new cultural standards.

Garland’s account represented an effort to bring the stylistic concept of soul into ascendancy over the racial concept. But as the appearance of Nicholas’s account two years later attests, the tension between the two concepts would persist in the critical discourse of BAM into the 1970s. This tension raised a series of related questions about black racial and cultural identity, as this genealogy has shown—and not just for the critics but also for the poets and artists of BAM. Garland suggested that the term soul, given its special “aura,” was a prime example of what Stephen E. Henderson would designate in 1972 as a “mascon” word, or a word embodying a “massive concentration” of “collective black experience” and thus a signifier of intense evocative power.⁴⁵ The key questions raised by the different valences of the soul concept should be understood in this light. Given the evocative power of the term soul itself, would its social uses be strictly guarded and limited to calling forth intraracial community, or would the

⁴⁵ Stephen E. Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 44.

goal be to exploit its affective register and extend the bonds of sympathy toward interracial solidarity? Similarly, if soul as a performance style encompassed both testimony in a very specific sense (as the expression of the inner reality of collective historical trauma) and a range of communicative acts in a much broader sense (including not only testifying but also signifying), then should soul be approached primarily as a form of historical documentation or as a medium of communication and a transportable style? If the latter, could soul as a performance style make or remake identity? Finally, to the extent that soul's evocative power depended on its "rootedness" in the gospel tradition and the spiritual, what articulations would soul give to the relationship between collective life (the life of the congregation, or the life of the race) and intense private experience, that aspect of the tradition that had entered into the cultural domain of popular song? Moreover, how would soul take what could otherwise be the conservative tendencies of its alliance with tradition and pursue the revolutionary goal of fundamentally reshaping social and political life?

These questions in part reflect the "conundrum" that Alan Lomax reported in his experience of soul music: not only did it apply a principle of black religious life to black secular life, but it also took a style associated with a specific referent (the racial memory of historical trauma) and used it to comment on the cultural dynamics of the romantic union. As such, a more specific question comes into the foreground for soul music and the soul concept: given the ideas about racial and cultural identity latent in the soul concept, why would popular song artists, invoking the term soul, choose to connect this concept with the specific relationship of the romantic union? What was the reason for the primacy of this relationship in soul music if the larger project of the soul movement more generally was to explore the grounds for transforming social relations as a whole? One answer can be deduced from critics of soul and "post-soul"

culture such as Mark Anthony Neal, who point to the cultural influence during the Civil Rights and Black Power era of sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous 1965 Labor Department report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which connected the social and economic realities of urban black communities to an analysis specifically of marital and household relationships. Soul music used the romantic union as a metonymy for the field of social relations as a whole, and this operation can be read as a response to the account of social problems in black communities that the Moynihan Report helped to promote in popular consciousness. Against a report that presented black families as matriarchal in structure and therefore non-normative with respect to a dominant white culture in which men were presumed to be the key earners and providers, Neal argues, the soul movement promoted positive images of the race—particularly of the black men described by Moynihan as suffering a “pathological” crisis of legitimacy. In the process, Neal contends, soul reinforced norms of gender and sexual identity in the interest of intraracial unity and strength.⁴⁶ The music itself, however, presents a different case. The work of Millie Jackson demonstrates that soul music could be quite comfortable in upending the bourgeois moral logic of the male-headed household if doing so could establish new moral standards that would extend the music's tradition of sympathetic identification to characters presented as outsiders to communal norms.

Jackson's 1974 album *Caught Up* is a song cycle that amounts to a single drama of communication in which the social relations embedded in the romantic union are subject to competing moral perspectives. The album dramatizes a love triangle—that is, a romantic union already subject to a multiple structure—and gives the first side of the LP to the nameless “other woman,” before turning to the wife (named Mrs. Jody) and allowing her to pronounce judgment

⁴⁶ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–4 and 61–65.

on her husband's infidelity (see fig. 3).⁴⁷ Jackson performs both parts in persona, and her drama of communication expands on a stylistic repertoire that would have been familiar to audiences from James Brown and fellow Southern soul singer Joe Tex: like these precursors, she combines the blues shout and the soul croon with the testimonial form of utterance known by that point as rapping. (In 1968, Brown had introduced rapping to a mainstream audience in his iconic soul anthem, "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," interspersing exhortatory rhymed couplets between call-and-response exchanges with a studio chorus. Eight years earlier, in the hit soul



Figure 3: The LP cover for Millie Jackson's album *Caught Up* (1974), picturing in vivid symbolic imagery the love triangle that makes up the song cycle's central conflict. (Author's collection.)

⁴⁷ Millie Jackson, *Caught Up*, Spring Records 6703, 1974, 33 rpm. All quotations from *Caught Up* are the author's transcriptions from this LP.

ballad “All I Could Do Was Cry,” Tex helped to introduce rapping into recorded song in the form of a monologue interlude that provides faux-biographical narrative exposition and commentary on the song’s dramatic situation.⁴⁸) On the first side of *Caught Up*, Jackson interrupts the so-called “confession” of the other woman, a song titled “(If Loving You Is Wrong) I Don’t Want to Be Right,” with a monologue interlude titled “The Rap,” making testimonial utterance addressed directly to the audience a central part of her drama of communication, as I discuss below. But the opening of this initial song establishes immediately the moral stakes of the drama, and the moral logic of the character who speaks here:

If loving you is wrong
I don’t want to be right
If being right means being without you
I’d rather live a wrongdoing life

Your mamma and daddy say it’s a shame
It’s a downright disgrace
But looong as I gotcha by my side
I don’t care what your people say

My friends tell me it’s no future
In loving a married man
If I can’t see you when I wanta
I’ll have to see you when I can

In the first verse, the speaker unspools the paradox encapsulated in the title into a kind of chiasm of the conditional mood: If (A) loving the husband is immoral, then (B) the other woman rejects the established moral rule. If (B¹) the established moral rule means rejecting love, then (A¹) the other woman chooses to embrace what is immoral. Rhetorically, the chiasmic structure immediately reveals the song cycle’s roots in ancient oral storytelling; semantically, its effect is that of a moral decision worked through a series of complications and reversals in value. In the

⁴⁸ James Brown, “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud,” King Records 45-6187, 1968, 45 rpm; Joe Tex, “All I Could Do Was Cry,” Anna Records 1119, 1960, 45 rpm.

third verse, the speaker's moral resolve intensifies to a decisive point: finding a logical opening within the moral paradox may be the same as finding a literal space in which desire can flow, if not flourish, and that may mean subjecting desire ("when I want") to contingency and circumstance ("when I can"). In between, it is the question of moral value itself that intensifies. Moral evaluation ends up in the court of "friends," who see infidelity as a kind of spiritual deadness ("it's no future"). But it is delivered first through community censure in the form of family ("mama and daddy"), who are presented here as occupying a dual social role: as the guardians of communal values and, not accidentally, as the antagonists of the illicit romantic union. When the speaker declares, "I don't care what your people say," it is clear that the song's moral complications and reversals are a scrambling of communal norms, traditions, and folkways ("what your people say") on the way to their contravention by some stronger, if individual, authority. This speaker sets a new moral standard with which the song cycle's other characters have to contend: whatever is dictated by love's uncontrollable power, which delivers individual authority over to a different, narrower kind of social force. If folksong serves the transmission of communal values, then soul here does something else: it transforms the field of social relations, figured here in the form of a kinship structure, according to the injunction of a higher power (love, or spirit) and its sway over personal action.

"The Rap" is Jackson's musical and thematic breakdown of the preceding song: if it were a sermon in church, it would be the exegetical commentary on the "text" that had just been delivered. The musical breakdown reflects this gospel style: the horn and string sections that had backed Jackson's shout fade away, and now a muted rhythm section, heavy on the bass, and two electric church organs sustain underneath the monologue. Thematically, the monologue dissects and explains the emotional stakes of what has become the song cycle's central problem: the

moral challenges posed by an illicit romantic union to the norms sanctioned by the communal world of kinship ties and familial obligations. “The Rap” also introduces the element of testimonial utterance that will build into a full-fledged drama of communication in the album, with monologue eventually extending into dialogue (and, in later albums, into entire theatrical set-pieces staged within the channel of communication, through such studio-produced recording drop-ins as telephone calls and knocks on the door). Here Jackson takes on the part of the speaker, the other woman, as her persona. She intersperses sung phrases into the statement of her theme before launching into her exemplum:

Spoken. You see the terrible thing about being in love with a married man is the fact that you can’t see him when you really want to—and that can get to you sometime.

Sung. Late in the midnight hour—

Spoken. When you really feel like you need a little loving the man ain’t nowhere around—and that can get to you sometime.

Sung. Early in the mor-or-ning—

Spoken. When you really feel like you need someone to hold onto, the man ain’t nowhere around—and that can *really* get to you sometime.

But what gets to you most of all is when the holidays roll around. You got to always be by yourself. ’Cause that’s the time when the families get together. All the in-laws come to visit. So he has to stay home and play the part of the good and faithful husband. But I ain’t worried about it. ’Cause I found when a man starts stepping away from home, somebody at home is falling down on the home front. That’s because when these women marry these men, they have a tendency to take advantage of ’em. They forget about all the sweet things they say to get ’em, that they have to keep on saying ’em to keep ’em. ’Cause you got a lot of women out there these days—just like me—who’ll tell a man anything in the world he feel like he *might* want to hear. I know. ’Cause I’m going with a married man.

Jackson’s persona immediately announces that she will be “telling it like it is” (“You see...”), though in making her case she delays the delivery of personal testimony until the end of her exemplum (“I know”), where it appears as the source of her authority. Having rejected the authority of communal values in the court of love, the other woman now attests to their tenacity. Like the husband’s parents, his in-laws now figure prominently as figures of the community’s moral norms and social customs. This is the reason that the exemplum focuses on “the holidays”

and the interference they pose to the romantic forces of “wants” and “needs”: during this time of the year, the husband must perform his duties to wife and child for his mother- and father-in-law to witness, and this service to the appearance of a proper marriage halts the illicit side romance. The reason that the other woman is unfazed by this situation, in turn, is the moral point she wants to make in the end: the state of a romantic union, lawful or illicit, is not so much a test of the bond between man and woman as it is a test of the struggle between women, which produces its own peculiar bond. That homosocial bond only deepens as the song cycle develops: the first hint of it here is the recognition of moral complicity (“just like me”) that both women share in pursuing the same objective, which is the authority derived from erotic power (*not* “falling down on the home front”). Logically as well as stylistically, “The Rap” is a highly wrought pattern: like the sung refrains that time-stamp what “can get to you sometime” about illicit love, the exemplum is a cascade of reasons, with every statement of fact, feeling, and opinion having its “cause.” This is more than just casuistry: Jackson’s persona is speaking to the folk, and she is offering them explanations in the language of personal testimony that she intends to be received as warmly as traditional folk wisdom.

In her stage performances, Jackson embraced this folk-oriented aspect of the persona she assumed in “The Rap,” according to written accounts. Like Ray Charles’s debut of “What’d I Say,” Jackson’s performances at the peak of her popularity were described essentially as gospel performances, with critics comparing her rapping to preaching and her singing to call-and-response. In a 1981 feature article, *Jet* magazine’s critic turned the focus on Jackson’s audience:

The sell-out crowd in attendance anticipates the arrival of Millie Jackson for a number of reasons. Some have come to hear “Rev. Millie” preach “the rap.” Others will rock to the beat and enjoy her bluesy, bawdy singing. Still others are there for therapy, awaiting “Dr. Millie Jackson psychiatrist” to rationalize the problems of the day.... Often one may hear

an emphatic “Amen” or “Go ahead, Millie!” from a staunch admirer who has come to enjoy her raunchy style.⁴⁹

Noteworthy in this account is the extent to which soul music’s synthesis of the spiritual and the secular is complete, and completely taken for granted, in the context of Jackson’s performance: the audience behaves like the “Amen corner” close to the pulpit in church, and yet what they affirm are erotically charged narratives, pleas, and speeches. The success of this synthesis is registered in the duality of Jackson’s roles (she is both “Rev. Millie” and “Dr. Millie Jackson psychiatrist”), which points to another synthesis of genres within “The Rap” specifically. Combining the sermon with self-help culture and the advice column, Jackson produces not only a form of moral discourse with special power over contemporary urban audiences but also, more fundamentally, a potent form of direct communication as such. *Jet*’s critic described “The Rap” as “therapeutic,” connecting it to traditions both in the sanctified church and in secular medicine that rely on the healing power of the word. Under this description, “The Rap” is another example in which soul music’s signifying practices are presented to an audience as efficacious speech, in this case with a level of intimacy and immediacy that is supposed to grant psychological access not to the speaker or character but to the listener. Indeed, a remarkable feature of Jackson’s performance of “The Rap,” even on record, is its ability to achieve a simultaneity of the theatrical, the intimate, and the authentic: she performs in character but addresses her audience person-to-person. What *Jet*’s critic called Jackson’s “therapy” could be read as a rhetorical strategy in her rap monologues that manifests an intention to affect the audience’s identity: not only to teach them a moral lesson but also to transform their sense of themselves—who they are, what they do, and why.

⁴⁹ “Millie Jackson Raps about Her Love Life, Race Mixing and Burden of Fame,” *Jet* 59, no. 25 (5 March 1981): 53.

When Jackson first shifts from monologue to dialogue in the *Caught Up* song cycle, she defines her audience more specifically as a community of women and uses irony and surprise to change her listeners' sense of what romantic love determines about female social identity. In "All I Want Is a Fighting Chance," Jackson's persona of the other woman confronts the wife of her lover. She attempts, provocatively, to establish between the two of them a sense of familiarity, in the truest etymological sense, before staking out the grounds of their competition:

Jackson: Wait a minute. Isn't that Mrs. Jody over there? Mrs. Jody!

Mrs. Jody: Yes?

Jackson: You know, I'm like an old relative of yours. I know you don't know me, but since I been going with your husband for the last past year and a half...

Mrs. Jody: Going with my husband?!

Millie: That would sort of make us wives-in-law, you know what I mean?

Mrs. Jody: Make us wives-in-law? Are you crazy? What's wrong with you? What the hell are you talking about?!

Jackson's persona is now subverting through parody the customary social system of kinship that she had condemned as a kind of legalistic barrier to her illicit romantic union: asking, in essence, if the category of extended family occupied by the husband's in-laws can be extended further to include the two women occupying a love triangle as fellow "wives-in-law," the other woman is downgrading the special moral authority that the in-laws have been seen to wield while upgrading the legitimacy of her own relationship to that of a bona fide familial relation. Her parodic reference to "wives-in-law" could be read as also downgrading the wife's status; she does, after all, appear to reject the appellation vehemently at the end of this dialogue. The other woman's part in the dialogue might even be read as a form of signifying, or the dozens—that is, ritual insult. But the real surprise the appellation holds for the audience is the affirmation it gives to the positions of both women in an increasingly complex web of social relations. The term "wives-in-law" introduces an official-sounding title to replace the pejorative expressions "other woman" and "cheated wife." It also introduces a social category that belongs just to them or to

women in their situation. Defining the women's social identity through extended familial ties, "wives-in-law" prioritizes their relation to one another. What the term offers is a social model in which the male presence becomes a vector through which these two women determine their own social responsibilities to one another as women. This is not a liberatory space of female autonomy and cooperation, but it does alter the stakes of the male-female romantic union for female social identity. In "The Rap," men are there to be seduced by whichever woman can perform the strongest lover's plea. In "All I Want Is a Fighting Chance," this logic is taken a step further: men are pawns in a competition between women to display supreme erotic powers. "Call out your army, alert your navy / Bring out your reserves and marines," shouts Jackson's persona, seeming to declare battle against the wife, before revealing that their target is the same: "I've alerted your man, he's well-informed / He's been attacked by my love machine." In this song cycle, masterful erotic performance by women may not control the web of social relations in which they are "caught up," but it does bring about a new alignment of power between the private world of erotic experience and the communal world of family's traditional bonds.

Erotic power is part of what counts as soul in *Caught Up*, as is the closely related power to set up a new code of morality within the romantic union that is supposed to govern all the social relations surrounding it. Still, in speaking with *Jet's* critic in 1981, Jackson made clear that she approached her themes of sexuality and morality (the "rules of the game" of love) as part of a drama about the economic role of black women in black households. She also made clear that her approach was meant to be taken as a black woman's response to a conversation shaped by the Moynihan Report, and its reception in the popular media for a decade and a half, about matriarchy and masculine pathology in black communities. Picking up on a recurrent theme in her raps, *Jet's* critic asked Jackson for her thoughts on "the conflict between Black men and

women.” It had to do, she said, with “the Black man not recognizing that he has become a product of the system, and he would rather blame his woman than blame the system for his situation.” What Jackson means by the “system” is an economy of white bosses who, it seems to her, use racial and gender quotas (after Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation) in a way that allows them to keep the average working-class black man economically disenfranchised:

He [the Black man] does not realize that when civil rights came along, they took the Black man’s job and gave it to the Black woman to solve two problems: hire the Black woman and you’ve covered both civil and equal rights, but you’ve only given up one job. This has left the Black man at home, becoming a house-husband. He doesn’t know how to deal with that, so he has rebelled against his woman who has taken the job that is available without realizing that without this job his a-- would have starved, too.⁵⁰

Suggesting that economics rather than culture determine the social conditions of the working-class black family, and that black fathers were becoming “house-husbands” rather than absent authority figures, Jackson could be read as taking the popular conception of the Moynihan thesis and turning it on its head, registering the extent to which it had become a kind of folklore in its own right for the postindustrial urban economy. But even in waxing sociological Jackson turns to comic reduction and parody (“house husband,” “his a-- would have starved”). Nevertheless, her explanation here reflects a sincere concern for what she considers the necessary conditions for black economic progress: harmonious black marriages and stable black households. According to Jackson, those conditions depend, in turn, on husbands’ respect for black women’s economic power and independence: her opinion seems to be that since black women have adjusted pragmatically to a white-controlled, postindustrial economic system that uses their labor for certain social purposes, black men need to adjust psychologically to do their part in making the black family viable—in some form—in a time of change. It could be said that Jackson is

⁵⁰ Ibid., 55–56.

responding to the way a restructured economy is restructuring the social unit of the black family. Her response is encapsulated in the characterization of Mrs. Jody, the wife and mother, in *Caught Up*. When her voice enters the drama on the second side of the album, male voices enter, too. Her son reminds her that it is either she or he who will become the head of the household: “I mean, after ten years,” he says, as his mother’s marriage dissolves and she establishes a new romantic union, “you gonna put the man on *me*, and make me take care of *you* and some *other* dude?” The new romantic partner, for his part, woos her by promising her independence in this new configuration: “I’m not trying to take your husband’s place, but if I can’t help you, I swear, I swear I won’t stand in your way.” The conclusion of Jackson’s challenge to communal norms of family relationships is the vision of a new family structure in which a woman’s self-identity more closely matches her economic role.

