

The Green Fields of the Mind: Robert Johnson,
Folk Revivalism, and Disremembering the American Past

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Abstract

Blaine Quincy Waide: *The Green Fields of the Mind:
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(Under the direction of William Ferris)

This thesis seeks to understand the phenomenon of folk revivalism as it occurred in America during several moments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. More specifically, I examine how and why often marginalized southern vernacular musicians, especially Mississippi blues singer Robert Johnson, were celebrated during the folk revivals of the 1930s and 1960s as possessing something inherently American, and differentiate these periods of intense interest in the traditional music of the American South from the most recent example of revivalism early in the new millennium. In the process, I suggest the term “disremembering” to elucidate the ways in which the intent of some vernacular traditions, such as blues music, has often been redirected towards a different social or political purpose when communities with divergent needs in a stratified society have convened around a common interest in cultural practice.

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Introduction

Imagining America in an Iowa Cornfield and at a Mississippi Crossroads

At the deciding moment of the film *Field of Dreams*, the movie's protagonist, Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, confronts a crucial decision. Faced with a failing farm after plowing under his crop to build a magical baseball field and contemplating his brother-in-law Mark's offer to buy the farm, Ray, a politically active member of the 1960s countercultural movement in his younger years, surveys his field and weighs his options. Before him stand the legendary ballplayers of his family heritage, as passed on to him in stories by his late, estranged father, whose guidance he rejected after reading a book by 1960s radical author Thomas Mann, a fictionalized version of J. D. Salinger. Unexpectedly, Ray's daughter, Karen, encourages her father to keep the field because, she says, "People will come . . . from all over." Karen continues:

They'll decide to just take a vacation, see, and they'll decide to come to Iowa City; they'll think it's really boring so they'll drive up and want to pay, like buying a ticket ... to watch the game. It'll be just like when they were little kids a long time ago. They'll watch the game and remember what it was like ... People will come.

Ray's brother-in-law, who lacks the imagination to see the ongoing game between deceased baseball legends, remains unconverted by Karen's faith and, undeterred, he hands Ray the necessary paperwork to sign in order to finalize the sale of the farm.

Sitting nearby, Thomas Mann (James Earl Jones), who has joined Ray on his

dream-inspired quest, can see the game, and he does find inspiration in Karen's vision.

Subsequently, he rises from his seat on the bleachers to offer the following monologue:

Ray, people will come, Ray. They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they're doing it. They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past. Of course, we won't mind if you look around, you'll say. It's only \$20 per person. They'll pass over the money without even thinking about it: for it is money they have and peace they lack. And they'll walk out to the bleachers; sit in shirt sleeves on a perfect afternoon. They'll find they have reserved seats somewhere along one of the baselines, where they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes. And they'll watch the game and it'll be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces. People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds of us of all that once was good and it could be again. Oh ... people will come, Ray. People will most definitely come.

As the rest of the movie unfolds, near tragedy is averted and, in the process, Mark, having obtained the ability to see the baseball game, tells Ray to keep the mystical field. In the final shot of *Field of Dreams*, Ray is playing catch with a young version of his father and, with the camera panning back and up to capture dusk enveloping Midwestern America in a navy blue embrace, car lights extend from Ray's driveway into the darkening depths of the horizon; the people have indeed come.

Field of Dreams, which was released in 1989, was not the first time that Shoeless Joe Jackson appeared in American movie theaters in the late 1980s. In 1988, he was a central figure in John Sayles's *Eight Men Out*, an examination of the infamous "Black Sox" scandal in which eight members of the Chicago White Sox, including Jackson, were given lifetime bans from baseball for their involvement in throwing the 1918 World Series. In this film, Shoeless Joe is not the metaphysical spirit of *Dreams*, but rather an illiterate, country-bred baseball phenom who perfects his batting eye by staring at a

candle in the dark. *Eight Men Out* was the film that forever ingrained in American memory the image of the young boy, one of Jackson's biggest fans, approaching his fallen baseball hero after his deposition and pleading, "Say it ain't so Joe, say it ain't so?"

The use of Shoeless Joe Jackson in both *Eight Men Out* and *Field of Dreams* is suggestive of how America sought to imagine itself late in twentieth century. While the comments made by James Earl Jones in *Field of Dreams* articulate a belief that what is best, even most American, about the United States is located in the nation's remote past, his characterization in Sayles' film speaks to how Americans would like to see their heroes, or their best versions of themselves: preternaturally but simple and rustic skilled geniuses, unblemished and untouched by the grime of aspiration as well as the tarnish of modern amenities and temptations. Bart Giamatti, the former Commissioner of Major League Baseball, addressed baseball's ability to capture these nostalgic feelings toward an imagined and pristine American past when interviewed for *Life* magazine in April of 1988 in the article "Front-Office Fan." Giamatti explained, "[Baseball is] intimately wrapped up with one's youth. Baseball is very much about being young again in a harmless way. That's why we call it a baseball park. You can call it a stadium if you want, but they were parks originally. 'Park' is a Persian work for 'paradise' ... You fly over a major city at night in the summer and suddenly you'll see that green oasis that reminds everybody of baseball's basic mythology: We come from a rural, simpler America" (quoted in Dickson 1992: 200).

If baseball in general, and Shoeless Joe Jackson more specifically, was indelibly linked to the American imagination and national memory in the late twentieth century, another figure who has occupied significant iconic space in the national imaginary for

almost fifty years now is blues singer Robert Johnson. Ever since Johnson's tragic and premature death in 1938, a veritable army of white scholars, musicians, fans, record companies, and Hollywood movies have circulated the blues man's life story in popular memory. Don Law, John Hammond, Sr., Alan Lomax, Frank Driggs, Pete Welding, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Peter Guralnick, Samuel Charters, Robert Palmer, the founders of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the United States Post Office, and Joel and Ethan Coen have all contributed to Johnson's presence in American memory. The sum of their collective discourse about the life and musical career of Robert Johnson is the story of a troubled troubadour who sang about selling his soul to the Devil at a Delta crossroads deep in the night, and who eventually died barking like a dog when the Devil cashed in on their deal. According to music scholars Barry Lee Pearson and David McCulloch, this myth has become "one of the most captivating legends in American music history" (2003: ix).

It is Eric Clapton, the British born American rock legend and blues ambassador in his later years, who has most recently articulated for American popular culture the ways in which Robert Johnson's legacy resonates similarly to Shoeless Joe Jackson's in the national imagination. In the liner notes to his 2004 tribute album, *Me and Mr. Johnson*, Clapton eulogized his blues mentor through a powerfully suggestive romantic poetics: "Up until I heard this music, everything I had ever heard seemed as if it was dressed up for a shop window somewhere, so that when I heard him for the first time, it was like he was singing only for himself, and now and then, maybe God ... It is the finest music I have ever heard. I have always trusted its purity." Even though a midnight deal in the Mississippi Delta could not seem further from a magical baseball field on an Iowa farm,

these late twentieth and early twenty-first century mass media commemorations of Shoeless Joe Jackson and Robert Johnson reveal they are two cultural figures orbiting in the same plane of activity in the iconographic universe of the American imaginary.

My own experience coming of age in the South in the decades preceding the end of the last millennium as first a baseball fan and later an aspiring blues aficionado is instructive. Along with *The Natural* – a film whose exploding lights and ominous lightning bolts are no less magical than *Field of Dreams* – these films have resonated in my memory and imagination in deeply emotional ways since I saw them as a young child in Oxford, Mississippi. It would be hard, if not impossible, to overstate the ways in which these stories that linger between and betwixt the real and the imagined have powerfully contributed to my identity. However, there is more to the story, which is to say my story, than these magical baseball films. The summer of my thirteenth year, I passed the moisture-thick Mississippi nights fully engrossed in Mickey Mantle's autobiography. Driven by the too-fleeting excitement of youth, I devoured the Mick's tales of heroic baseball feats by day and juvenile escapades with Billy Martin and Whitey Ford by night. By the time I came to the end of the book, I embraced Mickey Mantle as my own remembered favorite baseball player, a person from an entirely separate historical period attached to my personal log of experience as if a prosthesis.

The next summer my older brother, Kyle, was preparing to travel North to attend Harvard and, several weeks prior to his departure, our family vacation took us to New England where we visited my brother's future academic home. Walking through the streets of Cambridge and between the ivy walls of Harvard Yard, I discovered a wonderfully exciting world that I had never before known in the small, southern towns of

my childhood. Each time I ascended from the subterranean world of the “T,” the unencumbered energy on the streets was soon followed by an august sensation that swept through me upon entering the hallowed grounds of the university. Later during our stay in Boston, I bought a picture of Ted Williams, the great Boston Red Sox hitter, posed in mid-swing at home plate in Fenway Park. When I returned home from our vacation, I was to begin high school in several weeks and, freshly bathed in the waters of the northeastern liberal academic tradition, I set myself to the task of following in my brother’s footsteps. I framed my picture of Ted Williams, and hung it above my desk as an emblem of the world a well-rounded, liberal education would make available to me.

My brother’s years at Harvard coincided with a stretch of years during which the Atlanta Braves, our family’s favorite team, made a series of runs deep into the playoffs, often ending in World Series defeat. Separated by thousands of miles, my father and I re-established a strong connection with Kyle each autumn during the playoffs when he would nervously call for score updates. At home, as the panoply of browns and oranges that colored the air faded into the sweet darkness of an Arkansas fall evening, my father and I spent countless hours in front of the television cheering on *our* team. Bill Clinton, a Democrat, was to become president-elect in a matter of weeks; I was attending Little Rock Central High School, bastion of the civil rights movement; the Braves were playing the Toronto Blue Jays in the World Series; and life was good. Unfortunately, though, it was not to be the Braves year; the Toronto Blue Jays defeated them in six games, and fall soon gave way to winter.

Finding myself more and more sympathetic to liberal causes, I was fortunate to have a series of similar-minded teachers in my formative years, and they encouraged me

to explore these ideas. At their urging, I wrote passionately idealistic studies of Gandhi, populism and democracy, William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, and yes, even W.P. Kinsella, the author of the novel *Shoeless Joe*, the basis for *Field of Dreams*. And then I borrowed my Dad's copy of *Highway 61 Revisited*; in Bob Dylan, one of the voices of the sixties, I heard inspiration. Sure, the drive and energy of "Like a Rolling Stone" sent me hurtling down musical highways I would later explore on my own, and the mysterious world of "Desolation Row" awakened my imagination, but it was when I heard *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and *The Times They Are A-Changin'* that I found my politics. So many songs on these albums – "Oxford Town," "The Times They are A-Changin'," "With God on Our Side," and "Blowin' in the Wind" – spoke to liberal causes, and "Girl from the North Country" was the among the most beautiful, most lyrical, and saddest poetry I had ever heard. But it was "Masters of War" that drove me to anger and taught me not to trust the shadowy specter and the elusive forces that had appropriated what Abraham Lincoln called "the last, best hope of Earth."

When Ken Burns's ten-part documentary, *Baseball*, premiered on PBS – in all honesty, the film was a great disappointment – I began to get a sense of my emerging imagined self. Along with baseball players and historians, liberal intellectual after liberal intellectual posed before Burns' camera and spoke of their love of the game. One African American gentleman declared that, along with jazz and the Constitution, baseball would be remembered as one of the three greatest accomplishments of American civilization. Several months after the premier of *Baseball*, I learned of my acceptance into Williams College, a northeastern college where I dreamed of attaining a liberal arts education. A few days after my high school graduation and four years removed from our

first trip to Boston, my family traveled North again, first to visit Williams, and then east to Kyle's graduation. That summer a nation of baseball fans prayed for Mickey Mantle, who was fighting liver failure in a Dallas hospital. It was at this time that the Mick, the hero of a generation of Americans in the 1950s, looked those young boys now made men in the face and told their children not to be like him. Those night escapades with Billy Martin and Whitey Ford, which were so humorous to read, had not been so innocent, and now the terrible effects of alcohol abuse were ravaging Mantle's body.

To my amazement, Hank Aaron, a man who knew racism better than most, was the featured speaker at Harvard's Senior Day that year. At the outset of his speech, Henry Aaron asked the people in the crowd to, please, pray for the recovery of his dear friend, Mickey Mantle. I was blessed; Hank Aaron had asked me – true, I was one among many, but I was there, alone in that moment with Aaron – to pray for Mantle. Aaron, an African American man educated in the segregated South, who had received racist death threats as he approached Babe Ruth's home run record, proceeded to give a wonderfully eloquent speech in front of a reverent Harvard audience about the fundamental need to appreciate human equality. The next day, Vaclav Havel, the poet who had fought the Soviet Union with beautiful words, spoke to the graduating class about the need for multicultural understanding in the new global civilization, and I returned home freshly dipped in the waters of liberal thinking. In a matter of days, Mickey Mantle died, and a nation of baseball fans grieved.

After a homesick semester at Williams the following fall, I moved west to Tucson, Arizona, and soon found myself eager to embrace objects that reminded me of the South. Having lived much of my life in and around the Delta, I looked to the blues as

an aural homecoming and purchased several albums, most notably the Robert Johnson boxed set on Columbia Records. A year later a framed poster of Johnson joined my Ted Williams picture as a powerful personal badge of identity. I love, in the most romantic of fashions, the Delta, and have the most vivid recollections of seeing sun rises unravel over planted rows of cotton and soy beans while driving to Saturday morning cross country races. Listening to Johnson, along with other blues musicians, I was often transported back to what remains, for me, a dense forest of memories, and blues soon joined baseball as the twin marker of my identity as a liberal, aspiring intellectual.

For me, the ideal image for this identity, shared by so many, is the late Bart Giamatti: Renaissance scholar, Ivy League professor, baseball fan, and, in his last act in life's drama, Commissioner of Major League Baseball. Giamatti speaks for so many of us, romantics that we are, in the concluding passage to his 1977 essay, "The Green Fields of the Mind," in which he laments the end of yet another baseball season.

Of course, there are those that learn after the first few times. They grow out of sports. And there are others who were born with the wisdom to know that nothing lasts. These are the truly tough among us, the ones who can live without illusion, or without even the hope of illusion. I am not that grown-up or up-to-date. I am a simpler creature, tied to more primitive patterns and cycles. I need to think something lasts forever, and it might as well be that state of being that is a game; it might as well be that, in a green field, in the sun (2002: 493).

As much as this passage speaks for and to me, it also causes me concern about whom Giamatti sees as the truly tough, because they also cannot dream and imagine. If they are steeled against the hope of illusion, are they not potentially Machiavellian? Is it not they who control the world in Oz, behind the Wizard's curtain?

What follows is a study of several moments of folk revivalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with an emphasis on the ways in which an array of cultural

brokers and representatives of institutions promulgating their imagined versions of America identify, imagine, and use the “folk.” More specifically, it is an examination of this phenomenon as it impacted the commemoration of America’s southern vernacular music traditions, especially Robert Johnson, beginning in the 1930s and continuing to present times. Folk revivalism, at least until the most recent example, has historically occurred during times of national crisis and been led and peopled by individuals from privileged, liberal, and educated backgrounds, who were, at heart, romantic dreamers, much like myself. Often situating my analysis in these ethereal worlds of nostalgia and dreams, I hope to elucidate the power of memory and the imagination, two emotional instruments that enliven the human experience and promise a utopian image that threatens the establishment maintained by the non-dreamers who, like the Wizard, move deceptively behind the curtain.

Baseball, more precisely, Shoeless Joe Jackson, must seem an odd place to begin a study of Robert Johnson and folk revivalism, but inherent in Jackson’s characterization in the two films are themes essential to my examination. *Field of Dreams* is fundamentally a story of the ability to dream and the transformative power of the imagination, and the scenes from *Eight Men Out* described above, as well as Clapton’s presentation of Robert Johnson’s unique genius, suggest the location of the “folk” in a premodern and more innocent state of being, as of yet untouched by the material temptations of the modern world. These themes of the power of memory and of the imagination – a commitment to and the embodiment of an image first formed in the mind – the premodern innocence and vitality of the folk, and a need to re-discover or reaffirm a

more morally centered, or simply a better, version of a group's past are at the heart of folk revivalism.

Beginning with Johann Herder, the father of Romantic Nationalism and possibly the original folk revivalist, periods of folk revivalism have often been predicated upon a sense of crisis in the national order. Herder was distraught about the influx of French Enlightenment culture into Germany, and sought in German peasants, which is to say the "folk," unspoiled cultural traditions that could restore a distinct German culture (Wilson 1973: 726). Similar impulses have ignited folk revivals in America in the twentieth century. For instance, David Whisnant identifies a series of privileged, well-educated, "fotched-on" women from New England, who came to Appalachia at the turn of the century in an effort to revive what they felt were traditional practices that were quickly dying off (Whisnant 1983).

Several decades later, during the Great Depression in the 1930s – a crisis that intimated the great failure of capitalism and the free market economy – many Americans looked to the "folk" as a source of the strength of character needed to survive hard times, as the sign of a better, more innocent way of life situated in the past, and as the locus of a distinctive national culture (Filene 2004: 51-55). The 1930s and early 1940s were also the height of government-sponsored, New Deal public folklore programs, which were seen both as a means to create jobs that would reverse economic trends and to introduce America to its multicultural identity (Hirsch 1988). Possibly best known among these New Deal era projects was *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939), a collaborative documentary effort produced by writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans. Spending several months with three tenant families in Alabama, Agee and Evans sought

to celebrate the beautiful simplicity of life in the agrarian South and to suggest where a more innocent America was to be found.

