

HUDDIE LEDBETTER, THE LOMAXES, AND *NEGRO FOLK SONGS AS SUNG BY LEAD BELLY*

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ABSTRACT

Magdalen Anne Kadel: Huddie Ledbetter, the Lomaxes, and *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly*
(Under the direction of Chérie Rivers Ndaliko)

Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly is a multi-author work, the result of a collaboration between Alan Lomax, John A. Lomax, Huddie Ledbetter, and George Herzog. Each man had a distinct combination of privilege and disprivilege, and, as a result, his own effect on Ledbetter's representation within *Negro Folk Songs*. The representation of Ledbetter in *Negro Folk Songs* aligns strongly with pre-existing cultural stereotypes about African American men. Based on extensive research of the working papers to *Negro Folk Songs* at the Library of Congress, in this thesis I argue that the Lomaxes shift Ledbetter's representation from his initial interviews through erasure, addition, censorship, and framing, and that Ledbetter resists this representation by Signifyin(g).

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Introduction

Self-Reflection

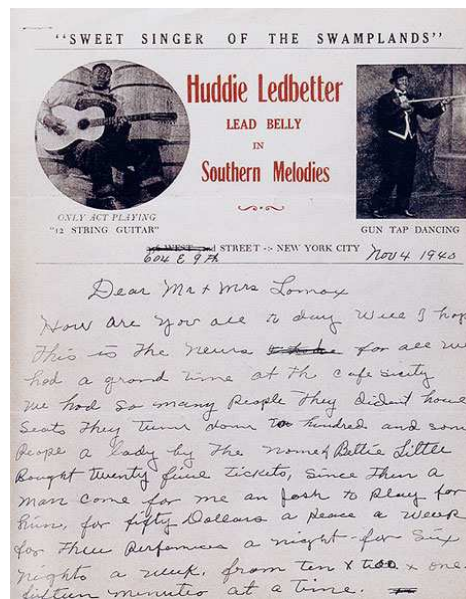
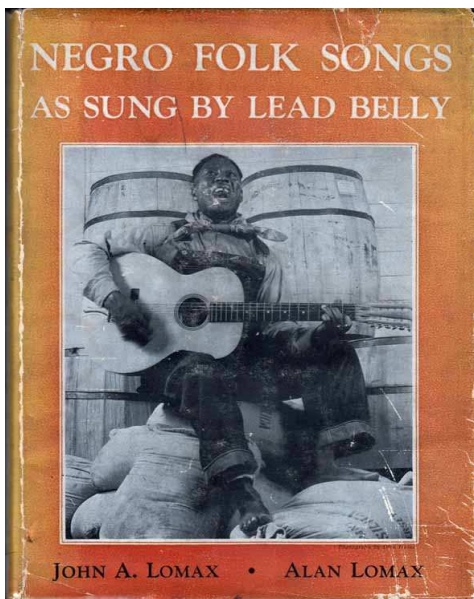
In the summer of 2013 I was given the opportunity to work at the Library of Congress through a Pruett Summer Research Fellowship. While at the Library of Congress, in the John A. and Alan Lomax Papers at the Folklife Center, I came across the working papers for the Lomaxes' book on Huddie Ledbetter: *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly*, 1936 (which I will refer to as *Negro Folk Songs* for the remainder of this thesis). The working papers include notes and edited drafts for both stories and songs prepared for inclusion in *Negro Folk Songs*. In *Negro Folk Songs*, I found a representation of Huddie Ledbetter that differed markedly from the impression of Ledbetter I had garnered from listening to Ledbetter's recordings and from family stories. My great-uncle, Kip Kilmer, had been good friends with Ledbetter; Ledbetter even mentions Kip Kilmer by name in an early performance of "The Bourgeois Blues."¹ What I understood from my family about Ledbetter was that he was a brilliant and charismatic man, and a powerful performer. They also acknowledged that he was an alcoholic (as was my great-uncle Kip), and my grandfather did not approve of how Ledbetter treated women. The image of Ledbetter I had prior to going to the Library of Congress was of a complex man, with many positive attributes, as well as serious flaws. The Ledbetter that came through in *Negro Folk Songs* struck me as flattened and exoticized; alternating between sycophantic servant (an Uncle Tom) and unrepentant, violent criminal (a black buck). This thesis represents my attempt to understand the process of how the Lomaxes, folklorists with extensive

¹1938, reproduced on Huddie Ledbetter, *Leadbelly: Important Recordings 1934-1949*, Disc A, JSP Records, JSP7764, 2006.

personal interactions with Ledbetter and (in Alan Lomax's case) progressive racial politics, nonetheless created a stereotyped representation of Ledbetter.

Ledbetter Through Images²

Figure 1. Gallery illustrating range of representations of Ledbetter, and comparing representation of Ledbetter to representation of John Lomax. Clockwise from top left: Cover of *Negro Folk Songs*, photo by Otto Hesse; Ledbetter's stationery; Ledbetter portrait, possibly from a *Life* photo shoot; John Lomax portrait.



²Clockwise from top left: Cover of *Negro Folk Songs*, photo by Otto Hesse; Ledbetter's stationery from <http://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=139575>; Ledbetter, possibly from a *Life* photo shoot; John Lomax image from http://www.culturalequity.org/alanlomax/ce_alanlomax_bio.php photographer unknown.

Each of the authors of *Negro Folk Songs* had different intersections of privilege and disadvantage in terms of race, education, class, and history of incarceration.³ Each also had a different relationship with Huddie Ledbetter as an individual and as a subject, and in some cases those relationships changed over the period of writing *Negro Folk Songs*. Each individual's intersection of identities affected how he related to the other authors of *Negro Folk Songs*. The authors mediated the representation of Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter in *Negro Folk Songs* through the techniques of erasure, addition, censorship, Signifyin(g), and framing. The resulting representation compressed Ledbetter's image into a series of racialized stereotypes, obscuring, although not erasing, Ledbetter's complex reality.

The above gallery of images illustrates some of the complexities of talking about race, representation, and multi-author works. The image on the cover of *Negro Folk Songs* represents Ledbetter against a background of wooden barrels, his bare feet resting on wooden barrels. These signify Ledbetter as rural, poor, and place him in a past era. The angle of the photograph and the way Ledbetter's face and gaze point away from the camera further distances the viewer from Ledbetter, making him seem unapproachable and unrelatable. This image is in stark contrast to the two images in the bottom row, where both John Lomax and Ledbetter look frankly at the photographer, and thus the viewer. In these images, both are also wearing stylish, crisp suits. As a rule, Ledbetter dressed in pressed shirts and fashionable suits; however, in Ledbetter's early days with Lomax, Lomax encouraged Ledbetter to wear the work clothes he had worn in Angola

³See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989). Crenshaw describes how attempting to address a single axis of disadvantage at a time (in her study, race and gender) leads to unjust outcomes when individuals who are multiply disadvantaged seek remedy through the courts. Crenshaw's analysis has been used as a basis for studies of other intersections of disprivilege. Crenshaw's article has served as a call to those dedicated to social justice: "It is somewhat ironic that those concerned with alleviating the ills of racism and sexism should adopt such a top-down approach to discrimination. If their efforts instead began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit. In addition, it seems that placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action." (pg. 167).

(Louisiana State Penitentiary): the very same overalls, work shirt, and kerchief that he wears in the photo above.⁴ In his prison garb, on a background that recalls the rural south of the past, Ledbetter's image on the cover of *Negro Folk Songs* could easily be the Uncle Remus variant of the coon stereotype that film historian Donald Bogle describes in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films*.

The pure coons emerged as no-account [nggrs],⁵ those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language.[...] Harmless and congenial, [the uncle remus] is a first cousin to the tom, yet he distinguishes himself by his quaint, naive, and comic philosophizing.⁶

While the top left and bottom right photos of Ledbetter provide a stark contrast, the overall picture is complicated by how Ledbetter chose to represent himself on his stationery. He chooses a photo from the same photo shoot as the cover of *Negro Folk Songs*, although he picks one that does not show his feet, his mouth is not open, and his face and gaze are directed at the viewer, lessening the distance between himself and them; however, he pairs this image with one of himself in tails and a bowler, tap dancing. While it could be argued that this image aligns with the "zip coon" stereotype, Ledbetter's clothes fit him well and are not over-sized, are in good repair, match, and are suitable to both the time period and the societal context. These two images illustrate the wide range of experiences Ledbetter's life encompassed, from field worker, songster, prisoner, to professional entertainer in New York. In his stationery, Ledbetter takes advantage of racialized stereotypes to market himself, but does not limit his image to stereotypes.

⁴Charles K. Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1992), 169, 196.

⁵I have chosen to replace this charged word with its disemvoweled version, in recognition of this word's historical and continued violent uses. This use hopefully lessens the immediate emotional impact of seeing the word, but allows the reader to nonetheless know what language was used in the source.

⁶Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films*, New Third Edition ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 8. Bogle does not capitalize any of the stereotypes he discusses, including the Uncle Tom and the Uncle Remus.

Transcription

Many of the extant documents in the working papers for *Negro Folk Songs* exhibit multiple layers of writing and editing, and thus multiple layers of meaning. Where something in the original text has been crossed out (often with typewritten “x’s” and “y’s”), the erased text is transcribed with a strikethrough: ~~effaced text~~ in this thesis; where text was inserted on another line or in another hand, the inserted text is represented with parentheses and a caret: (^inserted text). Each of the layers represents a moment in the document’s history, and thus a moment in the author’s thought process, or a moment of interaction between two authors. By representing in the transcriptions not only some version of a “final document,” (the product), but also the process by which the Lomaxes got to that final document, I hope to illustrate, in miniature, the larger process of editing that resulted in the stereotyped representation of Huddie Ledbetter.⁷

Background of Negro Folk Songs

In the summers of 1933 and 1934 folklorists John Lomax and his son Alan Lomax traveled the south in search of folk songs, partially supported by the Library of Congress. The Lomaxes focused particularly on southern prisons, and more specifically on the music of the prisons’ African American inmates.⁸

⁷This form of transcription is informed by my history of performing from fifteenth and sixteenth century musical notation, and experimenting with different transcription techniques for early repertoires. Through performing from facsimiles of early music I learned that form is crucial to conveying information, and that in changing form, you inevitably lose information. The choice to allow “erased” texts to remain legible is also influenced by Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida’s use of “sous rature,” crossing out a text but allowing it to remain.

⁸John A. Lomax, "Archive of American Folk-Song," in *Report of the Librarian of Congress: For the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1933* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), 99. “(2) Negro songs in much of their primitive purity can be obtained probably as nowhere else from Negro prisoners in State and Federal penitentiaries. Here the Negroes are completely segregated and have no familiar contact with the whites. Thrown on their own resources for entertainment, they still sing, especially the long-term prisoners who have been confined for years and who have not yet been influenced by jazz and the radio, the distinctive old-time Negro melodies. (3) The rhythmic labor chants, the songs that groups of Negroes sing in unison while at their work, furnish for the folklorist a practically unknown and unworked field. (4) It is only by making field recordings of the singing of southern Negroes that the tonal, rhythmic, and melodic characteristics of Afro-American folk music can be accurately preserved.”

In the summer of 1933 the Lomaxes collected folk songs at Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola). At Angola the Lomaxes first met Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, a skilled singer and 12-string guitar player. There are a number of conflicting stories about why Ledbetter was imprisoned, but he was charged with “assault with attempt to murder” and sentenced to six to ten years of hard labor on February 25, 1930.⁹ In July of 1934, the Lomaxes again recorded Ledbetter at Angola. In August of 1934 Ledbetter was released from prison, and John Lomax hired Ledbetter to travel with him. During the late summer of 1934, Ledbetter served as John Lomax’s chauffeur and valet, and performed for the prisoners from whom John Lomax hoped to collect further “sinful songs.”¹⁰ In September of 1934, John Lomax and Huddie Ledbetter began making their way to New York City, and arrived December 31st, 1934. John Lomax, Alan Lomax, and Ledbetter spent the next three months in both New York City and at the home of a friend of the Lomaxes in Wilton, Connecticut. Huddie Ledbetter’s fiancée, Martha Promise, came up to Wilton, Connecticut, from Louisiana, with the help of John Lomax, and Ledbetter and Promise married on January 21, 1935. John Lomax, Alan Lomax, and Huddie Ledbetter together created the book *Negro Folk Songs* in the winter of 1935 in Wilton, Connecticut, for The Macmillan Company, New York, with the help of ethnomusicologist George Herzog.¹¹

⁹Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 99.