Jackson instructs her audiences, but she also places them in the spectatorial position of Mrs. Jody’s new romantic partner: the point is to invite sympathetic identification with her characters as they determine new norms for their private and social lives as black women. Noteworthy in Jackson’s interview, then, is the turn away from ethnosympathy as one of soul music’s possible affective registers: she speaks expressly and directly to a black audience, and her singular concern is restoring the strength of the intraracial union. In her recordings, too, Jackson might have deemphasized interracial communication and sympathy as an aspect of soul, but she was also relentless in making critical conversations about race and identity a central part of her communication with black audiences. In a 1982 live recording of a rap titled “Lovers and Girlfriends,” Jackson introduces another monologue with an exemplum for romantic couples by telling her audience why she is rapping in the first place.⁵¹ Doing so is a return to form for her,

⁵¹ Millie Jackson, *Live and Outrageous*, Spring Records SP-1-3765, 1982, 33 rpm. All quotations from the performance “Lovers and Girlfriends” are the author’s transcriptions from this LP.

and a more bankable commercial venture, she explains, after the commercial flop—at least with black audiences—of her most recent album, *Just a Lil' Bit Country* (1981), which put a soul backbeat to country ballads.⁵² (It was not a farfetched strategy for “crossing over” with white audiences; Jackson had been recording her soul albums for the better part of a decade with the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, an all-white backing band from Alabama who helped shape the country sound of Southern soul.) “It seems just about the time I stopped rapping, everybody else started,” Jackson says, referring to the popularization of rap in the commercial recording industry of the late 1970s. “I say, I started this shit, I think it’s time I go back and make some more money off of it.” Though seemingly glib in her tone, Jackson makes a serious observation about the changeability of style—about its malleability to the audience’s tastes, and its ability to reflect and shape the audience’s self-image. First she responds directly to an audience member who yells to the stage that he will buy Jackson’s country album the very next day:

You gonna buy it tomorrow? See, you lying. Stores are closed tomorrow. So that’s how I got into this shit in the first place, listening to you jive-time niggers. Niggers like you the ones convinced me that this country shit was gonna sell. Have you been through the ghetto lately? Half the niggers in the ghetto walking around with cowboy hats, roach-crushers. I said, “Shit, looky there, what the urban cowboy done did. This is it, y’all, this is the time to do my country album!” Bullshit! Some complained that I was on a white horse. Would you have felt better if I was on a motherfucking mule?

Listeners of Jackson’s recording are offered here a live demonstration of the origins of her rapping style, which retains elements of both the call-and-response of gospel (“You gonna buy it tomorrow?”) and the signifying of street language (“lying,” “jive”). Jackson asserts that even the country style of her recent work comes from this same source, which she associates not with the rural Black Belt but instead with the urban black ghetto, and that her decision “to do my country album” was the result of her receptivity to style trends in this urban black environment.

⁵² Millie Jackson, *Just a Lil' Bit Country*, Spring Records SP-1-6732, 1981, 33 rpm.

In other words, Jackson suggests, the soul singer's cultural role is not to codify and conserve the expressions of an authentic blackness, but rather to participate in a particular kind of cultural exchange, staying attuned to the latest expressions of black identity to spring from a popular, street-level source and then offering them back in a true drama of *intracultural* communication. For Jackson, the drama heats up when communal values return with a vengeance. Implicit in her idea here is that the community sets limits to the proposal of new norms, whether cultural, social, or moral. Referring to the backlash she received to the cover image of her album, in which she and a black male suitor appear in antebellum satin and lace alongside a chivalric white horse, Jackson asks whether her black audience would have been satisfied to see her replace the white horse, here an ironic symbol of Southern white gentry, with a mule, a potentially demeaning image of Southern black peasantry (see fig. 2). Her aim, Jackson suggests, is not for a singular and definitive representation of blackness, but rather for an expression of black culture's constant appropriation and rearticulation of new symbols in a process of identity formation that, like cowboy hats and roach-crushers in the ghetto, can sometimes look more like a pastiche than a synthesis. Jackson arrives here at a profound answer to one of the central cultural questions raised by the discourse of soul itself: if blackness as such is subject to ongoing developments in style, then black identity can indeed be transformed through the cultural expression of soul—but only in ways that remain reversible, or subject to further change, according to the dictates of communal consensus and popular judgment. To Jackson, it might have seemed that the craze for roots set off by the soul movement led the urban black ghetto to go country, at least in style. But soul in Bernard Bell's definition is not only about style but also about "sharing it with your brothers and sisters," and Jackson decided that the judgments of this extended family might be taken as advice to go back, again, into the



Figure 4: The LP cover for Millie Jackson's album *Just a Lil' Bit Country* (1981), with the image of the "white horse" that elicited derision from segments of her audience. (Author's collection.)

crosscurrents between cultural expression and racial identity that had been so persistently contested in the history of soul and find the present historical moment's way of signifying collective life. At this particular moment, Jackson found, that way of saying happened to be rap, one of soul's many stylistic expressions.

II

The relationship between soul music and what I call the soul poetry of BAM was one of cross-fertilization. Soul poets, as mentioned above, responded to Larry Neal's call for a black poetry of ritual drama by scoring their poems on the page for voice and performance, by experimenting

with the same signifying practices as soul singers, from the “telling it like it is” of rap to the self-dramatization of the lyric, and by casting their work as offshoots of what they considered the deep roots of black oral tradition, including gospel. One of the figures who epitomized this school of poets was Carolyn M. Rodgers. Rodgers’s reception as a “soul” poet began early in her career, among her contemporaries and peers in the BAM scene in Chicago. It would eventually extend nationally and find expression in theater and television adaptations of her work. In 1968, with the small black press she cofounded with fellow Chicago poets Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) and Johari Amini (Jewel C. Lattimore), Rodgers published her first collection of poems, which she titled *Paper Soul*: during this period she would build an artistic identity around, but also contend with, a persona that in 1975 she called “soul sister poetess of the moment.”⁵³ By 1982, a year marked by the broadcast of *How I Got Ovah: A Gospel Tribute to the Work of Carolyn M. Rodgers*, a dramatic adaptation of her poetry for New York public television by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, her reception had shifted to that of a poet who celebrated black heritage by revivifying the communal traditions of the black church. Named after *How I Got Ovah: New and Selected Poems* (1975), Rodgers’s first book published outside the black press, *A Gospel Tribute* was Rodgers’s breakthrough to a mass audience, though it is now rarely seen. It is a central part of my discussion of her work here because, as the surviving record of her poetry’s realization in performance, it clarifies what was at stake in her efforts to deepen the gospel roots of her soul poetry. In her earliest poetry, Rodgers was as forthright as soul singers such as Millie Jackson would become in figuring black romantic union (in whatever permutation) as the core of intraracial social unity. She was much more explicit, though, in describing the communal values of church and family as a source of conflict in contemporary

⁵³ Carolyn M. Rodgers, *Paper Soul* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1968); Carolyn M. Rodgers, *How I Got Ovah: New and Selected Poems* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1975), 53.

black social life, specifically for a youthful generation steeped in the cultural politics of soul and committed to social and political transformation. With the publication of *How I Got Ovah*, Rodgers's major theme had become the resolution of this conflict, and whatever shift her contemporaries had noted in her work is best understood in this light. Like soul music itself, Rodgers's poetry aspires to a grand synthesis: hers is one in which the militant rebellion of the youth and the cultural transmission from the elders meet in the quiet insurgency of the church.

Some of Rodgers's contemporaries in BAM, particularly in Chicago, saw her poetry (and her politics) differently. In fact, as early as the mid-1970s, a critical narrative had developed about Rodgers's work in which the poet's personal transformations, in the words of David Lionel Smith, her fellow poet in the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) in Chicago, "have led her to retreat from her militancy and to take refuge in the traditional values of the black community: Christianity, respect for older people, and scepticism regarding radical change."⁵⁴ As if anticipating this critical narrative and attempting to forestall it, Angela Jackson, another fellow poet in OBAC, tried to present Rodgers as a poet equally churchly and streetwise: "she remind u of the church. / her eye is seeing holy. she remind you of the people on the corner / her words be leaning on the building there," wrote Jackson in her foreword to *How I Got Ovah*. For Jackson, this meant approaching Rodgers as a gospel poet just as much as a soul poet: "listen at her sanctified soul. / make u testify to truth."⁵⁵ Still, Jackson's compound term "sanctified soul," and her reference to the ritual performance of testifying, do portray Rodgers as having located soul's transformative powers in spiritual self-transformation. Rodgers's embrace of the spiritual traditions of the church, I contend, should be interpreted as efforts to reclaim ecstatic vision as a

⁵⁴ David Lionel Smith, "Looking back and Breaking through: *How I Got Ovah: New and Selected Poems* by Carolyn Rodgers," *Chicago Review* 28, no. 3 (Winter 1977): 207.

⁵⁵ Angela Jackson, "Foreword," in Rodgers, *How I Got Ovah*, ix.

resource within BAM's ritualistic poetics. Far from mitigating the project of social and political transformation, then, Rodgers's poems of family, community, and tradition cast it in a new realm, bringing soul into closer proximity with the ritualistic and visionary poetics embraced within the countercultural impulse of ethnopoetics for their emphasis on speech as efficacious action.

Rodgers endorsed what amounts to a ritualistic account of poetry for BAM in her germinal statement of poetic theory, "Black Poetry—Where It's At." In this essay, published in *Negro Digest* in 1969, Rodgers established a functional account of the "new black poetry" by presenting a system of categorization based on rhetoric rather than form. Just as Baraka had defined black music in *Blues People* by the functional roles played by certain styles in practical life, Rodgers classified different types of black poetry according to the ways in which they were intended to affect their audiences. The poems that Rodgers and her fellow young poets in BAM were then writing, she claimed, fell into ten main types, including "signifying," "teachin/rappin," "spaced (spiritual)," "bein (self/reflective)," and others. "Signifying" poems were patterned after "the dozens," the street game of verbal assault, and deployed biting irony to "move" the listener. "Teachin/rappin" poems provided moral instruction and political direction, demonstrating to listeners something about their identity. "Spaced (spiritual)" poems were "mystical" utterances that worked both inwardly, returning listeners to the "spiritual wisdom" of African ancestors, and outwardly, deploying *Nommo*, a Dogon concept of the word's power to affect the world. "Bein (self/reflective)" poems were lyric-narrative poems that described a state of affairs or expressed the poet's interior world.⁵⁶ Rodgers's own earliest poems tended to be "signifying" and "teachin/rappin" poems, while her poems from 1975 onward included more elements of the

⁵⁶ Carolyn M. Rodgers, "Black Poetry—Where It's At," *Negro Digest* 18, no. 11 (September 1969): 7–16.

“spaced (spiritual)” and “bein (self/reflective).” As parts of a taxonomy of poetic functions, each of these categories was defined by the kinds of actions that such poems were supposed to perform.

Though it is an undertheorized category in her essay, rap was fundamental to Rodgers’s poetics: it enabled her to create dramas of communication on the page. Fundamentally, rap took the form in her poetry of an idiomatic monologue, often delivered in the hip style of street language; it could be either intimate (a “love rap” to the beloved) or dramatic (an address to “brothers and sisters”). However, by associating rap so closely with teaching, as she did in “Black Poetry—Where It’s At,” Rodgers developed rap in her poems into more elaborate communicative situations, often built on the staging of argument. As epideictic discourse, a rap could become a kind of Socratic dialogue. Such was the case in the broadside poem *A Long Rap: Commonly Known as a Poetic Essay* (1971), in which Rodgers explores a series of arguments about the racial and gender stereotyping of Geraldine Johnson, Flip Wilson’s persona-in-drag (“she look like a cartoon / of what that moynihan described”), in part by staging a debate between her own persona and “a brutha... / sittin at the food counter / at the drugstore.”⁵⁷ My focus at this point will be on a pair of interrelated poems with a similar structure, first published in *Songs of a Black Bird* (1969) and reintroduced in *How I Got Ovah*, in which Rodgers’s interlocutor is her religiously devout but also class-conscious mother. These poems dramatize an argument (and its resolution) between a “militant” and a member of the “church folk” who are nevertheless bound by family ties, with a pedagogical intent that elicits the understanding and the empathy of a divided audience. As such, they establish a dramatic structure and a dramatic conflict that would be interpreted as a full-scale ritual drama in *A Gospel Tribute*.

⁵⁷ Carolyn M. Rodgers, *A Long Rap: Commonly Known as a Poetic Essay* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971), Harriet Monroe Modern Poetry Collection, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

In “Jesus Was Crucified, or It Must Be Deep,” Rodgers’s militant persona narrates a telephone conversation with her mother, but not before establishing a dramatic situation that locates the dialogue in the realm of spiritual privation: “i was sick / and my motha called me / tonight, yeah she did...” Her mother diagnoses the sickness as a result of the “too much hate” in her daughter’s heart, scolding her for “actin not like decent folks / talking about hatin white folks & revolution. Rodgers’s persona and her mother are in dissonance but not outright disagreement. The argument unfolds according to an unusual rhetorical pattern: not statement and counterstatement, but rather statement, ironic agreement, and willfully distorted restatement. Rodgers’s persona does not disagree that her “sickness” is in her heart, or in her mind, but she recasts the diagnosis by pointing to righteous anger and raised consciousness as the causes. When her mother suggests that black separatism has a flaw in the weak state of black solidarity (“negroes ain’t readi”), Rodgers’s persona agrees (“yes u right / negroes ain’t readi”), but her restatement has a double-edged irony: it is not “negroes” but “blacks” who will be ready, and even the latter are still in constant preparation for the coming revolution. Built as it is on a supercilious “rapping” of the “unhip” mother, this rhetorical pattern suggests a community of young black activists as the poem’s imagined audience, and it is designed to have a specific effect on them. It permits them to laugh at the moral pretension of religious tradition, but it also puts their own revolutionary thought before them with an underlying logical structure still determined by the forms of religious thinking. The argument ends on the status of personal belief and Biblical truth:

(and i sd)
just cause she believe the bible didn’t make it true
and she sd it is it is and deep deep down
in yo heart u know it’s true

(and i sd)

it must be d

eeeep

Belief in the faith of her elders lies deep in the daughter's heart, says the mother; yes, *really* deep, says the daughter. Here even more than elsewhere, the rhetorical pattern moves from reversal to reaffirmation: Rodgers's persona signs off the telephone with more sarcasm ("catch yuh later on jesus, i mean motha!"), but she has acknowledged a latent religious conviction that, as she will discover in the following poem, is as deep as a genetic inheritance. Motivating this affirmation is an awareness that the mother's Christ-like character, though easily satirized, might have a genuine basis in working-class struggle: the difficulty of collecting social security checks, for instance, after "the way i worked my fingers to the bone in / this white man's factori to make u a de-cent some- / bodi."⁵⁸

"It Is Deep," the poem that follows, completes the turn toward reaffirmation. Shifting from dialogue to monologue, Rodgers's persona "raps" here in the form of narrative testimony. Keeping the new situation within the same drama of communication, she centers this episode once again on the telephone: the mother has tried to call her daughter but cannot get through, and "she, having learned, that disconnection results from / non-payment of bill (s)," rushes "thirty-three blocks" across the South Side of Chicago to check on her "baby." Rodgers's persona describes this event as a visitation with the force behind it of an ancestral spirit: "My mother, religiously girdled in / her god... / blew through my door warm wind from the south." Her narrative is propelled by an epiphany, which occurs in the time of the telling; for Rodgers's persona, awe-struck by the mixture of intrusion and generosity in the mother's act, there are

⁵⁸ Carolyn M. Rodgers, *Songs of a Black Bird* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1969), 9–11.

depths of meaning unavailable in the time of the narrative itself. So too for the mother: “there she was, standing in my room,” says Rodgers’s persona, “not remembering that I grew hearing her / curse the factory where she ‘cut uh slave’ / and the cheap j-boss wouldn’t allow a union.” While the mother “would not be / considered ‘relevant’ or ‘Black,’” the realization is building that she has harbored some traits that the young militants have embraced (including the trace of ethnic chauvinism in the casual anti-Semitism of the expression “j-boss.”) The narrative climax is the mother’s gift of money for the daughter’s bill and groceries, but this is simply the exemplum.

The power of the testimony is that it elevates the self to a higher order of reflection:

My mother, religious-negro, proud of
having waded through a storm, is very obviously,
a sturdy Black bridge that I
crossed over, on.⁵⁹

As a rap that “make u testify to truth,” this poem moves its audience to new knowledge by teaching them a moral: the old religion of the elder generation subtends every militant action toward revolution they make. But this stanza is also an event in itself: it dramatizes a transformation in consciousness for Rodgers’s persona, in the time of the telling.

The deep consciousness that Rodgers explores in these poems is comfortably within the realm of modern lyric consciousness. In later poems, Rodgers would tap into a visionary mode as a way of accessing a unified racial identity, and in some instances would link visionary consciousness explicitly with the soul concept. “The Children of Their Sin (An Exorcise),” first published in *How I Got Ovah*, appears there after two poems about dysfunction and abuse in the black romantic union. In those two poems, titled “Some Body Call (For Help)” and “Slave Ritual,” both members of a romantic couple are heard defending the physical abuse that she

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12–13.

suffers at his hands—she because of her economic dependency on him, and he because, in his view, it is proof of his love—in what Rodgers imagines as a reproduction of the master-slave relationship inside the black household.⁶⁰ In “The Children of Their Sin,” the threat to black unity that Rodgers sees in intraracial violence is intensified psychically by the still unresolved black generational divide. Taking its title from Es’kia Maphela’s description of the position that descendants of the enslaved occupy in a guilt-ridden white psyche, “The Children of Their Sin” recasts the conflict of the earlier poems so that the relationship between black men and black women is seen to be triangulated always by the violence done to them by white men, cast here as the legacy of chattel slavery. The poem is patterned after the contrapuntal and choral structure of the ode: it begins with a dramatic situation set in the very recent past, in which Rodgers’s persona avoids an impoverished-looking black man on the public bus (the poem’s refrain: “and i moved and went / and sat next to / a white man”), before taking an analepsis first into a childhood memory and then into a visionary recall of her ancestors’ suffering under slavery. The poem ends with the persona’s consciousness of the situation transformed by the effusion of “my pain / my shame” from her memory and her “soul.” The childhood memory is of her mother’s condemnation for a man who had mugged her (“mean nigger jumped that fence and was gone”), and it stands at odds with her vision, which in its sheer brutality summons anew her empathy for the sometimes violent men who are also descended from the enslaved. “But oh / somewhere, deep deeeep in the e-qui-nox of my soul / shuffling shadows protested,” says Rodger’s persona, placing the vision of suffering ancestral spirits in the same depths of interiority where earlier poems had located her inherited religious belief:

i heard a coliseum of women
screamingMERCY

⁶⁰ Rodgers, *How I Got Ovah*, 13–16.

in tongues, from the whips
i saw purple bloodied babies falling like
hail, ripped out from the split thick black
bellies
i saw a body gagging in the wind
i heard some moans of pain, pleas for
MERCY
SALVATION RETRIBUTION⁶¹

The self is dramatized here in a classical mode of self-address (“But oh”) as a witness to the conversion of the “soul” into a theater for the visitation of spirits. The visionary experience remakes the inner self by obscuring individual identity (“e-qui-nox of my soul”) with images of an otherwise inaccessible substratum of collective experience. The images are horrifically gigantized or amplified versions of the forms of mass violence that characterized the slave trade and slave labor, the Middle Passage, and even Jim Crow: whippings (“a coliseum of women”), feticides (“falling like hail”), and lynchings (“gagging in the wind”). It is significant that the aural images of the visionary experience are transmitted through Christian glossolalia (“in tongues”): the inertness of the mother’s traditional religion, as well as the abjectness of the black romantic union, are transformed here by a vision that rejoins and sanctifies the communal and personal dimensions of black experience.

In “The Children of Their Sin,” it takes the transformative and efficacious language of visionary poetry to access the collective historical experience that Bernard Bell described as the content of soulful expression. In *A Gospel Tribute*, a similar effect is attempted through a ritual of community participation. In adapting some of Rodgers’s poetry from *How I Got Ovah* for WNET-TV in New York, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee placed it in a liturgical setting, where it was dramatized as a part of a soulful, funky church service. After its initial broadcast in 1982 as

⁶¹ Ibid., 21–25.

an episode in the public television series *With Ossie & Ruby* (1980-82), the program was not distributed to the public again until it was part of a limited educational video release in 1993.⁶² On the videotape, the viewer can see how intimate the theatrical set was designed to appear, perhaps to magnify the large ensemble cast. The set on the television studio floor consists of a small church altar, with the organ brought up to the pulpit, and an adjacent area with choir risers (see fig. 5). Davis and Dee perform the dramatic readings, and they are joined on the organ by Billy Preston, the influential soul and gospel musician and songwriter, and by the Community First Baptist Church Choir of Dallas. This is a format that for its original audience would have evoked precedents in BAM, especially the popular albums Nikki Giovanni recorded in the mid-



Figure 5: A shot from backstage of the set of *How I Got Ovah: A Gospel Tribute to Carolyn M. Rodgers* (1982). Pictured: Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis (center), Billy Preston (right), Community First Baptist Church Choir of Dallas (far right).