What the foregoing series of folk revivalists shared was their desire to imagine their historic situation anew when faced with the threat that their preferred social order was on the brink of absorption in the case of Herder or Whisnant's fofched-on women, and economic failure in the case of the New Deal revivalists. In this act of the imagination, these individuals looked to their romantic memories of a presumed and presumably innocent past as the cure for their present ills. Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard elucidates the relationship between the past, memory, dreams, and the power of the imagination. In his eyes, dreams are born of the memories of the past and, from this point, the imagination, that act of dreamers, floats freely with the potential to change the world (1958). It is crucial to note, though, that the memories that ultimately inspired the romantic ideology and politics of early twentieth century revivalists were often not directly experienced as life memories. As such, they constitute what Alison Landsberg considers "prosthetic memories." Much like my celebration of Mickey Mantle's 1956 Triple Crown year, Landsberg defines a prosthetic memory as "a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which [an individual] did not live ... [which] has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics" (2004: 2).

Though such prosthetic memories clearly have had powerful effects on the identities and politics of liberal thinkers like myself and early twentieth century folk revivalists, the term prosthetic, which is to say a false limb, immediately invokes artificiality. While my attraction to baseball legends like Mickey Mantle was relatively harmless, my celebration of Shoeless Joe Jackson, for example, reached back across time

and space to buttress my identity by means of an uneducated man who, according to Sayles' film, suffered the abuses of an alliance of corrupt baseball owners and whose dream of playing baseball again was never granted by the powers that be. Likewise, the individuals and families documented by WPA folklorists had dreams themselves, dreams that likely remained out of reach because many of the opportunities promised by the American Dream contemporary with their time were not made available to them. One only need think of "The Front Bedroom" in the Gudger's house, made famous by James Agee's suffocating description, decorated as it was with a series of glossy magazine images that spoke of an outside world only accessible through the imagination, a fact made only more clear by Agee's presence (1939: 157-169). Truly artificial and incendiary, however, were the actions of the founders of the White Top Folk Festival, specifically John Powell, who actually succeeded in intervening and preserving dying or extinct traditions rather than allowing the local residents to achieve their dreams of playing old-time tunes learned from a phonograph on the festival stage on White Top Mountain (Whisnant 1983: 226-236).

In each of their particular circumstances, Agee and Powell could be considered cultural brokers, or "cultural 'middlemen' who move between folk and popular culture ... [and] who shaped our nation's sense of its [cultural] heritage" (Filene 2000: 5). Moreover, situated as cultural go betweens, Agee and Powell were not neutral observers. Rather, empowered by their social ascendancy and privilege, both were able to selectively adapt the dreams and memories of rural Americans for which there was not room in larger regional or national discourses, and to assume these desires as prosthetic memories they could then redirect to suit the needs of their own political agendas. Such

artificial use, enabled as it was by the existence of social hierarchies and power differentials, speaks to the fact that memory is both partial and usable, characteristics that work to the advantage of cultural brokers who are able to mold it to fit their needs (Zelizer 1995: 226). What made the desires and memories of rural Americans particularly usable, or even pliable like the Alabama clay celebrated throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was the fact that outside of such romantic narratives very little was truly known about the historical experiences of these disenfranchised Americans. Hence, their memories were among the most available to be borrowed and subsumed into romantic narratives of rediscovering America in a distant Eden before a fall from grace into the machinery of modernity.

Michel Foucault critiques the construction of linear historical narratives and the resultant process of direct derivation when discussing the relationship between history and genealogy. He explains, “[t]he purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation” (1977: 95). He further argues that what he calls “the complex course of descent” is not a simple linear narrative, but the unintentional proliferation of “accidents” that become available as basic structural units in larger, artificially constructed – as opposed to organically occurring – narratives (1977: 81). Examining folk revivalism’s discourse of the rediscovery and reaffirmation of national identity through Foucault’s *complex course of descent*, it is possible to deconstruct this romantic mythology into a fortunate proliferation of accidents in the most innocent moments of folk revivalism. The story of twentieth and twenty-first century folk revivalism, though, is always not so accidental. In other instances, the absorption of memories and dreams initially outside the purview of dominant culture into

larger narratives celebrating the inimitable character of that very culture has a great deal to say about the disease and anxiety with which those who construct and consume America's official culture industry regard the truths to which these historical experiences speak.

The memories and dreams of those like the Gudgers exist on the periphery of accepted discourses on the American past as if satellites threatening to disrupt the established planetary order. Marshaled along fixed borders of historical interpretation as it were, these are memories that the cultural agents of officially endorsed American narratives must disremember. Disremembering is not an active attempt to forget incidents that have the potential to indict the dominant social order; it is an act in which the referential content of an expression or tradition originating outside of the political or cultural purposes of the incumbent hegemon – for my purposes it could be a blues song or a prison work song – is absorbed into a more broadly conceived agenda. Through this abstract assimilation, the original intent of the message is superseded by an all together different historical project. Rather than allow the truths suggested by the dominant culture's disinterest in allowing space for the actual historical experiences of the "folk" in celebratory narratives of national identity, certain institutions and industries within dominant American culture have used the interstices in the stories of the disenfranchised as empty vessels that these cultural brokers fill with commemorative content that tells a story that celebrates the dominant culture itself.

Robert Johnson is a very appropriate organizing principle for an examination of the impulses behind folk revivalism; he could even be described as a nexus where the

three revivals intersect across time and space. Johnson's own life and tragic early death were coincidental with the largely public sector revival of the 1930s and 1940s, and, twenty years later, Columbia records released the Robert Johnson album, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, at the height of the 1960s urban folk revival, where it was met with the zealous rhetoric of religious converts. Likewise, the memory of Robert Johnson has been central to the commodity-infused folk revival of the postmodern period, which has become synonymous with the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. Nearly concurrent with the *O Brother* revival, several music scholars have published new studies of Johnson's legacy in American culture. Due to this confluence of renewed interest in and commemoration of Robert Johnson, scholars, students and fans of blues in general, and of Johnson in particular, find themselves at a discursive crossroads. In a contemporary study, Patricia Schroeder argues that Johnson has always been, in her words, a "contested space" (2004: 19). Early in the twenty-first century, that sentiment is especially true. Along with Schroeder, Elijah Wald, Barry Pearson, and David McCulloch have, in their own recent publications, attempted to untangle the romantic discourse that has enshrouded Johnson for so long. Coincidentally, Eric Clapton's album, *Me and Mr. Johnson*, has given new life to the romantic poetics that have mythologized Johnson in American culture since the early 1940s. We thus find ourselves at a point in time when Johnson, arguably the apotheosis of Delta blues in the American imaginary, is an extremely intensified field of contestation.

Southern historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage identifies this potential for divergent interpretations of historical memories as one the fundamental attributes of past people and events which, like Robert Johnson's legacy, linger between groups struggling to

control accepted understandings of the past. In short, Brundage illustrates that memories are often contested spaces wherein groups contend to establish ascendant meanings. Within this dynamic framework, access to a culture's or a society's specific forms of power are essential variables that determine which group in a struggle over a contested memory is able to construct and maintain their interpretation of past events, places, or people. The implications for such an understanding of memory in the American South are particularly powerful due to the region's history of segregation, discrimination, and racial polarization. As white southerners have most often held within their purview the necessary social power for inscribing meaning on the region's past, there is indeed a long history of the largely white political and social establishment silencing recollections which express contradictory interpretations of past experiences that deviate from dominant commemorative narratives. Quite frequently, these contested sites are deep scars on the southern landscape of memory, and there is a certain import to cleansing the land of blood that is far too often not metaphorical (2000: 7-12).

While the implications for the ongoing construction of the commemoration of Robert Johnson, an African American man living in an era of institutionalized racism who succumbed to a violent and unknown fate, should seem quite clear, Brundage's insights on which alternative versions of memories become accepted, at least when suspended in a contested field, also shed light on the cultural convergence at the heart of folk revivalism: in this interface of differentiated cultural groups, certain interpretations have achieved superior status in the negotiation of social-meaning making due to the unequal distribution of access to structures of power. Thus, while Robert Johnson is clearly an example of a contested memory in the context of understanding the process of

memory creation in the American South, as a figure drawn into the cultural momentum of several folk revivals, the construction of his legacy during these convergences was riddled with the same central issues of power and access. Likewise, as a site of memory, Robert Johnson, as well as other southern vernacular musicians, impedes a nostalgic vista from opening across the southern landscape. The following study will revisit several such disfigurements on the southern geography of memory that, in their erasure or assimilation, allow the American past to burst forth in all of its romantic glory.

In Chapter One, I turn to Alan Lomax's memoir, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, to establish the brutal labor system in place in Mississippi in the 1930s and 1940s, and to suggest that, within this system, African American labor was an essential component contributing to the expansion of the scope of America's economic wealth and international influence as the nation was on the brink of the Second World War. I next examine the life and astonishingly brief recording career of Robert Johnson, paying special attention to his professional aspirations when juxtaposed with the limited and exploitative opportunities presented to young African American males in the 1930s Mississippi Delta; the violent and mysterious way in which he died and the ways in which the established authorities in Jim Crow Mississippi either ignored or negotiated the irregularities in that story; and, by extension, how such circumstances are the exact sort of memories later figures and institutions within America's dominant culture would want to disremember about a black blues singer's life in the American South of the 1930s when constructing a coherent and nostalgic narrative of commemoration regarding the American past. Finally, I analyze the fieldwork Alan Lomax conducted during this era as in the name of the federal government, situating him as a leading cultural broker of the

1930s folk revival, and I critique the ramifications of what I have called his “Mississippi Paradox,” whereby cultural practices beyond the pale of official American culture became representative examples of that same culture in sanctified institutional spaces.

In Chapter Two, I chart the metamorphosis of Robert Johnson’s legacy in the 1960s from that of an aspiring professional blues musician performing in the most popular styles of his day to the nearly archetypal folk blues man exemplar in the imaginary of the decade’s countercultural urban folk revival. Central to this transformation was the way in which Johnson’s lyrics and imagery, as well as his mysterious fate, resonated with the political and cultural energies percolating in the subjective landscapes of the revival. Placing Johnson’s commemoration in this decade in the larger context of the folk revival’s imagination by examining John Cohen and his work on the Friends of Old Time Music concerts, Robert Johnson becomes one of many southern vernacular musicians who presented the possibility of discovering an alternative American character at a time when the country’s ideals were floundering amid a period dominated by violent domestic discord at home, a controversial war abroad, and the increased availability of mass produced culture. However, focusing on what I call “the politics of the open road,” it is clear that his legacy in 1960s said a great deal more about the struggles, dreams, and desires of his white folk music fans than it did about his dreams or those of his African American contemporaries. Since the power and access necessary to establish accepted renderings of memory were within domain of influence of his privileged white fans, their commemoration of Robert Johnson displaced his memory in the African American imaginary. As much as the 1960s revivalists hoped to reaffirm their utopian vision as the country continued to further abandon its principles, in the

dissonance that resulted from the convergence of the counterculture youth movement and southern vernacular musicians, the imaginary worlds of the former group disremembered the past memories and imagined futures of the latter.

I conclude in Chapter Three with an examination of folk revivification in the postmodern moment at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. In this chapter, I seek to know in what ways the institutions and industries of America's official culture apparatus have disremembered a rebellious blues musician who inspired the imagination of a countercultural movement by locating him in an institutional space celebrating the America's musical heritage and replacing him – and other southern vernacular musicians – with several commodified, “glossy” images, including commemorative stamps and nostalgically rendered movie characters and filmic landscapes. Whereas black labor was fundamental to the establishment of America's international dominance in the years preceding World War II, in the aftermath of the country's military and economic ascendancy, there has been a secondary cultural expansion. Crucial to this expression of the country's emerging global hegemony was the ability of multinational corporate coalitions to export a romanticized American identity, as symbolized by representations of musical traditions native to the South, into areas that had been made available through more overt forms of occupation. As southern vernacular musicians, such as Robert Johnson, were imbued with specific historical experiences that would make manifest the contradictions inherent in the expansion of the American capitalist system, these memories had to be reenacted in such a way that they were rendered innocuous of these connotations, thereby presenting a desirable image of America in international markets. Early in the new millennium, the postmodern revival, I

argue, has disremembered the egalitarian vision of the American imaginary in the name of the continued advance of western capitalism towards the perpetual replication of itself.

This study, then, will examine the genealogy of Robert Johnson's memory, which has unfolded irregularly with revisions appearing at noticeably intensified periods of commemoration, in the various permutations of dominant American culture in an attempt to make a unique insight regarding a complex historical phenomenon, that of folk revivalism. As a study of Robert Johnson, I will consider the reasons and motivations that led a series of privileged and revivalist cultural brokers, dissatisfied with their historical situation, to elevate the memory of a musician beyond the status he had in his own lifetime to the point where he became a legend that inspired their lives. In tracking the amplification of Johnson's legacy during these periods of vernacular revivification, this unique cultural phenomenon, predicated upon the convergence of normally disparate cultures, will have traversed the continuum of social practice in the last century, a countercultural practice challenging the country's social and political establishment at one moment, and a mechanism of the culture industry to enable the solidification of the American status quo across new geographies in more recent times. At heart, my project is a study of the power of the imagination and memory, which inspired a series of privileged individuals who were bearing witness to the erosion of the American ideals they held most dear, and who found an image that addressed their impending anxieties. Sadly, this study is also the story of the power of postmodern and hegemonic forces to co-opt these images so that they speak to the expanding dominance of multinational capitalism. As much as I hope to suggest the power of imagining and remembering, I

more importantly want to suggest the more insidious ability to disremember a past that could convict our present.

Chapter 1

Discovering America in the Mouth of Jim Crow: Alan Lomax, Robert Johnson, and the Mississippi Paradox

In the Spring of 2005, I traveled to the Delta Blues Symposium at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, Arkansas, to present a paper that was largely a condensed version of the following study. Arriving at the Memphis International Airport, I picked up my rental car and, before heading west into Arkansas, I had lunch at the Arcade Restaurant, which had experienced a fleeting moment of fame on the horizon of American popular culture in the late 1980s when it was used as a filming location in director Jim Jarmusch's cult classic and cinematic tribute to Memphis' musical legacy, *Mystery Train*. As I was parking my car, I was surprised to learn that the diner was located a short walk from the National Civil Rights Museum, formerly the Lorraine Hotel, where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1966. Upon finishing my lunch, I wandered around this historic site, a deep wound in the wellsprings of American memory, which had now been resuscitated as a memorial to the struggle for a more inclusive society.

After this brief excursion, I made my way back onto I-40 and crossed the muddy expanse of the Mississippi River into Arkansas. Having watched the skyline of Memphis, the metropolis of the Mid-South, slowly shrink away in my rear view mirror as if swallowed whole by the river's powerful waters in an act of retribution for infringing upon its suffocating borders, I passed further into the far northwestern corner of the

Delta, picking up I-55 North and then US 63. All around the artifices of mankind fell away, and a familiar fecund vista opened before me as if a stage curtain had been pulled back, allowing the cavernous sky to meet the earth at a perfect 180 degree angle that only exists for me in the Mississippi's great flood plain. I was driving down an infinite stretch of two lane road that finally disappeared from view at the vanishing point, where the gradual curve in the earth's surface caused the highway to fall from view as if it tumbled into outer space. Here, on this headlong vector of paved earth with endless rows of crops bursting forth from the fertile soil on both sides of my car as far as I could see – a picture that one could witness driving down an unfathomable number of roads throughout the southern Delta – I felt an enlivening recollection of home.

Though the landscape of the Delta, thickly strewn with kudzu and carved almost surgically by countless tributaries, loomed large throughout my formative years, I became most familiar with it during the many fieldwork trips I took in my early twenties. On more than one occasion I filled the gap in time between interviews with blues musicians by exploring out-of-the way highways and back roads in search of landmarks that had attained a mythical quality for me: Stovall Plantation, the crossroads intersection of Highways 61 and 49 outside of Clarksdale, the graves of Mississippi Fred McDowell and Sam Chatmon, and towns like Avalon and Itta Benna. From these unplanned adventures, two of my photographs have always remained more stirring than the rest: the first – a small, white-washed church with a gravel lot, steeple ascending skywards, sitting along a two lane highway, perfectly elegant in the black and white photograph and outlined from behind by dense woods – brought to mind the singing of hymns, hands clapping and a deep, resonant faith; the second – the remnants of a shotgun house with

only the front wall erect, its empty doorway filled with the day's dying light, and receding from view through this door frame were rows of cotton rippling into the distance like the tide going out to sea – inspired in me feelings of wonderment and mystery that such a peculiar image did indeed exist in the corporeal world.

In truth, though, my imagination had been nurtured to expect and value this land and the people who animated it by the authors I encountered in the “Mississippi” section of Oxford’s Square Books: Larry Brown, Barry Hannah, Lewis Nordan, Willie Morris, Shelby Foote, William and Walker Percy, Richard Ford, Eudora Welty and, of course, William Faulkner. Devouring their fascinating tales of Yazoo witches, ominous Indian burial mounds and the ever present past, epic Civil War battles, and magical swamps, I formed my own prosthetic memories of a southern childhood which in truth I never fully lived. For instance, though I have never been hunting, the story of Larry Brown’s first kill on a deer hunt from *On Fire*, or the primeval power of Faulkner’s “The Bear,” brought the beauty of this primordial experience home for me. A solidly middle-class, white American for whom any sense of a regional identity had remained out of reach due to both my parents’ beguiling refusal to stay in one place for more than three years and the homogenizing effects of mass media in the digital age, I looked back over the years and decided Mississippi was a better, more romantic frontier in which to plant my flag and present myself as a child of this cultural and literary heritage. All in all, my conscious choice to prosthetically embrace a partial, or an imagined, Mississippi was no great sin; we are all romantics after our own fashion. What is problematic, though, is when one’s romantic yearnings sublimate another’s most tortured realism, when one person’s Auschwitz becomes another person’s Eden. And it is by no means a great

exaggeration to call the Jim Crow South of the 1930s in general, and Mississippi more specifically, just such a horribly inhumane place for African Americans like Robert Johnson and his contemporaries.