¹⁰John A. Lomax, "'Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro," *The Musical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1934), 181-182. for John Lomax’s definition of “sinful songs.” (John and Alan had different, almost identically titled, articles published about their Southern trip). “Our search was mainly for the reels or so-called “jump-up,” “made-up,” or “sinful songs” of the blacks. On one occasion I asked a Negro whom I found picking cotton in a Brazos Bottom cotton field in Texas, to sing for me the famous Negro melody, “De Ballet ob de Boll Weevil.” He shook his head, and said: This content downloaded from 152.2.176.242 on Fri, 7 Jun 2013 11:17:29 AM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 182 The Musical Quarterly “Boss, dat a reel. If you wants to get dat song sung, you’ll have to git one of dese worl’y niggers to sing it. I belongs to de church.” It was the songs of the “worl’y nigger” that Alan and I were looking for, and we hoped to find them in their near purity among the most completely isolated Negro convicts, as well as on large, remote cotton plantations and in lumber camps, and Negro colonies, some of which we likewise visited on this tour.”

¹¹Although the British branch of Macmillan published *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the New York branch published very little in music (the two companies separated in 1896). The Macmillan Company published a wide range of books, including fiction, such as *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, also published in 1936, and non-fiction works on history and “hygiene” for a popular audience.

Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter

Huddie Ledbetter is the “Lead Belly” of *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly*.¹² He was born on the border of Texas and Louisiana, near Leigh, Texas, around January 15, 1888. It is not known whether Ledbetter’s parents were slaves, but both were born before the Fourteenth Amendment, outlawing slavery, was ratified in 1868.¹³ Ledbetter’s mother was half Cherokee, and the Lomaxes occasionally reference his Native American ancestry, as well as his African American ancestry. Ledbetter lived most of his life near his birthplace, sharecropping and performing. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who worked the fields from a very young age, Ledbetter attended school through the eighth grade, and learned to read and write, and even studied Latin.¹⁴ He asked his parents for an instrument, and they responded by buying him an accordion, and later a guitar.¹⁵ Ledbetter spent a significant portion of his adulthood in prison or sentenced to work gangs, beginning in 1915.¹⁶ When he was free, he performed at local dances and play parties, singing, dancing, and playing guitar or accordion. When he was imprisoned, he used his skills as a performer to gain status and privileges within the prisons.

From Ledbetter’s own stories, as well as his criminal record, it is clear that he performed acts of serious violence, including murder. Ledbetter was living under Jim Crow in the rural south for much of his life, a system that was, itself, inherently violent. Under Jim Crow, African Americans could not assume that white police officers or the larger legal system would protect or defend them. Because African Americans lacked recourse to the legal system, they had to protect and defend

¹²For another perspective on Ledbetter’s life, up to 1935 please see Appendix 2, which includes the biography of Ledbetter put together by Margaret Coleman, Huddie Ledbetter’s childhood sweetheart, and Arthur Mae Ledbetter, their daughter, in response to a request from Alan Lomax.

¹³Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 7.

¹⁴John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, "Writings," folder 429, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), Washington, D.C.

¹⁵Ibid., folder 115.

¹⁶Charles K. Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1992), 58.

themselves, sometimes through physical violence. Ledbetter's stories of his own violence must be read within the context of this historical moment.

Ledbetter's musical legacy is far reaching. English guitarist-banjoist Lonnie Donegan covered Ledbetter's "Rock Island Line" in 1953, and Donegan's cover entered both the British and United States top twenty, topping out at number eight on the British *New Musical Express* chart, and number nine on the American *Billboard* popular music chart.¹⁷ Donegan's interpretation of Ledbetter's style, along with those of other blues artists, became the basis for the English "skiffle" style, which strongly influenced English rock bands, such as the Beatles and Led Zeppelin.¹⁸ Ledbetter's recordings continued to influence American popular music through the end of the twentieth century, as evidenced by Nirvana's cover of his version of "In the Pines/Black Girl" on *MTV Unplugged* in 1993.

John Lomax

John Lomax was born in 1867 in Mississippi, but lived most of his life in Eastern Texas. By 1933 he had had a number of careers: high school teacher, registrar at his alma mater, the University of Texas, English instructor at Texas A&M, and eventually salesman for a bank. He studied during the summers of 1906-1907 for an MA in English Literature at Harvard. At Harvard the faculty, including folklorist and English literature professor George Kittredge, encouraged him to collect the cowboy songs that had intrigued him as a child. John Lomax published on folklore, including the book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910), but left academia and folklore behind for banking. In the early 1930s, the Great Depression hit, John Lomax's wife died, and he lost his

¹⁷Robert Cochran, "Ride It Like You're Flyin': The Story of 'the Rock Island Line'," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1997), 224. Dave McAleer, *The Book of Hit Singles: Top Twenty Charts from 1954 to the Present Day* (San Francisco, CA: Backbeat Books, 1994), 26.

¹⁸John F. Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2010), 299-300.

banking job. John Lomax fell into a personal depression, and his sons, Alan and John, Jr., encouraged him to take up folklore collecting again.

John Lomax's relationship with Huddie Ledbetter was influenced by Lomax's beliefs about race. John Lomax was what historian Jerrold Hirsch has characterized as a "racial conservative," in contradistinction to a "racial radical." In the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, Hirsch asserts racial conservatives believed that:

Blacks have a place in the South—a defined and subordinate place befitting an inferior race—and are fine as long as they know and stay in their place. In sharp contrast, racial radicals...believe(d) that outside of the bonds of slavery, Blacks reverted to savagery, and therefore had to be actively held down-and put down.¹⁹

As long as Ledbetter treated John Lomax as his "boss," the two seem to have gotten along fine. In John Lomax's chapter of *Negro Folk Songs*, "Traveling with Lead Belly," he describes Ledbetter's initial demeanor as friendly and willing to please. He then describes the eventual souring of their relationship during their time in Wilton, Connecticut.

The days following our home-coming to Wilton [...] confirmed the conviction that I had lost control of my "man." Never again would he have genuine respect for his "boss." For Lead Belly had disobeyed me and had "got away with it." He had defied me, and I had no recourse.²⁰

As Ledbetter sought more independence from John Lomax, their relationship broke down, and although Ledbetter maintained a relationship with Alan Lomax throughout his life, his relationship with John Lomax was never renewed after their break in 1935.

Alan Lomax

John Lomax's youngest son Alan was to become one of the most influential folksong scholars in the United States. However, he was just seventeen years old at the time of the Lomaxes' initial meeting with Ledbetter in 1933. Alan had already shown himself to be a bright and talented student, distinguishing himself at the Choate School in Connecticut and the University of Texas at

¹⁹Jerrold Hirsch, "Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies: The Case of John Lomax," *The Journal of American Folklore* 105, no. 416 (1992), 185-186.

²⁰John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 63.

Austin. In May of 1931 Alan's mother died. The following year he enrolled at Harvard on a full scholarship, but did not do well academically, in part because he was mourning his mother's death, and his scholarship was not renewed. While at Harvard, Alan had participated in a protest against the deportation of a labor organizer, and was arrested for refusing to disperse. Alan was quickly released and made to pay a fine, but he believed that his grades and his Communist sympathies, evidenced by his arrest, would keep him out of Harvard "indefinitely."²¹ During the summer of 1932, Alan and his brother, John Jr., traveled with John Sr. on the latter's first folklore collecting trip in many years. Alan Lomax wrote of himself and his father during the 1932 trip "The tension between us grew almost too great to endure." Folklorist Benjamin Filene writes that the tension between Alan and John Lomax was due in part to the political differences between the two men. Filene calls John Lomax an "Old South conservative" and writes that Alan's journal "is dotted with references to heated debates in the car about 'Alan's Communist friends' and his supposed 'communistic activities.'"²² Alan Lomax returned to the University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 1932, and the following summer, in 1933, John and Alan Lomax again toured the south, seeking to collect folklore.

Negro Folk Songs

The process for acquiring and compiling the materials in the two main sections of *Negro Folk Songs* differed, leading to different processes of editing and representation within those sections. The two main sections of *Negro Folk Songs* are: "Part I. The 'Worldly [Nggrr]'," which contains prose descriptions and stories of Ledbetter's life, and "Part II. The Sinful Songs," which contains song transcriptions.. For Part I, the Lomaxes relied heavily on their memories, typing out Ledbetter's

²¹Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*, 37.

²²Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 48.

stories directly after he recounted them. For Part II, the Lomaxes relied on the aluminum disc recordings they made of Ledbetter, as well as notes they took down during Ledbetter's performances.

"Part I. The 'Worldly [Nggr]" consists of prose descriptions of Ledbetter, including one chapter entitled "Lead Belly Tells His Story." While the songs were recorded on discs, the discs were very expensive, and could record only a few minutes at a time. Although the Library of Congress reimbursed the Lomaxes for many discs, the Library was not officially underwriting *Negro Folk Songs*, and so was unwilling to reimburse for all the discs used in the project. As a result, the Lomaxes did not record Ledbetter's spoken stories that were used in the chapter "Lead Belly Tells His Story."

Although the working papers for *Negro Folk Songs* contain many song lyric transcriptions, there are almost no preliminary notes or transcriptions of the tales in "Lead Belly Tells His Story." Instead, there are only typewritten versions that are very similar to the versions in the final book. According to a typescript page (edited by Alan) that never made it into the book proper, neither of the Lomaxes knew shorthand, and Huddie Ledbetter became "embarrassed and unnatural" when he noticed the Lomaxes taking notes longhand.²³ Since the Lomaxes could not take down Ledbetter's words as he spoke them, the Lomaxes would listen to the stories, and "wrote down the stories complete directly after he (^had) told them."²⁴ The Lomaxes would then edit the stories for final inclusion in *Negro Folk Songs*.

"Part II. The Sinful Songs" is made up of material about specific songs: each song has its own introduction, a musical transcription of the first verse and chorus, and textual transcriptions of subsequent verses and half-spoken/half-sung (recitative-like) interpolations. The Lomaxes arranged

²³John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), 431. In fact, Alan knew a sort of rudimentary shorthand, in which a couple of the song texts are taken down, but it was not sufficiently quick or fluent to take down entire stories.

²⁴Ibid. This author's transcription technique described above.

for anthropologist and ethnomusicologist George Herzog to transcribe the musical material, since neither of the Lomaxes was fluent with musical notation. The Lomaxes would record Ledbetter's songs on their instantaneous recording machine on aluminum discs and then send a few discs at a time to George Herzog, who would transcribe the vocal line along with the lyrics of the first verse. Herzog would then mail the recordings back to the Lomaxes, who would transcribe the rest of the lyrics and interpolations. Sometimes the Lomaxes would record the same song more than once, transcribe a version of a song without recording it, and combine and reorder verses and interpolations from different performances of a given song and present them as a single song in *Negro Folk Songs*.

Given its status as a multi-author work, with portions generally associated with different genres, it is hard to classify *Negro Folk Songs* as belonging to any single literary genre, making it hard to evaluate it difficult to evaluate based on the expectations of any single literary genre (autobiography, memoir, academic monograph, etc.). The Lomaxes and Herzog disagreed among and between themselves about what genre it belonged to. In the working papers, the Lomaxes call the chapter "Lead Belly Tells His Story" a "loosely woven texture of reconstructed stories and letters, [presented] not as accurate biographical material, but as a set of dramatic ~~and exciting stories~~ (^tales)."²⁵ However, in the introduction to *Negro Folk Songs* the Lomaxes describe the book as a work of biography that uses Ledbetter's own words.²⁶ In the 2000s, the Association for Cultural Equity (founded by Alan Lomax) describes *Negro Folk Songs* as "noteworthy as the first in-depth *autobiographical* account of a folk singer from his/her point of view."²⁷ Ledbetter's biographers, Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, authors of *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (1992), use the information

²⁵ Ibid., folder 431.

²⁶ Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, x.

²⁷ Ellen Harold and Don Fleming, "Lead Belly and the Lomaxes", Association for Cultural Equity http://www.culturalequity.org/currents/ce_currents_leadbelly_faqs.php (accessed January 20 2014). Emphasis added.

in *Negro Folk Songs* “as the principal source for the chronology and background for Huddie's early life.”²⁸ It is this confusion of genre that makes it all the more vital to understand how Ledbetter’s image in *Negro Folk Songs* is mediated. If *Negro Folk Songs* clearly been presented “not as accurate biographical material, but as a set of dramatic ~~and exciting stories~~ (^tales).” it is unlikely that Wolfe and Lornell would have used it as uncritically as they did, that the Association for Cultural Equity would strongly argue for its status as an autobiography, or that Ledbetter would have responded to it as he did, saying

Don’t forget because there is a book writing about my life and I don't think nothing about that book.... Because Lomax did not rite nothing like I told him.”²⁹

In this thesis I argue that the reason Ledbetter no longer recognized the image of himself in *Negro Folk Songs*, why Ledbetter felt like nothing sounded like what he had told Lomax, was because the Lomaxes mediated Ledbetter’s image using erasure, addition, censorship, and framing. Although Ledbetter resisted the Lomaxes’ through Signifyin(g), the resulting representation nonetheless compressed Ledbetter’s image into racialized stereotypes.