⁶² See Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, *Hands upon the Heart*, volume 2, VHS, produced by Taro Meyer (1982; New York: Emmalyn Productions, 1993).

1970s with the New York Community Choir. (The audience of WNET-TV programs would have been primed for such a performance, too: from 1968 to 1973, the station produced the musical-variety show *Soul!*, hosted by Ellis Hazlip, a television and theater producer closely affiliated with BAM.⁶³) From the beginning *A Gospel Tribute* establishes that it will go further in imitating an actual community church service: the viewer first sees the choir as they sing an uptempo gospel version of the spiritual “How I Got Over,” then hears Davis, Dee, and Preston read Rodgers’s poem of sanctification “Living Water,” before following the camera’s close-up on the young female soloist in the choir, who takes the lead as Davis and Dee join the chorus. After introducing Billy Preston, Davis offers a spoken tribute to Rodgers. This movement becomes the pattern: a song is overlapped by a dramatic reading, an oration follows, and singing resumes to restart the cycle.

As the program unfolds, another cyclical pattern emerges in the dramatic readings: a movement not only between monologue and dialogue, as Rodgers’s own “raps” exemplify, but also, with the participation of the chorus, into call-and-response. One particular pair of consecutive recitations demonstrates what the addition of a choral voice in this dramatic adaption does to intervene in the synthesis that Rodgers’s poems attempt between the revolutionary impulse of BAM and the spiritual traditions of the black church. In her recitation of the poem “Jesus Must of Been Some Kind of Dude,” Dee performs Rodgers’s sermon rap as a dramatic monologue. Her live performance adds impersonation to the rap style: the character in which she delivers the poem combines the hipster (who uses the hip argot of street language) and the tall-tale teller (whose voice has the intonation and timbre of Southern black rural folk speech). Rodgers’s poem has a conceit that it already expresses through style. It makes the claim that

⁶³ See Gayle Wald, *It’s Been Beautiful: Soul! and Black Power Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 16–25.

Christ was a forerunner to the militants of Black Power (“a militant dude,” “[a] revolutionary cat”) by retelling some of the stories of the Gospels with the “macron” diction and imagery of soul. In this account, for instance, Christ spends the third day after the Crucifixion “just getting on up,” which plays on a trope popularized by soul musicians from The Esquires to James Brown and Curtis Mayfield, where upward movement can stand for both erotic experience and race progress; here it stands for resurrection.⁶⁴ In other words, style is used to establish a typology, with the intent to generate a specific effect: to elicit identification from a young black activist audience between *their* revolution and the moral revolution that, for the devout, is embodied by Christ. Dee’s performance enhances this effect (see fig. 6). Her rising intonation and her own “getting on up” (twists of the neck and waist) punctuate lines that draw out affirmative responses from the choir (“amen,” “uh huh,” “yes”). When Dee says, “But Jesus was



Figure 6: Ruby Dee performs Carolyn M. Rodgers's poem, "Jesus Must of Been Some Kind of Dude."

⁶⁴ Rodgers, *How I Got Ovah*, 63–64. See The Esquires, “Get On Up,” Bunky Records 775, 1967, 45 rpm; James Brown, “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine,” King Records 45-6318, 1970, 45 rpm; Curtis Mayfield, *Curtis*, Curtom Records 8005, 1970, 33 rpm.

cool, and his rap was heavy,” the choir erupts into a jubilant shout. Dee is using the dramatic monologue in concert with call-and-response to adapt Rodgers’s rap style into a different kind of epideictic discourse: rather than the point-counterpoint of an argument worked out in dialogue, call-and-response operates here on the principle of proposition and judgment. Dee’s monologue seeks the communal consent of the chorus in order to realize the poem’s claim—Christ is recognizable in and to today’s black militants—and uses both voice and movement to secure it. Like the idea of communal consent in the ballad tradition, a process that was also thought to be deeply embodied in performance, the pragmatics of call-and-response in this recitation could be read as suggesting a civilizational theory of its own: a popular insurrection for self-determination (the revolution of the “militants”) requires not only a vanguard but also a rear guard to shore it up with the traditions cherished by the masses.

The ballad itself is the basis of the next recitation. After the choir performs the hymn “What Kind of Man Is This,” Dee is rejoined by Davis in reciting the poem “And When the Revolution Came” as a dialogue. Even though Dee had performed “Jesus Must of Been Some Kind of Dude” as a monologue, her recitation had been shot through with dialogic structures as a way of figuring the larger synthesis the poem imagines: her persona, for instance, not only combined the hipster and the folk storyteller but also, in a duality compressed within the latter, fused testifying (the Gospels) with “lying” or “jiving” (the tall tale). In the present recitation, the choice of dialogue is dictated by the form of the poem itself, which is based on the ballad’s use of direct discourse for the purpose of impersonal narration, as well as its pattern of incremental repetition—employed in this recitation to shift the epideictic discourse back to argument. The poem is a series of proposals and counterproposals between “the militants” and “the church folks,” threaded together by the repetition in each stanza of the eponymous refrain (“and when

we been waiting for you
we can show you how to build
anything that needs building
and while we're on our knees, at that.⁶⁵

The imagined synthesis that *A Gospel Tribute* highlights in Rodgers's work is staked here on a specific claim: once the politics of black liberation alights on independent institutions as its chief enabling mechanism, its proponents will find common cause with the black church, realizing that it has harbored a quiet insurrection for centuries in an underground social strata that exists in something like a state of benign neglect in relation to the white world. In their recitation, Davis and Dee reach this point, as the poem requires, through argument. But it is an argument that takes place in a wider context involving the response of the chorus. Merging argument with call-and-response changes the viewer's understanding of who the poem's imagined audience is—not the youth who need to be taught a lesson, but the elders who want to see them brought back into the fold. It also puts the outcome of the argument squarely in the court of the congregation's communal judgment, which takes a side from the beginning and seems to have predetermined the church's absorption of the new militant strain. Like the poem's characterization of the church, Dee and Davis's adaptation is quietly radical, too: it starts with a ballad form and ends up with a performance that activates rather than anticipates the activity of the community, the audience's proxy. This appeal to the audience's active participation could be taken as Davis and Dee's doing honor to Rodgers's own functional theory of black poetry, and for that part of their viewership who still believed in the project of BAM, this gesture might have seemed like a transformation of European aesthetic forms (here the ballad) worthy of the name "black grace."

⁶⁵ Rodgers, *How I Got Ovah*, 65–67.

Near the end of the book *How I Got Ovah*, in a poem titled “Some Me of Beauty,” Rodgers writes in a testimonial mode of what she calls explicitly “a spiritual transformation / a root revival of love.”⁶⁶ This poem is the first text that Dee recites solo in *A Gospel Tribute*, and perhaps it is her highly individuated testifying style that brings out singular voices from the amen corner. *A Gospel Tribute* was broadcast four years after what would be the last book Rodgers published with a major press, *The Heart as Ever Green* (1978).⁶⁷ From then until her death in 2010, her only books would be the handmade chapbooks she published under her own imprint, Eden Press. The first of those chapbooks, *Translation* (1980), suggests even in its title that the work to come would continue to search for a poetic language that could embody or enact spiritual transformation. In the short poem “The I Am Awesome,” Rodgers’s way of articulating self-transformation has become almost hermetic in its concentration on spiritual existence. She announces her subject as “this awesome / you see an inflection of,” and then qualifies it in the next clause: “which is not clear like words as a way / of spirit speaking.” Even the glossolalia of speaking in tongues is transparent compared to the kind of “translation” from the divine to the worldly that Rodgers is trying to understand here. Rodgers comes out of this process as a depersonalized medium, an emptied vessel for the Holy Spirit: “I am confirmed. a common denominator / ... a zero / known as space with a circular eternal hold.”⁶⁸ Rodgers’s language for spiritual transformation has moved past the traditions of the black church into those of Christian mysticism: what she describes is the mystic’s ritual of self-abnegation in preparation for ecstatic experience. This poem could be read as evidence that Rodgers had completed a shift away from the political poetry of BAM. More importantly, it suggests the convergence of the spiritual,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁷ Carolyn M. Rodgers, *The Heart as Ever Green* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1978).

⁶⁸ Carolyn M. Rodgers, *Translation* (Eden Press, 1980). My gratitude to Nina Rodgers Gordon for permission to quote from this chapbook.

soulful strain in the poetry of BAM with a similar impulse in the broader postwar aesthetic avant-garde.

III

Rodgers's "root revival of love" was a late expression of BAM's so-called "rage for roots." But BAM was not alone in its rage for roots. The desire to transform contemporary culture by recovering submerged traditions was pervasive in the countercultural turn of the postwar avant-garde in which BAM participated. The examples are numerous. Ed Roberson, a poet whose early work reflects the vernacular poetics of BAM alongside a serious study of ethnopoetics, approached the concept of soul from a standpoint that was *a priori* non-Western. In *Etai-Eken* (1975), a song cycle that fuses "black chant" with the tribal songs of New Guinea, Roberson's choice of source material, particularly in "Dani Word Song," suggested that the link between soul and notions of origin, essence, and identity might have had a transcultural basis:

etai-eken
AY-tai AY-ken
seeds of singing,
i.e.,
soul,
i.e.,
soul⁶⁹

In Roberson's gloss on the Dani phrase that he took as his emblem, soul *is* the roots, in an inchoate, even primordial form: as the "seeds of singing," it is a basic human drive, the indwelling of whatever spirit calls forth for expression in the human voice. ("Maturity comes when and as you learn to hear deepest utterances with the deepest humanity," Roberson would

⁶⁹ Ed Roberson, *Etai-Eken* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), 3.

write in his notes three decades later. “Black folk call it soul.”⁷⁰) Roberson went to a distant ethnographic source to arrive at the same idea as Bernard Bell, who called soul the “primal force of human nature.” But back of Roberson’s thinking was a structuralist theory of poetics that appealed to ethnographic sources while trying to eschew any hint of primitivism. It was another example of this era’s rage for roots. Informed in its earliest iterations by the author’s travels in the field with Roberson, Andrew Welsh’s *Roots of Lyric* (1978) posited three ancient forms—riddle, charm, and chant—as the “fundamental powers” of all lyric poetry, the substrata connecting the European and all other traditions. “Our search is not for primal sources,” Welsh wrote, “but for basic structures of poetic language, whether they are found in a Bantu riddle or a poem by Donne, in a Cherokee charm or a song by Shakespeare.”⁷¹ Welsh’s method was to combine Aristotelian poetics, the formalism of Northrop Frye, and the same structuralism that ethnopoetics used for a transcultural and transhistorical study of oral poetry. In Welsh’s argument the rage for roots was a search for “basic structures,” and in ethnopoetics those structures could be understood not just as forms but also as deep cultural patterns. In an essay titled “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” first delivered in 1975 at a major ethnopoetics conference organized by Jerome Rothenberg, Sherley Anne Williams set ethnopoetics the task of studying “the new forms of poetry which develop as a result of the interfaces or confrontations between different cultures.” For Williams, the oral traditions with the status of “roots” in African American poetry included the spirituals, the work songs, and the blues precisely because of their hybridity; they were the first new forms to emerge from the

⁷⁰ Ed Roberson, Notes on “Cante Hondo,” MS, 2005. Ed Roberson papers, private collection. I am grateful to Ed Roberson for permission to use this material.

⁷¹ Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 21 and 23–24.

contact between African and European traditions in North America.⁷² As these examples illustrate, the pervasive “roots” metaphor registers a crucial feature in the theoretical and scholarly thought of the aesthetic movements brought into alliance by their anthropological orientation: with an abiding interest in the essential and the fundamental aspects of culture, their tendency was to shift seamlessly in thinking of essences as the grounds at once of specific cultural identities and of the human as such, and as the generative principles of both singular traditions and of cultural development as such. This tendency reflects an important instability in the motive shared by these movements to use the ethnographic source as the basis for alternative political models in the present.

Beginning in the late 1960s, BAM and ethnopoetics were united in what I have called a post-Eurocentric cultural moment by a common political vision embodied in the image of “small and integrated, stateless and classless societies,” as discussed earlier in this chapter. In this same period, BAM and ethnopoetics were joined in this vision by the US public folklore movement, whose dominant figure then was Alan Lomax. For figures associated with these movements, the appeal of the ethnographic source, the appeal of “roots,” was identical to what many of them found in the concept of soul: the idea that survivals of ecstatic and visionary ritual traditions from older communal societies could resurface in the present and, with the residual influence of their ritual functions, lend *political* efficacy to the contemporary small collectives that preserved or adapted them. Writing in the mid-1980s, as discussed above, Lomax thought he detected this process at work in the adaptation of the spiritual’s “sacred performance symbols” into soul music and the range of functions it performed for black communities in Northern ghettos post–Great

⁷² Sherley Williams, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” *Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 542 and 554. Williams’s essay was first delivered as a talk at “Ethnopoetics: A First International Symposium,” Center for Twentieth-Century Studies, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 10–12 April 1975.

Migration; he called the underlying continuity the “social soul of black soulfulness,” suggesting that the tradition had an intrinsic power to organize collective life. This account was part of Lomax’s *Urban Strain* project of the 1980s and 1990s, a hemispheric study of the major song and dance forms to emerge from the African diaspora in the urban centers of the New World in the twentieth century. It was an outgrowth of Lomax’s earlier *Black Identity Project* (1968–1970), which itself evolved out of an extensive 1962 fieldwork trip in the Lesser Antilles, where Lomax was able to study the social and political role of Afro-Caribbean expressive culture at the peak of the decolonization movement.⁷³ With the *Black Identity Project*, Lomax intended to intervene in US race politics with a public black cultural education program that he believed could help stabilize the Civil Rights Movement in a moment of crisis after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the ensuing wave of urban uprisings. The *Black Identity Project* was intended for a mass audience and was supposed to encompass a range of media products, including books, pamphlets, comic books, public service radio messages, television programs, and even children’s toys. Its largest component was an unpublished manuscript with the fitting title “The Roots of Soul.” Its most widely disseminated component, and the focus of my

⁷³ Lomax’s fieldwork in the Lesser Antilles brought him into collaboration with J. D. Elder, an anthropologist from Tobago who later became Minister of Culture and Education for Trinidad and Tobago, and it took him to Grenada, Carriacou, Trinidad, Martinique, and several other islands. With Elder, Lomax used the 1962 fieldwork expedition to launch a larger project on West Indies folksong that sought to articulate a cultural-stylistic basis for postcolonial national unification in the Caribbean. Continuing intermittently for decades, the West Indies project eventually produced, with the help of Bess Lomax Hawes, a much more focused work than the breadth of Lomax’s fieldwork had originally established: a songbook of ring game rhymes culled from the Lesser Antilles recordings and published in 1997. See Lomax, Elder, and Hawes, *Brown Girl in the Ring: An Anthology of Song Games from the Eastern Caribbean* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), and also Lomax, “Caribbean Folksong Project,” August 1964, MS, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 06.03.06 [2/6]), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Selections from Lomax’s 1962 field recordings in the Lesser Antilles, with excerpts from Lomax’s field notes alongside extensive historical documentation, are available in the compact disc series *Caribbean Voyage: The 1962 Field Recordings*, Rounder Records 1716–1733-2, 1997–2004, compact disc.

discussion here, was a series of public service radio spots based on “The Roots of Soul” and known collectively as the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air*.⁷⁴

The *Black Identity Project* was designed to deliver what might be considered a mainstream “soul” message for the 1960s, proposed to its funders as combating racial conflict through black racial pride by presenting its audience with positive images of black cultural heritage and achievement.⁷⁵ But in actuality the race politics of Lomax’s project were just as complex as the cultural theory and ethnographic research subtending it. Intended as a textbook or a reference work, “The Roots of Soul” amounts to a total cultural history of African peoples on the African continent and across the African diaspora, from the birth of humankind to the US Civil Rights Movement. Alongside chapters on religion (“The Black Moslems”), the diaspora (“Black Europeans”), and other topics, its chapters on expressive culture are informed by Lomax’s Cantometric and Choreometric studies of African and diasporic song and dance performances, which used IBM computer punch cards and a graphic coding system to chart stylistic patterns in a databank of thousands of recorded songs and filmed performances—all of which became evidence for Lomax’s hypothesis that the entire African world shared the same set of correlated traits (“multileveled, multiparted, highly integrated, multi-textured, gregarious”)

⁷⁴ The *Black Identity Project* was conducted under Lomax’s direction by his Cantometrics Project staff at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University. Lomax outlined the political objectives of the *Black Identity Project* in “Black Identity and Mass Education: A Proposal,” and associated correspondence with the Ford Foundation, one of the project’s funders. The project’s arguments about the global unity of black cultural style were established in Lomax’s manuscript “The Homogeneity of African-New World Negro Musical Style,” a paper delivered to the American Anthropological Association in 1967. Shifting through several alternative titles such as “Black Ravens” and “Black on White,” by the end of September 1968 “The Roots of Soul” had taken shape as a 150-page book-length manuscript on black cultural style, including an outline for the anthology that would be published in 1970 as *3000 Years of Black Poetry* (and titled here “Black Ravens”). All of these documents are grouped in Lomax’s papers within the Black Identity files, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 01.02.06–01.02.14), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. See also John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2010), 364–65.

⁷⁵ In addition to Columbia University and the Ford Foundation, supporters of the *Black Identity Project* included the the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and for a time, the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency.

linking performance style and social structure.⁷⁶ In “The Roots of Soul,” Lomax uses the term “communication system” for expressive culture to explain how it holds these correlations together: the lifestyle of the group is predicated on the proliferation of symbols that express the group’s identity and preserve its heritage. In the chapter titled “Black Americans,” Lomax expands on this idea, encapsulating the basic anthropological idea of the *Black Identity Project* in a message to his immediate audience:

Most historians of slavery have underestimated the capacity of the non-literate to transmit and to maintain their culture. In fact, every human being has a score of ways of saying to his fellow men who he is and where he comes from and what his people stand for. These patterns he represents in his art; in the design of his personal articles or his apparel, in the way he stands, moves, dances, does his work, as well as in the spoken and written word. His oral traditions, his songs and his music, again, carry the essential traits of his heritage in other symbol systems.⁷⁷

As Lomax’s biographer, John Szwed, has said about the *Black Identity Project*, its message to black Americans living through a period of social revolt was that their culture was more than a survival of chattel slavery’s deprivations. Here Lomax sets up his account of black cultural achievement by positing a fundamental human principle: non-literacy is a non-problem for the cultural continuity of any human society because its oral tradition, along with its ceremonial art and material culture, are all “ways of saying” that transmit to future generations its essential identity and essential values. Applying this principle and producing an account of black American culture’s essential character, or “soul,” Lomax wrote in a 1968 letter to his media agent, is precisely what could make the Black Identity Project in his view an effective instrument

⁷⁶ “A well-blended, rhythmically tight, often polyphonic choral performance,” Lomax said of African song, “is the norm in most areas.” Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture*, vii–xv and 94–95. This monograph contains Lomax’s account of the methodology and technology involved in the 1962–1968 Cantometrics and Choreometrics studies. His chief colleagues in these studies at Columbia were the musicologists Conrad Arensberg, Victor Grauer, and Roswell Rudd.