In his memoir, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Alan Lomax paints a stark and brutal picture of black life in Mississippi in the 1930s and early 1940s, describing both the limited and shackling economic opportunities available to African Americans and the many violent threats and gruesome horrors Delta blacks faced in these occupational environments as well as their daily lives. Even nearly sixty years after the end of Reconstruction, the state of Mississippi still openly contested the right of the federal government to exercise power and authority within its borders when such actions would threaten Jim Crow's established social order. On at least one occasion, local authorities rendered New Deal relief efforts futile by refusing to properly distribute meat and flour to hungry black families (Lomax 1993: 193-194). In the midst of this openly hostile social environment, Lomax details at length three primary forms of backbreaking physical labor that were a means whereby African Americans were able to support themselves and their families while simultaneously making essential contributions to the growth of the region's and nation's economy: sharecropping, building the system of levees along the Mississippi River, and laying the railroads that were continuing to extend across the state (Lomax 1993: 142-255).

Sharecropping in the postbellum South was, in essence, a form of economic servitude or peonage through which poor tenant farmers, often black, became bonded in debt to white landowners. According to the terms of this financial arrangement between

landlord and tenant, the white plantation owner provided the tenant with a plot of land, a house, and the supplies necessary to plant and harvest a crop while, in return, the tenant's family supplied the labor, working the land during the planting season. In theory, at the end of the season the two parties were supposed to divide the crop equally; in reality, however, the landowner was able to pay the tenant an arbitrary sum according to his discretion, and the device that tilted the balance in the plantation owner's favor when the time came to split the crop was the commissary.

It was here that the tenant's family had to borrow all the supplies, clothing, and food they needed during the year, accumulating a growing debt while waiting to see the profit yielded from the year's crop. Of course, once they harvested the crop and the time came to settle their account at the commissary, the tenants were not allowed to see or verify their accumulated debt on the landlord's books. Rather, at the plantation owner's caprice, a vicious and unending cycle of debt had been set in motion, and poor, unlanded tenants continually found themselves owing an ever-increasing balance to the white aristocratic landlord, an amount that, until settled, bound them and their family to the confines of a specific plantation. For those outspoken few who voiced displeasure at the inherent inequality and dishonesty of this arrangement, the fortunate had to uproot their family and relocate in search of a new means of support; quite often though, the proper authorities – including the overseer, members of the Klan, or even local law enforcement officials – threatened, intimidated, and cajoled the dissenters with violence and even death (1993: 93-98).

While sharecropping clearly had its antecedent in the antebellum world of slavery – indeed being largely of a not-so-subtle extension of this system – the role of black labor

in laying the railroad and building the levees was an essential factor in how the Delta became profitable for the white, southern landed aristocracy, and the nation as a whole, in the twentieth century. Writing nearly a half century after observing the fundamental and transformational impact black labor had upon the southern landscape, Lomax wrote, “Farm boys and plowmen left home to become professional boatmen, muleskinners, and railroaders, learning the pains and pleasures of the lonesome road. Their herculean labors brought daylight into the swamps, tamed the big muddy rivers, and built the roads along which wealth and change came to the Delta” (1993: 142). Yet, despite the wealth these professions brought to the region – and despite the fact they were often free laborers taking regular wages – African American railroaders building the South’s new infrastructure and muleskinners working to erect the large dikes that held back the Mississippi’s annual floodwaters were by no means immune to the degradations visited upon their sharecropping contemporaries, who found themselves conjoined by debt to a white landowner and plantation. One veteran of the levee work crews explained, “it was just like the penitentiary. They *paid* you what they wanted, they *give* you what they wanted you to have. If you didn’t do it like they want it, somebody’s [going to] beat you up” (quoted in Lomax 1993: 251).

Much like sharecroppers, railroaders and muleskinners found themselves on the wrong end of an exploitative system, often forced to live in degraded conditions in segregated work camps located deep in the Delta wilderness and to labor under the watchful eye of brutal white overseers, the threat of lashing, shooting, and lynching looming ever present. Meanwhile, the physical demands the labor and the climate imposed upon them far exceeded any rational expectation of the tests the human body

could survive. A good steel gang had to exhaust body and spirit to lay a quarter mile of track a day, working in teams to drive the spikes that joined the ties to the rail lines with six-pound hammers while the Mississippi sun beat down upon them. Driving steel in this manner was by no means a simpler matter of brute strength. Rather, done properly, the work required skillfully coordinated and choreographed movements, suggesting the crucial role the proud but burdensome craftsmanship of black steel drivers played in establishing inroads for the burgeoning forces of industrial capitalism to lay conquest to the land and bounty of the southern frontier in the first half of the last century (Lomax 1993: 142-169).

By comparison, the life of African American muleskinners working on the levees was more prone to violence and mortal danger. Lomax described the world of Delta levees as “the last American frontier, even more lawless than the Far West in its palmy days, partly because there was, so to speak, open season on blacks, considered less valuable than the mules they drove ... [the] often desperate men who contracted to build a section of the Mississippi levee ... corv ed their labor, they overworked and underpaid them, ruling them with pistol-whippings and the ever-present threat of lynching” (1993: 216-217). Though possibly more fundamentally discomfiting than these unmistakable and explicit outward acts of violence, a part of daily life on the levee, were the more thought-out and rationalized decisions, which embodied a cold and pragmatic estimation of the value of human lives as smaller, expendable units contributing to a greater endeavor. As Walter Brown, a veteran of the construction of the Mississippi River levees, explained to Lomax, “They’d have them rolling wheelbarrows up a runway. It’d be hot, just like this hot now. They got a boss out there telling you, ‘Come on with it.

Come on with it!’ Some of [them] get hot – they go to dump the wheelbarrow and they would fall into the pit. The next wheelbarrow of dirt, they’d throw it on the top [of] you! Leave you right there” (quoted in Lomax 1993: 253).

Such tales, which reveal the basic disregard for human life exhibited by contractors and other local authorities when weighed against the expediencies of the integrating the Delta into the national effort to broaden the ever widening net of the American economy in the twentieth century, abound throughout Lomax’s conversations with black laborers from the Mississippi Delta in the 1930s and 1940s. Where the efforts of black labor had made possible the networks of travel, transport, and communication in opening the far reaches of the South to the financial interests of the industrial world, African American manpower, in constructing over one thousand miles of levee walls along the banks of the Mississippi River, had erected a shield that allowed the fertile region to prosper undisturbed by the river’s destructive waters. Resting peacefully as it were and giving forth its natural riches uninterrupted, the fecund soil of the Mississippi Delta would generate seemingly infinite sums of money and other commodities for the regional and national economies. As one white overseer proudly declared, “We levee contractors created a billion dollars worth of land and property and that big green wall protects that wealth. It’s land that produces like no other land in the world” (Lomax 1993: 212-255).

Along with these three most widespread and entrenched entrée points into a life of backbreaking physical labor available to Delta blacks during Lomax’s fieldwork trips of the 1930s and early 1940s – which are most accurately considered examples of peonage – one other potential experience loomed large on the Mississippi landscape for African

Americans living in the Jim Crow South: the physically and spiritually imposing specter of Mississippi's Parchman State Penitentiary. Though not an employment opportunity by any stretch of the imagination, the forced labor of black convicts on the state farm at Parchman was another apparatus in the exploitative system through which state government agencies and private entrepreneurs partnered to extract and commandeer the Delta's natural resources in order to further cement the region's and the nation's expanding economic vision, status, and wealth. As late as 1957, only a few years before the civil rights movement brought the horrible conditions raging rampant throughout much of Mississippi to bare on the nation's conscience, a reporter for the *New York Post* described this manipulative approach to the treatment and rehabilitation of prisoners: "The state penitentiary system at Parchman is simply a cotton plantation using convicts as labor. The warden is not a penologist, but an experienced plantation manager. His annual report to the legislature is not of salvaged lives; it is a profit and loss statement, with the accent on profit" (quoted in Lomax 1993: 257).

That such a profit-minded approach to utilizing the time and energy of individuals who were judged to have violated the rules of society was cynical and fatalistic in estimating the potential for a human life to redeem its worth is certain; far worse, though, were the living conditions that existed during the confinement of black convicts at southern penitentiaries like Parchman. In the many interviews Lomax conducted within the walls of southern state penitentiaries during his numerous fieldwork trips, he documented stories of such horror and abuse, of such inhumanity and violence, that they seemed to arise from another time and place, calling to mind an entire tradition of infamous prison accounts, including Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*,

Alexandr Solzenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, and more geographically proximate accounts of life in the Confederate prison at Andersonville.

Lomax himself equated the brutality he learned of in these southern institutions of forced labor with Nazi concentration camps. The nightmarish tales he heard at Parchman and other penitentiaries throughout the South prominently featured recurrent images of inmates disappearing to never be seen or heard from again, prisoners lying in pools of their own blood after having been whipped and beaten to the brink of death, sexual abuse, unchecked violence and aggression, and coldly calculated execution. On those few occasions when the perpetrators of these heinous crimes, most often white overseers, were identified and questioned, spurious investigations were the norm; the guilty went unpunished and were allowed to continue working on the prison farms in the same or similar capacities (Lomax 1993: 256-313). Amid this life of moral degradation that unfolded concurrently with the ongoing entrenchment of middle class, suburban America in the middle of the last century, the labor of African American convicts continued to be a crucial means to an end: the efficient march of the logic of capitalism towards excessive profit, economic progress, and the continuous expansion of markets.

This, then, is the aggregate of the established labor system presented to a young, African American male in Mississippi in the early 1930s and 1940s: sharecropper, steel driver, muleskinner, convict – all one in the same, which is to say institutionalized peonage contributing invaluable to a rapidly expanding national economy while simultaneously experiencing infamous levels of brutality. Accurately tallied, a picture begins to coalesce of a national project to organize, interconnect, tame, and manipulate a vast swath of land and water in order to expand the reach and reconceptualize the scope

of a national economy on the brink of a new period of international influence. And of central importance to America's emergence was the role of the southern black labor in this exploitative and bottom line-oriented system.

Of the two extant pictures of Robert Johnson, the full-length studio portrait taken in Memphis in 1935, while he was in his mid-twenties, speaks volumes about the life he imagined he could make for himself as a musician. Seated on a stool, Johnson is the epitome of the well-dressed, professional musician, holding his guitar in his lap as if the photographer caught him plying his trade. For the occasion, he is wearing a fine, pin-striped suit, a neck tie with a matching handkerchief in his coat breast pocket, and a fedora hat tilted to one side. Based on this photograph, Robert Johnson, like many of his peers, saw a career as a blues performer as a launching pad to attaining an elevated social status that included all of the incumbent finer things in life, material objects beyond the means of most laboring African Americans in the Mississippi Delta, and, as part of actually achieving this goal, he was embodying this image of success in his self-presentation (Wald 2004: xiii).

Other than these two photographs, though, the only other historical artifact music scholars and fans are left with are the twenty-nine tracks Johnson cut for Don Law in San Antonio, Texas, in 1936 and 1937. Beyond this concrete, tangible evidence, there is a relative abundance of information that Johnson's fans and biographers have gleaned from conversations and interviews with his contemporaries, including Son House, Honeyboy Edwards, Robert Junior Lockwood, Johnny Shines, and a few family members. Yet, rather than painting a clear but partial picture, these first-hand reports serve to establish

Robert Johnson's legacy as a shifting and contested space. These discordant and incomplete accounts begin to suggest what about Robert Johnson's life both makes him available to be disremembered in later celebratory narratives and what made these very narratives necessary. The brief sketch of Robert Johnson's life, career, and death I include here is not meant to encapsulate his entire story; I am including the major events in his life that would later constitute his commemoration in American popular culture. For a more comprehensive biography or biographical sketch, see Guralnick (1982), Pearson and McCulloch (2003), Schroeder (2004), and Wald (2004).

The officially accepted date of Johnson's birth, according to one of his half-sisters, is May 8, 1911. Various accounts and records, however, contest this date, and the best estimate establishes that Robert Leroy Johnson was born somewhere between 1910 and 1913. For most of his childhood, young Robert moved between the homes of his mother, her husband, and his biological father. Interestingly, he went by a series of names throughout his life, including Robert Spencer, R. L. Spencer, and Robert Dodds, and his family and friends rarely knew him as Robert Johnson (Guralnick 1982: 9). In the early 1930s, his wife, Virginia Travis, died at the age of sixteen while giving birth to their first child. Angry that Robert was not present when his wife died his family and friends blamed his aspiring career as a blues musician and his assumed association with the Devil this profession entailed for the tragic death. That Johnson experienced such an apparent tragedy early in his life may offer one interpretation as to why his lyrics presented the image of a man tormented by the workings of the Devil. Blamed for the death of his wife and feeling a drastic sense of loss after this meaningless mortal blow to

his young family, Robert Johnson took up the wandering life of a blues singing troubadour (Schroeder 2004: 19-21).

One essential fact about Johnson's life that is *not* contested, at least by his contemporaries, was the lifestyle he passionately refused. Faced with the oppressive system of sharecropping, a young Robert Johnson made one rebellious decision: he would not be subjected to this unfair and backbreaking life. According to a neighbor, Johnson emphatically said, "I don't wanna work; I'm tryin' to learn how to make my livin' *without* pickin' cotton" (quoted in Calt and Warldlow 1989: 43). Instead, he was going to try and hone his musical skills so that he could make a living as a professional blues man. To this end, Johnson traveled extensively, exposing himself to myriad influences and learning the hottest and most popular blues sounds of his era; he admired and adapted the styles of numerous popular performers such as Leroy Carr, Kokomo Arnold, and Lonnie Johnson (Wald 2004: 173-174).

Though Johnson took up the life of a wandering troubadour, he did briefly settle into various communities in Arkansas and Mississippi, to temporarily arrest his movement. It was during one such stop in Robinsonville, Mississippi, in the early 1930s that Robert Johnson met one of his own musical idols, Son House, a blues man who would later play a major role in the construction of the crossroads myth. Blues critics and fans repeat a now famous story from Son House about Johnson's stay in Robinsonville ad infinitum. House would play at local house parties with his friend, Willie Brown. Whenever they took a break to cool off outside, Robert would take the opportunity to try his hand at playing some blues songs with House's guitar. As Johnson was still a novice performer, the people at the party would quickly urge House and

Brown to stop the young man's performance. Shortly after one such instance, Robert Johnson disappeared from Robinsonville for a period of time that House recalls as about half a year. After this lapse of time, Johnson came walking in the front door at a house party where House and Brown were playing with a guitar slung over his shoulder, and proceeded to convince them to let him play a few songs. To their amazement, the young man had returned as an astonishingly skilled blues guitarist (Wald 2004: 108-111). In an attempt to understand how Robert Johnson could have quickly acquired such speed and talent, House later suggested that he might have "bartered his soul to the devil" (Pearson and McCulloch 2003: 31). When this story circulated through popular culture in the 1960s, the myth of Robert Johnson selling his soul at a Delta crossroads was born.

Throughout the early and mid 1930s, Johnson traveled as far North as New York, all the while further perfecting his craft and hoping to record some tracks. In 1936, through the efforts of talent scout H. C. Speir, Robert Johnson traveled to San Antonio, Texas, to record with Don Law. During this first recording session, he recorded sixteen tracks. Then, in 1937, he returned to Law's studio in San Antonio to record his final thirteen tracks (Wald 2004: 114-122). When Robert Johnson walked out of Don Law's studio that summer, he had recorded his entire corpus of twenty-nine songs, the most tangible and important part of the legacy that he would bequeath to his fans and critics to interpret and construct his memory in American popular culture. In just over a year, Robert Johnson would be dead.

In death, Robert Johnson was once again a nexus for conflicting versions of history. In the commonly accepted story detailing his demise, a jealous husband poisoned the young blues singer for having an affair with his wife, and Johnson finally

succumbed to pneumonia several days later (Wald 2004: 123-124). However, other friends, family members, and local, white officials attributed his death to a range of factors, including stabbing, female jealousy, and syphilis. They also disagree on the time and date of his death (Schroeder 2004: 19-20, 42-48). Since confusion is a recurring theme in the life of Robert Johnson, it should not be surprising that nobody knows for sure where he was buried. Skip Henderson, a man who helps to raise money to provide headstones for the graves of blues singers buried in previously unmarked graves, has erected two separate markers for Johnson; other fans of the blues singers argue that a third unmarked grave is where friends laid Robert to rest (Cheseborough 2001: 116-124).

The discrepancies in this brief biographical sketch of Robert Johnson reveal the great extent to which later fans have pieced together his life story out of often contradictory and contesting threads in an effort to weave these interstices closed. Yet, what is more troubling, and thus necessitates imaginative revision, is how his life speaks to the historical experience of African Americans in the 1930s Delta. Local officials exhibited such a high level of disinterest in accurately documenting black experience that they allowed for omissions in Johnson's life at the most fundamental rites of passage: birth and death. More than simply failing to attend to accurate documentation of these essential human experiences, they omitted the information due to a complete disregard for black life. Most telling of all, local officials quickly dismissed Robert Johnson's death, and never brought the murderer to justice. Or, due to assumptions about black promiscuity, they just as likely assumed that a sexually transmitted disease dealt Johnson a mortal blow (Schroeder 2004: 19-20, 42-52).