²⁸ Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 267.

²⁹Ibid., 197.

Chapter 1

Addition and Ledbetter as “Black Devil”

In the chapter “Lead Belly Tells His Story” in *Negro Folk Songs*, the Lomaxes include a series of anecdotes to illustrate Ledbetter’s interactions with women. One of these illustrations is Ledbetter’s story of violently beating a woman for refusing to sleep with him after Ledbetter had “lent” her five dollars. Ledbetter’s tale, as first transcribed by the Lomaxes, does not reference the devil at all. By the time the Lomaxes edit the story for *Negro Folk Songs*; however, the characters in Ledbetter’s story describe him as a “black devil,” “[nggr] devil,” and “chief devil.”³⁰ These changes to Ledbetter’s personal account use erasure and addition to draw even tighter associations between Ledbetter and extant, racially defined stereotypes. Through these textual additions, the Lomaxes position Ledbetter’s story in an existing cultural framework, thereby simultaneously depersonalizing Ledbetter’s story and adding to their construction of his public persona as highly mythologized. Since the language linking blackness and evil is supposedly spoken by Ledbetter readers are less likely to read this association critically, and more likely to see it as an expression of Ledbetter’s self-conception (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of phrases which contain the word "devil" in *Negro Folk Songs* with the initial transcriptions of the same story.

Folder 431	<i>Negro Folk Songs</i>
Gonna tell my mama, you dirty bastard. Don’ kill me, oh Lawd have mercy, my mama get you, you damn smart sonabitch .	Gonna tell my mama, you dirty bastard. Oh, don’ kill me, please don’ kill me. Oh, Lawd have mercy! Oh, quit, darlin’! Oh, you black devil!
I’m comin’ over dere & be whipped, too, you low rascal .	I’m comin’ over dere an’ be whip’, too, you [nggr] devil , you.
Will, you low-down, sneakin’ [nggr] , you. Ain’ you been goin’ wid my daughter, too.	You some chief devil , ain’ you? You been goin’ wid my daughter, too, ain’ you?

³⁰I read “chief” as an allusion to Ledbetter’s Native American ancestry.

In African American folklore the devil is an ambivalent figure. He is sometimes represented as the epitome of evil, who leads the faithful into sin, as he is in much of the Western European tradition. In other contexts, the devil is a stand-in for a white slave owner or boss, and in such stories the African American protagonist will often trick, and thus best, the devil. In yet other contexts, the devil himself is the trickster, or conjurer; this version of the devil likely has its origins in African trickster figures, such as Legba, a figure from Fon (Nigeria and Benin) cosmology.³¹

In the version of Ledbetter's story that made it into print, the devil character that is evoked is of the devil as evil, and as one who leads people away from God, the central interpretation of the devil in mainline Western Christianity. These additions do not merely link Ledbetter and evil, they are a very concise way for the Lomaxes to connect Ledbetter's personal biography to a larger cultural trope of the time. For the Lomaxes, textual additions were a very efficient shorthand method of condensing complicated and sometimes controversial information about Ledbetter into a very compact form. This included Ledbetter's history as a prison inmate as well as the topics of many of his songs.

In an essay that was not represented in the final *Negro Folk Songs*, but that was preserved in the working papers for the book, John Lomax connects Ledbetter's history in prisons, his role as a songster, and his supposed connection with evil and the devil. According to Lomax, "sinful" songs, the term by which he identified African American secular songs, were viewed within the southern African American Christian community as "the most potent instrument of the Devil for stirring up wickedness in the hearts and the people and for keeping them away from the church and the bounty of God." Lomax continues: "Lead Belly, since the barrelhouse dance furnished the only outlet for his talent as a professional, became a sort of leader in this rebellion against respectability, morality

³¹*Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), s.v. "Devil, The."

and the church.”³² In this interpretation, Ledbetter is a devil because he is leading faithful people away from God through his music.

The Lomaxes’ edits, however, connect not only Ledbetter and the devil but also Ledbetter, the devil, and Ledbetter’s race. By the 1930s, philosophers, theologians, translators, and writers had read a connection between darkness of physiognomy and darkness of character back into Classical and early Christian writings.³³ By emphasizing Ledbetter’s race in this context, the Lomaxes added another link in this long chain of equating African ancestry and dark skin with evil. The association of darkness and evil also connects the Lomaxes’ mediation of Ledbetter with the “brutal black buck” which film historian Donald Bogle describes in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films*, and it illustrates one of the most potent ways in which the Lomaxes’ transformation of Ledbetter’s autobiographical text transformed the readers’ perception of him from a complex person to a caricature.

In the places where the Lomaxes added the devil terminology, they also erased a set of descriptors that were present in Ledbetter’s own account: “damn smart sonabitch,” “low rascal,” and “low down, sneakin’ [nggr].” Compared to the “devil” labels with which they were replaced, Ledbetter’s own monikers indicated that Ledbetter was representing himself in this story as the trickster figure, a “smart” and “sneaky” individual. Theologian and musicologist Jon Michael Spencer (now Yahya Jongintaba) describes Legba, the trickster, as a duality within a unity, “both malevolent and benevolent, disruptive and reconciliatory, profane and sacred, and yet the predominant attitude toward him is affection rather than fear.”³⁴ According to Spencer, Legba’s duality enlarges the sphere of humanity by encompassing both good and evil within himself in a

³²John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), folder 427.

³³See, for example, the introduction to Barthelemy, which gives numerous examples of translations that highlight the connection between “blackness” and evil. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

³⁴Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 11.

holistic, integrated way.³⁵ He sees blues singers' self-representations, including Ledbetter's, as rooted in the African trickster and conjurer tradition, and that "When the blues singer thematized the heroic badman, it was the singer himself, as the protagonist of his own songs, who triumphed as hero."³⁶ By erasing "damn smart" and "sneakin'," the Lomaxes obscure Ledbetter's references to the trickster figure, and thus a potential mechanism to understand why Ledbetter would tell such an unfavorable story about himself.

Throughout *Negro Folk Songs*, the Lomaxes mediate Ledbetter's words to make their representation of him fit more neatly within a limited range of stereotypes of African American men. Film historian Donald Bogle classifies the stereotypes of African American men, which persisted from the blackface minstrelsy of the 1830s through the films of the 1990s, as tom, coon, and buck.³⁷ The stereotype most relevant to this chapter is the buck, a character that Bogle subdivides into two varieties, the "black brute" and the "black buck":

The black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc. Audiences could assume that his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed. ... Bucks are always big, baadddd [nggrs], oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh. No greater sin hath any black man. ... Among other things, these two characters revealed the tie between sex and racism in America."³⁸

In Ledbetter's own telling of the story, at least as the Lomaxes first wrote it down, he already aligns with the buck stereotype, simply through his attack on a woman for refusing him sex. By emphasizing historical connections between evil and blackness through repeatedly having the female characters in Ledbetter's story refer to him as a "dark" devil, the Lomaxes further cast Ledbetter into the buck stereotype, a man whose frustrated sexuality was expressed through physical violence not because as an individual he chose to do so, but because he, as an African American had to fit into one of the stereotypes listed above—tom, coon, or buck, and buck was the only one that fit the

³⁵Ibid., 12.

³⁶Ibid., 8.

³⁷Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films*, 4.

³⁸Ibid., 13.

original story. As Bogle writes, “No minority was so relentlessly or fiercely typed as the black man. Audiences rejected even subtle modification of the black caricatures.”

Whereas techniques of removing text were powerful tools for the Lomaxes to strip complexity from Ledbetter, techniques of textual addition were a literal way for the Lomaxes to superimpose their own interpretations of Ledbetter’s character over his accounts and stories. The manuscripts document four different major additions, of which the devil terminology was the most potent. One addition was of a final interpolation in “Jail-House Blues” or “Thirty Days in the Workhouse,” which changed the final verse from a direct plea to the reader to a petition to a guard. Another was the addition of a verse to “De Ballit of de Boll Weevil,” which suggested Ledbetter had socialist sympathies, but which better reflected Alan Lomax’s politics, rather than Ledbetter’s. The final addition was within a series of additions and erasures in the story of Mister Jim, including the addition of curses, told [elsewhere in this thesis].

In all cases, the textual additions served another role in the Lomaxes’s efforts to capture Ledbetter’s musical self on the two-dimensional page in a way that fit with southern mythology about African American entertainers, and with how the Lomaxes themselves perceived Ledbetter. Addition obscures the viewpoints of co-authors by presenting their standpoints as that of the subject, and gives the opinion presented an extra air of credibility, since it is ostensibly avowed by the subject himself. By erasing the trickster in Ledbetter’s story, and adding the buck, the final version of the story in *Negro Folk Songs* aligns Ledbetter’s image with white stereotypes about African American men, and erases a humanizing African American trope through which Ledbetter represents himself.

Chapter 2

Censorship in “Whoa, Back, Buck!”

Huddie Ledbetter’s song “Whoa, Back, Buck!” survives in at least seven versions, each version shaped by the power relationships between performer, audience, and mediator. “Who made the backband? Whoa, goddamn!” or “Who made the back bend? Cunningham!” These two pairs of question/answer, which communicate very different messages, are both present among the extant versions of “Whoa, Back, Buck!”. This chapter analyzes how Ledbetter and the Lomaxes negotiated power relationships through acts of censorship and self-censorship in the song “Whoa, Back, Buck!”, and how these acts of censorship affected the representation of Ledbetter in *Negro Folk Songs*.

The definition of censorship has changed significantly over the last thirty years. Before the 1980s the term “censorship” was restricted to acts by political authorities, such as the state or church.³⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, the definition broadened to encompass virtually all discourse, since rules and norms are necessary to create an intelligible system of communication, marking some utterances as legitimate and others as illegitimate, creating a censorial system.⁴⁰ German literature scholar Beate Müller points out the inutility of such a broad definition of censorship, and proposes a more bounded definition:

[Censorship is] an authoritarian intervention by a third party into an act of communication between the sender of a message (the author) and its receiver (the reader), a message intended for the public but prevented from ever reaching it.⁴¹

³⁹Beate Müller, "Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Territory," in *Censorship & Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 4.

⁴⁰Ibid., 8.

⁴¹Ibid., 11.

Popular music scholar Martin Cloonan gives a somewhat broader definition of censorship within a musical context:

For me, censorship is the process by which an agent (or agents) attempts to, and/or succeeds in, significantly altering, and/or curtailing, the freedom of expression of another agent with a view to limiting the likely audience for that expression.⁴²

Both definitions presume a linear, three-part relationship, wherein a censoring agent intervenes between an author and an audience (Author → Censor → Audience). Censoring agents, however, often exist in a complex relationship with authors. For instance, Müller points out that in East Germany editors in publishing houses sometimes worked as censoring agents, both informing authorities of dangerous content in books, and helping authors negotiate the concerns of governmental censors (Author ↔ Censor/Editor → Audience).⁴³ In a similar way, as co-authors of *Negro Folk Songs*, the Lomaxes sought to help Ledbetter negotiate the expectations of the publishing house, the audience they anticipated for *Negro Folk Songs*, and the Lomaxes themselves.

A key difference between Müller's and Cloonan's definitions of censorship is that Müller defines censorship as an expression of authority. Political scientists Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss define authority as a specific type of power, of power linked with "consent and coercion."⁴⁴ Barnett and Weiss describe four types of authority, any one of which may inspire self-censorship in those subject to that authority, or that may be used to sanction acts of censorship. The four types of authority are: rational-legal authority, delegated authority, expert authority, and moral authority.⁴⁵ Whether or not a co-author or editor within a relationship can censor a work depends on whether they can claim one of these types of authority. For instance, musicologist Drew Massey has written about the editing relationship between composer Charles Ives and editor John Kirkpatrick; within

⁴²Martin Cloonan, "Call That Censorship? Problems of Definition," in *Policing Pop*, ed. Martin Cloonan and Reebee Garofalo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 15.

⁴³Müller, "Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Territory," 22-23.

⁴⁴Michael N. Barnett and Thomas George Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 38.

⁴⁵Ibid., 38-39.

this relationship, the two had similar backgrounds and claims to authority, and editorial decisions were come to through continuous conversation and compromise.⁴⁶ By contrast, within the multi-author relationship between the Lomaxes and Ledbetter, the Lomaxes had a greater claim to each type of authority, putting them in the position to influence Ledbetter to self-censor, and to (possibly subconsciously) censor Ledbetter's expressions.

