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Tradition and Originality in the Songs of Bruce Springsteen

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Abstract

Bruce Springsteen works within musical traditions in a way that acknowledges their influence and at the same time creates something new. This paper focuses on Springsteen's relationship to the American folk tradition and the ways in which he creates a dialogue with that tradition in order to offer his own distinct perspective. By looking at Springsteen's lyrics and their intertexts, we can appreciate how he engages the tradition and transforms it. Ultimately, his audience makes meaning from his songs by understanding them as part of a tradition, recognizing the earlier works that inform Springsteen's lyrics, and considering both the effect the tradition has on Springsteen's work and the effect Springsteen's work has on their understanding of that tradition.

Throughout his career as a songwriter, Bruce Springsteen has worked within musical traditions in a way that acknowledges their influence and at the same time creates something new. Many artists strive for originality, meaning ideas that are new, revolutionary, or a radical departure from what has come before. Originality, however, can exist within a tradition and can serve to put an artist in dialogue with what has come before. To achieve this type of originality, an artist must do two things: first, place themselves within a tradition in a way that their audience will recognize and, second, engage that tradition in such a way as to say something new. The value judgments attached to the qualities "original" and "derivative" – often used as a synonym for "unoriginal" – are modern and Western. Many historical periods and cultures would

¹ Copyright © Prudence Jones, 2018. Address correspondence to jonespr@montclair.edu.

find the denigration of imitation unfamiliar.² Springsteen's musical career has been defined by his ability to refine old material in new ways and to encourage his audience to see musical traditions from a new perspective. This paper categorizes and analyzes the ways Springsteen references the American folk tradition in order to elucidate the ways in which Springsteen's works constitute a commentary on and counterpoint to key themes in American folk music.

This paper utilizes intertextuality, the relationship in which texts influence or reflect one another, as a theoretical framework to consider this aspect of Springsteen's songwriting. As Julia Kristeva observed in coining the term, a literary work does not exist as a discrete entity, but rather contains echoes of countless other texts.³ Roland Barthes goes even further, claiming that texts do not simply contain meaning, but have a dynamic quality. The reader produces meaning by interacting not only with the text in question but also with a network of texts within which that text exists.⁴ Indeed, the etymology of the word 'text' suggests connection. Derived from the Latin *texere*, "to weave," 'text' implies a web constructed from various threads, each of which brings with it meaning.

² Jan Walsh Hokenson, "The Culture of the Context: Comparative Literature Past and Future" in *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies* ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003), 67.

³ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66. For recent surveys of the origins and development of intertextuality, see Marko Juvan, *History and Poetics of Intertextuality* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008); Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Yelena Baraz and C.S. van den Berg, "Introduction." *American Journal of Philology* 134, no. 1 (2013): 1-8.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 148; Giorgio Pasquali, *Pagine Stravaganti* (Florence: Sansoni, 1968), vol. 2, 275.

Intertextuality, therefore, does much more than remind the audience of an earlier text; it offers a related understanding of multiple works and, as Gregory Machacek astutely observes, the recontextualization that results from intertextuality creates new interpretation.⁵ It is not imitation but reinvention.

Richard Thomas offers still more insight into the workings of intertextuality. Thomas established a “typology of reference” that explains the effects poets can produce through allusion.⁶ As will be evident from the examples below, Springsteen interacts with the folk tradition through several types of reference, each of which has a distinct effect. The relevant aspects of Thomas’s typology include the following categories: Casual reference describes a verbal echo that recalls an antecedent in a general sense, but that does not point to a particular locus.⁷ In Springsteen’s compositions, casual reference may occur in lyrics, but also appears in extra-lyrical aspects of his work such as album titles. Single reference, by contrast, directs the reader to a specific locus in the antecedent so that the reader will “recall the context of the model and apply that context to the new situation.” Springsteen employs single reference in partial covers like “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live.” Self-reference resembles single reference, but the “recalled locus is the poet’s own work.” Springsteen, on occasion, quotes himself in his lyrics, becoming his own source and reminding listeners of a line’s previous context. Correction describes a reference that is polemical. The author “provides

⁵ Gregory Machacek, “Allusion.” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 122, no. 2 (2007), 522.