Thus, by examining the major social forces and historical currents at play during Johnson's own lifetime, we quickly begin to see the need for ambassadors of the late twentieth-century culture industry in subsequent decades to contain the troublesome echoes of the Delta in national memory by endorsing and circulating glossed-over narratives about the region's place within American identity. To let these gaps in historical discourses go unfilled and unmediated would make apparent the extreme indifference with which local authorities regarded the uncertainty and violence that marred African American life in the Delta during this period. When juxtaposed with the concurrent contribution of black labor to the furtherance of the region's economic growth, a picture comes into focus wherein a group of people who were essential to the country's international ascendancy were also denied the full benefits of that very wealth. Such a past had the potential to disrupt nostalgic stories of continual progress and the advance of the American Dream to the far reaches of the globe. By creating a myth which ascribes Johnson's death to a mysterious deal with the Devil, however, promulgators of dominant historical narratives, as well as his legions of white fans in the 1960s, were able to lift a romantically imagined and exotically situated Delta to a new plane in the American imaginary, dislodging Johnson's memory from its place in the African American imaginary.

Despite the fact that he was imitating and possibly even improving upon the most up to date, popular sounds of the day, Johnson, in the years immediately after his death, never surpassed or even equaled his musical influences in popularity with his contemporary black audience. According to Elijah Wald, the blues divas – Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Mamie Smith – along with piano-guitar duos like Tampa Red and

Georgia Tom joined Leroy Carr at the top of the *Billboard* “Race” charts (2004: 14-42). Nevertheless, in his decision to flee the life of sharecropping and seek the life of a finely dressed and urbane, professional musician, Johnson committed a significant revolutionary act: he rejected the system of economic servitude endemic to the exploitative labor infrastructure of 1930s Mississippi, and claimed a level of agency that many of his contemporaries did not share by pursuing new opportunities made available by the race record industry, even if that meant running the risk of dying a young and violent death. For a little over twenty years, Robert Johnson likely remained on the periphery of the imagination of his black contemporaries as a local musician who had achieved a small degree of popularity (Wald 2004: 194). More importantly, the specter of his memory was a reminder of both the possibilities beyond life in the Delta as well as the risks inherent to tacking a course against the prevailing winds.

In the summers of 1941 and 1942, Alan Lomax traveled to Mississippi with members of the Sociology department at Fisk University to conduct a field study and collect songs for the Library of Congress. For Lomax, these trips marked his return to the South after an absence of several years. In 1933, at the age of 17, he had embarked on his first such trip throughout the southern United States, accompanying his father, John, into numerous black penitentiaries in order to record songs on discs that they would eventually donate to government archives in Washington, D.C. (Filene 2000: 1). Nearly ten years later, Lomax was returning to the South as one of the foremost cultural brokers of his day, carrying both the authority of his status as a representative of the federal government and the mantle of a folk revival that he had helped to begin in earnest in the

1930s. Upon arriving in the Delta, one of the first people Lomax went looking to record was Robert Johnson.

Several years before, in 1939, John Hammond, a young jazz critic and employee of Columbia Records, had successfully urged the nascent ethnomusicologist to listen to Johnson's recordings, and now Lomax was determined to personally record this "especially gifted" folk artist. Of course, much to Lomax's disappointment, Johnson had been dead for several years (Lomax 1993: 3-15). What is curious about Lomax's desire to record Johnson is that the late blues singer was a little known commodity, especially in the minds of his African American contemporaries. Nevertheless, almost in spite of the fact that only a small cadre of white, northern jazz aficionados held Robert Johnson's music in high esteem at that point in time, Lomax firmly believed that the late blues singer was "one of the two or three greatest originals of the blues" (Lomax 1993: 13).

While clearly Lomax's and Hammond's estimation of Johnson's musical talent, though in the minority in the late 1930s and early 1940s when compared to the young man's popularity with his contemporary black audience, withstood the test of time and has become an almost unquestioned view among blues fans and music historians, the way in which their preferences diverged from African Americans in the Delta suggests the different perspectives, experiences, and needs that intersect at the meeting point that is folk revivalism. Further, when one group in this coming together occupies a higher rung on the social ladder – or, more accurately in this case, is actually considered a full-class citizen in a segregated society – and thus has the ability to document cultural practices and then disseminate them through established channels in society-at-large, the potential for assigning a different intent to these traditions is significant and far reaching.

Addressing the folk revivals of the twentieth century, Joe Hickerson, the former Director of the Archive of American Folk Song at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, provides insight about this process through which cultural outsiders have entered so-called “folk” communities and brought traditional practices to the attention of larger social or political entities. He explains,

what was happening was not a revival at all, but rather a kind of transfer or transplant. Songs, instruments and certain aspects of style were adopted and adapted from such regions of America as the upper and lower South, the Southwest, Appalachia, and the Mississippi Delta. These songs were then enjoyed, learned, and sung by people outside of those areas, mostly in the Northeast. They were transplants from one part of the country to another (1995: 14).

Such a peculiar convergence of interests and attitudes wherein one group selectively chooses according to their esoteric perspective from the cultural practices of another community captures much of the essence of the folkloristic enterprise. John Cohen states this predicament quite clearly, writing, “The problem has its roots in the earliest definition of ‘folklore,’ which was based on class distinctions that bordered on racism. Folklore study was a way for one class of people to look at the culture of another: an elite group defining the lower class” (1995: 47).

Cohen’s fundamental conceptualization of folklore study as a pursuit whereby a class of people situated in the upper echelons of a society is able to look downwards and to assign meaning to the traditions of another class is crucial to understanding the largely government-sponsored folk revival of the 1930s and early 1940s. Though the surge in interest in American folklife in these years grew out of a range of impulses and motivations, leading public folklorists like B. A. Botkin and both John and Alan Lomax were seeking to find in American folk culture a uniquely, or organically, national culture.

This approach amounted to a major break with previous theoretical foundations of the field, which had claimed that American culture was a diluted and residual form of British culture (Filene 2004: 51-52). Instead, Botkin and the Lomaxes asserted that American folklore and, by extension, the national culture was a living expression of the American experience. Despite these theoretical advances, as well as the interest 1930s public folklorists exhibited in urban folklore, Botkin, the Lomaxes, and others did hold on to other problematic concepts, ones that brought to mind the latent influences of Romantic Nationalism, by assuming the “folk,” and thus the country’s organic wellsprings of culture and character, were situated in a rural and remote past (Filene 2004: 55-62). This location of the folk was a problem that would only be exacerbated by later revivals.

The 1930s revival was also a response to the struggles inherent to the Great Depression in several forms. Faced with the apparent failure of the American economy and the laissez faire ethos upon which it was based, many Americans began to look to the “folk” with admiration for their strength of character and their cultural practices, both of which they saw as unblemished by the spoils and temptations of modernity (Filene 2004: 55-56). At the same time, through the efforts of the Works Progress Administration and Federal Writers Project, the government was attempting to employ a large number of Americans and thus temper the impact of the Depression. These public sector programs were not meant to simply provide work for the unemployed; rather, through projects such as the State Guidebooks series and the search for living lore in the cities as well as the country, Botkin and his compatriots hoped to introduce Americans to the nation’s cultural pluralism (Hirsch 2003: 4-5).

These sorts of theoretical shifts and interpretive maneuvers proved to be quite attractive to the federal government, who suddenly directed the attention and resources of official culture – “the culture sustained, sanctioned, and deployed by the federal government” – towards America’s vernacular and ethnic communities. As a result, Benjamin Filene explains, “the celebration of the marginal ... had become the basis for a new style of patriotism celebrating America” (2000: 133-134). Unfortunately, such a formulation of American culture was fraught with the problems of the discipline’s complex history of race- and class-based condescension. Seeking a broad American identity from the cultural practices of communities on the periphery of American society, the people on the outside looking in, amounted to constructing identity from the cultural ‘other.’ Moreover, Botkin, the Lomaxes, and others were gathering under the umbrella of their more inclusive, or pluralistic, American culture those very practices whereby America’s vernacular cultures, in this case southern African Americans, often responded to their marginal status and differentiated their cultural identity as distinct from the government-endorsed culture that symbolized their secondary status.

For instance, in the case of specifically African American traditions such as the blues, to expand official culture in this way amounted to labeling potentially subversive, countercultural practices as simultaneously quintessentially American, practices that were actually one of the means by which the dominated class was, in the words of Jeff Todd Titon, “resistant to, or co-opting, the ideology of the central or dominant class” (Titon 1995: 441). Turning to Lawrence Levine, we see that in fact blues in part

served as a mechanism by which [African Americans] could be relatively candid in a society that rarely accorded them that privilege, could communicate this candor to others whom they would in no other way be able to reach, and, in the

face of the sanctions of the white majority, could assert their own individuality, aspirations, and sense of being (1977: 240).

Moreover, the episodic and cryptic structure of a blues song along with the frequent use of “innuendo, repetition, hints and allusions” made the blues a powerful and appropriate vehicle for expressing dissent as well as a form of communication whose meaning was hard to discern. One example is the number of country blues songs about the damage boll weevils inflicted on the socioeconomic structure that controlled their lives, the plantation (Levine 1977: 240-241).

Since the public folklorists of the 1930s were seeking, in their fieldwork, to establish an inclusive American culture by documenting the nation’s folk culture, they would have had much to lose by reading this material as articulating a sense of protest and extreme dissatisfaction – even outright differentiation – in that same American society. There is at least one instance in which John Lomax incorrectly interpreted a verse criticizing middle class African Americans for trying to act “white.” Instead, he published this same verse and presented it as an example of encouraging social advancement (Levine 1977: 245). Guided by his desire to discover American culture in the culture of the disenfranchised “folk,” John Lomax recorded an expression of ridicule and complaint, removed this data from its African American cultural context, and recontextualized it in the whole of what he saw as American culture as symbolized by its placement in a national archive. In so doing, he re-presented a blues song epitomizing the racial divisiveness, bifurcation, and inequality of the era as both proof that African Americans were finding their place in American society and that American culture was distinct. Conversely, Charley Patton’s “High Water Everywhere,” which documented the efforts of white authorities to keep Delta blacks from fleeing the rising waters of the

Mississippi River during the infamous 1927 flood, is one blues song of the period that spoke to the marginalized experience of African Americans in the Delta in a way that also made clear the way their cultural practices responded to and differentiated them from a society in which they still occupied the bottom ranks of an entrenched caste system.

Fitz Brundage has explored the role of museums, archives, and other cultural institutions in forming the accepted memories of an official culture. As he explains, “Objects wrenched from their intended setting and exhibited in apparently neutral spaces may lose some of their function and acquire new meanings not intended by their creator.” Further, he notes, the “problem of changed context and altered meaning may be magnified when performances as well as objects are involved” (2000: 18-22).

Brundage’s comments illuminate the way in which the fieldwork of John and Alan Lomax altered the meanings of the expressive material they collected when they deposited their extensive recordings in the Library of Congress. Having placed these examples of African American expressive practices in a repository for the memory of officially endorsed American culture, they recontextualized these performances as specific incidents of American culture, not expressions of dissatisfaction, frustration, and anger with that very culture. Inspired by the inclusive cultural and political vision of the 1930s revival, the elder Lomax and his son expanded the imagined idea of America to include those peripheral expressive forms that were actually a means for establishing difference and which were contending with it for legitimacy.

Much as he and his father had in the 1930s, Alan Lomax looked to the traditional culture – and often the vernacular music – of disenfranchised Americans as a means to discover and document a distinct national culture when he returned nearly a decade later.

Indeed, Lomax goes so far as to explicitly state as one of his defining efforts a need to record for posterity these marginalized voices, which he saw as essential component of the American experience. Writing the “Preface” to *The Land Where the Blues Began* in 1992, he looked back through the years and stated his mission upon traveling to Mississippi on behalf of the Library of Congress in the early 1940s: “As the work went on, the eloquent people of the Delta spoke more openly, and it was a source of deep satisfaction to me that at last I, a white Southerner, could penetrate the Southern façade and learn something about what life was like on the other side of the Jim Crow line” (1993: xiv).

To this end, Lomax spent a great deal of time in Coahoma County, Mississippi, consciously attempting to record examples of dissatisfaction and rebellion in the folkloric practices of black Mississippians. Ironically, though, he often has to resort to his status and authority as a representative of official culture to establish the value of recording these cultural practices of disenfranchised Americans so he can later deposit them in the archives at the Library of Congress. At one point, Lomax is so taken with the predicament and yet cultural vitality of African Americans living in Mississippi during the Jim Crow period that he declares, “yet these people, confined to their shacks and their slums, really possessed America ... they were the only full blown Americans” (1993: 32).

This example speaks poignantly and powerfully to the tensions inherent to Lomax’s work, or his Mississippi Paradox. Walking back streets at night in the black side of Clarksdale, on the proverbial “other side of the tracks,” Alan Lomax was in search of his noble vision of America – what he saw as a republic constituted of diverse

vernacular traditions – in the culture of a disenfranchised community of African Americans who were excluded from the very promises fundamental to the country's founding principles. Further, his argument that Delta blacks, who were denied status as full citizens, embodied something inherently *American* was accompanied by Lomax's full acknowledgement of their brutal treatment and manipulation as dehumanized labor, a contribution which perpetuated the very economic system exploiting them. Indeed, it is in this very exclusion, exploitation, marginalization, and disenfranchisement that Lomax paradoxically identifies Delta blacks, Robert Johnson's peers, as quintessentially American (Lomax 1993: 3-141).

Collecting his field data as a representative of the Library of Congress, Alan Lomax discovered America's official culture in the traditions of the disenfranchised. Extracting these culturally specific expressions and resituating them within a national archive, the symbolic space for preserving national memory, he drew these possible moments of frustration, insubordination, and resistance under the aegis of official American culture. As an extension of the federal government working in the temporal and geographic heart of the Jim Crow South, the fieldwork Alan Lomax conducted in Mississippi in the 1930s and 1940s did indeed document the nation's cultural diversity and thereby contribute to the New Deal-era vision for a new American pluralism. However, he did so, in part, by incorporating those practices which empowered marginalized communities with the ability to question and contend with the government's political authority and legitimacy into an institution of national memory. Hence, cultural practices which were intended to articulate cultural and political difference and which would have contradicted any suggestion that Robert Johnson's contemporaries were

eager to embrace inclusion in American society as it was presently structured came to a strange resting place in a sacred public space that symbolized official culture, the very mechanism the federal government often relied on to endorse and perpetuate the same status quo African Americans like Charley Patton rejected in their music.

Located in Washington, D.C., the Library of Congress, as well as other repositories of official memory, looms as a tangible, physical expression of disremembering, a spatial manifestation of the ability of a dominant culture to redirect a specifically situated expressive practice of one constituent community towards the historical purpose of the larger politically body. While this process was unfolding in the spaces of African American daily life in Mississippi Delta towns, America found itself engaged in a conflict on two other continents. The outcome of this epic struggle would facilitate a new era of international influence for the country, and the traditions now institutionalized as inimitably American would prove crucial in this next phase of dominance.

Chapter 2

“I Have a Dream”: Conjuring an Image of America Renewed

Whereas the political establishments of the southern and northern regions of the United States came together in a violent military conflict in the 1860s, these two distinct cultural entities converged both politically and socially in the 1960s in ways that, though less destructive in scope than outright war, were extremely violent in their own right. As the burgeoning youth movement of the post-World War II generation came of age across the college campuses, coffee houses, and cityscapes of the Northeast, Midwest, and West coast, those individuals and groups who were passionately swept up in the decade's countercultural energies began to turn their progressive social and political gaze towards the entrenched order of the Jim Crow South. The drama that eventually played out on the streets and courthouse squares of southern towns between organizations such as the NAACP, SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and the defenders of the established racial hierarchy would again tear the nation asunder as these two diametrically opposed social groups struggled to realize their political vision for the region and the nation.

Such a convergence of the energies and self-interest of social and cultural groups – one northern, young, liberal, educated, and forward looking, the other southern, established, conservative, parochial, and resistant to change – renewed the centuries-old struggle to confirm the promises inherent in the republic's founding documents. For the

story that unfolded largely involved the youth of one traditional American stronghold carrying the message of peaceful protest and change achieved through nonviolence into the entrenched centers of power of a longstanding political rival and setting in motion the restructuring of this rival's – which is to say the South's – social hierarchy. Central to the dissemination and success of the dream of nonviolent protest as a vehicle for social change were leading figures in the 1960s urban folk music revival, including Peter, Paul, and Mary; Joan Baez; and, of course, Pete Seeger (Cohen 2002). Due to their unique combination of musical skill, thoroughgoing song collecting and dissemination, and innate leadership, the music of the era – often originally culled from southern repertoires – became an integral part of the civil rights movement. Indeed, “We Shall Overcome,” after traveling a rather circuitous route from North Carolina to Tennessee and then west to California before returning to Tennessee, became the anthem of the cause's effort to end Jim Crow (Cantwell 1996: 289).

Along with the many examples of songs discovered in the vernacular musical traditions of the American South, there were also original compositions, such as Bob Dylan's “Oxford Town,” which documented a specific skirmish, a charge on the battlefield, and became a testament to the struggle for equal rights and opportunities for all Americans. Based on James Meredith's integration of the University of Mississippi – or Ole Miss as it is more commonly known, a name that draws attention to the university's status as an icon and bastion of the Old South – Dylan's song painted a minimalist picture of the violence and death that erupted when a black man tried to enroll at an all white, southern college: “Oxford town around the bend / He come to the door, he couldn't get in / All because of the color of his skin / What do you think about that my

friend? ... Oxford town in the afternoon / Everybody's singin' a sorrowful tune / Two men died beneath the Mississippi moon / Somebody better investigate soon."