As is true for a number of other songs in *Negro Folk Songs*, there are multiple versions of "Whoa, Back, Buck!" in the working papers of *Negro Folk Songs*. Table 2 gives all six extant versions from the 1935-1936 period of putting together *Negro Folk Songs*: the versions in the working papers, transcriptions of the March 1935 recordings from Wilton, Connecticut, and the final version transmitted in *Negro Folk Songs*.

⁴⁶Drew Massey, *John Kirkpatrick, American Music, and the Printed Page* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013). See, for instance, Chapter 4, "Performance: Ives's Concord Sonata," especially pg. 80.

Table 2 "Whoa, Back, Buck!": transcribed by this author from two March 1935 recordings; as transcribed in *Negro Folk Songs*; and as written down in folders 431, 428, and 430 in the John A. and Alan Lomax Papers. The two March recordings are used as source material for the *Negro Folk Songs* version, and the versions in folders 431 and 428 represent intermediary steps between the recording and the printed version. The version represented in folder 430 is not reflected in *Negro Folk Songs*.

March 1935 Recording, 154-B.1 ⁴⁷	<i>Negro Folk Songs</i>
<p>[unaccompanied] Whoa, back, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn. Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Tom done bucked, and Bill won't pull, Papa's got to cut that other little bull, Whoa, back, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Eighteen, nineteen, twenty years ago, I taken Sal to the party-o. I taken Sal to the party-o, I wouldn't let her dance but a set or so.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, [Spoken: (Lomax?): Ti-yo, (Ledbetter:) Oh, yeah, back up, gee, whoa] Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>[Spoken:] This man was a long ways from home. And it was slow drizzling rain. And he's trying to get home, and you know just about how much speed an oxen has got. He was driving twenty yokes of oxen. Instead of oxen getting faster, they was speeding up slower. Every once in a while he'd look at 'em and he'd cut 'em, "Hi ya! Yeah, back up, gee Buck, whoa."</p> <p>[Sung:] Whoa, back, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Cunningham. Yes, and whoa, back, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>I taken Sal to the party-o, All dressed up in her calico, I taken Sal to the party-o, I wouldn't let her dance but a set or so.</p>	<p>Whoa, back, buck, an' gee, by de Lamb! Who made de backband? * Whoa, God-damn!</p> <p>Lead Belly Speaks This man was drivin' twenty yokes o' oxen. † He was a long ways from home. An' it was slow drizzlin' rain an' de man was cold. He was a long ways f'om home, an' he was tryin' to git his oxens to hurry up a little faster. An' you know 'bout how much speed an oxen has got. 'Stead o' the oxen gittin' faster, they was speedin' up slower. Ev'y once in a while he'd look at 'em an' he cut down, <i>Ti-yon!</i> ‡ "Yay! back up there! Gee! Buck, whoa."</p> <p>* Oxen wear no backband. It is a broad strap slung over the backs of mules and horses when they are harnessed, serving to hold up the trace chains. † Lead Belly, for dramatic purposes, exaggerates a little. No one man, at least, ever drove twenty yoke of oxen. ‡ A splendid sound, descriptive of the crack of the whip over the horns of the lead oxen,—an ox-whip with a stout six- or eight-foot stock of pecan or hickory and twenty feet of plaited leather or single strips of rawhide pieced together.</p> <p>[pg. 87]</p> <p>Lead Belly Sings: Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, be de Lamb, Who made de backband? Whoa, God-damn.</p> <p>Tom done bucked* an' Bill won' pull, Papa gotta cut dat uddah li'l' bull. Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb, Who made de backband? Whoa, God-damn.</p> <p>Lead Belly Speaks: He begin to think about his wife, eighteen, nineteen, twenty years ago, befo' he married her. He look way down de road, seem like he could see her,</p> <p>Lead Belly Sings:</p>

⁴⁷Huddie Ledbetter, *Leadbelly Ar & Library of Congress Recordings*, vol. 4, Document Records, DOCD-5594, 1997. Both 154-B.1 and 154-B.2 are reproduced on the same track.

<p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Nineteen, twenty years, twenty years ago, I went down to the party-o. I went down to the party-o, I wouldn't let her dance but a set or so.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Whoa goddamn, and whoa goddamn, Whoa, back, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Whoa goddamn, and whoa goddamn, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn. Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Me and my gal come a walking down the road, Wind from her feet knocking "Sugar in the Gourd," Yes, the sugar's in the gourd and the gourd on the ground, Want to get the sugar, got to roll the gourd around.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Who made the back bend? Cunningham. Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn. Whoa goddamn, and whoa goddamn, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p>	<p>Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb! Who made de backband? Whoa, God-damn!</p> <p>Eighteen, nineteen, twenty years ago, I taken Sal to de party-o, I taken Sal to de party-o, Wouldn' let her dance but a set or so.</p> <p>* Probably balked. † Cunningham in the old days leased large numbers of convicts from the State of Texas to work on his Brazos bottom plantation.</p> <p>[pg. 88]</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb! Who made de backband? Cunningham.†</p> <p>I taken Sal to de party-o, Eighteen, nineteen, twenty years ago, All dressed up in her calico; Wouldn't let her dance but a set or so.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb! Who made de backband? Whoa, God-damn!</p> <p>Lead Belly Speaks: That man was tryin' to get home. He was talking to his oxens. Ev'y once in a while he'd pop his whup, <i>Ti- yon!</i> "Whoa! yay! git up there!" Sometime he run aroun' to their head an' rap 'em. He look way down de road an' tried to make some speed through that mud. He look way down de road an' think about his wife. He look right at her an' 'gin to holler.</p> <p>Lead Belly Sings: Whoa, God-damn! Whoa, God-damn! Who made de backband? Whoa, God-damn!</p> <p>Me an' my gal come a-walkin' down de road, Wind f'om her feet knockin' "Sugar in de Gou'd,"* Sugar in de gou'd an' de gou'd on de groun', Want to get de sugar got to roll de gou'd aroun'.</p> <p>Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb! Who made de backband? Whoa! God-damn!</p> <p>* The name of an old fiddle tune.</p> <p>[pg. 89]</p> <p>Chicken in de bread-pan, mighty good stuff,</p>
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	<p>Mamma cook him chicken an' he never get enough; Jawbone walk an'-a jawbone talk, Jawbone eat it wid a knife an' fork.</p> <p>Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb! Who made de backband? Whoa! God-damn!</p>
March 1935 Recording, 154-B.2	Folder 431
<p>[accompanied with guitar] Whoa, back, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Cunningham. Whoa, back, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Chicken in the bread pan, mighty good stuff, Mamma cook him chicken and he never get enough. Jawbone eat and jawbone talk, Jawbone eat it with a knife and fork.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p> <p>Tee-ti-um, tee-tium-reilly-oh, Don't want to meet her in a mile or more. You take Sal and I take John, Look-a look yonder what John done done.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, and gee, by the Lamb, Who made the back bend? Whoa, goddamn.</p>	<p>Whoa, Buck, an' gee, by de lamb!</p> <p>[[generally the same as the book, slightly different order. Most instances are "back-band", but there's one instance of "back-bend" that's been changed to "back-band"]]</p> <p>Me an' my gal come a-walkin' down de road, Win' fom her feet knockin' "Sugar in de Gou'd,"** Sugar in de gou'd an' de gou'd on de groun', Want to get de sugar got to roll de gou'd aroun'.</p> <p>* Cunningham, mentioned often in Texas prison farm songs, always with fear and hatred, in the old days leased large numbers of convicts from the state to work on his large (^wide-spreading) Brazos bottom plantation. He is supposed (^reputed [[John's change]]) to have treated them (^the men) brutally. L.B. characterizes him as a "tush-hog in de numbers", that is-among a group of fierce men, (^he was) a particularly vicious and long-toothed boar-hog.] **"Sugar in de Gou'd", probably the name of some (^an) old fiddle tune. The stanza as a whole is a pun, vulgar in effect, but prettily put.⁴⁸</p>
Folder 428	Folder 430
<p>Whoa, God damn, whoa, God, damn, Who made de back ben'? Whoa, god damn!</p> <p>Chorus:</p> <p>Me an' my gal come a'walkin' down de road, Win' from her feet knockin' sugar in de gou'd. It's sugar in de gou'd an' de gou'd on de groun', Want to git de sugar, got to roll de gou'd aroun'.</p> <p>Whoa, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb, L.B. Speaks: Ti-yow! Gee! Whoa! Back L.B. Sings: Who made de back-ben'? Whoa, God damn.</p>	<p>Ho, Back, Buck, and Gee, by the Lamb</p> <p>learned from Dick-Licker on the Shaw State Farm in Texas.</p> <p>Daddy had an' old bull-dog, he was double-jinted, Taken him down to de black-smith's shop and had his peter pinted.</p> <p>Dinah she went down de road, I went down behind her, She stoop down (^jes) to buckle up her shoe and I seen her sausage grinder.</p> <p>Me an' Sal went to church one night, she sat on de</p>

⁴⁸I did not transcribe the entirety of the version in folder 431, only noted the differences between this version and that in *Negro Folk Songs*.

<p>Who made de back-ben? Cunningham. Who made de back-ben? Whoa, God Damn!</p> <p>Whoa God damn! Whoa, God damn! Who made de back-ben? Whoa, God damn!</p> <p>Chorus:</p> <p>(L.B. brings in his twlve [sic] string guitar)</p> <p>Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb. Who made de back ben? Cunningham. Chorus:</p> <p>Chicken' in de bread-pan, mighty good stuff. Mama cook him chicken' an' he never get enough, Jaw-bone walk an' a jowbone [sic] talk, Jaw-bone eat it wid a knife an' fork.</p> <p>Chorus: Tee-ti-um, tee-tium-reilly-oh, Don' wan to meet her in a mile or more. You take Sal an' I take John, Looky-looky yonder what John done done. Chorus:</p>	<p>steeple, I laughed forto break my heart and she pissed all over de people</p> <p>So they went to Cunningham, fell down on their knees, Mighta heerd them holl'in', "Have mercy on me."*</p> <p>He was lookin' right at her (his woman)</p> <p>Sometime he run aroun' to their head an' rap 'em (the oxen)</p> <p>He looked 'way down the road and tried to make some speed anyhow.</p> <p>* Cunningham (a notorious plantation owner, who leased convicts in Texas and is supposed to have treated them brutally) is described as "a tush-hog in de numbers"</p>
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The version in folder 430 bears little lyrical resemblance to the other extant versions; its series of scatological images bears greater resemblance to a performance of “the dozens,” a form of Signifyin(g) (generally, “repetition with a signal difference,”⁴⁹ discussed more in the next chapter) that uses profanity and insults to try to get a reaction out of a conversational partner. Given that the themes of sex, drugs, and politics are “the perennial concern of the (would-be) censor of popular culture,”⁵⁰ it is unsurprising that the Lomaxes would choose not to include verses with such vivid sexual imagery, such as “She stoop down (^jes) to buckle up her shoe and I seen her sausage grinder.”⁵¹

⁴⁹Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 26.

⁵⁰Ian Inglis, "Responses to Censorship in the USA: Acquiescence, Withdrawal and Resistance," in *Shoot the Singer!: Music Censorship Today*, ed. Marie Korpe (London: Zed Books, 2004), 175.

⁵¹John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), folder 430.

In the introduction to “Whoa, Back, Buck!” in *Negro Folk Songs*, the Lomaxes write

It was long before we could persuade Lead Belly, who censors his songs for white audiences more than is required nowadays, to sing the second stanza. We brought him round at last by telling him that nobody in the North had ever cut a bull or seen one cut. “All right, then, I’ll sing it,” he replied. “I jes’ didn’ understand de sityation.”⁵²

in reference to the verse

Tom done bucked* an’ Bill won’ pull,
Papa gotta cut dat uddah li’ bull.
Whoa, back, Buck, an’ gee, by de Lamb,
Who made de backband?
Whoa, God-damn.⁵³

This verse is far less explicit than the verses in folder 430, the “dozens” version discussed above; however, the Lomaxes suggest that it took considerable persuasion to get Ledbetter to sing it for them. This introduction suggests that the Lomaxes are removing a layer of mediation (self-censorship) added by Ledbetter himself, thus giving the reader access to a more genuine, authentic version of Ledbetter’s songs.