⁶ Richard F. Thomas, “Virgil’s Georgics and the Art of Reference,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 90 (1986), 173.

⁷ Thomas, “Virgil,” 175.

unmistakable indications of his source, then proceeds to offer detail which contradicts or alters that source," as "American Land" does when compared to Pete Seeger's "He Lies in the American Land." Finally, in multiple reference, "the poet refers to a number of antecedents and thereby subsumes their versions and the tradition along with them into his own," as occurs when Pete Seeger's "Bring Them Home" and "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" both lend lyrics to Springsteen's "Bring 'Em Home." Like correction, multiple reference revises the tradition.⁸

Viewed with the tools of intertextuality, Springsteen's lyrics clearly reference the American folk tradition and reframe some of its themes. The analysis below demonstrates that Springsteen uses folk material in a more complex way than "remix," a term William Wolff has used to describe Springsteen's borrowings: Springsteen's references, far from simple allusions, transform meaning and create dialogue.⁹ This paper considers evidence from the *Seeger Sessions* (2006), "The River," and *Nebraska* (1982). To be sure, analysis of the albums that reference folk material, including *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995) and *Devils and Dust* (2005), could comprise entire monographs. For instance, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, establishes Springsteen as an heir to Woody Guthrie.¹⁰ *Devils and Dust*, the heir to *Nebraska* in both sound and tone, also features the Guthrie-esque lyrical style of *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. In addition, analysis of intertextuality between Springsteen and countless other artists from a range of genres could provide subject matter for a book-

⁸ Thomas, "Virgil," 177, 182-183, 185, 193.

⁹ William Wolff, "Springsteen, Tradition, and the Purpose of the Artist." *BOSS: The Biannual Online Journal of Springsteen Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), 45-46.

¹⁰ Paul D. Fischer, "The Ghost and Mr. Springsteen." *The Journal of American Folklore* 110, no. 436 (1997), 108-111.

length study. This paper, however, focuses on the origin and ultimate realization of Springsteen's dialogue with the American folk tradition by juxtaposing "The River" and *Nebraska* with "Land of Hope and Dreams" and the *Seeger Sessions*. These works illustrate the ways Springsteen uses the categories of reference Thomas identifies to create a dialogue with the folk tradition, and with specific works in that tradition, in order to offer a distinct perspective. The audience, too, must participate, as they make meaning from Springsteen's songs by placing them in a particular tradition, recognizing the earlier works that inform Springsteen's lyrics and considering both the effect the tradition has on Springsteen's work and the effect Springsteen's work has on their understanding of the tradition. These expectations may seem high, but numerous scholars explain the interactions readers/listeners have with compositions. John Hollander likens intertextuality to metalepsis, the rhetorical device in which a word from figurative speech is placed in a new context.¹¹ William Porter sees a parallel to enthymeme, a type of syllogism in which the audience must supply a premise.¹² Herbert De Ley invokes game theory, specifically the cooperative type known as strategic equivalence.¹³

Springsteen's interaction with the folk tradition on the *Seeger Sessions* is evident from the album's aesthetic and title alone. The title references Pete Seeger and thus clearly indicates its genre as a folk – or folk-inspired – album. Additionally, as the *Seeger Sessions*

¹¹ John Hollander *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 114.

¹² William Porter, *Reading the Classics and Paradise Lost* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 35-36.

¹³ Herbert de Ley, "The Name of the Game: Applying Game Theory in Literature" *SubStance* 17, no. 1 (1988), 43.

band took the stage at each concert on that tour, they visually signaled they were performing a different type of music that required different instruments and different sounds than a typical Springsteen performance. Rob Kirkpatrick notes that while typical E Street Band albums and concerts featured songs written by Springsteen (with perhaps a sprinkling of covers) and a thoroughly modern (i.e. electric) form of musical expression, the *Seeger Sessions* was not only “the first collection of song *arrangements* ... but it dusted off songs associated with a folkie who was decades removed from pop-culture relevance”¹⁴ These indicators fall in the category of casual reference, as they evoke an artist without pointing to specific lyrics. As Thomas notes, casual reference suggests “an atmosphere, but little more.”¹⁵