⁷⁷ Alan Lomax, “Black Americans,” in “The Roots of Soul Manuscript,” 94, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 01.02.14 [1/2]).

in the Civil Rights struggle: “The guys in the integration movement tell me that a loss of identity, a need to have a clear-cut history, is the problem of the Negro and is the source of more anger than economic conditions.”⁷⁸ In its race politics the goal of Lomax’s project seems to have been to establish some kind of détente between the integrationists and the separatists in the black political vanguard. In a 1970 report to one of the project’s funders, Lomax framed the problem he had wanted to address as though it was part of a policy embracing black cultural nationalism: “Blacks were being told and feeling that they had a separate black tradition, but the range, nature and scope of this tradition was left pretty much undefined.”⁷⁹ The balance between integration and separatism was not the only source of tension in Lomax’s account of what political purpose the *Black Identity Project* would serve: though his stated position favored identity over economics as the primary vector for addressing racial inequality, the immediate precursor to the project, and a preview of its strategic use of public folklore and mass media, was the posthumous realization of King’s “Poor People’s Campaign” on the National Mall in May 1968.⁸⁰ The *Black Identity Project* enlisted the soul concept to serve a practical political function, but its politics were complicated by divisions in its audience and its own need to meet federal policy prerogatives. In each of Lomax’s dual or conflicting positions—economic justice supplanted by the reclamation of identity, racial identity subsumed into the human as such, separatism brought into accord with integration—can be seen the gradual accommodation of a radical politics of the

⁷⁸ Alan Lomax, qtd. in Szwed, 360.

⁷⁹ “Narrative Report on the *Black Identity Project*,” Alan Lomax to Marjorie Martus, Program Officer, Ford Foundation, 3 March 1970, TS, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 01.02.10 [3/5]).

⁸⁰ At Resurrection City, the encampment established on the National Mall as the public symbol of the Poor People’s Campaign, Lomax worked with Reverend Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick of SNCC to organize a public folklore program that featured Fannie Lou Hamer, the Georgia Sea Island Singers, Muddy Waters, and others. See Szwed, 361–64. Lomax recommended a staff consisting of some of these same performers when, in his correspondence with the Ford Foundation, he proposed a public education program to complement the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air*. Alan Lomax to Marjorie Martus, 7 June 1968, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004: MS 01.01.13).

small communal society to a liberal politics embracing the language of both diversity and universalism.

Soul would continue to be emblematic of black cultural heritage as such in the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air*, as the analysis that follows will show. But as “The Roots of Soul” developed beyond the unpublished manuscript, Lomax would qualify and compound the meaning of the term. In “The Roots of Soul,” soul is a property of the correlation Lomax observed between the basic structures of music and song and the basic structures of social organization in the African world. It is hard to define but easy to recognize, as Bernard Bell might say, because it names the manifestation of a social and political inheritance (the collectivist tribal structures of Sub-Saharan Africa in particular) within performative events throughout the cultures of the diaspora, first in music and song and then in other areas of life governed by style. In the only publication to grow out of “The Roots of Soul” manuscript, an anthology of “black soul poetry” issued under the title *3000 Years of Black Poetry* (1972), Lomax quibbles with the term soul in order to attach more aspects to the concept.⁸¹ His introduction opens with the Kongolesé myth of how human beings came to possess *mutima*, or heart, and how the heart’s longing for *Mpungu*, the highest god and its own father, brings humans into intimate connection with divinity. Finding the term soul “too other-worldly, too disembodied, too fleshless, too Greek, too Presbyterian a term to characterize black creativity,” Lomax offers “heart” instead. (In *Urban Strain*, the “social soul of black soulfulness,” as discussed above, would come to represent precisely this fleshly and erotic relation to the divine.) For Lomax, heart means essentially “man’s longing for oneness with the universe,” and with it come a set of cultural traits and beliefs that Lomax thinks of as bringing “unity” to African and

⁸¹ Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul, eds., *3000 Years of Black Poetry* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970).

diasporic poetry, from 1500 BCE to the present, and from Yoruba chants to negritude and BAM: a communalistic view of life, an animistic view of creation, a view of ancestry as alive in the present, and a view of poetry itself as efficacious ritual. For Lomax, this last idea, the connection between the poem and the ritual act, supports another cultural belief: a view of the poet as a political actor. “The majority of African poets have been revolutionaries and men of action, whose poetry was a statement of their commitment,” Lomax writes, positing what he considers an essential feature of black cultural heritage. He then makes a characteristic move, casting the black poet’s commitment to action not just as a feature of soul (or “heart”), or of the local societies where it thrives, but also as a defense of all human values everywhere: “Today this link between song and deed grows, as black writers see that a runaway geopolitical system, insensitive to any but its own needs, tries to silence all voices but its own, in Africa and everywhere—and thus puts the human continuity, itself, in question.”⁸² Just as Lomax approaches the social and political crux of what is irreducibly singular about the black poetic tradition, he begins reaching beyond black identity altogether toward a perch where culture is a realm of universal values, bringing back the implicit metaphysics that for the moment had led him to reject the term soul.

In actuality, most of the cultural traits and beliefs that had Lomax searching for a new emblem of black cultural heritage in the anthology reflected ideas that he had already smuggled into the concept of soul in the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air*. In late 1968, with *Black Identity Project* collaborator Raoul Abdul, the former literary assistant to Langston Hughes, Lomax coauthored the scripts for the twenty-nine short episodes of his black cultural history radio program. Assisted in the studio by the Atlantic Recording Corporation, he produced each episode

⁸² Alan Lomax, “Introduction,” in *3000 Years of Black Poetry*, ix–x and xxv–xxvi.

with narration by Jack Walker, a popular DJ on the Harlem-based WLIB radio station, and with musical tracks by his project assistant Roswell Rudd, a musical collaborator of Amiri Baraka's. Each of them thirty to ninety seconds in length, all episodes of the program were packaged together on a twelve-inch LP record and distributed for free to four hundred black radio stations as the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* (see fig. 7). (The program's two-part subtitle, printed on the record but never aired, was *A Big Beautiful Black History: Stories of the Rise and Spread of Black Culture in Africa and America*.)⁸³ As the dates on the LP indicate, the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* was broadcast at least through 1969, and its original distribution soon expanded, according to Szwed, to the National Education Radio Network (the forerunner of NPR), to the National Council of Churches, and to hospitals and prisons.⁸⁴ It is clear that Lomax took great care in his scripts to make the case for a "separate black tradition" in a language that would appeal to militants but also comfort integrationists and liberal humanists. The first episode sets the pattern by presenting Ray Charles as a symbol of contemporary "black style," an icon of "soul," and linking him sonically to what is presented as an artifact of that style's deep African heritage. Like most of the episodes, this one, called "The Roots of Ray Charles," opens with his song "What'd I Say" playing as the bed track and with Walker's narration coming in over the top: "R-r-r-ay Charles, from South Carolina. And the roots of his music lie deep in the South. But, like everything black and beautiful, those soul roots go back to Black Africa." It then intercuts Charles with a field recording of a "Topical Song" of the Central African Luba people,

⁸³ *Black Encyclopedia of the Air: A Big Beautiful Black History: Stories of the Rise and Spread of Black Culture in Africa and America*, producer Alan Lomax, Atlantic Records 154, 33 rpm. All quotations from the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* are the author's transcriptions from this LP. Issued by Atlantic Records but intended for non-commercial use, the LP has the appearance of both a promotional record for radio DJs and an educational record for libraries and other institutions. Exact pressing figures are not known, but based on its distribution the record was likely issued in a limited pressing of five hundred copies. Fred Knubel, *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* press release, MS, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 01.02.10 [3/5]).

⁸⁴ Lomax, "Narrative Report on the *Black Identity Project*"; Szwed, 365.

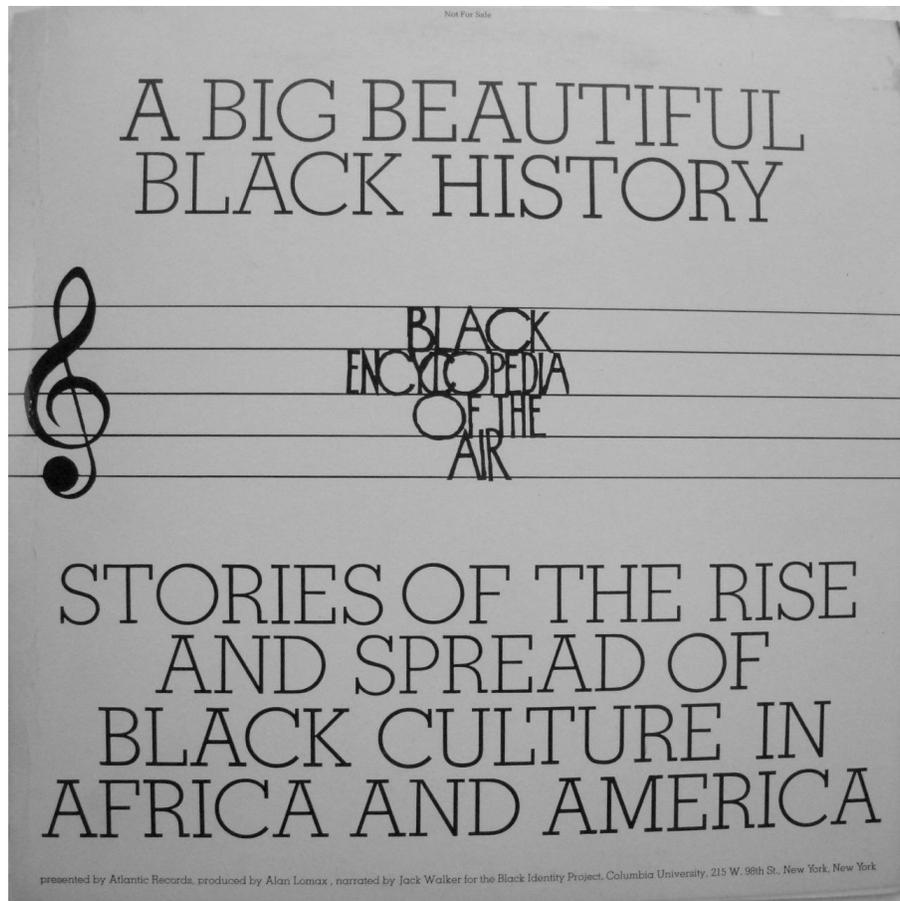


Figure 7: The cover of *Black Encyclopedia of the Air: A Big Black Beautiful History: Stories of the Rise and Spread of Black Culture in Africa and America* (1968–1969), the LP containing twenty-nine broadcast segments of the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air*, distributed to four hundred black radio stations in 1968 and 1969.

sourced from the South Africa–based International Library of African Music, and matches the tracks on the basis of their “swinging, many-leveled” orchestration. “They’re playing almost the same tune,” says Walker. “That’s black culture: handed down from generation to generation, coursing three thousand miles of ocean, outlasting slavery, tough as steel and full of soul.” As with the use of the phrase “black and beautiful” in this first episode, the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* frequently used tropes of hip “soul” style both to hail its young black audience and to make an event of precisely the kind of cultural continuities that the program posited. In an episode about Aesop, for instance, Walker begins: “You know, black people have been telling it like it was for a long time, baby.” But the program also frequently made direct political

analogies. In an episode called “Everybody Leads,” which focuses on a traditional Ndongo choral song from modern-day Angola, Walker’s narration describes how the performers rotate by turns from the chorus to the lead and back again. This episode has a moral about the role of song to instill the value of power sharing and to support non-hierarchical social structures. It begins and ends on this point: “Black style is super-democratic.” Lomax’s script is strategic in its use of political language: the appeal to democracy could embrace both the activist organizations of the New Left with their emphasis on participatory democracy and liberal Cold Warriors who located the American Way in the nation’s democratic institutions. It could resonate with the black liberation movement’s goal of an egalitarian social transformation without alienating mainstream allies.

While the messages in his scripts for the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* were deliberately multivalent, it is clear that Lomax wanted the program to play an instrumental role as political propaganda. Picking up on the theme of “Everybody Leads,” an episode called “Overlapping” takes a specific style trait in the African call-and-response tradition—the blending of the soloist’s voice with the chorus—and uses it to make a statement of solidarity that calls for egalitarian leadership and collective action. “It is an old Black African custom for the chorus to overlap with the leader and the leader to overlap with the chorus,” says Walker. He then begins to make the political analogy: “They let the man lead but they’re not afraid to go with him. That’s black style, all through Africa and in the States.” Next, examples of “overlapping” are adduced from Congolese religious song and African American gospel, which are taken as evidence that “an old African musical idea”—not just an old style trait—are at work throughout the world. This makes the statement of political solidarity possible because it makes style the vehicle of larger philosophies: “In black style, we stay close to our leaders and support them.” Delivered by

Walker, this statement (and its sudden shift into the first-person plural) speaks directly to a black public and embraces those who are sympathetic to the integrationist or the separatist cause, attempting to boost the morale of two constituencies who had recently undergone the trauma of losing leaders, in King and Malcolm X, respectively. At the same time, the political statement here speaks indirectly to liberal elites whose main concern is the stability of the social order, not its egalitarian transformation, assuring them that the dangers of seemingly leaderless movements for social justice will be short-lived: there is a basic principle in black culture, this episode says, that constantly generates new leaders from the masses.

The egalitarian streak in Lomax's scripts extended to the gender politics that he posited as a basic feature of black style. In an episode with the evocative title "Soul Sister with Spears," the *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* presented and celebrated an image of black female heroism: seventeenth-century Queen Anna Nzinga of the Ndongo and Matamba kingdoms, who defended her people against Portuguese colonizers in Angola. It developed the theme in an episode called "Woman Power," which shifted to the former French and British colonies in the Caribbean and deployed a recording from Lomax's 1962 fieldwork in the Lesser Antilles. "In the black world, women have always taken on leading roles," says Walker at the start of the episode, before it cuts to a recording of the traditional Nation Dance performed on the island of Carriacou. Here the ceremony involves a female chantwell (a Caribbean griot) who leads a chorus, a group of drummers, and a circle of dancers as she sings a deep, staccato recitation of a family lineage for the purposes (unspecified here) of consecration. Walker's narration then traces the "confident" singing of "this black sister" to West Africa. "Africans were never afraid of woman power," says Walker, in a gendering of the "soul power" trope: the claim this episode makes is that women are leaders of ceremonies in Carriacou because of a traditional West African social structure that

“gave the woman a place in the public eye and a voice in the public affairs.” In a culture that believes in efficacious ritual, the ceremonial leadership of women is de facto social and political leadership, and as Lomax has it in the script, listeners are told to embrace this as “a distinctive and blessed feature of black tradition.” Though the script does not make the point explicitly, its transposition of “soul power” into “woman power” might be taken as registering that one of the primary “soul roots” then surfacing in contemporary black culture was the leading role played by women artists in the soul movement—a phenomenon that this chapter, too, has registered. In addition, Lomax’s identification of black style with social and political norms of gender equality spoke to, and were perhaps informed by, one of the key social questions of BAM: what structure in the relations between men and women strengthen intraracial bonds. (As the contents of *3000 Years of Black Poetry* alone make clear, Lomax was reading the major poets of BAM during the period of the *Black Identity Project*, including Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Gwendolyn Brooks.) The women-focused episodes of *The Black Encyclopedia of the Air* put forth an idea that was as central to ethnopoetics as it was to BAM: women’s role in performing ritual granted them powers of social transformation.

The politics of Lomax’s *Black Identity Project* would solidify in the projects of his that evolved out of it, and they shed light on what kind of politics ultimately came to define the aesthetics of the soulful, the ritualistic, and the visionary in the general post-Eurocentric moment of which Lomax was a part. While his account of soul would become the basis for his *Urban Strain* project, his focus on ethnic tradition and his twinning of public folklore and mass media in the *Black Identity Project* sent him on an exploration of rural American folkways—or what he called “multiregional-ethnic-productive culture”—that from 1978 to 1985 would see him produce hundreds of hours of video footage for a public television series called *American*

Patchwork (1991). Inspired by the election of US President Jimmy Carter in 1976, on a campaign built around the slogan of “an America that encourages and takes pride in our ethnic diversity, our religious diversity, our cultural diversity,” Lomax set off in search of local cultural diversity in the regional territories of the country, first taking his recording crew into the Mississippi Delta region in 1978 to trace the roots of the blues, and then sending off a missive to several federal agencies titled “We Need a Grass Roots Communication System” (1978–1979).⁸⁵ The missive argued for the decentralization of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and the diversification of its cultural programming. It called for the creation of “small independent production teams” at local television stations across the country with a mandate “to air the traditional grass roots cultural material in their own backyards.” And it proposed a series of “model programs” in the mold of his Mississippi Delta documentary, each one designed to be regional in its scope and appeal, “so that local speech patterns, body language, character, humor, custom, etc., be given full play without the need to tailor them to the interest of a national audience.” Only one of the model programs in the missive, pitched as “The American Patchwork,” would be made—not as a group of independent regional documentaries but rather as the national PBS series of the same name. The name of the program itself evokes the long pluralist tradition in American cultural thought, including Sandburg’s *The American Songbag*, with its “ragbag of strips, stripes, and streaks of color from nearly all ends of the earth.” In shaping the program, Lomax was suspended between the two opposing poles within that pluralist tradition: a politics celebrating the essential differences of separate, homogeneous communities, and another embracing the diversity of interlinked communities within a singular, heterogeneous

⁸⁵ Jimmy Carter, “Our Nation's Past and Future” (address accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York, July 15, 1976), American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25953>.

body. His proposal for the program frames the language of regional and ethnic multiplicity and uniqueness within the scope of an all-seeing camera and an all-knowing narrator: “The camera roves America. The narrator follows themes, traces traditions, lingers with interesting singers, joins festivities, outlines regions, discovers ethnic enclaves...[and] finds out the thousand and one ways that Americans have created for amusing themselves and remembering their roots.”⁸⁶ Lomax was moving from a position in which ethnic traditions such as the “roots of soul” in Africa were a source of radical alterity to one in which they became interchangeable as parts of a multicultural national identity (a “pluralistic heritage,” in Carter’s words) embraced by liberal elites.

What then would be the fate of the “new communalistic and anti-authoritarian forms of social life” that Rothenberg, promoting the radical countercultural pluralism that emerged from BAM and also galvanized Lomax, had conceived in the image not of the nation but rather of the “small and integrated, stateless and classless societies” of the non-Western world? The various participants in this post-Eurocentric cultural moment might have been brought into alignment by a specific textual source: the 1961 English translation from German of Janheinz Jahn’s monograph *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*, which argued that the peoples of Africa had evolved a unified culture and philosophy (*muntu* is the Bantu word for human) in large part on the basis of the *Nommo* concept, or the belief in the power and instrumentality of language to change reality.⁸⁷ Directly or indirectly, the influence of Jahn’s work was pervasive: while it gave Carolyn Rodgers and BAM as a whole in Chicago its most potent symbol of an Afrocentric poetry, it also stood behind Lomax’s theory of the homogeneity of black style and

⁸⁶ Alan Lomax, “We Need a Grass Roots Communication System,” TS, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004: MS 38.03.39), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁸⁷ See Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, translated by Marjorie Grene, 2nd edition (New York: Grove, 1994), 121–26.

bolstered Rothenberg's own transcultural account of shamanism and the use of the poetry in efficacious ritual. According to Rothenberg, the study of the Dogon myth of *Nommo* by European anthropologists was "one of the touchstones for twentieth-century artists looking for poetic technologies to which to relate their own (re)explorations of the 'sacred.'" Rothenberg's use of anthropological sources mixed the scholar's interest in historical specificity with the artist's penchant for intuitive connections: a signature feature of his approach to ethnopoetics, in the post-Eurocentric moment that also happened to span the two editions of his *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968–1985), was to perform a kind of textual *Nommo* by relying on juxtapositions of disparate, far-flung sources to reveal what he called "coincidences between 'primitive-archaic' & modern thought." Like shamanism itself, which Rothenberg (following Mircea Eliade) acknowledged he had taken from its original context in the religious traditions of Siberia and Central Asia and made a general principle of visionary poetry everywhere ("a unifying vision that brings with it the power of song & image...to heal-the-soul"), beliefs such as *Nommo* from the traditions of Africa also served in Rothenberg's account as enabling myths for poets of the US counterculture. "[W]hether fiction or not doesn't yet matter," Rothenberg said of such beliefs; whatever their claim on truth or reality, they provided an alternative ethos for contemporary poets who felt compelled to turn away from the dominant culture at home.⁸⁸ Perhaps the image of "small and integrated, stateless and classless societies" was another such fiction, another enabling myth.