The versions of “Whoa, Back, Buck!” in folders 428 and 431 are very similar to the two March 1935 recordings upon which they are almost certainly based, and to the final version in *Negro Folk Songs*. There are two main differences between these versions: changes in the footnotes describing both the “backband” and Cunningham, and differing transcriptions of the oft-repeated word(s) “backband”/ “back bend.” The difference in transcription is significant, since the Lomaxes themselves note that “backband” does not make sense in context. This calls into question why they choose the transcription “backband” over “back bend.”

The version of “Whoa, Back, Buck!” in folder 428 consistently uses “back-ben’,” whereas the version in folder 431 predominantly uses “back band,” with a single exception. The recordings themselves do not provide clarity on which Ledbetter sang: Ledbetter’s accent does not strongly mark a difference between the vowels in “band” and “bend.” In General American accent these

⁵²Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 85.

⁵³Ibid., 87.

vowels would be [æ] and [ɔ] respectively; however, in Ledbetter’s dialect they are [æ] and [ɔ], two vowels that are almost indistinguishable to a speaker of General American,⁵⁴ and that Ledbetter sometimes used interchangeably. “Backband”/ “back bend” occurs in the context of the chorus, which asks the question “Who made the backband/back bend?” and then has either the exclamation “goddamn” or the name “Cunningham.” Table 3 gives the different extant footnotes describing Cunningham:

Table 3. Variation in footnotes describing Cunningham, from the working papers to *Negro Folk Songs*.

Folder 430	Folder 431	<i>Negro Folk Songs</i>
<p>So they went to Cunningham, Fell down on their knees, Mighta heerd them holl’in’, “Have mercy on me.” *</p> <p>* Cunningham (a notorious plantation owner, who leased convicts in Texas and is supposed to have treated them brutally) is described as “a tush-hog in de numbers”</p>	<p>Cunningham, mentioned often in Texas prison farm songs, always with fear and hatred, in the old days leased large numbers of convicts from the state to work on his large (^wide-spreading) Brazos bottom plantation. He is supposed (^reputed [[John’s change]]) to have treated them (^the men) brutally. L.B. characterizes him as a “tush-hog in de numbers”, that is-among a group of fierce men, (^he was) a particularly vicious and long-toothed boar-hog.]</p>	<p>Cunningham in the old days leased large numbers of convicts from the State of Texas to work on his Brazos bottom plantation.</p>

The footnote in *Negro Folk Songs* provides only the dry fact that Cunningham leased convicts to work on his plantation; however, the footnotes in the earlier working papers focus on Cunningham’s reputation for cruelty.

When given the context that “Whoa, Back, Buck!” was a work song, learned on a prison plantation from a fellow prisoner (Dick-Licker), and that Cunningham was a “notorious plantation owner who leased convicts,” the call and response “Who made the back bend? / Cunningham” can be read to mean “Who drove us so hard our backs bent under all the work? / Cunningham.” “Goddamn” as a replacement word for Cunningham also makes sense in this reading, because it could be used when overseers were too close, and as an exclamation of contempt for the hated

⁵⁴Sound differentiation is highly variable based on cultural context. The oft-cited example is the alveolar tap [ɾ] used in Japanese, and which Westerners, who have not grown up with the sound, identify variously as either the postalveolar approximant [ɹ] or the alveolar lateral approximant [l]. This is an example of mental categorization/stereotyping/framing making it more difficult for someone to accurately perceive the world around them. The Japanese speaker accurately produces an alveolar tap, but the Westerner does not have a category for this sound, and so forces it into one of two mutually exclusive categories.

Cunningham. In contrast, the Lomaxes themselves point out that their reading of “backband” is nonsensical (identifying it as “the always recurring question, important for we do not know what reason”), since “Oxen wear no backband.”⁵⁵

Müller and Cloonan both discuss how censorship can be subtle, and, in the case of Cloonan, even subconscious. Barnett and Weiss also discuss how the possessor of power does not have to intentionally wield their power and authority in order for it to have a significant effect on those around them.⁵⁶ The Lomaxes’ choice of “backband” over “back bend” may have been, to their minds, a choice between equally likely possibilities, given the ambiguity of Ledbetter’s accent on those words. However, their choices to change the person who taught Ledbetter the song from Dicklicker to his uncle, and thus its context from prison plantation to home, to remove part of the description of Cunningham that highlights Cunningham’s lack of compassion, and choosing the transcription “backband” over “back bend” have the effect of censoring a criticism of a plantation owner, Cunningham. If it was a conscious choice, the Lomaxes may have seen it as necessary, either to avoid accusations of libel, or in order to ensure their continued access to prisons across the south. As an additional unintended consequence of the Lomaxes’ editing, the version of “Whoa, Back, Buck!” in *Negro Folk Songs* seems to have a refrain that makes no sense, furthering the stereotype that African American music, particularly blues, as just nonsense strung together, and that its performers are clowns, or “coons,” defined by Bogle as “no-account [nggrs], those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 85.

⁵⁶Müller, “Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Territory,” 24-25.; Cloonan, “Call That Censorship? Problems of Definition,” 14.; Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, 7-8.

⁵⁷Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films*, 8.

Negro Folk Songs is a multi-author work, but that does not mean that each author was granted equal authority in determining what content was included or excluded in the published book. The Lomaxes at once claimed authenticity for *Negro Folk Songs* by asserting that they had convinced Ledbetter not to self-censor, while at the same time using censorship (consciously or unconsciously) to partially erase one of Ledbetter's potentially inflammatory utterances. As a result of this censorship, the altered statement is nonsensical, furthering the stereotype of African American musical utterances as frivolous and lacking in meaning, and connecting the performer of such utterances to existing cultural stereotypes of African Americans, such as the "coon."

Chapter 3

Signifyin(g) in “Go Down Ol’ Hannah”

Huddie Ledbetter’s repertory included songs from every part of his life, ranging from joyful fiddle tunes for dancing, to the mournful laments that synchronized the strokes of convicts’ hoes. “Go Down Ol’ Hannah” is one of the latter, and the Lomaxes recorded it on prison plantations throughout the south, including versions sung by James “Iron Head” Baker and Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter. Both men’s renditions paint the scene of a desperately hot summer, with convicts working in the fields to the point of exhaustion, and beyond. Both men include a verse that paints a vivid picture of a field where each row contains a man’s corpse. Ledbetter uses Signifyin(g) to highlight this verse, changing the line from “It’s a man lying dead on the low turn row” to “It’s a man lying dead on every turn row.”

Ledbetter frames this verse using the rhetorical technique of Signifyin(g) (Table 4). Signifyin(g) is, as literary theorist Henry Louis Gates defines it, “repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference.”⁵⁸ This “repetition with a signal difference” can serve to either intensify or obscure meaning, depending on audience.

Table 4. “Go Down, Ol’ Hannah”: in the March 1935 recording, transcribed by this author; as transcribed in *Negro Folk Songs*; and in folders 428 and 431.

March 1935 recording	<i>Negro Folk Songs</i>
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⁵⁸Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, 26.

<p>...Hannah, don't you rise no more,⁵⁹ Go down old Hannah, don't you rise no more, If you rise in the morning, bring judgment day, If you rise in the morning, bring judgment day.</p> <p>You oughta been on the Brazos, nineteen and ten, You oughta been on the Brazos, nineteen and ten, They was working women like they do the men, They was working women like they do the men.</p> <p>If a man don't know, if a man don't know, If a man don't know, if a man don't know, It's a man lying dead on the low turn row, It's a man lying dead on every turn row.</p> <p>Oh the man's on the end a-holl'in', bring 'em, bring 'em on here, Oh the man's on the end a-holl'in', bring 'em, bring 'em on here,</p> <p>Oh nineteen ten, it was a mighty hard year, Nineteen and ten was a mighty hard year.</p> <p>Go down old Hannah, don't you rise no more, Go down old Hannah, don't you rise no more.</p>	<p>Go down, ol' Hannah, doncha rise no mo', Go down, ol' Hannah, doncha rise no mo'; Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Judgment Day.</p> <p>You oughta been on de Brazis* in nineteen and ten; Dey was workin' de women, like dey drove de men.</p> <p>You oughta been here in nineteen an' ten, The mens was fallin'—a reg'lar haulin' in,</p> <p>The sun was shinin', the mens was flyin', The cap'n was holl'in', we wuz almos' dyin',</p> <p>Number one leader, I was rollin' some, † I was rollin', honey, from sun to sun.</p> <p>[p. 120] Moon in de mornin', 'fo' de sun did rise; I would think about my baby, hang my head an' cry. Oh, de man on de end* holl'in', "Bring 'em, bring 'em on here." †</p> <p>Ef a man don' know, ef a man don' know— It's a man lyin' dead on de low turn row.‡</p> <p>Long-time man, hold up your head, You may make it, an' you may fall dead.</p> <p>Go down, ol' Hannah, don' you rise no mo', Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Judgment Day. Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Judgment Day.</p> <p>* The Brazos, Texas' longest river. † "Rollin' " is the equivalent of "working" and is descriptive of the easy motion of a good worker as he hoes or plows down a long row. [p. 120] * The assistant captain, who oversees all the gangs in the fields. If the work isn't going fast enough, "He'll get off his horse an' walk across de fiel's an' whip 'em, gang by gang. He'll tighten 'em up, ef dey ain' tight like that. He'll give mos' men just' five or six good lick, but ef one is way late he'll throw him down an' pull down his britches. But ef you is a real good worker, he ain' gonna bother you, ain' gonna touch you 'tall." † Prison lingo, meaning "hurry up, tighten up." ‡ A cleared space, several rows wide, running across a field at right angles to the other rows, where the plow teams can turn without trampling or uprooting the cotton, cane, or corn.⁶⁰</p>
<p>Folder 428</p>	<p>Folder 431</p>

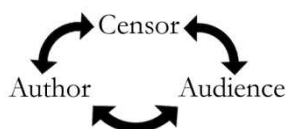
⁵⁹The digital reproduction, kindly provided by the University of North Carolina's Southern Folklife Collection, seems to begin after Ledbetter has begun singing. I have not been able to confirm whether this is an issue with the original recording, or with the reproduction.

⁶⁰Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 118-120.

<p>Hannah, doncha you rise no mo', Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Judgment Day.</p> <p>You oughta been on de Brazis in nineteen and ten; Dey was workin' de women, like dey drove de men</p> <p>Ef a man don' know, ef a man don' know— It's a man lyin' dead on de low turn row. It's a man lyin' dead on ev'y turn row.</p> <p>Moon in de mornin', 'fo' de sun did rise; I would think about my baby, hang my head an' cry. Oh, de man on de end holl'in', "Bring 'em, bring 'em on here."</p> <p>Oh, nineteen ten, it was a mighty hot year, Nineteen and ten was a mighty hot year.</p> <p>Go down, ol' hannah, doncha rise no mo'.</p>	<p>Go Down Old Hannah (^Shirley: write each line twice except for 1st stanza.)</p> <p>[...] They (^Dey) was workin' de wimmen, like they (^dey) de (^drove) de men.</p> <p>[...] The cap'n was holl'in', we was almos' dyin', (or) The cap'n was holl'in', "Jump in there, shine." [...]⁶¹</p>
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Signifyin(g), like the expressive forms of many other historically oppressed groups, can function as a way for people to communicate with a lesser chance of external intervention. The previous chapter discusses how some writers define censorship as interference between sender (author or singer) and receiver (audience) (this could be represented as Author → |Censor| → Audience). This linear, unidirectional definition of censorship falls short not only in that it fails to recognize the complex role a censor can play within a work, for instance as editor or co-author (Author ↔ Censor → Audience); it also fails to recognize the audience's role as a co-creator of meaning (see Figure 1).

Figure 2. Visualization of relationships between author, censor, and audience.



German literature scholar Beate Müller's broader discussion of censorship does acknowledge the audience's role as interpreter in her discussion of "Aesopian" language, or "language intended to

⁶¹I did not transcribe the entirety of 431, but rather noted the differences between the version in Folder 431 and that *Negro Folk Songs*.

‘smuggle’ contentious ideas into the space between the lines and thus past the censor.”⁶² Examples of Aesopian language include genres such as allegory, parables, and irony. In order for Aesopian language to be successful, however, it must walk a fine line between revealing meaning to the audience, and concealing that same meaning from the censor: too complex or obscure, and few audience members will be able to decode it; too obvious, and the censor will not have plausible deniability for letting it through.

Signifyin(g) is often used as an Aesopian language, conveying meaning past the watchful eyes of overseers, bosses, and other censors. In Signifyin(g), the sender of the message and its receiver are equally responsible for the correct coding and decoding of the message, as is presented in the trope of the “Signifyin(g) Monkey.” This trope, described by Henry Louis Gates in his book of the same name, involves a fight between three friends. The ultimate loser in the fight among the three is the one who failed to recognize that the other was Signifyin(g), and took his friend’s statements literally.⁶³ Signifyin(g)’s multiple layers of meaning are not always obvious, even to those within the intended audience, but it is the responsibility of the listener to actively participate in meaning making with the speaker.