Like the name Seeger, the term “Sessions” in the album title resembles a programmatic statement. Per William Batstone, in poetry, a programmatic statement occurs when “poets, either directly or indirectly, speak of their poetry.” These statements illuminate “poetic goals, literary approach, and stylistic preferences” and represent “self-conscious authorial statement[s].”¹⁶ “Sessions” reminds the audience that folk constitutes a process as well as a genre. Songs arise from a dynamic composition process that results not in a product but a series of versions of the same track. The term implies iterative performance

¹⁴ Rob Kirkpatrick, *Magic in the Night: The Words and Music of Bruce Springsteen* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 202.

¹⁵ Thomas, “Virgil,” 175.

¹⁶ William W. Batstone, “Catullus and the Programmatic Poem: The Origins, Scope, and Utility of a Concept” in *A Companion to Catullus* ed. M. Skinner (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 235.

and collaboration and, by extension, the creative process involved in folk music.

Specifically, during the *Seeger Sessions* tour, Springsteen used a mode of composition Pete Seeger identified as a hallmark of the folk tradition: new versions of traditional songs. Seeger himself calls attention to the phenomenon. In introducing “If I Had a Hammer” on the *Clearwater Classics* album, he remarks, “there are a number of different versions of this song, but they all harmonize together.” In fact, Seeger could be criticized for interfering with the natural folk tradition and hastening the end of folk music, since he made the songs he sang so popular. Because they were played widely on radio, his versions became canonical and crowded out alternate versions. Bryan Garman notes criticisms leveled at Seeger for making music that was too commercial, a side-effect of Seeger’s seminal role in reviving folk music in the 1940s.¹⁷ This controversy gets at the heart of the folk tradition: folk represents a process, not a corpus or canon. Songs change with every performance; songs evolve to remain relevant as the culture changes, for instance by incorporating references to current events.

Cover versions represent one way in which folk songs change over time, since these covers often add new verses or lyrics. Springsteen participates in the folk process by adding verses to two songs, “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live” and “Bring ‘Em Home.” Blind Alfred Reed wrote the former in 1929 as a protest song about the Great Depression. Ry Cooder covered the song in 1970, using selected verses and creating a different musical

¹⁷ Bryan K. Garman, *A Race of Singers: Whitman’s Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 139-140.

arrangement. Springsteen's version owes more musically to Cooder, and, lyrically, it takes only one verse from Reed's version.

Springsteen's new verses transform the song into a protest against the government's response to Hurricane Katrina. Blind Alfred Reed's version references the events of the Great Depression. It contains numerous vignettes (including the high price of food and clothing, the poor quality of schools and fines when children do not attend, and police brutality) connected by the refrain "How can a poor man stand such times and live." Springsteen takes Reed's final verse ("Well, the doctor comes around...") and makes it his beginning. This technique exemplifies single reference: Springsteen clearly refers his audience to a single locus and expects the audience to recall the context of that reference (a song about the Great Depression) and apply it to a different event. As Giuseppe Giangrande observes, single reference goes beyond "plain echoing of the model" and applies the context of the source to a new topic.¹⁸ After Reed's verse, Springsteen adds original verses, keeping Reed's refrain and thus reinforcing the song's theme of disproportionate suffering by the poor. Springsteen's new verses preserve the tone of the protest song but update its message to apply to a recent catastrophe: Hurricane Katrina through the inclusion of references to Canal Street, the levees, and relocations to Texas.

Although Springsteen keeps Reed's "doctor" verse almost verbatim, the new context in which he places it changes its meaning. For Reed, the doctor may represent an actual physician (similar to the other characters in his lyrics) and also may function

¹⁸ Giuseppe Giangrande, "Hellenistic Poetry and Homer" *L'Antiquité Classique* 39 (1970), 46.

as a metaphor for ineffectual remedies in a financial crisis. For Springsteen, by contrast, the significance of the doctor develops as the song progresses. This initial verse identifies the song's origin in Reed's composition. Springsteen's second verse, however, reveals that the doctor in his version refers to George W. Bush. The reference to "high times" in his youth evokes Bush's history of substance abuse and "we're with you" quotes Bush's speech in Poplarville, Mississippi, on September 5, 2005.¹⁹ Bush's words, like the doctor's pill, qualify as humbug: something deceptive. Springsteen's second verse implies that Bush, like Reed's doctor, does not fulfill his promises. Through this use of single reference, Springsteen draws a parallel between Hurricane Katrina and the Great Depression in order to highlight the plight of the poor and the response of the powerful in both instances.