In the 1985 edition of *Technicians of the Sacred*, Rothenberg expanded his original commentary on a text from the West African epic *Gassire's Lute* by appending a 1966 poem by Baraka titled "Ka 'Ba." Collected by Leo Frobenius and published in English translation in 1937,

⁸⁸ Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred*, 534 and 485–88.

Gassire's Lute tells the story of a Soninke warrior-prince, Gassire, whose efforts to become a bard play a decisive part in the history of the ancient city-state of Wagadu, driving the cycle of the city-state's founding, decline (or "disappearance"), and regeneration. Striving to be a bard because the line of succession prevents him from becoming king, Gassire is motivated by a primordial vanity that causes the first "disappearance" of Wagadu but also ensures a greater glory for the city-state in the future due to the beauty of Gassire's art. In the crucial passage of the text, Gassire is told by the lute maker before a battle that the instrument will not sing until it gains "heart" by absorbing the "blood of your blood."⁸⁹ This legend could have been another example in Lomax's account of the African poetic tradition as one that puts the spiritual philosophy of "heart" into the black cultural style of "soul." Rothenberg, for his part, uses his commentary on *Gassire's Lute*, after a brief synopsis on the provenance of his text, to juxtapose the legend with the full text of Baraka's poem—for which he gives no commentary. This is an odd editorial decision. Little by way of structural or generic similarity makes for any obvious connection between the two texts: While *Gassire's Lute* is a mythic narrative, Baraka's "Ka 'Ba" is a lyric poem that begins with intensely private observation ("A closed window looks down / on a dirty courtyard, and black people / call across or scream across or walk across") and shifts into communal address ("We are beautiful people / with african imaginations / full of masks and dances and swelling chants"). Yet commentary would have certainly been warranted, given the historical importance of both texts. ("Ka 'Ba," from Baraka's book *Black Art* [1966], belongs to one of BAM's founding documents.) And the themes of Baraka's poem offer Rothenberg substantial material for historical comparison. It evokes elements of ritual drama (masks, dance, chant); it suggests an African cultural matrix or core located in spirit, beauty, and imagination

⁸⁹ Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred*, 2nd edition, 194–201.

(“beautiful people / with African imaginations”); it presents an image of the black world on the basis of a fundamental orality (“Our world if full of sound”); and, in its final stanzas, it combines an analysis of US chattel slavery and its legacies from a class perspective with a deeply Islamic spiritual vision of earthly life’s sacralization:

We have been captured,
brothers. And we labor
to make our getaway, into
the ancient image, into a new

correspondence with ourselves
and our black family. We need magic
now we need the spells, to raise up
return, destroy, and create. What will be

the sacred words?⁹⁰

Rothenberg withholds any comment about the common religious worldview connecting Baraka’s poem and the West African epic. Nor does he say anything explicit about the way Baraka’s imagery reflects the political uses of Islamic religious thought—and African ritual traditions—in BAM. Baraka’s poem wants to transform “labor” from involuntary servitude into a special kind of praxis, one that works through “the ancient image” to realize “a new / correspondence with ourselves / and our black family,” and he offers this process up explicitly as a kind of “magic.” Perhaps what intrigued Rothenberg about Baraka’s poem was the theme it shares with *Gassire’s Lute* of artistic regeneracy (“return, destroy, and create,” in Baraka’s words). But the basis for comparison that Rothenberg subtly intimates is not about African American poetry’s connection to ancient African oral art (the purview of BAM) but rather about art as such: “Whatever its history,” Rothenberg says of *Gassire’s Lute*, “its statement about the artist remains chilling.”⁹¹ It

⁹⁰ Baraka (Jones), *Black Magic Poetry, 1961–1967* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 146.

⁹¹ Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred*, 2nd edition, 540–42.

is as though Rothenberg, confident in the efficacious ritual of his own exegetical “magic,” trusts the juxtaposition of two incarnations of the Word to have the effect of *Nommo*—a practical function in bringing about a new state of affairs for the reader. With its investment in heart, soul, and spirit, the countercultural avant-garde, even at the height of its post-Eurocentric moment, could do away with the normative function of commentary and exegesis in twentieth-century folklore—to root tradition in an otherwise obscured or submerged social and political context—because the kind of social and political transformation it was after often redounded on a universal humanism.

Coda

Near the end of the book *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*, first published in 1971 and reissued in an expanded edition in 1985, the North Carolina–born poet, publisher, and amateur folklorist Jonathan Williams included a poem that combines elements of speech and inscription to represent a material artifact of Southern folk culture. “From Uncle Jake Carpenter’s Anthology of Death on Three-Mile Creek” reproduces a fragment from a written record of oral tradition:

Loney Ollis
age 84
dide jun 10 1871

grates dere honter
wreked bee trees for hony
cild ratell snak by 100
cild dere by thousen

i nod him well¹

The poem’s first stanza resembles an epitaph, with the name of the deceased and the dates of his lifespan arrayed in a lineated column: it could just as easily be copied from an engraving on a headstone as it is, according to the poem’s caption-like title, from a peculiar book of local people’s necrology. The second stanza is a modest litany in epic form—“grates dere honter” may have been Three-Mile Creek’s version of a Homeric epithet—and it plumbs the local lore of hunting and harvesting achievements for the myth of this particular man. But emerging in the poem’s final unilinear stanza is a different kind of particularity: the voice of a particular speaker, the “I” of the local record-keeper (presumably Uncle Jake Carpenter himself), who represents his own speech, in his own hand, in an idiosyncratic orthography that bends standard English toward a different pattern of sound and sense “nod well” by this particular rural community. Yet

¹ Jonathan Williams, *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets: A Garland for the Southern Appalachians* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), np.

Williams's reproduction of this half-literate text extends beyond dialect and idiom, as John Lomax and Sterling Brown defined those terms, and carries them into a new symbolic register. His poem is designed to capture the phonology of folk speech and the figurative logic of folk thought, but it also conjures an allegory about the material culture of writing in which this inscription originated and the scholarly practices of collecting through which it might have circulated. The poem itself, part of Williams's own lifelong collection of folklore, is explicitly "from" a prior collection, and it points to a historical community harboring both lore and a medium to record it so subterranean to any official economies of language and print that it has not yet fixed the relations between speech and writing.

Williams had numerous touchstones for this kind of poem, which might be called an artifact of orality for the way it reproduces a linguistic object that is itself based on the primacy of speech. The primary touchstone is the philological tradition of ballad collecting, from Thomas Percy and Francis James Child to John Jacob Niles, the postwar collector and performer to whom part of *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets* is dedicated. Williams evokes this tradition in his poem with what Susan Stewart would call its distressed surfaces, the fragmentary presentation and striated orthography that inscribe the artifact as both the remnant of a residual culture and the product of attempts to preserve it. Related to this tradition is another touchstone, the history of the anthology format, to which the title of Williams's poem alludes. "Uncle Jake Carpenter's Anthology of Death" has its deep roots in Meleager of Gadara's fourth-century BCE *Anthologia* (from the Greek, meaning "a gathering of flowers"), which collected Greek epigrammatic verse from inscriptions on statues, monuments, buildings, votive offerings to the gods, and graves, and

later became the basis for the medieval *Greek Anthology*.² The “flower-gathering” Meleager, ancient itinerant collector of memorializing inscriptions and oral traditions, is also Williams’s own secret source for *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*: the book’s subtitle, *A Garland for the Southern Appalachians*, refers to another English derivation from the Greek term *anthologia* (“garland”), which was the name given to the small collections or “miscellanies” of ballads in seventeenth-century England that Percy dismissed as secondary to oral sources. Williams’s subtitle suggests yet another related touchstone. By referring to the Southern Appalachian Mountain region of the US, Williams aligns his poetry with a specific subgenre of twentieth-century ballad collections. In fact, Williams’s subtitle may allude to the foundational text in this subgenre, Cecil J. Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell’s *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1917), which set the model by approaching the region as a special site of transplanted organic growth for the Anglo-Scottish ballads that Child had collected in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. Behind such anthologies were often racialist claims about the provenance of authentic Anglo-American ballads.³ But with his subtitle Williams alludes to a broader tradition of “ballad hunters” and “song catchers” in the Appalachian region, from John Lomax to Dorothy Scarborough, who did extensive fieldwork in the region’s rural communities for a different reason: the unique blending of Anglo-American and African American song traditions they found there. Williams unites all of these touchstones with the title of a different poem in *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*, “The Flower Hunter in the Fields,”

² These contextual details come from the scholarly apparatus to a standard nineteenth-century textbook edition of the *Greek Anthology*. See George Burges, ed., *The Greek Anthology: As Selected for the Use of Westminster, Eton, and Other Public Schools* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1852), v.

³ For instance, Cecil Sharp explained the longevity of English and Scottish folk ballads among Appalachian peoples by stating as a truism that “[t]heir language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually acquired and accumulated in past centuries and handed down generation by generation, each generation adding its quatum to that which it received.” See Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam, 1917), vii.

dedicated to William Bartram, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American botanist whose published works include an account of his travels in the southeastern US. For Williams, anthologists (“flower collectors”) like Uncle Jake Carpenter are in kinship with both anthropologists (“ballad hunters”) and naturalists (“flower hunters”) in the collections that they make. The significance of these touchstones is that they allow Williams to present each of his folklore specimens with a signal to the reader that it comes already mediated by a deep history of folklore collecting.

“From Uncle Jake Carpenter’s *Anthology of Death*” and the other epitaphic poems in Williams’s *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets* also update a specifically poetic source that they take from Romantic literary culture. With his conceit of recovering the traces left behind to memorialize the people, Williams evokes Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), which invokes, like Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper,” laboring rural folk who are unsung and—without the invocatory drive of the poet—unspeaking. Unlike his Romantic precursors, however, Williams represents the folk in their own voices, and often in their own texts. His work complicates the terms of the critique that my dissertation has aimed to challenge: the claim proposed by critics of folksong’s “manufacture” and “artifactualization” that poets and folklorists actually write *for* the folk, supplementing their speech with an inscriptive record. In Williams’s poetry, however, the folk show up in a variety of ways: when he reproduces an already existing artifact such as “Uncle Jake Carpenter’s *Anthology of Death*,” for instance, the folk are represented by a recovered text of their own. I turn to Williams in this coda because his poems crystallize an important problem in the folklore tradition. When the folk are represented as the authors of texts, readers become aware of the mediating role that folklorists have played as curators and editors, but they are not lead toward suspicion of the folklorists as

makers of fictions. Instead, they see that “the folk” have been very real all along, and that their lore and expression harbor deeper and more varied realities that wait to be discovered—the strata and substrata of an even lower underground that a poet such as Williams, for his part, approaches as depths to be sounded by an extraordinarily sensitive medium. For Williams, the furthest of those depths reached what he called the “grace” of the often poor, uneducated folks he classed together as “people on the Outside, beyond the pale” and their “homemade world of the eccentric...the weird.”⁴ Closer to the surface, however, those depths reached a world of bigotry and malice that Williams called a “human bestiary,” where, he said, “half the people you see look scary.”⁵

As I have argued, poets and folklorists working in print responded to the proliferation of phonography in the early twentieth century by devising formal means for capturing what they considered the reality of speech. Often this strategy entailed something other than exact phonetic transcription, as in Sandburg’s use of metrical quantity and Brown’s emphasis on idiomatic expression. These poets produced work that was phonographic in the sense that it strove for the status of a recording commensurate, if not correlative, to phonography’s technical means. Williams’s poetry in this sense is post-phonographic. Though Williams described himself according to the earlier model as a way to establish his authenticity as a folklorist of the Southern Appalachians—he was, he said, “an autochthonous mindless recording mechanism established ecologically within the mountain region” (Magpie’s Bagpipe, 164)—he went beyond the earlier

⁴ Williams, *The Locologodaedalist in Situ: Selected Poems 1968–70* (New York: Cape Goliard and Grossman, 1972), np; Williams, *A Palpable Elysium* (Jaffrey, NH: Godine, 2002), 14; Williams, *Blackbird Dust: Essays, Poems, and Photographs* (Turtle Point Press, 2000), 184.

⁵ Williams, *A Palpable Elysium*, 48.

phonographic poetry in his embrace of the artifactuality of the written signifier as a component in the poet's recording apparatus.⁶

Williams's post-phonographic approach to poetry has its basis in the particular synthesis his development as a writer embodied between folk culture and avant-garde art. As a student of Charles Olson's at Black Mountain College between 1951 and 1954, Williams was exposed early to Olson's theory of projective verse and absorbed the dual emphasis it placed on composition by field and the breath as the unit of measure—an oral poetics and a typographic poetics in one.⁷ In 1951, before his move to Black Mountain, he studied at the School of the Art Institute (SAIC) in Chicago, where he likely would have been exposed to the then-current rage for *art brut* among the city's younger visual artists, many of them studying at SAIC and developing a distinctive style of neo-expressionist art under the influence of Jean Dubuffet. Williams's training in Chicago, then, might have provided the latent spark for what became, in the early 1980s, the increasing focus in his folkloric practice on documenting visionary folk artists. It was Williams's interlude away from Black Mountain in 1952 for an army stint in Stuttgart, Germany, where he practiced typography and printing, that primed him for the craft of concrete poetry, which he developed into a major feature of his poetic output in the 1960s after he began what became a lifelong part-time residence in Cumbria, England, and befriended the Scottish concretist Ian Hamilton Finlay. By the 1960s, then, Williams's work had triangulated folk art and the Black Mountain School's avant-garde experiments in notating speech with the cool modernism of a specific brand of concretism—one that, in Finlay's hands, proposed the “poem as inscription” by

⁶ Williams, “The Arts—a (Finger-Lickin’) Southern Experience,” in *The Magpie's Bagpipe: Selected Essays of Jonathan Williams*, ed. Thomas Meyer (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), 164.

⁷ Biographical details about Williams discussed in this paragraph and the next come from an interview Williams and his partner Thomas Meyer gave in 1976 to the underground queer magazine *Gay Sunshine*. See John Browning and Jack Sharpless, “Interview: Jonathan Williams and Thomas Meyer,” *Gay Sunshine* 28 (Spring 1976): 1–6.

combining the typographic glyph with the site-specific epigrammatic tradition of Meleager's *Anthologia*.⁸ Based on his training and early aesthetic influences, Williams approached orality as human expression that was neither reduced nor abstracted but rather elevated and monumentalized—on the scale of an *art brut* sculpture, or a folk art environment—by graphic representation. He looked for his ideal model of inscription in the three-dimensionality of an engraving on stone placed within a built environment.

In addition to these formative early influences, Williams shared with the roster of poets discussed in this dissertation, from Sandburg and Brown to Amiri Baraka, an interest in inscribing popular music, particularly the blues and jazz, into poems. Alongside his training at Black Mountain, Williams learned techniques of improvisational poetic composition, or “spontaneous bop prosody,” as Allen Ginsberg famously called it, in the New York and San Francisco circles of Beat writers where he gravitated in the middle and late 1950s. It was the Beat approach to getting the blues and jazz into poetry that brought Williams in line with his contemporaries in the countercultural avant-garde, including Baraka himself. “I come from the Bourbon & Branch Water Tradition,” Williams wrote in 1959, referring to his Southern upbringing, “[but] have made all the scenes in Squaresville and most of the ones claimed by the Sugar Beet Generation.”⁹ When he left Black Mountain in 1954, Williams moved to San Francisco, joined the Beat scene at North Beach, and took a job packing records at a rhythm-and-blues wholesaler.¹⁰ In 1959, he moved to New York for a year and continued his association with the Beats there. What Williams took from the Beats in linking poetry with popular music is

⁸ Stephen Bann, “Afterword,” in Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Honey by the Water* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 51.

⁹ Jonathan Williams and Fielding Dawson, *Empire Finals at Verona* (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1959), np.

¹⁰ Williams remembered spending most of his evenings during his San Francisco at The Place, the North Beach haunt of the Beats, where he met Allen Ginsberg and Michael McClure, along with the San Francisco Renaissance cohort of Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer and their guiding elder Kenneth Rexroth. See Browning and Sharpless, 4.

signaled by the most direct of the allusions packed into the title of *Blues & Roots / Rue and Bluets*. During his year in New York, Williams regularly listened to the jazz musician Charles Mingus play at a number of Lower Manhattan venues, including Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, a haven of such Beats as Baraka and Diane di Prima and the locale where Mingus was working with Kenneth Patchen on a series of jazz-and-poetry sessions later released on LP.¹¹ *Blues & Roots*, meanwhile, became the title of the watershed LP that Mingus recorded in the winter of 1959, while Williams followed him around New York. Most significant for Williams was that Mingus's album became an early harbinger of the trend in jazz that Lerone Bennett called soul: an infusion of gospel and early downhome blues into jazz, with such compositions as "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting" using the stereophonic space of the studio recording to stage a kind of cult or visionary folk ritual. By tapping the avant-garde Mingus for the title of his book, Williams signaled that he would attempt to duplicate the same back-to-the-roots movement that experimental jazz had made and use it as an intervention in the poetic avant-garde.

Perhaps it was moving in the same jazz circles in New York in the late 1950s, with musical and literary spheres overlapping at the Living Theatre, that brought Williams into contact with Baraka. In 2002, in a late essay on folk art, discussed below, Williams would refer to Baraka's earlier, given name (LeRoi Jones) and refer to him as "[m]y old friend LeRoi." He and Baraka shared enough of an affiliation in their early careers to justify the familiarity. Both poets were featured in Donald Allen's era-defining anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* (1960), which drew them into a common identity as key members of the postwar avant-garde in poetry. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, meanwhile, Williams and Baraka collaborated

¹¹ Williams, *A Palpable Elysium*, 40.

as small-press publishers of the New American Poetry movement, issuing a number of poetry titles jointly under Williams's Jargon Society imprint and Totem/Corinth Press, the operation run by Baraka and his then-wife Hettie Jones.¹² As such, they became architects of the small-press revolution that formed an aesthetic underground in modern American poetry from the 1950s to the 1970s, making them colleagues in the movement to reshape the field of literary production among an entire generation of poets in the postwar period. In the 1990s and 2000s, their interests and activities converged again as aesthetic tastemakers, this time in the field of African American folk art. This later conversation would reveal the extent to which the formal question of representing folk expression on the page, for Williams, was inextricable from social and political questions about the representation of racial and class difference by intellectual elites. To underscore the stakes of this conversation, I first want to highlight two distinctive objectives that Williams and Baraka shared in using the idioms of the New American Poetry to represent folk culture, musical or otherwise.

Williams and Baraka both took the speech-based poetics of the Black Mountain school and united it with a Beat aesthetic of submitting poetic language to the improvisational styles of postwar popular music, especially the blues and jazz. This poetic style could be expressed prosodically, but it also manifested in a distinctive sub-literary diction: the language of the hip. Take Williams's 1959 poem "After Herrick," in which he intercuts riffs on the Renaissance poet's elegiac love lyric "The Vision" ("Sitting alone, as one forsook") with blues and bop versions of the Ira Gershwin pop ballad "But not for me" ("They're singing songs of love"): "*but not for me ... but not / for me (very high / Miles D.) / the bitter-type crab-apples / bouncing-like /*

¹² For brief histories and partial bibliographies of Totem/Corinth and the Jargon Society, see Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960–1980* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), 90–91 and 114–15. For a personal account of Totem/Corinth's publishing activities, see Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 58–78.

out of the sky—and / you know, / why cry?”¹³ Evolving one line out of the last on the basis of sonic patterns, with Billie Holiday and Miles Davis as his guides, Williams plies a style here that is a hipster’s update on Wordsworth and Coleridge’s “language of men speaking to men”: this is a style based on the blending of demotic and refined, or popular and elite registers of expression. It is in this style that Williams and Baraka converge aesthetically.