Ledbetter Signifies in “Go Down Ol’ Hannah” by making a small change in the form of the verse. On the March 1935 recording, most of the stanzas consist of literal repetitions of material, AABB; however, in the third verse, Ledbetter changes this pattern, singing:

If a man don’t know, if a man don’t know,
If a man don’t know, if a man don’t know,
It’s a man lying dead on the low turn row,
It’s a man lying dead on every turn row.

⁶²Müller, *Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Territory.*, 5, 21

⁶³Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, 85.

making the pattern AABB' (or perhaps AAB**B**).⁶⁴ For those familiar with Signifyin(g), this use of repetition with a slight difference is a sign to pay close attention, to look for potential meaning within the change itself. Ledbetter changes the line from pointing out a dead man on a single row to a dead man on every row, underscoring the brutality of the convict lease system by pointing out the sheer number of men who were killed by it.

The transcription of “Go Down, Ol’ Hannah” in *Negro Folk Songs* includes only a few repetitions of lines: in the first and last verses, and verse six. *Negro Folk Songs* does not include the repetition and variation in verse seven, transcribing it as:

Ef a man don’ know, ef a man don’ know—
It’s a man lyin’ dead on de low turn row.‡

having the effect of censoring Ledbetter’s Signifyin(g) on the convict lease system, as presented in the recording. The general sense of the verse remains (men are worked to death in the fields), but the increased weight that Ledbetter gives this verse through Signifyin(g) is censored.

As noted in the previous chapter, censorship does not have to be performed consciously in order for it to occur. In fact, if Aesopian language or Signifyin(g) are successful at concealing the author’s meaning within an editing or co-authoring relationship, the editor or co-author may not even realize that they have substantially affected the message conveyed to readers. The note to Shirley⁶⁵ in folder 431 to “write each line twice except for 1st stanza” points to the possibility that the omission of Ledbetter’s Signifyin(g) was due to process, rather than censorial intent.

Whether Ledbetter’s Signifyin(g) was censored intentionally or not, diminishing the weight of Ledbetter’s lyrical critique of the prison system affected the image of him presented in *Negro Folk Songs*. Readers of *Negro Folk Songs* already familiar with “Go Down, Ol’ Hannah” might question

⁶⁴Here we can see that even the standard notation for variation, an easily glossed over apostrophe, is predicated on Western verse forms, where variations are generally ornaments, rather than signifiers of a key meaning-making technique.

⁶⁵Possibly John Lomax’s oldest daughter, Shirley Lomax Mansell Duggan.

why Ledbetter would change the verse from “You could find a dead man at de en’ of ev’y row”⁶⁶ to “It’s a man lying dead on the low turn row,” that is, from every row to a single row. The removal of Ledbetter’s resistance through Signifyin(g) makes his image in *Negro Folk Songs* align more closely with the racial stereotype of the Uncle Tom, described by film historian Donald Bogle:

Always as **toms** are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n’er [pg. 6] turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts.⁶⁷

Being represented as a tom lessens Ledbetter’s credibility within the African American community and, while white audiences are far more comfortable with the tom stereotype than they are with any other available to African American men, it is nonetheless a damaging stereotype. Ledbetter is also presented using tom-like language in the chapter “Lead Belly Tells His Story.” For instance, when Ledbetter is trying to get a job with John Lomax after his release from Angola, Ledbetter is represented as saying:

“Boss,” he said, as if deeply moved, “boss, I don’t think you oughta talk dat way to me. Boss, dis is de way I feels about you: Ef you got in a fight wid a man an’ he start to shoot you, I’d jump in between an’ ketch de bullet myself an’ not let it tech you. Boss, please suh, lemme go wid you; I’ll keep yo’ car clean an’ drive jes’ like you tell me. I’ll wait on you day an’ night. An’, boss, you’ll never have to tie yo’ shoes again ef you’ll lemme do it.”⁶⁸

The image this last line evokes, of one man kneeling before another in service, is iconic of the type of self-effacing servility expected of the tom.

Ledbetter’s Signifyin(g) is an act of artistry and an act of resistance to censorship through Aesopian language, and the two acts are inextricably linked. Removing the artistry of the Signifyin(g) removes its covert meaning, and removing its covert meaning removes a part of Ledbetter’s artistry. There are a four major of instances where the Lomaxes censor Ledbetter’s text, removing Signifyin(g) and other instances of resistance. These include obscuring Ledbetter’s criticism of the

⁶⁶Alan Lomax, "'Sinful' Songs of the Southern Negro," in *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934-1997*, ed. Ronald D. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2003), 24. Alan Lomax quoting the version of “Go Down, Ol’ Hannah” collected from James “Iron Head” Baker

⁶⁷Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films*, 5-6.

⁶⁸Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 30.

plantation owner, Cunningham, discussed in the previous chapter; changing the order of verses in “Ain’t Bothered a Bit” to make police violence seem comic rather than shameful; and changing the refrain of “Billy in the Lowlands” from “Billy won’t wake, sir” to “Billy won’t work, sir,” in another song about a man affected by heat stroke. Each of these examples involves Ledbetter creating a negative representation of law enforcement or the prison system, and the Lomaxes’ editing of each undermines the critique inherent in Ledbetter’s performances of these songs. The Lomaxes used Ledbetter’s status as a convict and experiences on prison plantations as a marketing tool; however, it is the songs in which Ledbetter most directly discusses these experiences that the Lomaxes censor. In censoring Ledbetter, the Lomaxes shift Ledbetter’s representation in *Negro Folk Songs* from someone who is resisting and critiquing the prison system through the African American technique of Signifyin(g), to a character closer to the Uncle Tom.

Chapter 4

Frames and Mister Jim

Table 5. First, how Ledbetter introduces his story, as transcribed by the Lomaxes. Next, how the Lomaxes initially frame Ledbetter's introduction in the working papers, but subsequently cross out. Finally, how the Lomaxes frame Ledbetter's story in *Negro Folk Songs*.

Folder 429	Folder 429	<i>Negro Folk Songs</i>
<p>I was comin' on home from work one day wid my dinner bucket in my hand when I met up wid Mister Jim Candy (^Currie Tilly)⁶⁹ an' a gang o' his [nggrs] down on the street, drinkin'. Mister Jim (^Tilly) owned a big lot of land near Morningsport an' worked his [nggrs] hard an' never give them (^not one) a-cent nickle [sic], besides feedin' an' givin' them the clo's on their backs. That was Mister Jim. But Me an' him was always friendly, had been raised (^right) up together. I had played for him an' his wife when they would get to drinkin' (^and) I thought me an' him was friends, but it was Mister Jim got me in de trouble I rode to de penetenshuh.</p>	<p>[Whole section below exed out] L.B., in describing his "killin's" and the "killin's" he has seen, take an fierce pleasure in them, like a little boy who recites the tale of some bloody Western to his parents. He told me about the trouble that sent him to the Louisiana penitentiary [sic] for ten years for "sault 'tepmpt [sic] to murder," in some such way as this - - -</p>	<p>Without the protection of some powerful white man, no Negro could stay out of jail long in northwestern Louisiana and go the pace that Lead Belly went during the years he lived in Mooringsport. Trouble came down on him soon enough.⁷⁰</p>

The Lomaxes and Huddie Ledbetter begin the story of how Ledbetter found himself at Angola, the prison plantation where the Lomaxes first encountered him, in decidedly different ways (Table 5). (For the full record of the three extant versions of this story, see Appendix 1). Each introduction affects how the reader understands the content that follows by framing that content differently. This chapter will discuss how Ledbetter and the Lomaxes frame the story introduced

⁶⁹The Lomaxes change the name of this character in Ledbetter's story from "Jim Candy" to "Currie Tilly" in the versions in 429 and 432. In *Negro Folk Songs* they erase this character entirely. The historical record from this incident indicates that the white man involved was named Dick Ellet, sometimes mistakenly recorded as Elliot. Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 98-99.

⁷⁰John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), folder 429.; Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 23.

above differently, and how these changes in frame change Ledbetter's representation in this story, and in *Negro Folk Songs* as a whole.

Ledbetter's story, as transmitted by the Lomaxes (429), is significantly longer than the version in *Negro Folk Songs*; however, there are several points on which the two versions agree: Ledbetter is walking home from work, when someone accosts him for some whiskey. Ledbetter protests that he has only mule (low-grade, illicit whiskey). Insults are exchanged, and Ledbetter pulls out his knife and attacks a group of African American men with it until a policeman comes and takes him to prison.

Frames are powerful because they give shape to content. Cognitive scientist Seana Coulson, paraphrasing linguist Charles J. Fillmore, calls frames "a system of categories whose structure is rooted in some motivating context."⁷¹ For instance, when a listener hears "A man walks into a bar" the "motivating context" is a joke, and the "joke" frame is initiated. The joke frame contains certain categories, including setup and punch line. The opening sets in motion not only the joke frame, but the "bar joke" frame, and primes content usually associated with that frame, such as priests, rabbis, and bartenders. When the joke concludes, "A man walks into a bar...Ouch!" the punch line shifts the meaning of the word "bar" from a pub to a pole, and the phrase "walks into" from going through a doorway to walking into a solid object. The set of initial assumptions, the narrative that the listener has set in motion on hearing the beginning of the joke, is the "frame" of the statement, and it is only when that frame is shifted or subverted by the punch line that the listener becomes aware that they were creating a narrative in the first place; otherwise, the frame remains subconscious.

Frames are particularly compelling because, when the content and context do not give explicit values for categories within the frame, the listener automatically fills in default values.⁷²

⁷¹Seana Coulson, *Semantic Leaps: Frame-Shifting and Conceptual Blending in Meaning Construction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 18.

⁷²Ibid., 19.

Default values are sometimes imposed even when they are not completely logical, because understanding information that conflicts with a frame that has already been activated imposes a cognitive load: “The mind is lazy and applies ready schemas (prepackaged expectations) to new experiences.”⁷³ Framing shapes not only how listeners perceive content, Coulson points out that it also affects a person’s memory of events they experience.⁷⁴ By logical extension, framing not only affects how people perceive events, it also affects how people represent events, both those they experience and those that are recounted to them.⁷⁵

The version of Ledbetter’s story in folder 429 and that in *Negro Folk Songs* have very different frames, which affects how readers will understand the story that follows. In the version in 429, Ledbetter begins *in media res*, walking down the street from work with a lunch bucket in his hand. This sets the frame as a regular day, one that most people can relate to and populate with their own experience of coming home from work. Then Mister Jim Candy and his men appear unexpectedly, and it this unanticipated meeting that precipitated the events that led to Ledbetter’s incarceration. The very ordinariness of the initial frame makes the violence that followed as surprising to the listener/reader as it was to Ledbetter’s character in the story. Ledbetter underscores that “it was Mister Jim got me in de trouble I rode to de penetenshuh.”⁷⁶

The version of the story in *Negro Folk Songs* begins with the phrase “Without the protection of some powerful white man, no Negro could stay out of jail long[...]and go the pace that Lead Belly went.”⁷⁷ The phrase “powerful white man” primes John and Alan Lomax, and leads the reader to

⁷³Marina Grishakova, "Beyond the Frame: Cognitive Science, Common Sense and Fiction," *Narrative* 17, no. 2 (2009), 190.

⁷⁴Coulson, *Semantic Leaps: Frame-Shifting and Conceptual Blending in Meaning Construction*, 20.

⁷⁵The Lomaxes’ methodology, described in the introduction, of attempting to reconstruct and type Ledbetter’s stories immediately after he told them, put them under significant cognitive load, making them more prone to applying pre-existing frames without modification.

⁷⁶John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), folder 429.

⁷⁷Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, 23.

frame the story that follows in relation to what the Lomaxes have already written about their relationship with Ledbetter, particularly their supposed role in getting him released from Angola. The phrase “go the pace that Lead Belly went” suggests that Ledbetter was reckless, and that his eventual incarceration was unavoidable. “Trouble came down on him soon enough” also suggests that Ledbetter’s imprisonment was inevitable. Things that are framed as inevitable are framed as the “natural course of events,” and thus moral. That the inevitable is the natural, and the natural is the moral, is not the conscious, reasoned conclusion that all engaged readers must come to, but rather the subtle, subconscious framing of the content that readers from the same background will share automatically.