Similarly, "Bring 'Em Home" is a song modeled on a Pete Seeger response to the Vietnam War, which Springsteen altered to make applicable to the Iraq War. Seeger mentions Vietnam by name in his first verse and references napalm in verse seven, making his song clearly a protest of the Vietnam War. "Bring 'Em Home," however, takes a song about one historical event and universalizes it, leaving it to the audience to connect it with the Iraq War. Springsteen uses single reference to build on Seeger's highly specific Vietnam protest. Springsteen's also simplifies the song: his "Bring 'Em Home" has seven verses to Seeger's eleven, and Springsteen excludes two themes from Seeger's song, namely the idea of a just war and the importance of education in cultivating peace. Furthermore, the textual references to Seeger's composition

¹⁹ George W. Bush, "Remarks to the Community in Poplarville, Mississippi," September 12, 2005, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 41, no. 36, 356.

involve lines that treat war in general terms and come early in the song, establishing the connection before departing from the model. Springsteen reference Seeger's "It will make our generals sad I know ... They want to tangle with the foe" but broadens this sentiment, replacing "generals" with "politicians" and "the foe" with "their foe," implying that the decisions regarding war now reside further from the battlefield (i.e. made by politicians rather than generals) and that the enemy is not the foe of a nation but the foe of politicians waging a vendetta. Springsteen's omission of Seeger's verses in which he declares himself "not really a pacifist" and allows that there are circumstances in which he would fight reinforces this reading; Springsteen's song calls only for an end to war. In a post-Vietnam and post-9/11 world, "Bring 'Em Home" looks back to its roots in folk tradition of the protest song but takes the theme beyond a specific protest, perhaps looking ahead to future performances in which it will describe new wars.

In both "Poor Man" and "Bring 'Em Home," Springsteen incorporates intertextual references to additional songs that expand the nexus of connections his versions suggest. In doing so, he employs multiple reference in which texts go beyond "demonstration of virtuosity" in poetic composition and forge connections between different elements of a tradition to create a hybrid that represents more than the sum of its parts.²⁰ In "Poor Man," Springsteen adds the line "Yeah and I ain't got no home in this world no more," an almost direct quote of the refrain of Woody Guthrie's "I Ain't Got No Home" ("And I ain't got no home in this world any more"). The intertext of "Poor Man" also provides an example of self-reference: Springsteen covered the Guthrie song on

²⁰ Thomas, "Virgil," 195.

the 1988 Folkways tribute to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly and performed it at his September 24, 1993, concert in East Rutherford, New Jersey, a benefit show for hunger relief.²¹ Especially during live performances, the quote from Guthrie serves as a reference to Guthrie's Dust Bowl Ballads. At *Seeger Sessions* concerts, Springsteen talked about Hurricane Katrina and included the detail that Katrina caused the biggest displacement of people since the Dust Bowl. Thus, what might seem like the incidental inclusion of a line from another folk artist in fact constitutes a single reference to Guthrie. Together, the allusions that create multiple reference in "Poor Man" form a nexus of historical events to contextualize Katrina and its aftermath and argue for the significance of this catastrophe as part of a broader American story of economic and political catastrophe.

Multiple reference also figures in "Bring 'Em Home." In the second half of the song, Springsteen includes several allusions to "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." For instance, Springsteen's "The men will cheer and the boys will shout" and "Yeah and we will all turn out" in verse five closely resemble the opening verse of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home":

When Johnny comes marching home again, Hurrah,
Hurrah,
We'll give him a hearty welcome then, Hurrah, Hurrah;
The men will cheer, the boys will shout,
The ladies, they will all turn out²²

²¹ Various Artists, *Folkways: A Vision Shared - a Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly*. SBME Special Mkts (2008).