For Williams and Baraka, the two objectives behind this style were distinct but interrelated. On the one hand, they used it according to the Black Mountain school to tell unofficial histories or counter-histories that challenge dominant national narratives, like Charles Olson’s telling of American economic history by exposing the mercantilist origins of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in *The Maximus Poems*. On the other hand, they use this style as documentarians of folk belief to capture popular expressions in a mode that lacks ideological filters but enables critical framing. Like their precursors in the 1930s and 1940s, and many of their contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s, Williams and Baraka turned to the voices of the folk for images of equality on racial and class lines, but with careers that reached beyond the end of the Civil Rights Movement, they also used folklore to expose the seams that emerged in the late 1960s between the non-ascendant classes and liberal-progressive politics.

This mode of engaging with folklore was a dominant one for Williams. The poems of his own that Williams said represented a “current human bestiary” were issued as a Jargon Society chapbook titled *The Plastic Hydrangea People Poems* in 1968. They were later incorporated into the 1971 and 1985 editions of *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*, where they became part of his “unofficial oral history” of the Southern Appalachian region. The poems’ original publication date, and their original chapbook title, are significant: the assassination of Martin Luther King,

¹³ Williams, *Empire Finals at Verona*, np.

Jr., looms large over these poems, as does the Southern white coalition of working- and lower middle-class voters who helped to elect Richard Nixon to the presidency—that is, everyone from “construction workers and cab drivers and barbers” to North Carolina “mountain boys,” in Williams’s view, who might be said to have as much humanity as the gaudy, ersatz flowers decorating their exurban homes. In other words, Williams was responding with his poetry and his folklore alike to a real source of social and political pressure: the white backlash to both the legal desegregation of American society in the 1950s and the legal protection of voting rights among racial minorities in the 1960s. Williams said that he saw “the old populist faith in the good sense of the citizenry” coming under threat both from the “human bestiary” who were his oral informants and from the “linguistic violence” that some poets might take out on them.¹⁴ With that “populist faith” in question, then, Williams’s poems do something different than invoke the voice of the folk either as a vehicle of protest or as an image of solidarity, as is the case for the poets discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively. Instead, Williams’s poems subject the voice of the folk to the kind of immanent critique of underlying social forces that, in Adornian accounts, as I have discussed, poetry is said to be uniquely capable of performing—and they do so in order to express a suspicion of the ideological ugliness that can embed itself in folklore and folkways. Disavowing “linguistic violence,” Williams’s poems “try to keep their wits about them,” extending one principle of B. A. Botkin’s “folk-say” thesis and methodology beyond its typical application in WPA-era folklore—to represent folklore in both its noble and its venal aspects.¹⁵ Suspicious of one stratum of the folk, however, Williams searches for a deeper “collective substratum,” to use Adorno’s term for the lyric’s basis in common speech,

¹⁴ Williams, *The Locologodaedalist in Situ: Selected Poems 1968–70* (New York: Cape Goliard and Grossman, 1972), np.

¹⁵ See Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore*, xxv–xxvi.

reinforcing a project that is central to the range of poets discussed in this dissertation and that is, as much as Adorno's theory, as neo-Romantic as it is modernist: sounding the depths further and further underground for a more absolute outside that, against a dominant bourgeois (or petit bourgeois) society caught in anomie, is supposed to provide a source of moral coherence or authenticity.

Williams's poems "keep their wits about them" primarily by subjecting the language of their speakers to blank parody. This technique allows Williams to generate critique without resorting to the "linguistic violence" of polemic when his target is the linguistic violence of bigotry. Take the poem "Dear Reverend Carl C. McIntire," which I quote here in full:

Just a note
to let you know
we are listening to you
on Station
K-I-K-E
in Richmond,
Virginia

There are four of us Fundamentalist Baptist ladies
who ride together at 7:30
to the shirt factory and the napalm plant
and we always listen to your
"20th CENTURY REFORMATION HOUR"
every day
after the early morning
"MO-TOWN-SOUND SHOW" with
"Urethra & the Catheters"—

you both groove, baby,
I mean you let it *all* hang out
and no doubt!

So when you laid that wicked-world bit
on our heads Friday we felt we should be prepared
to meet God and goodness we sure would feel lost
without your spiritual uplift in our new pink
Dodge Polara...

Yours agin sin sin and keepin' those darkies
from a destroying *our* freedom,
zang-a-dang!

Myrtle-Jean Pugh, Co-Captain
James River Industrial League of
White Women Bowlers,
Team #16

While most of Williams's poems in "The Plastic Hydrangea People Poems," and in *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets* overall, have determinate oral informants, this poem appears to be a fictive monologue based on a composite of undocumented sources. The poem mixes realism with travesty, and these are the ingredients in its parody: Carl McIntire, the postwar national radio evangelist, and his broadcasts of Reformed (i.e., Calvinist) doctrinal commentaries; Myrtle-Jean Pugh, a factory worker whose favorite pastime puts her at the top of a working-class institution, the bowling league, and whose sincere religious fundamentalism is matched by her sincere racism; "K-I-K-E," fictive radio call letters emblemizing the speaker's anti-Semitism; "Urethra & the Catheters," a malaprop-portmanteau of Aretha Franklin and Motown girl groups, reflecting a bipolar love and debasement of black expressive culture; a casual reference to the "napalm factory," betokening the equally casual patriotism of supporting the War in Vietnam; and the pink Dodge Polara, the perfect vehicle for "Plastic Hydrangea People," all combine to form a portrait of the nascent conservative movement in the South. The poem's blank parody relies on impersonation; the poet's critique dwells immanently in the voices of the poem, which are all uttered by the character Myrtle-Jean Pugh. In fact, just as Williams celebrates Uncle Jake Carpenter by making him the author of his own text, in this poem he targets his critique by making the Myrtle-Jean character herself the impersonating subject. After Myrtle-Jean namedrops "Urethra & the Catheters," the poem departs from its linguistic base, with Myrtle-Jean impersonating the blackness she has just misidentified by imitating palely the language of

the hip: “you both groove, baby, / I mean you let it all hang out / and no doubt!” Two stanzas later, the poem departs from its linguistic base again, this time with Myrtle-Jean exaggerating the dialect of her own white Southern Baptist identity group: “Yours agin sin sin and keepin’ those darkies / from a destroying *our* freedom.” Myrtle-Jean is the signatory of this letter, and by making her the voice of both other folks and her own folks, Williams shifts the question of representation onto his speaker: Myrtle-Jean is guilty of racial misrepresentation before she voices a hyperbolic assertion of her own tribal identity as a white Southern American.

Baraka tapped into a similar structure of dramatic and verbal irony with his 1965 poem “Word from the Right Wing,” a monologue that excoriates President Lyndon Johnson for the War in Vietnam but also, like Williams’s “Dear Reverend Carl C. McIntire,” sets up its speaker as a representative of archaic folk beliefs. Baraka’s technical means differ significantly from Williams’s: Baraka leads with the “linguistic violence” of invective, invokes and affirms a genre of black folk expression, and saves parody for one discrete moment in the poem. But Baraka’s ultimate effect in the poem is, like Williams’s objective, to make visible the corrupted materials that can accrete inside folklore. In its first half the poem remains focused on the target of its polemic, Lyndon Johnson, and does not yet reflect back on the speaker:

President Johnson
is a mass murderer,
and his mother,
is a mass murderer,
and his wife
is weird looking, a special breed
of hawkbill cracker
and his grandmother’s
weird dumb and dead
turning in the red earth
sick as dry blown soil

The poem's invective here is inseparable from its invocation of black folk expression, which operates through a rhetorical allusion to "the dozens," a street game of ritual insult often redounding, as here, on the maligning of an opponent's mother. The conventional reading of this poem is precisely that it stages a one-way game of "the dozens," in the voice of Baraka himself, in order to lay down a straightforward, blistering indictment of Johnson and his actions in the Vietnam conflict.¹⁶ This is one important dimension of the poem. Indeed, the invocation of "the dozens" is crucial. It locates the utterance in the oral tradition of black folk culture and supplies it with a pattern for hyperbolic verbal attack. But as much as this poem is an indictment of a war its speaker views as unjust, it is also a kind of dramatic monologue that puts its speaker on the line for critical appraisal. As the second half of the poem vividly displays, it uses the speaker as a surrogate whose words prompt readers to reflect critically on the patterns of white racism that have become introjected into black folk thought and expression.

The poem's second half begins by envisioning Johnson, from the vantage point of his black subordinates, as the victim of the assassination that killed John F. Kennedy ("He has negroes work for him hate him, / wish him under the bullets of kennedydeath"), but it soon takes a different turn:

these projectiles kill his mother plagued
by vulgar cancer, floating her dusty horoscope,
without the love even she thinks she needs, deadbitch,
Johnson's mother, walked all night holding hands
with a nigger, and stroked that nigger's
hard. Blew him downtown Newark 1928...I got proof¹⁷

¹⁶ See Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 43. For accounts that build on Henderson's reading, see William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 20 and Jerry Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 108–09.

¹⁷ Baraka (Jones), *Black Magic: Collected Poetry, 1961–1967* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 93.

Where the first half of the poem reverberates with a racial epithet that Southern blacks use to insult whites, the second half of the poem makes an unsettling shift in its game of “the dozens,” using white racial fears about miscegenation to impugn Johnson’s mother. By weaponizing Southern white racial paranoia against a Southern white US president, the speaker’s position accepts rather than indicts the potency of that belief. This is the source of the poem’s dramatic irony: for the reader, the intended meaning of the speaker’s insult, the sexual insatiability and frustration of Johnson’s mother, is overshadowed by the unwitting implications of the racial figure chosen by the speaker to make the point. With its outlandish final assertion—“I got proof” of an interracial tryst in Newark—the poem invites readers to laugh *at*, not *with*, the speaker. The poem’s readers are laughing for a different reason: the speaker ultimately sounds like a right-wing conspiracy theorist. Indeed, the poem’s title (“Word from the Right Wing”) cues readers to view the speaker’s utterance with ironic distance. Is a “word from the right wing” how Johnson or his supporter’s might dismiss the utterance? Is it, rather, a reflection of the radical foment in which Baraka found himself in Lower Manhattan in the mid-1960s, when politically “it was all mixed up and unsorted,” and his political inspirations ranged from the Marxist Antonio Gramsci to, in his words, “the right-wing [Georges] Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*”—whether or not readers in Baraka’s time grasped the reference?¹⁸ If Sorel were the touchstone, would it be plausible to suppose that readers in 1967 understood the poem’s expression of anarchic violence as radically right-wing, and not a manifestation of the revolutionary left? Or is it that the exploitation of racial fear in the poem’s utterance mirrors the reactionary cast of mind among Southern conservatives in the 1960s, who fomented a racial backlash against the president who signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965? It would be a mistake to interpret Baraka’s poem as

¹⁸ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Freundlich, 1984), 271.

drawing any kind of equivalency between white racial ideology and examples of black folklore in which it implants itself. But it is crucial to see that Baraka's poem enlists folk expression toward a different critical objective than a straightforward poem of protest would: it points back self-reflexively at the way the language available to an insurgent poetry in the popular voice can depend on certain folk beliefs, including archaic racial codes and taboo thinking, that are antagonistic to its own ends.

For comparison, consider another of Williams's "Plastic Hydrangea People Poems" from *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*, titled "Cracker-Barrel Reveries on the Tune 'Pax Americana,'" which sees the Reverend King, rather than President Johnson, become the subject of conspiratorial thinking. Based on a conversation he heard from the local "mountain boys" in a country store in Scaly Mountain, North Carolina, this poem also sees Walter Jenkins, Johnson's onetime top aide, become the subject of homophobic scandalmongering:

feller over in
franklin
says hes got thishere book
says that fbi feller hoover
says that nigger preacher kings
nothin
but a tarnation communist

and i reckon you boys
heared on tv this
walter Jenkins hes
some kind of unnatchrul sex prevert why
you know them seven chillun
must be lightbulbs
you just know it

just like you know ol castro
and them jew boys in new york
got us into veetnam

some things be's plain obvious

The poem is presented as a transcribed utterance, and it begins by couching its speaker's monologue in hearsay: the King conspiracy he describes is reported fourth-hand, as idle chatter about a book that quotes the anticommunist J. Edgar Hoover and his campaign to tarnish King's character. In the poem's second stanza, the speaker's utterance is mediated not by other informants but rather by the mass media, namely television, and reports second-hand on the gay sex scandal surrounding Jenkins in 1964 ("unnatchrul sex pervert") while speculating that his children, therefore, must be the product of incest elsewhere in the family ("must be lightbulbs"). In the third stanza, the speaker's conspiratorial thinking turns to Vietnam, where Baraka's speaker starts his invective. Here, however, the speaker ascribes US engagement in the conflict to a Jewish conspiracy in a way that recalls instead Ezra Pound's "Canto XLV" ("With usura hath no man a house of good stone"), itself a source of inspiration to the postwar neo-fascist organizations with which this speaker's views keep sympathy. Williams leaves no question as to the meaning of "a word from the right wing" in this poem. He not only makes it a point in the poem to frame the speech of his informant critically through blank parody—he "keeps his wits" with the ironic musical setting of "Pax Americana" in the title, which at once figures peace and hegemony—but also insists on embedding it within its layers of reportage to suggest the way popular media corrupts popular consciousness. The poem's unilinear refrain, "some things be's plain obvious," extends the irony: if *these* things are obvious to Williams's informant and speaker, then there must be little chance for Williams's "old populist faith in the good sense of the citizenry." The contingency and fragility of that faith is what this poem reveals about Williams's *and* Baraka's ways of framing folk expression: if folk expression is a signifier of the common and the popular, then it can also function to register where and to what extent common speech and popular consciousness have become the sunken, sedimented, and degraded layers of

culture. But this point entails a contrary faith: if folk expression comes to betray the values cherished by the liberal-progressive or radical-left poet-folklorist, then using poetry as a critical frame can raise folk expression up again by raising it as a problem.

By 1971, when he published the first edition of *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*, and even more so by 1985, when he published the book's second edition, Williams could see and hear the separation between his values as a folklorist and the values of the folk: resentment and suspicion of the civil rights and anti-poverty campaigns of the Great Society, and later the Evangelical-led conservative revolution in the South, made that a certainty. He chose to turn the combined tools of folklore and poetry toward documenting that separation. That folklorists, the representatives of the folk in the cultural field, might not share an immediate empathetic connection with the people they wrote about posed a crisis-level problem for the discipline of folklore itself. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, literary folklorists in particular justified their role as representatives of the folk on the basis of mutual understanding and sentiment. Folklore's reliance on this kind of immediacy was articulated powerfully by Alan Lomax, even when he aspired to give his research the scientific status that combining the literary and anthropological fields of the discipline might bring. In 1950 at Indiana University, home of what was already the nation's major training institution for professional folklorists, Lomax told an international conference of folklorists that their discipline was predicated on an ethical and political mission—the idea “that we are making a better present and preparing some sort of juster future for all people”—and that this mission was based, in turn, on a simple “value notion.” “We are folklorists because we like folklore, or we like the people from whom it comes,” Lomax said. “We like the way folklore makes us feel and we like the way many people make us feel.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Alan Lomax, “Making Folklore Available,” in *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934–1997*, edited by Ronald D. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2005), 114.

Williams, for his part, believed in the same value notion, which lent urgency to his critical approach to folklore. “I remember how miserable I felt a day I walked into the country store in Scaly Mountain, NC,” Williams wrote, “and heard the mountain boys saying the things they do in the poem ‘Cracker-Barrel Reveries.’”²⁰ Williams did not like the way folklore at this stratum of society was making him feel, which means that it failed the test of Lomax’s value notion. So he put it to the test, in turn, of immanent critique. But he also looked deeper for another realm of American society where he could feel himself in sympathy with the folk. It happened to be at a further remove of mediation than the songs and speech with which this dissertation has largely been concerned. He looked to folk culture in the form of the plastic arts, art environments, and material culture, and—perhaps above all—to folk attitudes, beliefs, and sensibilities. And Baraka, it turns out, was right there with him.

* * *

From 1984 to 1991, along with the photographers Roger Manley and Guy Mendes, Williams traveled by car throughout the Southeastern US, from Virginia to Louisiana, to document eighty-five “cultural eccentrics” that he preferred to call “visionary folk artists.”²¹ Mixing interviews with the artists, ethnographic observations of their locales, and photographs of them and their work, Williams and his collaborators assembled a large book of documentary profiles titled *Walks to the Paradise Garden*, which was left unpublished at the time of Williams’s death in 2008. (Williams published selections from the book in art and literary journals from the late 1980s to the late 1990s.) He intended the book’s title as an allusion both to Frederick Delius’s “The Walk to the Paradise Garden,” an orchestral interlude in the 1906 opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, and to Howard Finster’s “Paradise Garden,” a folk art environment in which the

²⁰ Williams, *The Locologodaedalist in Situ*, np.

²¹ Williams, “Corners of the Paradise Garden,” *Modern Painters* 9, no .2 (1996): 51–58.

Baptist minister would fill his Pennville, Georgia property with sacred paintings and sculptures made of junkyard detritus.²² On the one hand, then, Williams's project reflects a career-long search for languages and forms that synthesize folk culture and classical high culture—Delius's opera is itself a late Romantic version of the Shakespearean tragedy, set in a pastoral mode and characterized by peasants—and in this way taps into the same impulse that drove Williams early on, for instance, to fuse the Renaissance lyric with bebop. On the other hand, Williams's project also reflects a desire to find the authentic humanistic values missing in other strata of the folk in an unrecognized subculture of folk artists who seem to have no place in society other than in their own self-made worlds. "I have always sought out the ostracized and undervalued when and where I could find them on the margins and fringes of a society with little regard for ecology, privacy or visionary experience," Williams wrote.²³

But Williams also recognized the problems of class and race that attended his subject position as a documentarian and collector with respect to these visionary folk artists. "Just who is this stubborn, rusticated mountaineer Celt," Williams asked himself aloud, "with sophisticated tastes and primitive longings?"²⁴ For Williams, the problem of primitivism had a number of valences, often connected to the questions of representation and mediation that are raised, as we have seen, in his poetry. Williams constantly wondered whether folk art could serve as a sufficient channel for authentic communication between persons of difference class and racial positions, or whether the specter of appropriation would always shadow this humanistic project. Among the scores of folk artists he profiled, some cases were more problematic to him than others. In the cases that were not problematic to him at all, it was less the stakes of the project

²² Williams, *A Palpable Elysium*, 152–54.

²³ Williams, "Corners of the Paradise Garden," 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

than his aspirations for it that became especially evident. Williams enjoyed an instant rapport and an unvexed relationship with the artist known as St. EOM, the creator of a folk art environment in Marion County, Georgia that he called the Land of Pasaquan. In making this temple complex comprised of shrines, pagodas, ceremonial walls, and dance floors, St. EOM developed a philosophy of “Pasaquoyanism” that was equal parts syncretistic religion and antiestablishment politics: “Politics ain’t been much good,” St. EOM told Williams, reflecting on the election of President Ronald Reagan, “since the studs dragged the bitches off the thrones thousands of years ago.”²⁵ St. EOM speaks left-libertarian politics in the language of hip, and Williams can quote him with little explanatory commentary because St. EOM is something of his alter ego: he spent the early part of his career in the art world of New York but returned to the rural South to live life as art on his own aesthetic grounds. Insofar as their aesthetics, their politics, and the languages they use to articulate them overlap seamlessly, their subject positions become almost interchangeable. A different case with a similar outcome for Williams is the folk artist Sister Gertrude Morgan, a black street evangelist from Lafayette, Alabama who founded the Everlasting Gospel Revelation Mission in New Orleans. In building this storefront church and religious folk art environment, where she created religious paintings, preached sermons, and combined the two into dramatic evangelizing performances, Sister Morgan evolved an aesthetic synthesis that Williams, a white Southerner, could never duplicate but found congruent with his own ideals of folk culture: a combination of Christian iconography, American pop culture, and what Williams identifies as a ludic, Dada-esque avant-garde strain. Williams found himself in such sympathy with Sister Morgan’s cultural sensibility that he could write a prose poem, not in

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52–53. See also the “as-told-to autobiography” of St. EOM, edited by Tom Patterson, with photographs by Williams, Manley, and Mendes, in *St. EOM in the Land of Pasaquan: The Life and Times of Eddie Owens Martin* (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1987).

her voice but rather in the persona of a stall-crier or traveling minstrel declaiming the contents of a broadside advertising her performances:

WHO IS SISTER GERTRUDE MORGAN? SHE IS THE PROPHETESS ANNA, THE BRIDE OF CHRIST. THE NURSE TO DR. JESUS, THE HOUSEKEEPER FOR DADA GOD, AND THE EVERLASTING GOSPEL REVELATION PAINTER! HER BUSINESS? TO WHUP UP ON SIN!²⁶

Through Sister Morgan, Williams finds a different way of invoking the voice of the folk: to be *their* surrogate, to invert the hierarchy and make one's own voice a medium in service of folk beliefs, and to express unironic sympathy for different folks' understanding of themselves and their world.