Stereotypes are frames applied to groups of people, and then applied to individuals within those groups uncritically. Stereotypes can be used as a shorthand way to define the self, by setting off the self in contrast with a stereotyped or racialized “other.” Literary theorist Edward Said discusses how Orientalism acts as a framework for Westerners to understand the “Orient”:

“Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness,”⁷⁸ and “Orientalism [...] *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world.”⁷⁹ Said also discusses how Orientalism serves as a way for European culture to define itself, “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”⁸⁰ Stereotypes about African Americans in the United States have a similar role for white Americans—stereotypes act as a framework through which to understand African Americans, and as a way to define whiteness, by positing it as not-African-American-ness. Although Said was discussing a different

⁷⁸Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 6.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 12. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 3.

historical and geographical moment, the mechanisms of Othering operate similarly in the United States, acting as both filter and frame for content. However, that content, as Said repeatedly points out, is made up of individual humans, and a side effect of the stereotyping process is to diminish the humanity of the people to whom it is applied.

In Ledbetter's telling of the story in folder 429, he focuses on Mister Jim's role in his imprisonment throughout; however, this character is completely absent in the version in *Negro Folk Songs*. The frame in *Negro Folk Songs* suggests that Ledbetter is completely responsible for his own imprisonment, despite the fact that Ledbetter's story as originally transcribed includes a number of exculpatory details, including Mister Jim's greater power in relation to both Ledbetter and Mister Jim's workers, Mister Jim's role as instigator of the incident, Mister Jim's violence against Ledbetter, hitting him with a set of brass knuckles, and Mister Jim's power over Ledbetter's trial,

Didn' a [nggr] 'pear 'gainst me. All was white people swearin' what Mister Jim tole 'em to swear. If it hadda been the [nggrs] I [next page] would never got in no trouble. But Mister Jim (^Currie Tilly) had it in for me, (^'cause) his [nggrs] couldn' work the way I had 'em cut up.⁸¹

By erasing Ledbetter's original frame and the character of Mister Jim, and substituting a frame that emphasizes the inevitability of Ledbetter's imprisonment, the Lomaxes shift culpability from Mister Jim to Ledbetter himself. Both have an equal claim to veracity; however, when "Lead Belly Tells His Story" (the title of the chapter, and itself a framing device), he frames his incarceration as the result of a powerful white man's intervention; but when the Lomaxes frame the same story, they frame Ledbetter's imprisonment as the result of the absence of a powerful white man. This frame aligns Ledbetter's character in the story with the cultural stereotype of the African American man as a "black brute," discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Framing provides a way to understand why the Lomaxes changed Ledbetter's story: as the Lomaxes attempted to remember Ledbetter's story "as he told it," their minds were put under

⁸¹John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), folder 429. The pages are out of order in the folder, corrected here for clarity.

significant cognitive load.⁸² Their existing cultural stereotypes about African American men were activated, and, because of the greater cognitive load caused by their methodology, they were less able to consciously confront these stereotypes. Ledbetter's identity as an African American convict activated the "black brute" stereotype/frame, affecting how the Lomaxes perceived and remember Ledbetter's story of his incarceration. Subsequently, in representing Ledbetter's story, they created a frame that reinforces the "black brute" stereotype.

⁸²For a description of the effects of cognitive load on perception of stereotypes, see Grishakova, "Beyond the Frame: Cognitive Science, Common Sense and Fiction", 191. For a description of the Lomaxes' methodology, see the introduction.

Conclusion

The nexus of knowledge and power creating “the Oriental” and in a sense obliterating him as a human being is therefore not for me an exclusively academic matter. Yet it is an *intellectual* matter of some very obvious importance. [...] Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me.—Edward Said⁸³

Huddie Ledbetter was not the first African American man to be represented to a white audience as a series of stereotypes, nor would he be the last. That white men in the United States in the 1930s would create a racially stereotyped portrayal of a black subject is not at all surprising. Why, then, discuss this subject at all? Why study the arrangement of the deck chairs on the Titanic when we already know where they ended up? The purpose of this study is not to prove that the Lomaxes stereotyped Ledbetter, but to understand how they got from a living, breathing, complex human being, to a series of dehumanizing stereotypes: the coon, the black brute, and the Uncle Tom. I argue they did this through erasure, addition, censorship, and framing. This is, to some extent, an exaggeration; Ledbetter is not, in my reading, completely obliterated from *Negro Folk Songs*, in part because of his ability at Signifyin(g). But he is obscured.

Edward Said writes “Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective.”⁸⁴ This study does not give a definitive answer for how to create a libertarian study of difference; however, it does give the author of future attempts at libertarian studies things to guard against in their own work. Although I believe the Lomaxes’ actions were, for the most part, subconscious, by bringing these actions into the open,

⁸³Said, *Orientalism*, 27.

⁸⁴Ibid.

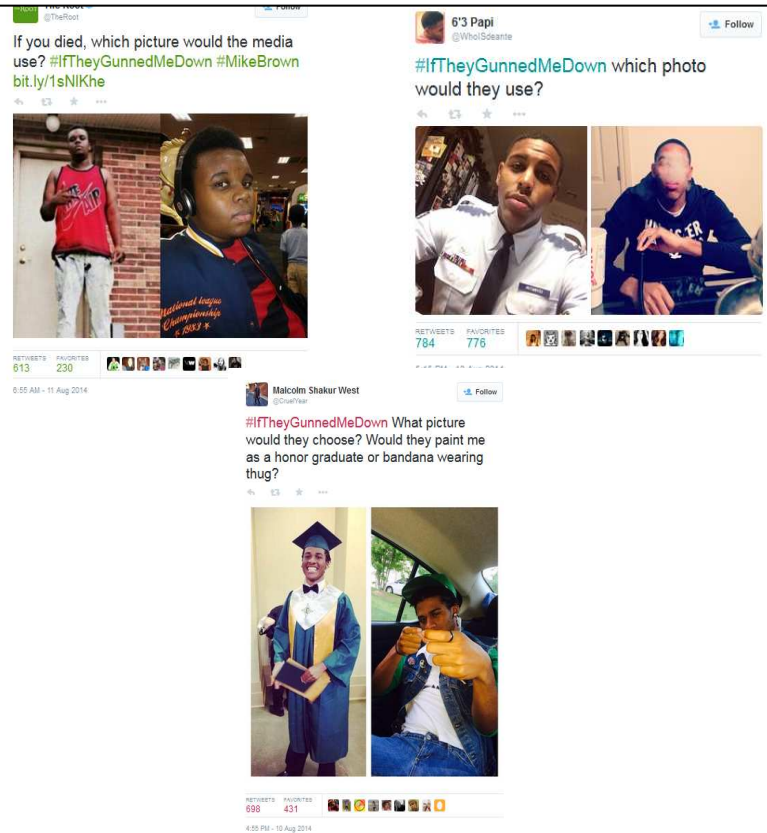
into the conscious portion of the mind, the libertory academic can choose to guard against them in their own work, whatever the identity of their subject. Although many stereotypes are identity-specific, the mental process of stereotyping and the academic processes described here remain the same across identities, particularly those that are marginalized. Investigators can be aware of the easy and automatic cultural narratives, and consciously search for information, images, and instances that subvert or complicate this narrative, and include them in our studies, rather than dismissing them as aberrations in the data.

To me, this is not a purely theoretical matter, or, as Said puts it, an “academic matter.” This process of representation is ongoing, now with different subjects. And the representation of African Americans through stereotypes has real world consequences. As I was preparing the seminar paper on which this project was based, George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin’s killer, was still waiting to go to trial. As I edited this paper Michael Brown, another young, unarmed African American teenager, was killed by a police officer. The reaction to this event on social media may serve as a starting point for the “nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective” Said calls for. In response to the way the media represented Michael Brown, individuals on social media platforms Twitter and Tumblr began using the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. In this hashtag primarily young African American men posted a pair of photographs of themselves, one in a casual setting, one formal.

The point of the hashtag is not that the casual portraits are somehow “untrue,” but that, based on past precedent, the media would use the informal images exclusively in order to create an unbalanced representation of who that person was if he were the victim of violence. This unbalanced representation would then be used to justify the violence he was subjected to by aligning him with cultural stereotypes about African American men, particularly the black brute. The media does this not by fabricating images whole cloth, but by erasing representations that conflict with the

stereotype, adding representations that confirm the stereotype,⁸⁵ and by framing them with captions and articles that say, for instance, the victim was “no angel.”^{86,87}

Figure 3. Twitter posts using the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag, underscoring how the media selects images of African Americans that feed into stereotypes, and erases images which don't. Clockwise from left, Michael Brown, 6'3 Papi, and Malcolm Shakur West.



Ledbetter wrote to a friend: “Don’t forget because there is a book writing about my life and I don’t think nothing about that book.... Because Lomax did not rite [sic] nothing like I told him.” There is no “true” Ledbetter who can be reconstituted from the flattened representation in *Negro Folk Songs*. However, by listening more consciously to Ledbetter’s voice as it survives in recordings, Ledbetter’s image can be re-complicated. It is not always comfortable to critique our heroes, such as Alan and John Lomax, who contributed so much to collecting and

⁸⁵See, for instance, <https://twitter.com/Jesterfaze/status/492133899833602048> mocking the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag, which includes images which are not of Trayvon Martin.

⁸⁶Gay, Roxane. “How America profiled Trayvon Martin and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.” *Salon*. http://www.salon.com/2013/07/19/how_america_profiled_trayvon_martin_and_dzhokhar_tsarnaev/ Accessed 11/11/2014.

⁸⁷<https://twitter.com/TheRoot/status/498830003551748096> <https://twitter.com/WhoISdeante/status/498623810132647936> and <https://twitter.com/CruelYear/status/498618644189175809>

appreciating American Folk music. Rather than seeing Ledbetter, or the Lomaxes, as heroes with feet of clay, perhaps we can see them as tricksters, like Legba: capable of good and bad actions, both revealing new truth and concealing, making them not wicked, but more fully human.

APPENDIX 1: HOW LEDBETTER CAME TO ANGOLA

John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress Washington, D.C.

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[Typed with edits by Alan Lomax]

[whole section exed out:

L.B., in describing his “killin’s” and the “killin’s” he has seen, take an fierce pleasure in them, like a little boy who recites the tale of some bloody Western to his parents. He told me about the trouble that sent him to the Louisiana penetentiary [sic] for ten years for “sault ’tepmpt [sic] to murder,” in some such way as this - - -]

“I was comin’ on home from work one day wid my dinner bucket in my hand when I met up wid Mister ~~Jim Candy~~ (^Currie Tilly) an’ a gang o’ his niggers down on the street, drinkin’. Mister ~~Jim~~ (^Tilly) owned a big lot of land near Morningsport an’ worked his niggers hard an’ never give them (^not one) ~~a cent~~ nickle [sic], besides feedin’ an’ givin’ them the clo’s on their backs. ~~That was Mister Jim.~~ But Me an’ him was always friendly, had been raised (^right) up together. I had played for him an’ his wife when they would get to drinkin’ (^and) I thought me an’ him was friends, but it was Mister Jim got me in de trouble I rode to de penetenshuh.

He was always drinkin’ wid some o’ his niggers (look like they crazy to me, workin’ for him year in an’ year out an’ never gettin’ nothin’ out o’ it, ~~not a nickle~~) an’ he was pretty well loaded (^dat day.) He calls me an’ says, “Say, ol’ nigger, you got any whiskey?” I tells him, “Nawsuh, I don’ have no whiskey, nothin’ but dis ol’ mule an’ you wouldn’ drink that.” “You’re (^a) lynin’, ~~nigger~~ (^sonofabitch, I know) you got some whiskey.” “Nawsuh, boss, I ain’ got no whiskey” I had some

mule, which it is a mixtry of alcher-rub an' water, an' I give him that. He smelled but he wouldn' drink it an' I walked on 'way from there.

~~But~~ (^Then) here come a bunch o' his niggers, I s'pose he had put 'em on me to have some fun, but he didn' have much fun dat day. They come runnin' up an' one obem holler, "Say, Ledbetter, give us some whiskey." I turn aroun', tell 'em, "(^Goddamn it,) didn' you hear me tell Mister ~~Jim~~ (^Currie Tilly) I ain' had no whiskey? Go on now, leave me 'lone. Don't bother wid me. (^An' yet unstill) they kept on ~~at me~~ (^foolin' wid me). Then one obem said, "You're a god-damn liar, nigger, you got some whiskey."