As troubling as the events surrounding the integration of Ole Miss were for the country's conscience, perhaps no other tragic episode came to stand for the violent intersection of these two divergent social groups and the causes they championed – and surely no other event captivated to such a great degree the attention of both sides in the civil rights movement – as the disappearance of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in the summer of 1964. After weeks of searching and investigating, federal agents discovered the bodies of Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, both Jewish college students from New York who had grown up surrounded by liberal values, and James Chaney, an African American born and raised in Mississippi; local members of the Klan had murdered all three outside of Philadelphia for their involvement in voter registration drives and other activities carried out in the name of "The Movement," shooting them at close range, in cold blood, before burying their bodies deep in an earthen dam.

In the *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*, Willie Morris, a Mississippi native and the youngest editor in the history of *Harper's Magazine*, detailed the events the leading up to the murders, as well as the subsequent struggle to find, arrest, and indict the conspirators in a city and state where many refused to cooperate with federal authorities or where those who were willing to provide information were terrorized into submissive silence. Of the murders, and the tumult that followed, Morris writes, "Their disappearance, along with the harassments, beatings, burnings, and mob cruelties – not only in that haunted summer of 1964 but in the months which followed – attracted the

attention of the nation and the world and became a symbol of the entire civil rights movement and of the recalcitrance which greeted it” (1983: 16). To mark the first anniversary of this horrific incident a year later, black and white mourners marched together through the town and countryside of Philadelphia singing “We Shall Overcome” (Morris 1983: 152-216).

In 1961, three years before the murders in Philadelphia, Columbia Records, in an attempt to capitalize on the current popularity of reissued blues albums, released the album, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, and Robert Johnson appeared on the horizon of the 1960s folk revival as if a newly formed star and soon became the heroic alternative to the conformity that was alienating the disaffected post-World War II generation. Nevermind that African American blues fans of the late 1930s and 1940s were probably taken aback when a largely regional or unknown artist like Robert Johnson, not Leroy Carr or even Lonnie Johnson, was labeled the “King” of blues music (Wald 2004: 247). Though Robert Johnson’s relative importance had been greatly exaggerated in the album’s title, it is important to note that he did have a few minor hits; “Terraplane Blues” was a modest success, while “Kindhearted Woman Blues,” “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” “Sweet Home Chicago,” and “Ramblin’ On My Mind” eventually became standard entries in the blues canon (Pearson and McCulloch 2003: 74).

How then did Robert Johnson ascend to his throne, and for whom was he the preeminent blues singer? The answer is largely found in the efforts of John Hammond, Sr. Not only had the influential jazz critic, music producer, and devoted fan turned Alan Lomax on to Johnson’s recordings in the Columbia offices in 1939, he had also hoped

one year earlier to bring the blues singer to the attention of America's music loving public at his 1938 "From Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall. Hammond had intended to include Johnson in this event until he learned of the young man's death. Refusing to entirely abandon his vision for the concert by excluding what he clearly saw as Robert Johnson's singular greatness from the line-up, he did play recordings of "Walkin' Blues" and "Preachin' Blues" during the night at Carnegie Hall, two Son House covers that were among Johnson's "most archaic numbers." With these choices, John Hammond, Sr. differentiated himself from other blues fans of the era in two important ways: first, he was in a significant minority at the time by estimating Johnson as an irreplaceable talent; and second, he also diverged from other blues fans in identifying the late blues singer's characteristic skill as the ability to play in a "primitive" or "old-time" style, not one that was increasingly modern, polished, and urbane (Wald 2004: 226-248). Still, due to his status in the recording industry, the jazz critic's interpretation of Robert Johnson's legacy and musical skill as being largely defined by his ability to play archaic blues songs loomed large over the popular discourse on the blues singer's commemoration for the next seventy-five years (Pearson and McCulloch 2003: 20).

Hammond's ability to irrevocably influence the commemoration of Robert Johnson in American memory exemplifies the way in which memories are not objective. Rather in specific historical contexts, as Fitz Brundage explains, groups "establish standards of credibility against which they test their narratives," and it is those individuals and modes of presentation who meet these standards who come to "acquire [the] cultural authority" necessary to render their interpretation of past people, places, and events intelligible, plausible, and meaningful (2000: 5-6). In the case of the performance

of Robert Johnson's music in Carnegie Hall, albeit a mediated one, a certain confluence of circumstances occurred to make Hammond's presentation of his legacy both palatable and attractive to his gathered audience. These factors, for which the sum was characteristically greater than its parts, included Hammond's stature as a record producer for Columbia Records and well-known music critic, as well as the culturally significant performance space of the stage at Carnegie Hall in 1930s New York. These variables combined to form a particular calculus which empowered John Hammond with the appropriate cultural authority to construct the dominant narrative about the life and legacy of Robert Johnson as a blues musician who was especially interested in and adept at performing in residual rural styles. This narrative, having gained the necessary credibility, would have an immeasurable impact on his growing white fandom in the 1960s and beyond.

Like the interest in American folklife and music that had awakened so vibrantly in the 1930s, the 1960s urban folk revival, into which the memory of Robert Johnson had been thrust when Columbia Records released *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, was also the function of a crisis in the stability of the national order and the American sense of self. Between the contentious debate over the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, America found itself more divided than at any time since the Civil War; the country's youth were further dissatisfied by changes in American society in the aftermath of World War II. During the war, the nation had redirected the economy to support the cause abroad and, in the 1950s, with the military expanded across the globe and consumerism having become the new American ethos, the military industrial complex

was born. Simultaneously, America had evolved into a technocratic and bureaucratic society, which valued conformity and looked upon difference with suspicion. Over this scene loomed the Soviet Union and the Cold War; children grew up with bomb shelters in the back yard and bomb drills as a key component of their education. Communism lurked everywhere and, ironically, many of the leaders of the 1930s revival and their programs were done in by McCarthyism (Cantwell 1996: 153-187).

Faced with this vision of post-war America, the country's youth in the 1960s became politically, culturally, and socially disenchanted. In response, a group of left-wing, middle-class, young Americans, many of whom were educated at elite, northeastern universities, listened to and imitated the vernacular musical traditions of the American South as the cure to their frustrations with the spartanization of the nation (Cantwell 1988: 176). Beyond listening to and reproducing old-time and blues music, these young Americans cloaked themselves in the imagery of the southern working man: tattered blue jeans, overalls, and work shirts (Cantwell 1988: 182-184). In reproducing these sounds and images, members of this youth movement were not passively consuming materials imposed upon them by the hegemonic entertainment industry. Rather, they were creating what Michel De Certeau terms a "secondary production" in which they used materials from the dominant culture as a means to articulate a Jeffersonian political imperative about their vision for themselves and for a more egalitarian and democratic America, which would embody certain values long associated with a small-scale and self-sustaining agrarian life (De Certeau 1984: xiii-xiv).

By thus creating a secondary production out of race records, hillbilly recordings, and related musical forms, along with functional work clothes, as a means to embody an

alternate personal history, America's post-war youth were constructing precisely what Allison Landsberg suggests in her conceptualization of "prosthetic memory," which is to say a personally meaningful memory of a heretofore unlived past, one that is felt so profoundly it is able to mold an individual's political philosophy (2004: 2). Turning to Gaston Bachelard's work on the congruous relationship dreams and memory, prosthetic dreams such as these enlivened the imagination which, Bachelard explains, "separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future" (1958: xxx). Hence, when 1960s revivalists like Pete Seeger, Ralph Rinzler, John Cohen, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Samuel Charters, and countless others came together at the Newport Folk Festival, Washington Square, and Greenwich Village coffee houses, the vernacular musical traditions of the South were their means of voicing support for equal rights, non-violence, acceptance of cultural difference, and the anti-war movement – in short, their panoramic vision of America, past, present, and future.

A founding member of the New Lost City Ramblers, John Cohen remains, in many ways, both a spokesperson for this generation as well as the embodiment of the cultural energies that were coming to the fore and overflowing in similarly minded dynamic individuals during the 1960s urban folk revival. A graduate of Yale, Cohen has enjoyed far reaching success as a photographer, documentarian, song collector and field recorder, musician, film consultant, teacher, festival promoter, and all around advocate of traditional music throughout his career. During the revival, he remained a leading public figure, not only by performing with the New Lost City Ramblers, but also as a frequent contributor to the pages of *Sing Out!* and, in partnership with Izzy Young and Ralph Rinzler, as co-founder of the Friends of Old Time Music concerts in New York City. In

his work with the F.O.T.M., Cohen would play an integral role in bringing traditional southern musicians like Clarence Ashley, Doc Watson, Roscoe Holcombe, Bill Monroe, Dock Boggs, Mississippi John Hurt, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and Furry Lewis to the culturally significant space of New York City to perform, much like John Hammond had done nearly a quarter century before (Cohen 1995: 40-41).

Engaging this passion for traditional music was, indeed, intimately connected to Cohen's search for America and his need to create meaning within that established framework by fashioning the country after his imagination. Of his first introduction to southern traditional music, Cohen has recalled, "In 1951, I would listen to *The Wheeling, West Virginia Jamboree* on WWVA late at night and was intrigued by the music ... Coming from a middle-class suburban experience, this was an introduction to what I had been missing. It became my awakening and, for me, the Discovery of America" (1995: 30). Once these soundscapes opened the door onto a different past and another possible reality, Cohen was transfixed and transformed by the object of his imagination:

I think we had been raised on the earlier field recordings and commercial hillbilly records and viewed them with some kind of awe, just as a poet or artist might view their sources of inspiration. The opportunity to visit traditional artists in their homes was seen as a privilege, an activity of reaching out, a dynamic process that might bring meaning and music to one's own life.

Cohen, then, simultaneously exemplified and articulated the frustrations and dreams of a generation looking for a different, more meaningful historical experience, one that could address their political, social, and cultural dissatisfaction with post-war America (1995: 26-41).

While much, if not all, of Cohen's visionary career was dedicated to the pursuit of this image, it was through his contribution to the Friends of Old Time Music concerts

held in New York City from 1961-1965 that he was able to dramatize this vision of the country for himself and others in ways that suggest the power of re-production, memory, and the imagination. Created in part to counteract the commercial elements vying for space in the revival by celebrating the musicians who had inspired himself and many others, Cohen, along with Ralph Rinzler, intended to introduce traditional southern musicians in the flesh and blood – what Cohen described as “a chance to hear what [the music] really sounds like” – to a northern audience at various venues in Greenwich Village, the thriving bohemian cultural center of the 1960s, and thus to ultimately infuse the American metropolis with the vernacular musical traditions of the American South. Looking back on these concerts in the liner notes to a recent Smithsonian Folkways collection of live F.O.T.M. recordings, Cohen remembers approaching the work with a “high-minded tone” while the phrase “‘millions for defense and not a penny for tribute’ was ringing through [his] head.” Having gathered together the revival community to share these and other common passions, values, and ideals, Cohen draws his essay to a close fondly remembering, “For some of us the concerts were a dream come true, while for newcomers ... these concerts shaped their own dream of music” (2006: 22-25).

Bachelard describes this “ability of the image to react on other minds and in other hearts” as “transsubjectivity” (1958: xiv-xv). Transsubjectivity, then, speaks to the ability of images, in this case the southern musician enacting traditional culture, to resonate and move across, betwixt, and between individual minds, consciousnesses, and imaginations in such a way that a shared aesthetic and vision of the nation established a social community capable of political and cultural yearning, articulation, action, and meaning making. At the 1960s Friend of Old Time Music concerts, a highly educated, talented,

and influential group of individuals came together who held within their purview the cultural authority and access to certain modes of presentation which enabled them to dream and realize their image of a re-discoverable America in miniature in New York City, the meeting point for many of the country's political, social, and cultural energies.

John Cohen's compatriots in the 1960s folk revival were equally eager to embrace an imagery that romanticized rebelling against the strictures of the middle-class economy, the homogenization of American culture, and the increasingly structured approach to time and space in their daily lives. For many, the answer was found by taking up the traveling life – by developing a personal politics of the open road – as imagined in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (Cantwell 1996: 284). And if the imagery of the road suggested by Kerouac was one attractive alternative, then Robert Johnson became another voice speaking across the ruptures in American society and to the shared frustrations of the decade's countercultural youth movement. Ironically, then, it was not the defiance that Johnson's chosen profession embodied that drew the interest of the folk revival, but the sense of rebellious freedom, reckless abandon, and mysterious wandering spelled out in his lyrics on *King of the Delta Blues Singers*.

Unsurprisingly, given the tendency of youth movements to determine the ebb and flow of the exchange of commodities in a consumer culture, producer Frank Driggs organized the album in the way that he felt would resonate and succeed in the folk revival market of the early 1960s. In an effort to reach the "romantic imaginings" of the 1960s blues and folk revivalists, Driggs led off the album with "Cross Roads Blues," immediately drawing the listener's attention to tracks that alluded to the Devil and the

crossroads imagery, which were not songs that were relatively popular with Johnson's contemporaries, and thus would not necessarily have incited an African American memory of the late blues singer. Apparently, Driggs' marketing plans proved successful as the white folk revivalists flocked to Johnson's music. Since they knew nothing else about the man, his fans in the 1960s began the practice of filling in the gaps in his story with the adventures narrated in his lyrics, stories that coincidentally supported their romantic yearnings to discover a new American past (Pearson and McCulloch 2003: 28-78).

Indeed, the response future fans had upon initially hearing the songs on the album suggested that, for them, the experience was a powerful, life-changing moment (Schroeder 2004: 23). For instance, Samuel Charters, the host of several F.O.T.M. concerts featuring southern blues performers, referred to Johnson as "one of the superbly creative blues singers" in his early, influential 1959 study *The Country Blues*, which, as its title implies, firmly established Johnson as performer rooted in rural styles (142). Taking the hyperbole further, Peter Guralnick declared, "Robert Johnson became the personification of the existential blues singer, unencumbered by corporeality or history, a fiercely incandescent spirit who had escaped the bonds of tradition by the sheer thrust of genius" (1982: 2). Similarly, Eric Clapton found what he felt was an eternally resonant bard addressing the universal human condition from somewhere in the culturally distant past of the Mississippi Delta when Johnson spoke. Describing the first time he heard the blues man's music, Clapton declared, "I have never found anything more deeply soulful than Robert Johnson. His music remains the most powerful cry that I think you can find in the human voice" (quoted in Wald 2004: 247).

Along with cultural brokers like Charters and Guralnick, Clapton thus romantically transformed Johnson from an aspiring professional blues musician schooled in the hottest and most modern licks of his era to a pure, untrained poet outside of time and historic circumstance, who spoke to the deepest and most profound needs of the human spirit. When other revivalists accepted this romantic reading, they re-inscribed onto Robert Johnson an identity as the purest folk singer, the cure to the ills of their age and those of the human experience, as opposed to the historic figure who attempted to escape the shackles of his native region by aspiring to become a professional blues musician. If Kerouac spoke for the blossoming dreams of a generation when he wrote, “With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I’d often dreamed of going out West to see the country ... I was a young writer and I wanted to take off” (1955: 3-11), then Robert Johnson suddenly sang in harmony in “Ramblin’ on my Mind,” “I got ramblin’ on my mind ... Runnin’ down to the station, catch that old first mail train I see.”

In many ways, the beat movement had presaged the coming of the folk revival, and it is therefore not surprising that similar values and imagined landscapes would appeal to the members of each cultural moment (Cantwell 1996: 282-288). The romantic concept of freedom presented by the image of traveling open country roads was in fact so central to the folk revival that Ronald Cohen’s account of the period, *Rainbow Quest*, begins with three of the revival’s personalities – Guy Carawan, Frank Hamilton, and Jack Elliott – traveling throughout the South in the summer of 1953. Along the way, they picked up Billy Faier, a talented banjo player who would become a figure of some importance during the revival through his work writing for publications such as *Caravan*

along with his active involvement with the Newport Folk Festival as both a performer and organizer during the festival's formative years. Frustrated by the confinement of the car and feeling the lure of the unfettered lifestyle promised by hitchhiking, which was truly only a more contemporary version of jumping a train as described in "Ramblin on my Mind," Faier and Elliott eventually struck out on their own to hitchhike across the South before returning to New York (Cohen 2002: 3-7). And as irony, history's frequent muse, would have it, once Faier and Elliott made it to New York several months later, the two young folk musicians would meet and spend time with Jack Kerouac, who later remembered Faier as "a great 5-string banjo genius" (Personal correspondence, Billy Faier Collection).

Many years later, in a letter to his friend Russell Baker, Faier would write of his lifelong love of hitchhiking, fondly recalling "the stories about the beautiful trips, full of joy, freedom, and good fellowship experienced by hitchhikers and drivers." Beyond articulating a love of the romantic symbology of the open road, in this letter Faier also addressed the ways in which this life embodied for him the environmental politics of the 1960s and a cure to the growing energy crisis the nation was facing. He continues, "Finally, Russ, let me say that we as a nation or a small town can drift along and let it all happen to us. Or, we can, by flexing what muscle we still have, in the appropriate places, control the changes for our own benefit ... A non-violent revolution of the kind I describe can change our nostalgia for the future to a bright hope, a renewal of our sense of worth as a nation, an abandonment of cynicism" (Billy Faier Collection). Much like southern vernacular music at the F.O.T.M. concerts, the image of the open road was a source of inspiration whereby Billy Faier and other similar-minded advocates of traditional culture

and lifeways were able to imagine a better future for the nation in an image of America renewed.