In this respect, Williams's writing about the folk artists he knew recalls Sandburg's use of folksong as a medium for dramatizing sympathetic identification with others. Williams's project dealt in its own way with the stakes that had long been part of this Romantic topos of cultural encounter. Among the folk artists he documented, the cases he found problematic were those that brought into relief the potential incommunicability and incommensurability between himself and his subjects. But the problem ran deeper for Williams. He did not believe that folk art would offer members of the intellectual and cultural elite such as himself special access to race or class consciousness. For Williams, this was not only because the era of the twentieth century that could support "old populist faiths" was under historical pressure. Rather, Williams also believed that folk art was special precisely because of the access it gave its creators to an autonomous life of the imagination. He came to this belief in part through the work of Vernon Burwell, a black folk artist from Rocky Mount, North Carolina. When Williams met him in 1988, Burwell was sixty years old and had retired from decades working as a railroad mechanic

²⁶ Williams, "Seven Outsiders," *Conjunctions* 21 (1993): 220–21. Sister Gertrude Morgan died in 1980. Williams's encounters with her work occurred prior to the official start of his research for *Walks to the Paradise Garden*, and some of them came second-hand from his collaborator Guy Mendes.

to concentrate on his self-taught practice as a sculptor. Burwell specialized in sculpting large human figures, especially historical personages, out of construction materials. In his interview with Burwell, Williams prodded him for an answer to what Williams considered a fundamental question for his project: he wanted to know what impels ordinary folk to create artworks. “So, why, Mr. Burwell,” asked Williams, “did you suddenly in 1976 decide to start making human figures out of cement?” Burwell responded, “Well, I just decided I would try to make something.” Burwell’s reticence makes Williams self-aware of the distance—on grounds of both class and race—between the social world of the intellectual elite who want to interpret Burwell’s work and the imaginative world that Burwell creates an artist. “That’s really all that he will say,” Williams concluded, “and maybe he thinks it’s pretty funny that a bunch of museum curators and college professors and collectors and poets keep coming around the place.”²⁷

Williams’s fundamental question for Burwell had a more elaborate form: he wanted to know, more specifically, what folk art’s reason for being could be in the absence of any instrumental value or practical function. In folklore scholarship of the prior two decades, a premise had been established that the functional purpose of folk art was primary and its aesthetic value secondary. Recall that in 1963, at a time when he and Williams were small-press publishing collaborators, Baraka had argued this claim explicitly. What can the folklorist say, however, when the entire process and apparatus behind a folk artist’s work is subsumed by that artist’s basic nonutilitarian desire, in the words of Burwell, to make? The status of this nonutilitarian desire as a kind of first principle of folk art—call it a drive toward aesthetic autonomy—was underscored, for Williams, by Burwell’s reticence to him. And Williams insisted that Burwell’s reticence could not be explained simply by racial difference. (He noted

²⁷ Williams, *Le Garage Ravi de Rocky Mountain: An Essay on Vernon Burwell* (Rocky Mount, NC: North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1988), 3–5.

the same impasse in communication with another of his informants, the folk artist Russell Gillespie, a white Baptist preacher.) Instead, he suggested, the problem—and its solution—were about labor and class. “The happy instance is that Vernon Burwell, sixty years old in a social order that had demanded service with a smile over much of a lifetime,” argued Williams, “decided to offer us the happy products of his imagination with absolutely no request on order.” Burwell’s work may not have offered Williams one of the desiderata for which he approached folk art—access to the deep interiority of a subaltern class—but it did offer a way to sublimate class difference altogether. Like modernist abstraction, raising the artwork and its creator out of a world determined by use and exchange values, Burwell’s folk art speaks for itself, and that is precisely the point, even if it speaks very little. For Williams, the world of visionary folk art was an autonomous world of ecstatic imagination that eliminated barriers of class from what was supposed to be the realm of universal humanistic values. Just as happily, as Williams might have said, it happened to do the same for racial barriers. “Let no one suppose that I assume that I know what black people, as black people, are thinking or feeling. I don’t,” said Williams, quoting the philosopher W. H. Ferry. “What I do assume is common humanity.”²⁸ Williams was pulling back from Baraka’s efforts in the 1960s to set folk culture in opposition to Western values as such, but in so doing he was arriving at a point, as we have seen, that two other skeptics of the West in the folklore field, Alan Lomax and Jerome Rothenberg, had also redounded upon in the 1980s: that folk culture mattered because it was perhaps the last refuge of a humanist universalism.

It is not the case that class or race gets denied or dismissed in Williams’s account. Williams’s implicit claim is that the folk produce art as a kind of compensatory or redemptive

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

inversion of values, so that they can participate in a human exchange that is not subject to the laws of market exchange. It is a classically liberal claim, and one way to interpret Williams's position is that he drew from nineteenth-century liberalism as a mainstream defense for the stronger positions some of the artists he profiled occupied as outsiders to almost any part of society governed by the logic of capitalism. In writing about the Bessemer, Alabama folk artist Thornton Dial in 2002, Williams converged one last time with his "old friend" Baraka, who had written an extensive essay on Dial in 1993 in conjunction with exhibitions at the Museum of American Folk Art and the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Williams disagreed with Baraka about how exactly it could be said that Dial, interpreted as a true autonomous artist outside the market, occupied a position that rejected racial and class injustice. In their respective essays, Williams and Baraka each staged a hypothetical dialogue between Dial, a black artist and retired laborer, and a white critic of his work. Dial had spent his adult life as a house painter, a carpenter, and an ironworker for the Pullman Car Company. All that time, he was also a painter and a sculptor. In his hypothetical dialogue, Williams focuses on Dial's achievements in transcending the wage-earning market, impersonating a typical Southern white racist's response to Dial's art practice: "'Buck Dial, you go way from here, you stop messin' with that art. That art is for white folks!'"²⁹ Williams suggests that Dial confronted and opposed racism simply by daring to turn his skills as a laborer into visionary talent as an artist. Baraka, for his part, suggests that Dial's art in and of itself signifies a radical race and class politics—a politics all the more radical for remaining obscure to white observers. In his hypothetical dialogue, Baraka puts Dial in conversation with William Arnett, a prominent collector and champion of African American art and artists of the South, who in this dialogue wants to know the real meaning of Dial's work:

²⁹ Williams, *A Palpable Elysium*, 144.

“You don't want to hear this tale, boss. Them weird metal Uncle Sam fishes, you don't wanna know, Boss, what that shit be sayin’,” says Baraka's Dial, as a black laborer might say, deflecting conflict, to his white boss. “Shit, suppose Nat Turner painted?” he continues, comparing the import of his work to a kind of slave revolt. “Naw, man, you ain't frontin' me. This is just color and stuff. Some weird stuff I think up.”³⁰ It is no accident that Baraka's Dial sounds strikingly similar to John Lomax's Lead Belly, who, Lomax said, spoke with the front of his mind and thought with the back of his mind when he interacted with whites. Baraka was responding to the same problem as Williams, who followed Sandburg in approaching folk culture as a site for intersubjective communication across lines of race and class and then, finding that those lines could be rebarbative boundaries, followed Lomax and Rothenberg in seeking their dissolution in a universal humanism that for him was vouchsafed by aesthetic autonomy. Baraka, however, doubled down on Lomax's claim for irreducible cultural difference, albeit on the opposite side of the political line. For Baraka, a folk artist like Dial was not only a subterranean but also an insurrectionary artist, and the social and political value of his work depended not on a hidden refuge of humanistic ideals to which visionary aesthetic experience gave everyone equal access, but instead on a protected space of cultural signifying within a starkly plural and heterogeneous society.

Baraka's analysis of Dial's artistry shared a certain kinship with Williams's general approach to folk art. According to Baraka, Dial's art made an assault on white supremacy and Eurocentrism by representing a “real world of black feeling” in a way that seemed at once to take stock of and to reject what Baraka called the “class definitions” of high and low culture.³¹ For

³⁰ Amiri Baraka, “African American ‘Self-Taught’ Art,” in *Fearful Symmetry: The Art of Thornton Dial* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1993), 37–38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33 and 38.

Baraka, Dial's art also forced critical observers to reevaluate the meaning of the term "primitive" in reference to black art, not only to feel guilt for its longstanding racist valences but also to consider seriously its possible reclamation as a term of oppositional strength. Destabilizing high and low culture, expressing ambivalence about the allure of the primitive—these were ideas that Williams considered fundamental to folk art's role in critical narratives about race and class. In Baraka's account, the categories of the "low" and the "primitive" were instruments of Western art history's own self-affirming hegemonic narrative, and their force could be felt in Dial's work, he argued, both in its depiction of tragedy and, where images of love and triumph dominated, in the refusal of the tragic as the baseline of African American life. The concept of the "primitive" cut a number of different ways for Baraka. "African art has only recently begun to emerge from beneath the veil of racist devaluation as 'primitive,'" he wrote. "Although we should understand that even the term 'primitive' is misused to distort the very origins—in Africa—of human society itself."³² Baraka's point was that the "primitive" could devalue a work of folk art if the term were understood to mean early on a timeline of evolutionary development—as it was, for instance, in John Stuart Mill's account of the ballad—but it could also grant the work the ultimate prized status if the term meant basic, fundamental, and uncorrupted, as it did for Child. Moreover, Baraka suggested, the "primitive" could be used as a critical concept to upend other teleological cultural narratives, such as European modernism's narrative of increasing aesthetic sophistication, insofar as the "primitive" had been deployed in the twentieth century by black artists, trained and untrained, as a self-conscious means of producing distressed artifacts. After the 1930s, Baraka argued, it became possible to see a "modernist" like Jacob Lawrence and a "primitive" like Horace Pippin using their medium in the same way because black art, in

³² Ibid., 34.

Baraka's account, was charting a different narrative—one in which the “technological gap” between fine art and folk art gradually diminishes.³³ If the “primitive” and the “low” were instruments of cultural hegemony, Baraka argued, they could also be turned against their masters by an artist like Dial and, as part of folk art's general reorientation of values, used to snipe at the canons of Western art.

It was precisely on this point that Williams most directly took issue with Baraka's analysis of Dial and with his account of folk art more broadly. Williams too grappled with the problems and the possibilities of the “primitive” and the “low” as critical concepts, as we have seen, but he disagreed with Baraka about identifying the hegemonic system in which these concepts could intervene. For Williams, who wanted to unite the liberal tradition with folk art in order to revive a universal humanism, it was not the Western art tradition as such that ought to be undermined by sounding the depths of the “primitive” but rather the separation of that tradition, aided by what Baraka called its “class definitions,” from the world of laboring folk on which it depended. In his essay on Dial, Williams questions the connection that Baraka draws between the Western art tradition in which they both think Dial's work intervenes and the history of European colonization. He quotes from Baraka's essay on Dial and offers his own counterpoint:

My old friend LeRoi is as unrelenting as ever, I am glad to report, and he does make the eyes go round and puts you on your toes: “Wagner was Hitler's Bebop, The Rolling Stones have spoken directly of their vehicular mode of racism and gender oppression. What was Rodin's *The Thinker* thinking about? Well, check the year it was created, and what was Europe doing? Well, colonizing Africa, Asia, Latin America.” Well, an old ironist like me often thinks *The Thinker* was wondering whether or not he'd told the washerwoman to put no starch in his collars. Still, LeRoi may have it right after all.³⁴

For Baraka, the universal humanistic values claimed by the Western art tradition—reason, beauty, the ethical life—are enshrined in the contemplative pose of Auguste Rodin's late-

³³ Ibid., 36.

³⁴ Williams, *A Palpable Elysium*, 144.

nineteenth-century sculpture *The Thinker*, but the real content of Rodin's allegorical figure, he contends, is the system of colonization and oppression at its base. Williams, however, tries a different line of critique, taking aim at the distinction between high and low culture that restricts who has access to the realm of universal humanistic values. For Williams, the humanism embodied by *The Thinker* is subtended by the mundane, the everyday, and—closer to home than Europe's historical colonies—the working class. Not only is Williams, the “ironist,” suggesting that a figure of genius in the Western art tradition might stoop to consider matters as lowly as his laundry. He is also suggesting that the hierarchy of culture and labor supporting the classical traditions is reversible. For Williams, the key value of folk art is that it would take the kind of access to the realm of universal values that *The Thinker* enjoys and extend them to the washerwoman.

Like each of the other poet-folklorists examined in this dissertation, from Sandburg to Sterling Brown, Baraka would have appreciated Williams's argument that culture should work for the working class. Williams believed that a lower subterranean stratum of the folk could shore up the liberal tradition by rescuing the threatened bond between folklore and liberal-progressive politics. Baraka, for his part, approached this stratum of the folk from a starting point that was resolutely Marxist. Baraka cast a specific image of the black folk artist through Dial: a worker, an autochthon of the Black Belt, and “the mass man of the Afro-American nation.” Baraka was envisioning a folk figure that he called the “Basic Blood,” a vestige of the Communist Party's 1928 thesis of “self-determination for the Black Belt” as much as a throwback to Baraka's own 1960s black nationalism.³⁵ It might seem, then, that folk art was just another channel routing Baraka back to the ethnic and cultural pluralism of his nationalist phase.

³⁵ Baraka, “African American ‘Self-Taught’ Art,” 36 and 41.

But Baraka's focus on African American folk art actually led him to a new form of cultural politics. Gone was Larry Neal's "two Americas" thesis, and in its place Baraka adopted a formulation by the leftist cultural historian and former Maoist H. Bruce Franklin, arguing that the US was a "mulatto culture" inseparable from the New World as a whole, with African American culture at its center, not its periphery. Baraka also seems to have been prescient about the leftist critiques of American pluralism in its multicultural phase that would come at the turn of the new century from Dean Robinson, Adolph Reed, and others.³⁶ Where Baraka arrived through his study of African American folk art was a viewpoint in which black cultural expression, as he put it, "speaks from outside the center of US society, yet its being, its presence, its historic force continue to color America from the North Pole to the South." Black traditional culture was deeply imbricated in the American tradition, but its locus in the lower subterranean stratum of folk culture enabled it to pervade the mainstream with force derived from an antinomian outside.

If Baraka helped to articulate a reason why folk culture should still matter to the radical left after an era in which ethnic pluralism had reigned, Williams helped to articulate a different future for what had become folk culture's increasingly questionable political utility to an increasingly unviable liberal-progressive tradition. At the time of Williams's death in 2008, that tradition stood poised to undergo an economic crisis as existentially threatening as the social and political crisis of the reactionary 1980s in which Williams republished *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*. Williams belonged to the line of poets, folklorists, and poet-folklorists that this dissertation has charted, for whom the modern industrial society of twentieth-century America

³⁶ Robinson, for instance, argues that nationalist and pluralist movements in the black activist tradition historically reproduce the dominant political and economic practices of their eras, so that since the late 1960s, he contends, the brand of ethnic pluralism that emerged from the Black Power era has been shaped within parameters set by "progrowth capitalism." See Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201.

had become, in the words of Lloyd Lewis, “a civilization which was over-scientific, over-capitalized, over-mechanized.” Writing soon before the republication of *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*, and just prior to the launch of his *Walks to the Paradise Garden* project, Williams felt that artists like himself and his photographer collaborators were, alongside their subjects, true cultural outsiders: “[T]here is little or no context in 1981 for poets or photographers,” he believed, because “their pleasures are nothing at all to the mentality of any region or the power and ordinance in industrialized capitalist states.”³⁷ Williams was deeply critical of the capitalism that would sputter and stall in 2008, putting new pressures on and dredging up new resentments from the laboring folk he documented, but it was criticism aimed specifically at what he sensed to be one of capitalism’s internal contradictions: that it seemed to work against the liberal social model that historically had incubated it, making impossible the liberal cultural projects that mattered most to him, such as aesthetic autonomy or the freedom to be an autochthonous visionary genius on one’s own plot of land. Williams was not a socialist like Sandburg, or a Communist like Brown, or a Third World Marxist like Baraka. He was a liberal who shared some of the left-libertarian impulses of his informants from the lower subterranean stratum of late-twentieth-century folk art. He believed in a Rousseauvian society simplified to its basic principles of association and intended to maximize individual freedoms. In this respect, Williams was attempting to chart a future for the folklore field from an orientation planted deeply in its roots, the nineteenth-century liberal tradition of Mill, Child, Higginson, and even Frederick Douglass, who each in their own way looked to folk culture for resources they believed could solve the problems of modernity by restoring basic moral sympathies or rudimentary social bonds. Deciding whether this return to roots was adequate to the problems set before it in the

³⁷ Williams, “The Camera Non-Obscura,” in *The Magpie’s Bagpipe*, 83.

twenty-first century would become the task of a new generation of poets who, in the wake of the 2008 economic crash, would once again mine folk tradition and folk history for answers.

Bibliography

Publications

- Abrahams, Roger. *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Aldine, 1970.
- Adorno, Theodor W. "Lyric Poetry and Society." Translated by Bruce Mayo. In *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edited by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Mackay Kellner, 155–71. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Akers, Jhon C., ed. *A Small Friend: Carl Sandburg's Guitar*. Spartanburg, SC: Holocene, 2008.
- Allen, William Frances, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds. *Slave Songs of the United States*, 1867. Facsimile edition, New York: Dover, 1995.
- Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones). "African-American 'Self Taught' Art." In *Fearful Symmetry: The Art of Thornton Dial*, 33–64. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1993.
- . *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. New York: Freundlich, 1984.
- . *Black Magic Poetry, 1961–1967*. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969.
- . *Black Music*, 1967. Reprinted with preface by Amiri Baraka. New York: Akashic, 2010.
- . *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, 1963. Reprinted with preface by Amiri Baraka. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. Page references are to the 1999 edition.
- Baraka, Amiri and Larry Neal, eds. *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. New York: William Morrow, 1968.
- Bell, Bernard W. "The Debt to Black Music." *Black World* 12, no. 5 (March 1973): 16–26 and 74–87.
- Bennett, Lerone Jr. *The Negro Mood and Other Essays*, 1964. 2nd ed. New York: Ballantine, 1965.
- . "The Soul of Soul." *Ebony* 12, no. 2 (December 1961): 111–20.
- Bernstein, Charles, ed. *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Bone, Robert. "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," *Callaloo* 28 (Summer 1986): 446–68.
- Bontemps, Arna. "Famous WPA Authors." *Negro Digest* 8, no. 7 (1950): 43–47.
- Botkin, B. A. *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People*. New York: Crown, 1944.