I didn' 'low him time to say no more. I grab him by his collar, draw him up to me an' 'gin give him my ol' knife, "Whop, whop, whop." He 'gin to holler an' (^I bop at him wid my knife, holdin' close to me by his collar. "Goddam you black bastard. You'll fool wid me, will you. Well, I'm gonna fix you so you won't fool no more." An' I kep' stickin' him an' he was hollin', "Get him off, he's killen me.") de other niggers come runnin' up an' I let him go an' he ran off holl'in' an' then I grab the nex' one (^come up) an' give him the knife. (~~How his eyes flashed an' how he did smile when he said all this.~~) (^Yassuh I had 'em some wid dat knife). I was cuttin' niggers fas' de nex' minute. Weren't long til six ~~on~~ (^ob) 'em were runnin' down de street holl'in' an' bleedin'. Mister ~~Jim~~ (^Tilly) run up an' catches me by de collar an' hol's me tight an' rough, but he didn' hit me an' I didn' hurt him. My knife was in my hand an' he didn' hit me or nothin'.* "What the Hell you think you doin' you crazy black bastard?" An' he kept holl'in', "What the Hell you think you doin' you black sonofabitch?" holdin' me but not hittin' me. I didn' hurt him, either. I had my knife in my right hand. Then Sherrif [sic] Mortie Bowers runs up an' catches me by de arm an' he didn' make Mister Jim let go (^which wasn' fair) an' they ~~drags me off to~~ carries me right on down to jail. (^Nex' day) Sherrif Tom Hughes come up ~~an' got me an' took~~ (^to Morningsport & carries) me back down to the Shreveport jail an' they kep' me there 'til I come to be tried.

~~An~~ It was Mister Jim ([^]Currie Tilly), what got it in for me 'cause I had cut his niggers up so they couldn' work, that sent me to Angola. Didn' a nigger 'pear 'gainst me. All was white people swearin' what Mister Jim tole 'em to swear. If it hadda been the niggers I

*[handwritten on verso] Later, as L. B grew to confide in me more he added in retelling this story, "Yes, he did, too. He did hit me. Had a pair o' brass nuckles [sic] on his hand an' he hit me right in de mouf." Pointing to the scar across his upper lip. "I showed this place in court an' tole 'em about Mr. Tilly hittin' me an' it made him pow'ful mad."

[[next page, out of order in folder, corrected here]]

would never got in no trouble. But Mister Jim ([^]Currie Tilly) had it in for me, ([^]'cause) his niggers couldn' work the way I had 'em cut up. (~~an~~ Anyhow, I reckon they won' mess wid me nex' time.)

My face was all swole up from where those niggers had him me when I was cuttin' 'em an' I looked so bad an' them white people o' Mister Jim's ([^]Tilly's) said so many bad things abainst [sic] me I didn' hvae [sic] a chance. Wouldn' no mens 'pear for me, but I had lotsa wimmens give my character. Dey don' pay no 'tention to wimmens, they give me ten years an' Bud Russell come an' got me an' took me on down to Angola an' I put up ~~ten flat years~~ four years and three months flat 'fore I saw Shreveport again.

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“Mist’ Currie come runnin’ up an’ catches me by de collar an’ hol’s me tight an’ shakes me, but he didn’ hit me. I had my knife still my in right han’ but I didn’ do him nothin’. ‘What the Hell you think you doin’, you crazy black bastard? What the Hell you doin’, you black sonofabitch?’ He kep’ shakin’ me but he didn’ hit me an’ ~~didn’~~ (^I) didn’ hurt him, ~~either~~ (^neither). I had my knife in my right han’. He held me ’til de police ~~run~~ (^ran) up an’ ~~catches~~ (^caught) me by de arm. Policeman din’ make Mist’ Tilly let go an’ he ~~keeps~~ (^kep) hol’ o’ my collar till they ~~git~~ (^got) me down to de Shreveport jail an’ kep’ me there till I come to be tried. ~~Such was Lead Belly’s account~~

“It was Mist’ Currie got me in trouble an’ Mist’ Currie sent me to de pen. He was mad ‘bout nigger I had kill in Texas bein’ his nigger an’ ~~when~~ I (^had) fix six mo’ his niggers so dey couldn’ wuck for awhile. An’ you know, didn’ a nigger ’pear against me? All was white people swearin’ what Mist’ Currie tol’ ’em to swear. If it hadda been de niggers, I wouldn’ never got in no trouble, never woulda been tried, but Mist’ Currie was mad ’cause his niggers couldn’ wuck de way I had cut ’em up. Anyhow, I reckon dey won’ mess wid me nex’ time.”

~~Such was Lead Belly told his~~ this story several times, always with the same emphasis on his friendship with Mister ~~Currie~~ Tilly, ~~and~~ on the fact that ~~he~~ Mister ~~Tilly~~ Tilly had not hit him and that he had not cut Mister Tilly. Then, in retelling the story, after he had grown to confide in us more, he added, “Yes, he did, ~~hit me~~, too. He did hit me. Had a pair o’ brass ~~knucks~~ (^knucks) on his han’ an’ he hit me right in de mouth.” Pointing to the scar that splits

[end of page]

Lomax, John A., and Alan Lomax. *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly*. New York: Macmillan, 1936, pp. 23-24.

Without the protection of some powerful white man, no Negro could stay out of jail long in northwestern Louisiana and go the pace that Lead Belly went during the years he lived in Mooringsport. Trouble came down on him soon enough.

“I was comin’ home f’om wuck one day wid my dinner bucket in my han’ when a gang o’ [nggrs] come runnin’ up: ‘Say, Ledbetter, give us some o’ yo’ whisky.’ I turn aroun’ an’ tell ‘em, ‘Goddamn it, haven’ you heard me say I didn’ have no whisky—nothin’ but mule? Go on away, don’ bodder me now. I’m tired an’ don’ feel like no foolishness.’ An’ yit unstil de kep’ worr’in’ me about de whisky. They kep’ foolin’ wid me. I didn’ pay ‘em no min’ till one ob ‘em say, ‘You a goddamn lyin’ nigger, you got some whisky.’

“Wasn’ nothin’ for me to do but to grab him. I didn’ ‘low him time to say no mo’. I grab him by his collar an’ pull him up to me an’ begin to put my knife to him, *Whop! Whop! Whop!* ‘Goddamn you black bastard, you’ll fool wid me, will you? Goddamn, I’ll fix you, goddamn, you won’ fool wid me no mo’! An’ I kep’ whoppin’ my knife in him, an’ him screamin’, ‘Get him off, get him off! He’s killin’ me!’—jus’ bawlin’ fo’ help. When ‘nother nigger come up I let de one I had go—he was glad to run—an’ I grab me my nex’ an’ commence to cut him. Lawd God, I was cuttin’ niggers fas’ de nex’ while! Putty soon they was six ob ‘em runnin’ down de street wid blood jus’ gushin’ out.

“De po’lice ran up an’ caught me by de arm and got me down to de calaboose. Nex’ day Sheriff Tom Hughes carried me down to de Shreveport jail an’ kep’ me there till I come to be tried.”

“When a man’s in trouble ev’ybody turns him down, nobody will go his bail, his friends and relations turn their backs on him and won’ even come to see him.” That was the way Huddie found things, lying up int he Shreveport jail. “My people lived all over dat country, an’ not one ob ‘em

come to see me. I don' blame 'em. They were scared to come 'roun' de jail house; they was scared they would git in trouble. I used to be de same way 'fo' I got in trouble—nobody couldn' git me down to de jail house. But when I got ot know how bad de jail was on a man, I be down to see all my frien's git in trouble. ... An' yet unstil I git back to Shrevepo't wid my new car an' my lots of money, don' you think I'm gonna go 'roun' to see my relations or give 'em a ride in my car! Man, I'm jus' gonna fly on by an leave 'em flat-footed." Era was the only one who stuck by him, and she didn't have the money to hire a lawyer.

Lead Belly was sent to Angola, the Louisiana State Prison farm, for ten years for assault with intent to murder, in 1930, just five years after leaving the penitentiary in Texas.[...]

APPENDIX 2: LETTERS FROM MARGARET AND ARTHUR MAE LEDBETTER

Margaret Coleman was Huddie Ledbetter's childhood sweetheart, and Arthur Mae Ledbetter was their daughter.

Lomax, John A., and Alan Lomax. John Lomax Correspondence, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932-1942 (AFC 1933/001), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress Washington, D.C., Folder 115.

March 27, 1935

Mr Alan Lomax,

Dear Sir:

We hope that this will be some service to you.

This is the best we could do. She have wrote it over and over so this is the contents.

We started it two different ways you can fix it to suit you.

This is as much of that song as my mother could think of. You will find it on the end of one of these sheets of paper.

I am not just back to my self yet but I am thankful to be better.

Arthur M. Ledbetter.

P.S. I hope it isn't too late.

[next page]

Hudie Ledbetter was the son of Wess and Sattie [?] Ledbetter. Both of them are now dead. Hudie was raised by his mother and father on the farm. He was an apt boy in his books was always willing to learn. He was smart swift toward any kind of work he new. He was honest and always loved music. He began his music first on an acordian [sic.], harp, piano and later a guitar. He learned so well and fast until the news spread around among the people far and near. He was asked to play for all the parties and dances. Was noted to be the best dancer of his race. He never tried to interfere with any one unless they would give him a cause then he would try to defend himself. Through all of his troubles he has always been a boy to regain the same friendship with his enemies. Hudie was a poor boy, but was willing to help in any good cause he could. He never grew tired or impatience [sic] with any thing. He was the only boy in that country that won fame through [pg. [2]] his talent. Hudie was always so interest in his music and work he did not have time for pals, although he was friendly with every one. Some of his first pieces he learned to play were, 'There ain't no corn bread here, Baby take me back, and Frankie was a good woman.

Hudie's mother and father were poor people. They worked hard on the farm to make an honest living. They had a standard record throughout Harrison County and Louisiana as being good honest respectable people. They live for their son prayed night and day for him to be what he is today.

AFC 1933/001, 115 (box 3)

Letter from Mother [Margaret] and Arthur Mae to Alan Lomax

[n.d., 1935]

Dallas Texas

Mr Lomax sir in ans. to your request concerning the life of Hudie Ledbetter. he was born and raised by good moral and honest parants [sic] by the home of Sallie & Wess Ledbetter. Hudie was a boy from his child hood days quite [sic] and respectful. His record proved that he was a honest boy never meddle quarreled or aurguard [sic] with any one. he was plain spoken some thing about Hudie's life was quite diffrent [sic] from other childrens, he never played like others he talked of the things he wanted to when he became a man. He learned to have a inner view of life that if he could learn music he would make lots of money.

So he could make his mother and father happy in their old age. His talent was music though he was good at any kind of work was swift quick very apt in his books though he had not the opportunity to go to school long for his parents were of a middle age when Hudie was born. That forced Hudie to work [pg. 2] at a very early age.

His parents were poor but honest and hard workers but unfortunate to some. They loved their son dearly and he loved them did all he could to make them happy. Hudie and I were lovers from child hood days went to school together to parties and dances. he was never late always on time loyal to his staff. Hudie was liked by every one who new [sic] him. Through all of this there was an unfinished duty he continued to look forward to so he talked it over with his parents to get him some kind of an instroment [sic] so he could learn music. They bought him an acordion [sic] later a

guitar which he love so well. The first night he got that he stayed up all night trying to learn, so by morning he had learned, There ant no corn bread here, later, baby take me back, Frankie was a good woman. The next the boweever [Boll Weevil] blues, so on and on song by song he learned composed his songs and music. No one ever thought he would learn as fast as he did. He was asked to play for a recital he proved so well the news spreaded around for miles so he continued to get better and better. then he was asked to play for all the big parties and dances. He was noted to be the best dancer and guitar player around. As the time rolled on the white people with stores and drugstores asked Hudie to play Saturday evening and nights at their places to draw the crowd, in that way he made nice change this inabled [sic] him to be of lots help to his parents. They were proud of him. The life Hudie lived nor his character caused him to get into trouble but jealousy in the heart of the people because he could beat them playing and dancing and made more money. Some began picking on him telling wrong things. Hudie being big hearted would laugh and try to keep down confusion. He would say to them boys I don't care what you say bout me don't hit me. He would try to defend himself regain friendship with his enemies. Because Hudie won the record that brought him fame through his own hard labor they continued to worry him until he was forced into the first trouble sent to prison for a long time which caused much grief to his parents....He sang and played before the governor and sang his way out. So you see that caused the young whites to pick at him. Still standing up for the right trying to defend himself to get the banner they kepted [sic] on until they sent him back. This grieved the mother so she passed before he was free the second time, but their prayers left behind went out and caused God to send you and your father to the aide of the poor colored people that wanted to be helped. I am glad to speak on the life of this faithful hard working boy who made himself what he is today with the aid of your people and the determining will of Hudie. With God in the plan we are glad for him may he continue to be loyal and true. From Mother and Arthur Mae.

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