Upon closer comparison though – or by reinserting Johnson into his historical context with the incumbent realities and dreams of his African American contemporaries – Faier’s politics of the open road begin to suggest a point of divergence between the imagined memories and dreams of Robert Johnson when compared with those of twentieth century folk revivalists. Johnson’s lyrics, like those of many blues singers of the era, do indeed express a fascination with freedom of movement, something unique to the post-slavery black southern experience (Peter Aschoff, Personal Interview, see also Litwack’s *Been in the Storm So Long* and Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*). “Walkin’ Blues,” a widely played blues song, which Hammond linked to Johnson in American popular memory at the “Spirituals to Swing” concert, is another striking example of the powerful immediacy of this newfound freedom for southern African Americans; in his recorded version, Johnson sings, “I woke up this mornin’ feelin’ ‘round for my shoes / Know ‘bout that I got these old walkin’ blues.” However, this freedom, as the experience of sharecroppers and black laborers working on the railroads and levees attests, can be greatly exaggerated. It was only through Johnson’s outright rejection of the established occupational hierarchy of the Mississippi Delta – not to mention his complete refutation of Billy Faier’s preferred agrarian lifestyle of living close to the land in order to cultivate its natural riches – that he was able to articulate his own politics of the open road, which was very much a by product of his desire to perfect his musical skills and become a professional blues musician.

The particular imagery of Robert Johnson's lyrics and that of the folk revival's politics begins to deviate even further on another crucial element constituting this ideology of the open road: the practice of hitchhiking. Several of his contemporaries do relate stories in which they traveled with Johnson in this manner. For instance, in two documentaries released in the 1990s, *Searching for Robert Johnson* and *Can't Your Hear the Wind Howl*, Johnny Shines, a blues singer who traveled with Johnson in his youth, describes several instances in which the two of them would hitch rides from town to town in order to build interest in performances they were expecting to play at nearby juke joints in the coming days. However, traveling in this way was very much a matter of expediency for the two young blues men. In fact, as part of the image of a professional blues singer which Johnson dreamed of actualizing, he was expected to drive a nice car and, as in the photo taken in Memphis, dress in the finest clothes (Wald 2004: xiii). That "Terraplane Blues," in which the image of a car served as the song's key symbol, was one of Johnson's few minor hits begins to suggest how this song powerfully spoke for and captured the imagination of Johnson's African American audience. When Robert Johnson sang "Who been drivin' my Terraplane for you since I been gone," that he chose a car as the appropriate vehicle for a metaphor expressing his concern over a lover's promiscuity speaks to how important an image of aspiration and desire an automobile was for both the late blues singer and his contemporary audience. Taken as a point of contrast, then, Faier expresses utter disdain for the individualism and success implicit in driving one's own car, and yet this image was the transsubjective intersection through which Robert Johnson was able to conjure the dreams of his contemporary audience.

The pictures beginning to emerge only grow more distinct when the self-images each group – Robert Johnson’s contemporary black audience and the disaffected 1960s generation – dreamed of embodying for their own cultural, social, and political reasons are closely contrasted. In the case of the image Johnson was adopting, promoting, and disseminating in the Memphis photograph – that of the well-dressed, professional musician – this says volumes about the dreams and desires he was trying to convey to and for his African American listeners. Much as the imagined southern working class selves of the young men and women of the folk revival were integral to their ability to hope for and attempt to discover an America of the past and future, so too was the remembered image of a finely dressed, successful black man an essential point of departure for the imagination of African Americans living in the 1930s as well as the 1960s. Embodied in a photograph, it became a dream made real, capable of traversing multiple subjective consciousnesses and enrapturing the minds and hearts of twentieth century black Americans looking for better opportunities down the open road.

Though Billy Faier in no way directly identifies the importance of the memory of Robert Johnson, the attractiveness of the symbology of the open road begins to suggest what about Johnson resonated in the 1960s and the ways in which this resonance is a powerful point of departure from his relevance in his own historical and cultural context. In the seemingly boundless and mysterious world he spoke of in his lyrics, once consumed as a blues reissue released by a major free market entity like Columbia Records and then reproduced by means of a secondary production, certain alienated youth in the 1960s adapted Robert Johnson’s legacy as a prosthetic memory of an un-lived past; they utilized this new appendage of identity to inform their politics and to

rediscover the nation anew, thereby finding a remedy to their social, political, and cultural displacement.

Fitz Brundage has observed that, in order for memories to remain relevant, they “must address contemporary concerns about the past” (2000: 10). In much the same way, the continuous construction of memory may also address contemporary concerns about the present. The legacy of Robert Johnson in the 1960s, made available in 1961 when Columbia Records tried to capitalize on the recent popularity of blues reissues, was processed in such a way by members of the folk revival that he was used to negotiate their concerns about post-World War II America. Yet, these concerns were very different from those of the particular historical circumstance of Johnson and his peers in 1930s Mississippi. Making use of Johnson’s legacy in this way – reproducing him as a prosthetic memory – due to the needs of their own political, social, and cultural agendas, they extracted him from a specific context in American history – one that was inundated with its own anxieties and distresses – and labeled the images he cast out from and across the African American imaginary as universal. In so doing, the young men and women of the 1960s folk revival brought Robert Johnson’s memory into the larger American imaginary absent of the reverberations of his own time and place, distanced as it were, without carrying forward the empirical meaning of his historically situated actions and goals and the way in which these related to the day-to-day concerns, material needs, long-term aspirations, and transformative dreams of his marginalized African American peers.

Indeed, distancing actions have been problematic for the impulses of both the 1930s and 1960s folk revivals, even undermining and compromising, to a degree, the

high-minded goals of the two interconnected movements. Devotees of the 1960s folk revival, much like their forbears in the 1930s, inadvertently located the “folk” they imitated and listened to in the far off and long ago. Record companies, such as Columbia, Paramount, and Okeh, had recorded the likes of Robert Johnson, Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, Clarence Ashley, and Dock Boggs in the remote and rural past. Further, the recordings themselves, made with some of the earliest technological equipment, retained an anti-modern and anti-commercial quality. In the early years of the revival, many, like John Cohen, assumed that performers like of John Hurt or Son House were long dead. Cohen recalls, “F.O.T.M. put on concerts by musicians who we thought had passed on years earlier, but here they were alive and picking” (2006: 25). Despite the fact that they did celebrate these musicians in the F.O.T.M. concerts and on the stages at Newport when they joyfully learned otherwise, these constructions of an assumed past life during the 1960s urban folk revival had the potential to force southern musicians into an imagined and distant past if not tempered by a commitment to alter their impoverished living conditions in the present (Filene 2004: 60-62).

Moreover, in using these forms of southern vernacular music to articulate their grievances with 1960s America, they unintentionally elided and displaced the troubling historical experience of lower class whites and blacks in the American South. This idea of displacing a troubling historical experience with something altogether different is what I refer to as disremembering; it is not as much a conscious effort to silence memories that might question the established social order as it is an act in which the referential content of a culturally specific expression, maybe an African American spiritual or, just as likely *and* with similar implications, an old-time tune detailing the struggles of miners, is

absorbed into the trajectory of a larger, more affirming narrative – in this case, the rediscovery of the country’s national character. In the process, the original thrust of the message is displaced by or redirected towards an all together different political agenda or historical project. Still, many 1960s revivalists were also rebelling against, in their own fashion, a privileged upbringing when they imagined a different past, grew their own food, and lived together communally; it was not until the postmodern revival of vernacular southern musical traditions that disremembering would achieve a truly troubling level as violence and suffering became postmodern and multinational commodities.

There is still, of course, all that singing about the Devil and the myth-like story of the crossroads. Whereas the Devil imagery resonated with the romantic leanings of the white revivalists, Elijah Wald suggests that, as used on tracks such as “Me and the Devil,” the image was widespread throughout the blues scene in Johnson’s time, possibly for its inherent humor (2004: 274). Whatever the case, there was nothing unusual or exotic about the appearance of the Devil in a blues song composed in the popular style of the 1930s, and any well-informed blues fan could easily cite Skip James and Tommy Johnson as other performers from the era who drew on similar imagery. In fact, the mischievous character of the Devil, in various guises, permeates the oral narratives recorded in both Lomax’s *The Land Where the Blue Began* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. What is unusual, therefore, is the way in which Johnson’s white fans considered him to be the sole proprietor of such imagery.

Much of this attribution in American memory and imagination is due to an essay which Pete Welding wrote and which included an interview with Son House. Published

in 1966, Welding's essay, "Hell Hound on His Trail: Robert Johnson," first appeared in *Down Beat* magazine, and was then reprinted in the British journal, *Blues Unlimited*. In the interview and subsequent essay, Son House confirmed that Robert Johnson was in league with the Devil and that this deal was the reason behind Johnson's musical dexterity. Most influential in supporting and solidifying Welding's crossroads deal were two songs, an extremely small percentage of Johnson's twenty-nine recordings: "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Hellhound on my Trail." Blues fans and critics both interpreted the lyrics in these songs as a metaphorical narrative in which Robert Johnson was fleeing a malevolent and metaphysical force, whose presence haunted him until he received the mortal blow he had been running from most of his life (Pearson and McCulloch 2003: 65-89). Welding thus elevated Johnson to the highest realms of romantic exoticism, and Robert Johnson became a pure, folk genius exploring Faustian themes, not a creative and exceptional talent who used his skill, honed through hard work, to envision and pursue a life of material well being beyond the limited opportunities immediately within his grasp.

In the years between 1961 and 1966 – an amazingly brief span of time – Robert Johnson's white, largely folk oriented, fans, many of whom were from privileged backgrounds and who thus had access to authoritative modes and spaces of memory construction, had revised and elevated his memory in the American imaginary. Johnson, the hip, urbane musician with professional aspirations became a haunted but quintessential folk blues performer, and he surpassed the likes of Leroy Carr and Bessie Smith as the most popular blues singer of his era in powerful ways. By labeling Johnson as a folk performer, his white fans inadvertently disregarded the way he boldly rejected the systemic, institutionalized peonage pervading the Mississippi Delta of the Jim Crow

era when he set out on the road to become a professional blues singer. Further, that Robert Johnson died a death whose mystery could be deciphered by interpreting his lyrics, and not when he succumbed to violence that was all too common under the watch of indifferent white authorities in the 1930s South, displaced a memory which typified the very racial discrimination that continued to disturb the African American experience – and that had rendered the American experiment incomplete for nearly two centuries – with one that spoke to the existential concerns of a countercultural youth movement in the present. What is, of course, quite ironic is that Johnson’s memory, if approached from a different perspective, could have been powerfully interwoven into the civil rights movement, a cause central to the revival’s egalitarian vision of collectivity.

While negotiating their own contemporary anxieties regarding the increasingly apparent inability of America’s political establishment to uphold the country’s principles, 1960s folk revivalists disremembered Robert Johnson’s place in the African American imaginary. In this process, they selectively utilized and modified his malleable and interstitial legacy so that it included those attributes essential to the counterculture’s imaginary selves and their collective effort to discover America anew. Passionately celebrating Robert Johnson in the 1960s, many of his white fans were committed to reaffirming the promise and character of the American idea as many compatriots in the post-World War II generation likely felt they were bearing witness to a country that was rapidly abandoning its ideals in preference for the fruits of global hegemony. However, as Johnson’s past receded further from his re-membered image, he would become available, along with other southern vernacular musicians, as an exportable commodity

when certain American institutions began to exploit culture for many of the same reasons other industries had done so with black labor in Johnson's own lifetime.

Chapter 3

“It’s Not the South I Grew Up In”: Vernacular Music Goes Postmodern

On August 30, 2005, Sony BMG released *Bob Dylan: Live at the Gaslight 1962* on the same day that the soundtrack to Martin Scorsese’s Dylan documentary *No Direction Home* hit the streets. *Live at the Gaslight* was yet another CD in the immensely popular wave of previously unheard recordings being culled from the music icon’s vaults and released to both acclaim and commercial success. The Gaslight recordings, long familiar to Dylan fans, were notable for making widely available some of the young folk singer’s first live performances of songs such as “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” both of which would come to be among his most essential and emblematic early compositions. The Gaslight Café album thus presents a picture of Bob Dylan as he was coming into his own as a folk singing troubadour on the verge of exploding onto the Greenwich Village folk scene. Besides these two original Dylan songs, the rest of the album consisted almost entirely of traditional material from the American South, including the quintessential ballads “The Cuckoo” and “Barbara Allen” (Knopper, *Rolling Stone*, 2005: 22).

In a move that was fundamentally incongruous with the climate and value system of the 1960s Greenwich Village folk community, Sony BMG agreed to sell the album exclusively at Starbucks coffee shops. Further, Sony chose to release these seminal recordings at this particular juncture so as to capitalize on the excitement created by

Scorsese's film. As one individual closely involved with the project explained to Steve Knopper of *Rolling Stone*, "By choosing music that is complimentary to the time period of the film, we [raised] awareness about the television event" (2005: 22). Having interwoven the release of Dylan's Gaslight recordings with other market forces, Sony BMG consciously created dual, or simultaneous, partnerships across disparate sectors of the market. In the first instance, Sony and Starbucks, both multinational corporations, combined to construct a mutually profitable interface, or a corporate layering, of distinct areas of the consumer experience: the aural and the bourgeois café. In the second partnership, Sony, the entertainment industry giant, acted in tandem with a representative of official culture, PBS, to appeal to the modern, multimedia consumer on a bilateral front in an effort to present a specific image and sound of Bob Dylan, that of the emerging voice of the blossoming 1960s Greenwich Village counterculture. However, framed by the broadcast space of PBS and holding together these two corporate sponsorships, Dylan's recordings were less a countercultural expression and more an example of that familiar retroactive embrace of the culture industry whereby yesterday's rebel is today's left-of-center voice warmly welcomed back for an encore.

Stuart Hall's work on class struggle and popular culture further reveals how this early twenty-first century album of recordings from Bob Dylan's formative years in the early 1960s is quite different from his studio albums from this same period. He has observed, "Today's rebel folksinger ends up, tomorrow, on the cover of *The Observer* colour magazine. The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it is incorporated and is made to resonate. What matters is ... the state of play in cultural relations." (1981: 235). In other

words, by inserting this album of music from Dylan's past into a field of potential corporate relationships, his memory became the fulcrum on which these alliances were formed, as opposed to the voice that was critiquing very similar partnerships in songs like "Masters of War" in the context of the 1960s urban folk revival counterculture. Inherent to this structure of Sony's release of *Bob Dylan: Live at the Gaslight 1962*, therefore, is a certain layering of the consumer experience, what could be called an intertextual density. With the release Dylan's 1962 Gaslight recordings, the meaning of the former rebel folk singer had indeed shifted, and his aural memory became an example of the powerful, layered, and interwoven density of multinational corporations at this current stage in the advance of capitalism. Triangulated as it were, the memory of Bob Dylan became a consumable object holding together a network of intertwining market relationships.

Here, both of these alliances between independent market entities suggest the tendency of images of the past – and even recorded sound – in the era of late capitalism to function just as frequently according to the present needs of the multinational coalitions that temporarily make use of them as they are able to recall the full emotional and cultural resonance of the memories to which they were once closely bound. For my purposes, to release these recordings of largely traditional songs from the American South into the firmament of international markets also constituted doing so with representations of southern vernacular music. In fact, these sorts of manifestations of southern vernacular music had been bursting forth from several corners of dominant culture for at least a quarter century, and the lingering specter of Robert Johnson – as promulgated by culture brokers of both the official and popular culture industries – was an integral image in these postmodern processes.

Emanating from several domains of the multinational culture industry, this tendency to commodify images of vernacular southern music would culminate with the release of the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, itself a postmodern folk revival that created this very disconnect between the world it captured in a series of filmic images and the past world it seemed to want to revive. The latter was the Depression-era South, a time and a place that had inspired the vernacular republicanism of folk revivalism while simultaneously allowing for the existence of impoverished and degraded living conditions, in both black and white communities, along with a legacy of racial violence and discrimination. Rather than dramatize, at least in part, the intrinsic tensions, contradictions, and convergences at the core of the country's vernacular music tradition, the film at best remained entirely ambivalent about – or, at worst, created a comic caricature of – these very inequities, which had inspired the progressive apparatuses of the American imaginary, instead disremembering this political tradition in preference for a shiny trinket from the museum gift shop of our national past.

If like Bob Dylan Robert Johnson in the 1960s inspired a counterculture, beginning in the 1980s his memory, and that of other southern musicians, became densely entangled with layered corporate coalitions and postmodern renditions of themselves. In 1986, when the Rock and Roll Museum and Hall of Fame opened its doors, Robert Johnson was among the first group of musicians the museum inducted in the “special early-influence category,” and the Hall of Fame permanently institutionalized Johnson's status as one of the folk progenitors of rock 'n' roll (Pearson and McCulloch 2003: 47). Much as was the case with Lomax's work with

recontextualizing subversive African American cultural expressions in the Library of Congress, placing Robert Johnson in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on such a pretext further altered the meaning of his rejection of the opportunities presented to a young black man in 1930s Mississippi. As a result, the memory of Robert Johnson became but a piece in a larger, more encompassing narrative, a supporting beam in a commemorative physical space, which displaced the memory of his hard won musical skill and the larger social context of racist exploitation of which it was a part.

Strangely enough, had Johnson not met his early violent death – a fate of course common to many black males of his time and place – his musical sound may have developed in ways which would have made it impossible or illogical to incorporate his legacy into the very physical space of the Rock and Roll Museum. Some music scholars have argued that, enamored as he was with Lonnie Johnson, he might have more fully embraced that sound and become a jazz guitarist (Wald 2004: 174-187). Others, including Robert Palmer, reference a rumor that Johnson was playing electric guitar with a three-piece band immediately before his death, and therefore argue that he, not Muddy Waters, would be known for popularizing the Chicago blues sound (Palmer 1981: 131). Either predictions are both but one among many, and any guess is idle speculation that more likely than not says more about the musical preferences and tastes of the prognosticator – as well as the whims of the tides of history – than it does Robert Johnson's musical legacy had he met a different fate or lived to sing another day. But his early death did make his memory available in a way that was especially pliable, and institutions such as the Rock and Roll Museum, which assume to claim the authority to

give expression to official celebratory narratives, were able to subsume Robert Johnson into their own established trajectories of meaning.