- . “American Folklore.” In *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition*, edited by Simon J. Bronner, 131–44. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002.
- . “Applied Folklore: Creating Understanding through Folklore.” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (September 1953): 199–206.
- . “We Called It ‘Living Lore.’” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 14 (1958): 189–201.
- Boyes, Georgina. *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.
- Bracey, John H., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst, eds. *SOS: Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.
- Brady, Erika. *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999.
- Brown, Sterling A. *A Negro Looks at the South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . “The Blues.” *Phylon*, 13, no. 4 (1952): 286–92.
- . “The Blues as Folk Poetry.” *Folk-Say* 2 (1930): 324–39.
- . *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*. Edited by Michael S. Harper. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1980.
- . “Dark of the Moon.” *Folk-Say* 2 (1930): 275–79.
- . *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975.
- . “Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs.” In *A Son’s Return: Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, edited by Mark A. Sanders, 243–64. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996.
- . *The Negro in American Fiction / Negro Poetry and Drama*, 1938. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969.
- Brown, Cecil. *Stagolee Shot Billy*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Brown, Sterling, Herbert Halpert, Alan Lomax, et al. “Conference on the Character and State of Studies in Folklore.” *Journal of American Folklore* 59, no. 234 (October–December 1946): 495–527.
- Browning, John and Jack Sharpless. “Interview: Jonathan Williams and Thomas Meyer.” *Gay Sunshine* 28 (Spring 1976): 1–6.
- Burges, George, ed. *The Greek Anthology: As Selected for the Use of Westminster, Eton, and Other Public Schools*. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1852.
- Campbell, Olive Dame and Sharp, Cecil J. *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. New York and London: G. P. Putnam, 1917.
- Carnevali, Emmanuel. “The Sandburg-Sarett Recital,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 15.5

- (February 1920): 271–72.
- Carter, Jimmy. “Our Nation's Past and Future” (address accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York, July 15, 1976). American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25953>.
- Child, Francis James. “Ballad Poetry” (1874), reprinted in *Journal of Folklore Research* 31.1–3 (January–December 1994): 214–22.
- Choi, Helen Onhoon. “Vox Pop Modernism: Technology, Commonality, and Difference in American Literature of the 1930s,” PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006.
- Clay, Steven and Rodney Phillips. *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960–1980*. New York: Granary Books, 1998.
- Conforth, Bruce. *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013.
- Cross, Tom Peete. *Motif Index of Early Irish Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1952.
- Cruz, Jon. *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Cullen, Countee, ed. *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by American Negroes*. New York: Harper, 1927.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- d’Alessio, Gregory. *Old Troubadour: Carl Sandburg with His Guitar Friends*. New York: Walker, 1987.
- Dance, Daryl Cumber. *Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Davidson, Donald, John Gould Fletcher, Henry Blue Kline, et al. *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. 2nd ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006.
- Davidson, Michael. *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.
- Demby, William. *Blueboy*. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Dixon, Robert M. W. and John Godrich. *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890-1943*. 4th ed. New

- York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
 ————. *Recording the Blues*. London: Studio Vista, 1970.
- Dolarin, Brian, ed. *The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Dorson, Richard. *American Folklore*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, 1845*. 2nd ed. Dublin: Webb, Chapman, 1846.
- Drake, St. Claire. "Social and Economic Status." In *The Negro American*, edited by Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark, 3–46. Boston: Beacon, 1966.
- Drucker, Johanna. *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903. Critical edition, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: Norton, 1999.
- Dworkin, Craig and Marjorie Perloff, eds. *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Evans, David. "Bessie Smith's 'Back-Water Blues': The Story behind the Song." *Popular Music* 26, no. 1 (January 2007): 97–116.
- Federal Writers' Project. *American Stuff: An Anthology of Prose and Verse by Members of the Federal Writers' Project*. New York: Viking Press, 1937.
 ————. *Slaves Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves: Typewritten Records*. Edited by B. A. Botkin. Washington, DC: Library of Congress Microfilms, 1941.
- Hamilton Finlay, Ian. *Honey by the Water*. Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1973.
- Fuller, Hoyt W. "Towards a Black Aesthetic." In *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., 3–12. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971.
- Furr, Derek. *Recorded Poetry and Poetic Reception from Edna Millay to the Circle of Robert Lowell*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
 ————. "Re-Sounding Folk Voice, Remaking the Ballad: Alan Lomax, Margaret Walker, and the New Criticism," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 59.2 (Summer 2013): 232–59.
- Garland, Phyl. *The Sound of Soul*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. Oxford and New York: University of Oxford Press, 1987.

- . *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford and New York: University of Oxford Press, 1988.
- . “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes.” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 1–20.
- Golston, Michael. *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Graham, T. Austin. *The Great American Songbooks: Musical Texts, Modernism, and the Value of Popular Culture*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Gregory, David. “Fakesong in an Imagined Village? A Critique of the Harker-Boyes Thesis,” *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* 43.3 (2009): 18–26.
- Gummere, Francis Barton. *The Beginnings of Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1901.
- . *Democracy and Poetry*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911.
- . *The Popular Ballad*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907.
- Hamilton, Marybeth. *In Search of the Blues*. Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2008.
- Hansen, Mark B. N. and W. J. T. Mitchell, eds. *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Harker, David. *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British “Folksong,” 1700 to the Present Day*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985.
- Harris, William J. *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985.
- Hartman, Charles O. *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody*. 2nd ed. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996.
- Henderson, Stephen E. *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*. New York: William Morrow, 1972.
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 1870. 2nd edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900.
- Hirsch, Jerrold. *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Hirshey, Gerri. *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music*. New York: Times Books, 1984.
- Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” *The Nation* 122, no. 3181 (23 June 1926): 692–94.

- Hymes, Dell. "Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication." *American Anthropologist* 66, no. 6 (December 1964): 1–34.
- . "Ways of Speaking." In *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, edited by Richard Baumann and Joel Scherzer, 433–510. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Jackson, Bruce. *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: African American Narrative Poetry from Oral Tradition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Jackson, Lawrence. *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Jackson, Virginia. *Dickinson's Misery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Jackson, Virginia and Yopie Prins, eds. *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- Jahn, Janheinz. *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*. Translated by Marjorie Grene. 2nd ed. New York: Grove, 1994.
- Johnson, Charles S. *The Negro in American Civilization: A study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research*. New York: Holt, 1930.
- Johnson, James Weldon, ed. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.
- . *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931.
- Jones, Hettie. *How I Became Hettie Jones*. New York: Grove Press, 1997.
- Kalaidjian, Walter. *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Keil, Charles. *Urban Blues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.
- Kemme, Steve. "A Writer's Life: William Demby." *Mosaic* 20 (Fall 2007): 34–38.
- Kent, George E. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.
- Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Kittredge, George Lyman and Helen Child Sargent. *English and Scottish Popular Ballads, Edited from the Collection of Francis James Child*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904.
- Kochman, Thomas, ed. *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America*.

- Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.
- Kramer, Dale. *Chicago Renaissance: The Literary Life in the Midwest, 1900–1930*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1966.
- Langan, Celeste. “Understanding Media in 1805: Audiovisual Hallucination in Lay of the Last Minstrel.” *Studies in Romanticism* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 49–70.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. 2nd ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Lewis, Lloyd. *It Takes All Kinds*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947.
- Lindsay, Vachel. *The Congo and Other Poems*. Boston: Macmillan, 1914.
- Locke, Alain. *The Negro and His Music*. Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936.
- Lomax, Alan. *Folk Songs of North America*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960.
 ————. *Folk Song Style and Culture*. Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968.
 ————. “List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records,” mimeographed typescript, 1942. Recorded Sound Reference Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
 “Making Folklore Available.” In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934–1997*, edited by Ronald D. Cohen, 113–19. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Lomax, Alan and Raoul Abdul, eds. *3000 Years of Black Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970.
- Lomax, Alan, J. D. Elder, and Bess Lomax Hawes. *Brown Girl in the Ring: An Anthology of Song Games from the Eastern Caribbean*. New York: Pantheon, 1997.
- Lomax, John A. *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. New York: Macmillan, 1947.
 ————. “Self-Pity in Negro Folk Songs.” *The Nation* 105 (9 August 1917): 141–45.
 ————. *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*. New York: Macmillan, 1919.
- Lomax, John A. and Alan Lomax. *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: Macmillan, 1934.
 ————. *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*. New York: Macmillan, 1936.
- Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Lowell, Amy. “Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry,” *The Musical Quarterly* 6.1 (1920): 126–57.
- Martin, Meredith. “Ballads, Nations, and the Histories of Form,” paper presented at University of

- Chicago, Chicago, IL, November 14, 2013.
- McLane, Maureen N. *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Historical*. London: John W. Parker, 1859.
- “Millie Jackson Raps about Her Love Life, Race Mixing and Burden of Fame,” *Jet* 59, no. 25 (5 March 1981): 53–57.
- Minton, John. *78 Blues: Folksongs and Phonographs in the American South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.
- Mitgang, Herbert, ed. *The Letters of Carl Sandburg*. Revised ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.
- Morrisson, “Performing the Pure Voice: Elocution, Verse Recitation, and Modernist Poetry in Prewar London.” *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 3 (September 1996): 25–50.
- Muir, Peter C. *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850–1920*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Neal, Larry. “The Black Arts Movement.” *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 29–39.
- Neal, Mark Anthony. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Nelson, Carey. *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Nelson, Scott Reynolds. *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of An American Legend*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Newman, Steve. *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.
- Nicholas, A. X., ed. *The Poetry of Soul*. New York: Bantam, 1971.
- Niven, Penelope. *Carl Sandburg: A Biography*. New York: Scribner, 1991.
- Olson, Liesl. *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis*. New Haven, NH: Yale University Press, 2017.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Methuen, 1982.

- Owens, Richard. "Circuits of Reciprocity: Folk Culture, Class Politics, and Contemporary Ballad Writing," *Chicago Review* 60.2 (2016): 78–90.
- Park, Robert E. "The Negro in American Civilization." *Ethics* 41, no. 3 (April 1931): 367–70.
———. *Race and Culture*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950.
- Parry, Adam, ed. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. 2nd ed. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- Porterfield, Nolan. *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867–1948*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
- Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Edited by T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968.
———. *Pavannes and Divisions*. New York: Knopf, 1918.
- Prynne, J. H. *Field Notes: "The Solitary Reaper" and Others*. Cambridge, UK: Barque Press, 2007.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Reed, Adolph Jr. *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Reed, Brian M. *Phenomenal Reading: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetics*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012.
- Regan, Matthias, ed. *Carl Sandburg: The People's Pugilist*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2010.
- Reynolds, John and Tiny Robinson, eds. *Lead Belly: A Life in Pictures*. Gottingen: Steidl, 2008.
- Roberson, Ed. *Etai-Eken*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975.
- Robinson, Dean E. *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
———. "Black Power Nationalism as Ethnic Pluralism: Postwar Liberalism's Ethnic Paradigm in Black Radicalism." In *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought*, edited by Adolph Reed, Jr., and Kenneth W. Warren, 184–214. Boulder, CO and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010.
- Rodgers, Carolyn M. *A Long Rap: Commonly Known as a Poetic Essay*. Detroit: Broadside

- Press, 1971.
- . “Black Poetry—Where It’s At.” *Negro Digest* 18, no. 11 (September 1969): 7–16.
- . *The Heart as Ever Green*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1978.
- . *How I Got Ovah: New and Selected Poems*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1975.
- . *Paper Soul*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1968.
- . *Songs of a Black Bird*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1969.
- Rothenberg, Jerome. *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968.
- . *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania*, 2nd ed. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Rothenberg, Jerome and Diane Rothenberg, eds. *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse toward an Ethnopoetics*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.
- Rutter, Emily. “The Blues Tribute Poem and the Legacies of Getrude ‘Ma’ Rainey and Bessie Smith,” *MELUS* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 69–91.
- Sandburg, Carl. “Aboriginal Poetry,” *Poetry* 9.5 (February 1917): 254–55.
- . *The American Songbag*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927.
- . *The Chicago Race Riots: July, 1919*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1919.
- . *Early Moon*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930.
- . *The New American Songbag*. New York: Broadcast Music, 1950.
- . *The People, Yes*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936.
- Sanders, Mark A. *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999.
- Saussy, Haun. “The Curious Case of ‘Oral Literature’” (paper presented at Franke Institute for the Humanities Forum, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, February 12, 2014).
- Schlabach, Elizabeth Schroeder. *Along the Streets of Bronzeville: Black Chicago’s Literary Landscape*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Smethurst, James. *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 70s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Smith, David Lionel. “Looking back and Breaking through: *How I Got Ovah: New and Selected Poems* by Carolyn Rodgers.” *Chicago Review* 28, no. 3 (Winter 1977): 206–11.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977.
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

- . *Ethnic Modernism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- St. EOM, *St. EOM in the Land of Pasaquan: The Life and Times of Eddie Owens Martin*. Edited by Tom Patterson. Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1987.
- Stewart, Susan. *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- . *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Stewart-Baxter, Derrick. *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers*. New York: Stein, Day, 1970.
- Szwed, John. *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*. New York: Viking, 2010.
- Thompson, Julius E. *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960–1995*. London: McFarland Press, 1999.
- Thurston, Michael. *Making Something Happen: Political Poetry between the World Wars*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Tidwell, John Edgar, John S. Wright, and Sterling A. Brown. “‘Steady and Unaccusing’: An Interview with Sterling A. Brown.” *Callaloo* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 811–21.
- Tracy, Steven C. *Hot Music, Ragmentation, and the Bluing of American Literature*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015.
- Trumpener, Katie. *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Wald, Elijah. *The Dozens: A History of Rap’s Mamma*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Wald, Gayle. *It’s Been Beautiful: Soul! and Black Power Television*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Walker, Margaret. *Ballad of the Free*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1965.
- . *For My People*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942.
- . *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. Edited by Maryemma Graham. New York: Feminist Press, 1990.
- . “New Poets.” *Phylon* 11, no. 4 (1950): 345–54.
- . *On Being Female, Black and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932–1992*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997.
- . *Prophets for a New Day*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970.
- . *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius*. New York: Amistad Press, 1988.
- . *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

- Watts, Jerry. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. *Phonographies: Grooves in Afro-Sonic Modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Welsh, Andrew. *Roots of Lyric*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Wheeler, Lesley. *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- Wilgus, D. K. *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1959.
- Williams, Jonathan. *A Palpable Elysium*. Jaffrey, NH: Godine, 2002.
- . *Blackbird Dust: Essays, Poems, and Photographs*. Turtle Point Press, 2000
- . *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets: A Garland for the Southern Appalachians*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985.
- . "Corners of the Paradise Garden." *Modern Painters* 9, no. 2 (1996): 51–58.
- . *Le Garage Ravi de Rocky Mountain: An Essay on Vernon Burwell*. Rocky Mount, NC: North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1988.
- . *The Locologodaedalist in Situ: Selected Poems 1968–70*. New York: Cape Goliard and Grossman, 1972.
- . *The Magpie's Bagpipe: Selected Essays of Jonathan Williams*. Edited by Thomas Meyer. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982.
- . "Seven Outsiders." *Conjunctions* 21 (1993): 213–48.
- Williams, Jonathan and Fielding Dawson. *Empire Finals at Verona*. Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1959.
- Williams, Sherley. "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry." *Massachussetts Review* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 542–54.
- Wilson, William Julius. *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Wolfe, Charles and Kip Lornell. *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Work, John W. III. *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular*. New York: Crown, 1940.
- Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing." In *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier, 45–53. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Yanella, Phillip R. *The Other Carl Sandburg: A Portrait of the Radical Sandburg before His Glory Days in the Pantheon of Popular Writers*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.

Zangwill, Israel. *The Melting-Pot: Drama in Four Acts*. New York: Macmillan, 1909.

Zumwalt, Rosemary Lévy. *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Audiovisual Materials

Baraka, Amiri and The Spirit House Movers. *Black & Beautiful Soul & Madness*. Jihad Productions 1001, 1968. 33 rpm.

———. *Black & Beautiful Soul & Madness*. Reissue, Sonboy Records 003CD, 2009. Compact disc.

Bontemps, Arna, ed. *Anthology of Negro Poets*. Folkways FL 9791, 1954. 33 rpm.

Brown, James. “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine.” King Records 45-6318, 1970. 45 rpm.

———. “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud.” King Records 45-6187, 1968. 45 rpm.

Brown, James and His Famous Flames. *Please Please Please*, Polydor CD-31453 1016-2, 1996. Compact disc.

Davis, Ossie and Ruby Dee. *Hands upon the Heart*, volume 2, 1982. Produced by Taro Meyer. New York: Emmalyn Productions, 1993.

Eccentric Soul: Sitting in the Park. Numero Group N-063, 2015. Compact disc.

Eliot, T. S. *T. S. Eliot Reading His Own Poems, 1946*. Library of Congress PL 3, 1953. 33rpm.

The Esquires. “Get On Up.” Bunky Records 775, 1967. 45 rpm.

Golden Gate Quartet and Josh White. *Freedom: The Golden Gate Quartet and Josh White at the Library of Congress, 1940*. Bridge 9114. Compact disc.

Jackson, Millie. *Caught Up*. Spring Records 6703, 1974. 33 rpm.

———. *Just a Lil’ Bit Country*. Spring Records SP-1-6732, 1981. 33 rpm.

———. *Live and Outrageous*. Spring Records SP-1-3765, 1982. 33 rpm.

Johnson, Lonnie. *Lonnie Johnson: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 3, 1927–1928*. Document Records DOCD-5065, 1990, compact disc.

Leadbelly, *Leadbelly: Important Recordings, 1934–1949*. JSP. 4 compact discs.

———. *Lead Belly's Last Sessions*, recorded by Frederick Ramsay, Jr. Folkways FW 40068. Compact disc.

Lomax, Alan, producer. *Black Encyclopedia of the Air: A Big Beautiful Black History: Stories of the Rise and Spread of Black Culture in Africa and America*. Atlantic Records 154, 1969. 33 rpm.

———. *Caribbean Voyage: The 1962 Field Recordings*. Rounder Records 1716–1733-2, 1997–2004. 12 compact discs.

Lomax, John, producer and narrator. *The Ballad Hunter*. Archive of American Folk Song, AFS L53, 1941, cassette.

Mayfield, Curtis. *Curtis*. Curtom Records 8005, 1970. 33 rpm.

Rainey, Ma. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Yazoo 1071, 1990. Compact disc.

Robinson, Elzadie. *Elzadie Robinson: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 1, 1926–1928*. Document Records DOCD-5248. Compact disc.

Robinson, Smokey and The Miracles. *Going to a Go-Go*. Motown Records MOTD-5269, 1986. Compact disc.

Sandburg, Carl. *The People, Yes*, Decca 29M 273, 1941, 33 rpm.

———. *Carl Sandburg Sings His American Songbag*, Caedmon TC2025, 1967, 33 rpm.

Tex, Joe. "All I Could Do Was Cry." Anna Records 1119, 1960. 45 rpm.

Walker, Margaret. *Margaret Walker Alexander Reads Langston Hughes, P. L. Dunbar, and J. W. Johnson*. Folkways FW 09796, 1975. 33 rpm.

White, Joshua. *Southern Exposure: An Album of Jim Crow Blues*. Keynote Recordings 107, 1941. 78 rpm.

Work, John W. III. *Recording Black Culture*. Spring Fed Records 104, 2008. Compact disc.

Archival Sources

Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004). Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Ed Roberson Papers. Private collection. Chicago, IL.

Federal Writers' Project Papers. Manuscripts Collection. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL.

Folklore Project, Life Histories. US Works Progress Administration Records. Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Harriet Monroe Modern Poetry Collection. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

Illinois Writers Project Papers: "Negro in Illinois." Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. Chicago Public Library, Chicago, IL.

John Avery Lomax Family Papers. Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

John A. Lomax Oklahoma and Texas Cylinder Recordings (AFC 1940/017). Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Lloyd Lewis Papers. The Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.

Carl Sandburg Papers, Connemara Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT.

Sterling A. Brown Papers. Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. Howard University, Washington, DC.

Susan Cayton Woodson Papers. Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. Chicago Public Library, Chicago, IL.