Though Johnson's importance to the 1960s folk revival community's political selves, both imagined and real, surely contributed to his inclusion in the museum's first inductions, his status as an early influence on rock 'n' roll was due in large part to that other musical phenomenon which beamed out across American musical soundscapes in the 1960s: the so-called British invasion. Eric Clapton, who had been awestruck by Johnson as a universal poet who alleviated his personal malaise with modern culture, likely first came across African American blues records, like many other Europeans, when American soldiers left these albums in England at the end of World War II (Filene 2000: 121). Other disillusioned young British men, including Keith Richards and his band mates in the Rolling Stones, joined Clapton in having a powerful reaction to hearing Johnson's music, and these future rock stars became influential fans of the late blues singer, contributing immeasurably to the perpetuation of Johnson's romanticized memory (Schroeder 2004: 39). Susan McClary has suggested one possible reason for the strong attraction British blues-inspired rock musicians like Clapton and Richards had for African American blues singers like Robert Johnson was that there was a long held view that British musicians possessed strong feminine characteristics, and the adoption of the persona of a blues musician was a means for Eric Clapton and his peers to express an overtly virile and male identity (2000: 55).

Not only were Johnson's British fans utilizing his music and memory as a means to negotiate perceived ambiguities about their sexuality, they were also frustrated by the sterility of middle-class British culture. Listening to *King of the Delta Blues Singers* and

adopting these narratives as prosthetic experiences enabled Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and Eric Clapton to imagine a different cultural experience and to transport their cultural identity across the Atlantic. Once they arrived in America as aspiring rock musicians, they were ultimately able to perform many of his songs, such as “Crossroads Blues” and “Love in Vain,” on records and during live performances. Having done so, they acquired a status as a new generation of American roots music-inspired rock ’n’ roll innovators (Filene 2000: 123-126). This identity conferred upon British rockers like Eric Clapton a greater degree of cultural authority, thus empowering them to make their own contributions to Johnson’s ever evolving memory, and the version of Robert Johnson’s past they constructed when they performed his music is very much what Fredric Jameson means by the pastiche, or “the play of random stylistic allusion” (1991: 18).

Cream’s version of “Crossroad Blues” is a case in point. Scott Barretta, the former editor of *Living Blues*, notes that several of the possible locations of the crossroads are entirely incompatible with Johnson’s version of the song. While the frequently suggested location of the intersections of Highways 49 and 61 in Mississippi is anachronistic since this crossroads did not exist during Johnson’s life, the small town of Rosedale is another popular possibility according to many blues fans. Unfortunately, for those devotees determined to discover the fateful crossroads, this idea originated in Cream’s cover of the song, not Johnson’s original. Clapton and his band mates actually first heard the reference to Rosedale in the “supernaturally benign” “Travlin’ Riverside Blues” (2008: 102). Hearing Johnson sing, “Lord, I’m goin’ o Rosedale, gon’ take my rider by my side,” they excerpted this line and reinserted it into their version of “Crossroads Blues,” further constituting Robert Johnson as an assembly of his various

personas and appearances, a patch work quilt stitched together out of many disparate shards of memory. Nevertheless, as disciples committed to the dissipation of the Johnson legacy, they were able to spread their romantic gospel, as mediated through their own desires and needs, that Robert Johnson was the most exemplary blues musician, the inspiration for their particular brand of rock 'n' roll (Wald 2004: 244). Having made such a public acknowledgement of Johnson's influence upon their careers, Clapton and the Rolling Stones repaid their musical hero, as it were, when his legacy, sewn together as it were out of different threads, achieved official institutional status in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

Ironically, that British fans of Johnson's music were able to have such a profound impact on his legacy was, in a strange and round about way, a function of America's expanding military might at the end of World War II. Indeed, as America was solidifying its new role in the post-World War II international order, the country was concurrently expanding its cultural might in the form of the very blues records that inspired the British blues fans. Of course, Britain was an ally of the United States in this conflict, and once the American military had helped to restore the nation's safety and security, a great majority of America's military forces returned home. Others, quite possibly, found themselves assigned to that other front in the recently won war, the area that had long held a greater interest for America's international aspirations and which in many ways had finally forced the United States to join the conflict: the South Pacific. It was as an occupying power in Japan that America crossed a new threshold in its ascension as a global superpower – militarily, economically, and culturally (Zakaria 2008: 35-36).

The international popularity of Elvis Presley, one of the most iconic American figures in the last half of the twentieth century whose music was rooted in southern vernacular traditions, is of course widely known. The worldwide appeal of his image as an American cultural export circulated on a global scale suggests that the traditional music of the South has been one means whereby the country has advanced its economic and cultural agendas as a global superpower. Occupied Japan is in fact one international market where the figure of Elvis as a cultural commodity has had a powerful resonance (Doss 1999). Without first establishing access to Japan's economic and cultural markets by means of military and political domination, however, it is difficult to imagine Elvis' iconic status establishing a foothold in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, in many of his movie roles, Presley depicted characters in the United States Armed Services stationed in the South Pacific, as if he was dramatizing the very process which enabled the onset of his popularity in foreign markets.

The figure of Elvis lurks throughout Jim Jarmusch's late 1980s comedic film, *Mystery Train*, in ways that demonstrate the popularity of vernacular southern music in Japan specifically, and the world more generally. Jarmusch, a director whose multilingual films and popularity at the Cannes Film Festival attest to his international renown, divides his film into three intertwined vignettes. These independent but entangled shorts feature four international characters, all of whom have traveled to Memphis, and are tied together by the shared plot element of a mysterious gunshot. In the first story, a young Japanese couple has come to Memphis to visit Graceland and Sun Studios, while during the second vignette Elvis rises from the domain of sheer memory to assume a metaphysical presence. Not only, then, does the name of the movie come from

a song Elvis made famous; the ghost of the King hovers around the edges of the film. In an enigmatic scene during this second story, a stranger, following the instructions of a hitchhiker he claims was Elvis' ghost, delivers a comb to an Italian woman who is stranded in Memphis while she waits to fly home with her husband's corpse. Later that evening, Elvis' ghost appears in her hotel room accidentally, he explains, as if as an icon he floats freely in the cultural ether only to randomly appear and disintegrate; while manifest, he attaches to a random assortment of objects in the film, including as a painting on hotel walls, a nickname given to a British man in the film's third vignette, and a voice singing "Blue Moon" on the radio, a recurring device that temporally situates the film's viewer in the movie's overlapping narrative. Eventually his image comes to symbolize American culture writ large when the young Japanese woman says, while comparing Presley's face to that of the Statue of Liberty, "The Statue of Liberty in New York. She's Elvis, too." For her, Elvis is what differentiates America and Japan. "This is America, and the city of Elvis. We didn't have Elvis in Japan. This is nothing like Japan," she says.

Mystery Train, though, also suggests that Elvis is but one among several southern musicians who are popular in Japan. Much of the dialogue exchanged by the young Japanese couple involves a debate over the relative merits of Elvis, the favorite of the girlfriend, and rockabilly performer Carl Perkins, one of Elvis' own Sun Records contemporaries, who the boyfriend prefers. As they discuss whether to visit Graceland or Sun Studios first, the boyfriend, dressed as a Japanese Carl Perkins, rattles off the names of the Sun Studio artists who are not Elvis: "Carl Perkins, Howlin' Wolf, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison," he says with a sense of wonder. Throughout the rest of the movie,

southern vernacular artists such as Screaming Jay Hawkins and Rufus Thomas appear as filmic images on the silver screen, and as the credits roll the Japanese couple boards a train bound for New Orleans in order to see Fats Domino's house. The film's use of southern vernacular music is also not limited to assorted appearances of performers; rather, Jarmusch extends the referential arc of his narrative to include artifacts of southern musical history. On multiple occasions, his characters walk by an abandoned theater whose marquee reads "Grand O Opry," and later, when three characters drive by a boarded up building, the shot lingers behind the car to reveal the words "Stax" spray-painted several places. Taken together, these two shots would seem to suggest the dilapidation of southern musical history when left to the devices of those responsible for preserving American memory.

Jarmusch's depiction and use of vernacular southern traditions is much more complex than simple tribute or celebration. Or, to put it another way, there are more troubling events lingering above the city sidewalks of Memphis history than the decay of American musical memory, the theme Jarmusch *does* choose to foreground for his international audience. More than the introduction of Elvis singing "Blue Moon" on the radio, the main device tying the three incidental stories together in time and place is a mysterious gunshot. In the film's final vignette, we finally learn this gunshot was the accidental outcome of a largely alcohol-induced suicide attempt gone wrong; upon hearing the loud noise, all of the main characters flee the presence of violence and the film draws to a close. As for the wounded victim, played by Steve Buscemi, the nearly tragic injury is treated with great humor as Buscemi's character exasperatedly realizes he will receive treatment across the border in Arkansas, where the tone implies these men

who have stepped outside the bounds of the law will be beyond the reach of the legal authorities.

As a violent act, the gunshot serves to bring the story to an uncomplicated ending, in a neatly wrapped bow as they say, by revealing the central element that binds these three seemingly disparate stories together. Further, in the use of Arkansas as a lawless frontier, Jarmusch situates *Mystery Train* in a larger tradition in which the South is both lawless and violent. Yet, Jarmusch decides to present these very attributes with a particular emphasis on humor, not moral dilemma or discomfort. What makes this use of violence particularly strange and disconcerting is the film's deliberate proximity to a powerful scar on the southern geography of memory. Jarmusch filmed the scene in which the Italian woman receives Elvis' comb at the Arcade Restaurant, which is located a few short blocks from the Lorraine Hotel, the site of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. While Dr. King does appear briefly in *Mystery Train* – as a mural on a bar room door and in an indirect comparison to Otis Redding – the silence about this tragic act of violence in a film that chooses to reside so closely to the location of its unfolding is deafening. In essence, *Mystery Train* disremembers quite possibly the penultimate act of racial violence in the South in deference to a narrative constructed in concentric circles around a center of violence as humor while simultaneously using vernacular southern music to appeal to a broad international audience.

In ways that are quite similar to the presence of American blues albums in records bins in England, the example of Japan in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* indicates that as America has increased the reach of its military and political power, southern traditional music has been a central component of a concomitant cultural expansion. First, though,

the occupying forces had to install the structures of the Western free market and, having done so, they succeeded in insinuating the American economic system on non-Western societies, such as post-World War II Japan, on a global scale. Fredric Jameson explains that this worldwide ascendance of capitalism in the wake of World War II is proof of the rise of the multinational market in the era of late capitalism (1991: xviii-xix, 5). This new economic era is also a period in which there has been, to quote Jameson, “a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” (1991: 36). To that point, Raymond Williams has argued that during the last phase in the capitalistic project, the country, or the geographical area where capitalist countries acquire raw materials – a role the South once played for much of the West – now consists of the “underdeveloped” countries of the world (1973: 278-280). At the same time that the “developed” countries, to borrow again from Williams, obtain necessary materials from these countries, the United States also relies on these largely non-Western nations as places to which we can “export” items from American popular culture (Filene 2004: 52).

Crucial to this secondary, or cultural, occupation, according to *Mystery Train*, was the ability of the American entertainment industry in several forms to successfully commodify representations of vernacular southern music as a vehicle for exporting American culture. The worldwide currency of Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Rufus Thomas, Screaming Jay Hawkins and other renditions of musical forms indigenous to the South is therefore a cultural expression of the advent of multinational capitalism. As Jarmusch’s narrative slights of hand suggest, though, a complex and often violent history had to be displaced in order for southern vernacular music to become both palatable and attractive to a global audience and to contribute to expansion of American culture in the

age of global capitalism. A tectonic shift in the role of traditional southern music in the American imaginary had taken place; a transsubjective process binding imagined selves into a coherent political community became a way to sell an image of American cultural identity abroad like so many versions of Carl Perkins at an international Sun Studios convention, done Star Trek style.

In the mid-1990s, shortly after Columbia released the Grammy Award-winning Robert Johnson box set, *The Complete Recordings*, a newly commodified and exportable image of Robert Johnson joined fellow southern musicians like Rufus Thomas and Carl Perkins, and entered the infrastructure of multinational market ways through the influence of the federal government; fittingly, Elvis Presley paved the way for his fellow Mississippi native to enter a particularly significant space within the iconography of America's official culture. Beginning in 1993, the United States Postal Service issued stamps of as part of the Legends of American Music series and, after a contentious nationwide vote decided on the 1950s Elvis over the white jump suit clad, Las Vegas incarnation of the King, the USPS honored Elvis Presley first in a this commemorative series (Doss 1999: 196-198). One short year later, the Postal Service included Robert Johnson among eight blues and jazz performers featured in the 1994 portion of the series; other southern, black performers similarly honored included Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith (Schroeder 2004: 4).

As a commemorative space, stamps are, in many ways, an accurate barometer for measuring a figure's status in a nation's officially endorsed memory (Filene 2000: 233). Further, as an act of representation and commemoration, stamps fulfill the needs and

agendas of those groups in power, and are thus a means to frame past people and events in order to meet the needs of the dominant culture (Schroeder 2004: 7). In the case of the African American musicians issued as stamps in 1994, to cast an encompassing shadow across these historic personalities that enveloped them as having made a contribution to America's twentieth century musical heritage contradicted their own specific historic location beyond the bounds of full citizenship, as defined in their own lifetimes. This attempt to craft an image of American heritage out of the experience of disenfranchised cultural groups amounted to a more recent example of Lomax's Mississippi Paradox, though one recapitulated in a new and expressly transportable form. In this case, the paradox holds powerfully true for Bessie Smith, who it is rumored died after being refused care outside a white hospital in Clarksdale, Mississippi (Schroeder 2004: 86). Given the power of a stamp as a symbolic space as well as its inherent exchange value within and across markets and polities, such an act is admirable in its retroactive inclusivity. Unfortunately, it is also discomfiting as a disingenuous effort to correct the injustices of the country's history by acknowledging a group's significance in the form of an image whose purpose is to circulate and distribute a revised American past throughout international markets.

The specific image the Postal Service chose for Robert Johnson's stamp is further instructive of the potential for disremembering in the case of the American Legends series. Whereas the debate over Elvis' official image largely occurred before the Post Office issued the stamp, the Robert Johnson stamp was met with a great outcry once it reached the public eye. The cause for such vehemence on the part of a diverse range of Americans was the Post Office's decision to modify the image it used as the basis for the

Johnson stamp. As its inspiration, the Post Office chose the other of Johnson's two existing photographs, a photo-booth head shot of the young blues man in which a cigarette dangles from his mouth. So as not to be seen as promoting cigarette smoking, the Postal Service demanded the illustrator remove the cigarette from the stamp (Schroeder 2004: 4-12). In assuming to incorporate Robert Johnson into a new form and then to alter the image, the USPS, in this instance an arbiter of America's official culture, claimed the ability to first inscribe onto Robert Johnson a broad national identity; and second to hold within in its purview the authority to control the representation of that image, despite the very fact that Johnson's life quite clearly exemplified the ambivalence with which black lives were viewed by the proper authorities in his own lifetime. To put it bluntly, it was as if the caretakers of America's officially scripted living legacy cared more about his health in death than in life.

Though the removal of the cigarette was the most obvious change made at the behest of the Postal Service to the historic Robert Johnson in the production of the USPS issued stamp, there were other alterations as the federal government transformed a photograph into a stamp. While in the original photograph Johnson stands out against what appears to be drapery hanging down the back of the booth, the stamp's illustrator repositioned the young blues man in front of a wall of horizontal wooden planks or shingles, suggesting his location in front of a log cabin or some other antiquated backdrop. This second change in the original photographic artifact imbued the stamp, already a shiny or reflective surface, with the connotation of pastness. As a document of American origin and heritage – an image drenched in “the glossy qualities” of nostalgia – the creators of the Robert Johnson stamp thus attempted to conform to a preconceived

conception of a particular period in the country's past. Yet, as Jameson makes clear, this glossy quality of nostalgic images ultimately puts them at odds with the lived past they wish to recreate (Jameson 1991: 19-21).

These two visual discrepancies between the historic and nostalgic Robert Johnsons locate the stamp within Jameson's larger discourse regarding the commodification of images in the era of late capitalism. The original photograph was an actual snapshot of a historically situated moment when a young, aspiring blues man, who would eventually resist the established but exploitative and inhumane labor system prevailing in the South, paid for a picture, which likely projected his own imagined self. Creating an official national past under the auspices of the federal government, the USPS stamp excised him from this context by assembling pieces into a portrait in a previously un-lived combination. What the Postal Service had likely envisioned as a replica of a historically occurring instance instead became an image for which there was no preceding past event. Detached from his own historical moment as such, it also became impossible to animate Robert Johnson's image with his past experiences and desires as well as his own imaginary horizons. The commemoration of Robert Johnson on a stamp in effect made him not just a head without a body, but an image without an entire lived past. Frozen outside of time beneath an impenetrable glossy finish, out of the grasp of historicity as Jameson might say, the narrative and attendant image situating Johnson as a nostalgic source of American heritage coalesced into a distributable, reified commodity (Jameson 1991: 6-21).

Jameson's notion of "glossy images" is actually a constituent part in a postmodern art form specific to the period of late capitalism he refers to as "nostalgia films," which are a "desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past ... through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image" (1991: 19). As historical artifacts, however, there is an irreconcilable tension – or an impossible interchangeability – between nostalgia films and the past they purport to depict. Much as the commemorative Robert Johnson stamp detached his memory from any tangible historical moment, a nostalgia film, in Jameson's conception, serves to create a "historicist deficiency by losing itself in mesmerized fascination in lavish images of specific generational pasts" (1991: 296).

Descriptive words like *mesmerized* and *lavish* are indeed quite apt adjectives for the cinematic imagination of Joel and Ethan Coen. Together, the Coen brothers have succeeded in creating outlandish exaggerations of allegorical figures, historical periods, and regional behavioral tendencies in films such as *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, and *Fargo*. Of concern here, though, is their filmic frolic through the iconography of the American South, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a movie that generated both the most recent surge of interest in folk music and folk's newfound profitability, a trend which has come to be known as "The *O Brother* revival" (Filene 2004: 50).

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is a modern retelling of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, set in 1940s Mississippi. As the film opens onto a vista of Delta cotton fields, three white convicts are escaping from the farm at Parchman State Penitentiary in order to recover buried treasure at the urging of Ulysses Everitt McGill, George Clooney's modern day version of Odysseus. The tension between the past world the Coens claim to

be representing and their nostalgic version of it is immediately evident. The fact that the trio sets out in comic flight from a prison infamous in the annals of history for unfathomable atrocities is reason enough to feel a powerful disconnect; however, the incongruity runs much deeper. The image and accompanying sound which opens the film is the hard labor of a prison chain gang digging with their hoes to the rhythm of a work song. However, the singing coming from the cinematic image is not from voices of the actors, but instead an actual 1959 recording of “Po Lazarus” Alan Lomax made at Parchman, which is dubbed in sync with the opening scene and which also became the first song on the movie’s soundtrack.

The Coen brothers, then, are establishing the comedic movement and energy of their film by having their wandering threesome flee a reenactment of a past moment, or a lived memory, from the brutally violent Parchman Farms. According to Marita Sturken’s work on memory, these sorts of reenactments have the ability to permanently alter the understandings of the lived past. She explains, “memories are continuously written and rewritten and transformed over time until they may bear little resemblance to the initial experience” (1997: 42). Having established the tone of their film with a reenactment that was so dissimilar to the historicity of the actual memory of 1940s Parchman Penitentiary work gangs, the Coen brothers were immediately threatening to overwhelm this past scar on the southern landscape of memory with their nostalgically constructed excursion into the verdant richness of the Mississippi Delta.

After the three convicts set out in search of the treasure – which ultimately turns out to be a ruse perpetrated by Clooney’s Ulysses so he can stop his wife from marrying another man – much of the rest of the movie’s plot unfolds according to the major events

in Homer's epic poem. Interesting though this may be as an exercise in creating parallels with a western mythic formula, the structural elements of *The Odyssey* ultimately become a template that, when superimposed on the potential action of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, constrains the movie's momentum, and negates its ability to establish any significant narrative thrust. Instead, the film unfolds as a series of southern mythic figures, icons, and scenarios parade across the screen. There are hoboes and trains, phonograph record players and early radios that bring to mind shows like the Grand Ole Opry and the King Biscuit Blues hour, infamous bank robbers and governors, full immersion baptism scenes, prison work gangs, possible lynchings, and, of course, a reference to Robert Johnson at the crossroads. Further, the movie's plot advances by jumping from vernacular song to vernacular song, suggesting that the Coens assembled their narrative with these recordings as their basic structural units, as if the action was of secondary importance.

Through this combination of images and scenes associated with an iconography of the romantic South, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* becomes what Jameson would call a "pastiche of the stereotypical past" (1991: 19). Moreover, the film's soundtrack, which consists entirely of southern vernacular music, is an integral component to this stylized, old timey caricature, as essential as to the pastness saturating the film as Ulysses McGill's ever present pomade. While the nostalgic connotation of the Coens' film may be old timey, so to speak, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is also a thoroughly postmodern commodity. Jameson defines postmodernism as "the consumption of the sheer commodification as a process" (1991: x). As a filmic text assembled out of stereotypical units from a vague southern past and simultaneously lacking the normal dramatic series

of events which would lend the film any substantial narrative energy or expectancy, *O Brother* is experienced as a singular commodity, a varnished whole whose structural units are fused together by an unbreakable glossy finish. In a very fundamental way, the narrative of the Coens' nostalgic film embodies the postmodern process of the commodification of images into reified wholes. As a structural unit bound inextricably to this postmodern singularity, the film's soundtrack becomes aligned horizontally with its other densely packed commodified images. Much like Bob Dylan's recordings at the Gaslight Café, the vernacular music of the South in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* occupies a plane in a multilayered coalition of mutual influence and profitability between two hegemonic industries in the era of multinational capitalism.

In a round about way, the memory of Robert Johnson was one of the postmodern images the Coens used to assemble what Jameson would call their "glossy mirage" (1991: 21). During their odyssey across Mississippi, the three men pick up a hitchhiker at a crossroads named Tommy Johnson. When queried as to why he was at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere, the young man explains he went there to sell his soul to the Devil in order to achieve musical fame. Any Johnson fan watching this movie probably thought highly of the Coens' knowledge of blues history, because many critics argue that Tommy Johnson, not Robert Johnson, encouraged the notion that he sold his soul to the Devil (Palmer 1981: 59). According to the soundtrack's liner notes, however, Robert Johnson was the source of the character in the film. A short while later, after the four travelers have recorded a hit song at a rural radio station, Clooney's Ulysses McGill excitedly says, "Boy, I believe you did sell your soul to the Devil," verifying with his authoritative voice this explanation for the aspiring African American blues man's talent.

This sequence both incorporated Johnson's legacy, in the form of the crossroads myth, in the postmodern *O Brother* folk revival and further staged his memory as a reenactment. Yet, in reenacting that memory with the crossroads deal with the Devil – not his determination to pursue a life outside of the Delta's established occupational structure – proffered as the reason for Johnson's musical skill, the blues man's memory was further transformed, as Sturken warns, into an reenactment that in no way resembled the talented, aspiring musician who walked into the house party in Robinsonville and left his friends awestruck by his newfound skill. In so doing, the film disremembers an ambitious young black man facing limited opportunities with the mythic Johnson who becomes another in a series of commodities – in this case one photographed onto exportable celluloid – to be consumed globally. Whereas the myth, as originally dramatized in the 1960s, disremembered Robert Johnson's hard won musical skill behind a romantic crossroads veil that spoke to the political vision and imagined worlds of a countercultural movement, the myth, as commodified in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, was a means to transport a particular innocuous image throughout the multinational thoroughways and ever expanding markets of the hegemonic global entertainment industry.

Such an indecisive and incomplete reenactment of Robert Johnson makes apparent the Coens' reluctance to embrace the complexity of the southern past they claim to render through the film's cinematic imagery. Indeed, what is troubling about the film is that the music and iconography are held at a distance due to several decisions made by the filmmakers. They instructed cinematographer, Roger Deakins, to give the film a golden hue so that it would look like a photograph from the 1940s. In this manner, they

continued the revivalist impulse to situate vernacular culture at a temporal and geographic remove. Laminated with this glossy, romantic veil, the film lacks depth and, protected in this way, becomes inaccessible and impenetrable. *O Brother* also remains extremely ambivalent about the violent content of the music, and instead finds humor in the strange South in a way that is quite similar to *Mystery Train* (Filene 2004: 57-58). No example is more shocking than when the character of Tommy Johnson is nearly lynched, which becomes an opportunity for the Coens to display their quirky protagonist as well as their filmic acumen as they visually reference *The Wizard of Oz*. Just as Jim Jarmusch's comedic film mutes the murmurs of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination lingering above the streets of Memphis, the Coen brothers dismember the most symbolic act of organized racial violence in the South from its rightful place as the swaying nightmarish reminder of how the American experiment had failed for generations to ascend to its own imagined heights.

Quite unintentionally – or so you would think – Holly Hunter, one of the stars of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and a native southerner, summed up the deficiencies of the Coens' representation of this period of southern history when she said their South “is not the one I grew up in” (Filene 2004: 59). It is very likely that many of the southern vernacular artists on the soundtrack, especially Robert Johnson, who almost experienced the first humorous lynching in history, would probably say the same thing. Indeed, a film that purports to dip into the waters of history and to offer up a genuine rendition of a particular past instead becomes a transformed and filtered snapshot, more suggestive of the postmodern, multinational period in which it was made than the field of memory it disremembers behind the nostalgic glare of exportable American culture.

The implied disconnection of commodification between images and the pasts from whence they come, the very pasts that haunt American memory, is therefore the distinguishing characteristic of postmodern revivifications of southern vernacular music. The sum result of these distancing maneuvers – whether in the form of glossy stamps or bronze filmic landscapes – is that these items from southern vernacular culture are not available for a “secondary production” like they were in the 1960s; they are not transsubjective memories on imagined horizons that inspire a generation of Americans to reaffirm the country’s founding ideals. Rather, they become postmodern commodities that are to be passively consumed.

In Jameson’s configuration, the postmodern revival unfolds as a circular process of commodification and consumption, in which cultural brokers from the hegemonic entertainment industry, as well as those representing official American culture, have disremembered the pain and violence this music speaks to while utilizing southern vernacular music as a means to culturally colonize areas made available through military or economic occupation. Empty of their problematic content, these vernacular traditions from the American South become a vehicle for a romanticized image of Americanness to be marketed around the globe and adopted by the next generation of individuals like Eric Clapton and Jarmusch’s Japanese couple the world over. As his life and the genealogy of his commemoration in American memory is central throughout this process, Robert Johnson stands as the center – at the crossroads if you will – around which a dialectic of disremembering and commodifying the American imaginary orbits while the expansion of western capitalism continues through the various stages in its development until it

finally circles back and, having exploited labor and exported culture, revels in its own commodification.

Coda

Vernacular Populism, Corporate Ambassadors, and Revenants in the American Night

There is an observation from Joe Hickerson that, in its eloquent simplicity, captures the strange convergence of cultures and communities at the heart of folk revivalism. He writes, “In the beginning there were the folk, and they sang songs. They did not sing folk songs; they did not know that term. They sang songs. Along comes the collector, who collects the song and calls it a folk song” (1995: 22). Though the initial encounter of the folkloristic enterprise, be it that of a passionate fan, an advocate, or an academically trained researcher, is usually the outcome of a shared passion for a particular cultural tradition or form of expression, from the very moment the folklorist and the traditional artist or performer come into contact, they are quite often irrevocably differentiated by their divergent attitudes and orientation towards cultural practice.

Central to folk revivalism, then, is the intersection of individuals and groups with different material needs, daily concerns, and imagined horizons, all of which play a role in constituting their present perspective on the world as well as their memories of the past and hopes for the future. As the social field in which this drama plays out is not neutral, the implications for this peculiar moment of intersecting difference are potentially far reaching. Put simply, the meaning – at least the meaning that is relevant to a broader audience – derived from the convergence is usually created by the outsider, who has the requisite cultural authority and the access to dominant modes or spaces of memory

making. Indeed, these forms of power are implicit in the very presence of the cultural outsider; otherwise, the curious guest would likely have lacked the ability to cross social, cultural, or political boundaries in the first place.

As I have attempted to illustrate in the preceding chapters, the genealogy of Robert Johnson's commemoration in the American imaginary – as well as the other celebrations of vernacular southern expression I have paused to include intermittently – has unfolded irregularly at moments of folk revivification, with unexpected developments and sudden shifts largely occurring according to the needs of individuals empowered by the very sorts of access and authority I just described. Throughout this process, I have suggested that at certain periods so called “folk” musicians, a designation often made by cultural brokers who were situated outside of the very musical traditions from which they were extrapolating meaning and narratives, have possessed qualities attractive to liberal, educated, and thus privileged but simultaneously disenchanted Americans seeking to celebrate diversity and, in so doing, either enlarge or discover an image of America.

I hope that my concept of disremembering has elucidated how their use of these musicians – whether done by means of prosthetic attachment, secondary production, or commodification – which was achieved from a position of social ascendancy, has inadvertently silenced historical circumstances and attendant attitudes emanating from the corners of American society that would contradict any claim that these voices and experiences from the margins were fully capable of and willing to be incorporated into an image of generalized Americanness. To put it differently, in order to migrate particular attributes seemingly inherent to traditional musicians from the American South into the vision of America which folk revivalists like Alan Lomax, John Cohen, Billy Faier, Eric

Clapton, Jim Jarmusch, the Coen brothers, and many others imagined, some things – such as their own dreams, frustrations, and even the full experience of their marginality – were better left behind.

Though the three periods of folk revivalism I describe herein do share the practice of disremembering, it would be a mistake to overemphasize their common characteristics. In the first two instances, which were in many ways the same continuous cultural moment, the revivals of the 1930s and 1960s were the political articulations of a group of compatriots bound by a love of country. As much as the well-educated, liberal, and privileged youth in the 1960s folk revival disremembered the struggles of the largely marginalized and working class traditional artists they celebrated when they re-imagined their identities so as to mediate a society they saw as increasingly beholden to the demands of an accelerating consumer culture and expanding military industrial complex, many of them committed a dual act and also disremembered their own historical situation. Caught in the tight paradox of being born into a life of ascendance and opportunity yet broadening their horizons through a liberal education, members of the post-World War II counterculture looked to the folk as a means to negotiate that very paradox. If they disremembered the folk, they similarly disremembered the privilege they were born into when they adopted a southern working class image, moved into communes in Greenwich Village, and returned to the stages of the F.O.T.M. concerts and later the Newport Folk Festival with civil rights in mind. More than disremembering either themselves or the “folk,” the members of the modern folk revivals were disremembering social inequality in mid twentieth century America and, in their mind’s eye, seeing an image of collectivity. Determined to hold America to its egalitarian

principles, they saw in the traditional lifeways and cultural practices of the American South a path towards reaffirming the national character. Their imagined American landscape was that of a populist vision for a vernacular republic.

Conversely, in the third instance, folk culture, again epitomized by vernacular southern musicians, was a vehicle through which the conservative and economically motivated culture and entertainment industries began a process of producing commodified images and narratives that would culminate in the postmodern *O Brother* revival. The memory of Robert Johnson was already loosened from his African American historical and cultural context in the American imaginary; more importantly, if re-membered, his legacy, and that of other southern musicians, brought to bear on the national conscience experiences that contested the very legitimacy of the American idea, which these industries were trying to spread through a secondary phase of international cultural expansion. Placed in a museum of national heritage, he was disremembered into an icon of national identity; as a stamp, a special commodity bearing the endorsement of American official culture, the USPS subsequently froze this nostalgic rendering of his memory in a laminated snapshot that circulates with market value. Finally, captured on celluloid, that international and postmodern art form whereby an innocent, bucolic, and romanticized image of America became exportable, Robert Johnson's postmodern commemoration – along with other images and sounds of southern vernacular culture – was as a transportable and commodified image. Densely intertwined multinational interests then carried these memories abroad as corporate ambassadors selling American identity in foreign markets as if it were a shiny souvenir from a museum gift shop.

There is, of course, one question worth asking: what would Robert Johnson have said about this fascinating story charting his complex course of descent, to borrow from Foucault, in the American imaginary? Here was a young man who found himself living in arguably the most exploitative, inhumane, and racially violent period in American history, and he responded by maintaining agency over the trajectory of his own life. Rather than accept the limited opportunities of his regional and historical situation, he strived defiantly to be his own man by learning the cutting edge black musical trends of his day. In his own right, Robert Johnson was a dreamer, a visionary young man who saw a way out for himself by way of lofty goals and hard work. Tragically, he was unable to escape the violent realities of his own life, and in death, his legacy could well have epitomized the entire horrifying spectrum of 1930s Jim Crow Mississippi. Yet, due to the confluence of his fragmentary and discontinuous memory and the interests of a succession of folk revivals, he instead became a folk blues man who lingered mysteriously, first as a romantic alternative to a faltering but once principled country, and second as the glossy point of departure for America's commodified musical heritage. To answer the question, he likely would have been quite proud to have achieved the musical recognition which he was hoping to realize, but he probably would have been surprised, to say the least, that it happened many years later as part of a largely northern and white folk revival. Strangest of all was that the federal government commemorated Robert Johnson's musical contributions on a United States Post Office stamp before he ever received a proper burial.

In the end, the life of Robert Johnson and the descent of his memory in the American imagination during periods of intense folk revivification were both but a part in

a larger, more encompassing historical process whose inertia continued to exploit the labor and culture of disenfranchised Americans to further the hegemony of the American way of life across the globe. Having used African American labor to install the economic framework and military might to open the geographic spaces for this dominance, culture then became a way to make popular a more innocent and consumable image of American identity in these occupied spaces. Approached from the perspectives offered by scholars of memory studies, figures such as Robert Johnson, shrouded in the mystery of unknown fates, are finally among the most usable – maybe even most powerful – of memories because the interstices in their stories are empty vessels that the cultural institutions and industries of American hegemony fills with whatever commemorative content they so choose and, in the process, craft the story that celebrates the dominant culture itself. With these apparatuses in place, the United States, the presiding hegemon in the era of multinational capitalism, is able to continually act this dominance out by exporting similar narratives of American cultural identity into the geographical areas it has made available through military and economic conquest.

Tracking the descent of Robert Johnson's memory through the national imaginary, he returns as a revenant in the American night. At first, much like Shoeless Joe Jackson, he hovers as an existential spirit who indicates modern life can be more simple and innocent, that there is indeed a green field and a gentle breeze untroubled by the winds of time and the violent disruptions of history. Yet, once the full range of past experiences and imagined worlds comes into play on the contested field of Robert Johnson's memory, the pastoral scene disassembles beneath the weight and pressure of America's racially divisive past. Whereas the memory of Shoeless Joe Jackson, as

presented in two Hollywood films of the late 1980s, symbolized what is best about the American idea, the memory of Robert Johnson, when critiqued in the several phases of his genealogy, suggests a great deal about what could disturb the gentle, rolling slumber of the American Dream in the river of time.

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