²² Full lyrics can be found at <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/on-the-homefront/culture/music/when-johnny-comes-marching-home-again/when-johnny-comes-marching.html>. Retrieved July 1, 2016.

And then in his seventh verse, Springsteen includes the title lyric (“Yeah, when Johnny comes marching home”) making the allusion impossible to miss. The upbeat tone of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” might seem like a departure from the more somber first half of “Bring ‘Em Home,” but “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” has its own complex history. The American song, published during the Civil War, derives from an Irish anti-war song that dates to around 1800 called “Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye” in which a soldier returns from war disabled and his wife almost does not recognize him:

The enemy nearly slew ye
Oh my darling dear, Ye look so queer
Johnny I hardly knew ye.²³

Springsteen perhaps had the darker antecedent of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” in mind when he referenced it in a song that brings out the cost of war in a way more reminiscent of “Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye.” If so, this allusion constitutes an example of window reference, a subtype of correction that involves a “reference back to the source of [the] model: the intermediate model thus serves as a sort of window onto the ultimate source, whose version is otherwise not visible.”²⁴ The cognitive dissonance produced by referencing “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” in the anti-war “Bring ‘Em Home” is resolved if the listener recalls

²³ Full lyrics can be found at <http://www.ireland-information.com/irishmusic/johnnyihardlyknewye.shtml>. Retrieved July 1, 2016.

²⁴ Thomas, “Virgil,” 188.

the Irish Johnny and thus appreciates how Springsteen layers these songs of return.

While Springsteen's "Poor Man" and "Bring 'Em Home" use single and multiple reference to place traditional songs in a new context, "American Land" and "Land of Hope and Dreams" open a dialogue with their antecedents through the type of reference Thomas identifies as correction and Giangrande refers to as *oppositio in imitando*.²⁵ Thomas describes correction as demonstrating "the scholarly aspect of the poet."²⁶ Indeed, these two songs do more than make connections within musical tradition: they conduct a critical examination of the tradition, interrogate its presumptions, and offer an alternate narrative.

In "American Land," Springsteen takes elements from Pete Seeger's "He Lies in the American Land" but radically alters the tone as well as the tune.²⁷ In 1947, Andrew Kovaly taught Pete Seeger a song he had written in Slovakian, called "I Lie in the American Land." In the song, Kovaly described a man who came to Pittsburgh from Slovakia, saved enough money to send for his family by working in a mine, but died in that mine before his family arrived. Seeger created an English version of the song and changed the title slightly. Springsteen's song begins with an unmistakable verbal reference to Seeger's version ("What is this land of America"). While the quotation by itself represents single reference, the remainder of the song reveals that Springsteen

²⁵ Thomas, "Virgil," 185; Giuseppe Giangrande, "'Arte Allusiva' and Alexandrian Poetry," *Classical Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1967), 90.

²⁶ Thomas, "Virgil," 185.

²⁷ Lyrics to Seeger's "He Lies in the American Land" can be found at http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Pete_Seeger:He_Lies_In_The_American_Land. Retrieved June 29, 2016.

employs correction. He begins by identifying an antecedent and thus directing readers to recall the context of the verbal echo in the earlier work, but subsequent details contradict the source. The process resembles deconstruction, in which an author destabilizes a text by incorporating contradictory meanings.²⁸ Correction, however, suggests a resolution to the contradiction, as the author takes a clear position.

In "American Land," Springsteen acknowledges the hardships faced by immigrants but accentuates opportunity rather than tragedy, thus reversing the message of Seeger's song. Symbols of prosperity – "silk," "satin," "gold," "diamonds," and a beer tap that never runs dry – abound in the America of "American Land," and work, the key to this prosperity, abounds as well. In Seeger's song, the hope of a new life in America falters when the man who goes off to seek his fortune dies before his wife can join him in their new home ("Only his grave, his blood did she find"). Springsteen's song, however, looks to the future and makes no mention of the song's main character meeting a tragic end. General terms describe the dangers immigrants faced. The costs of being an immigrant (hazardous job locations including "railroads," "fields," and "factories") appear in only one stanza and connect to an unspecified "they." This less personalized look at hardship and danger allows for an optimistic tone. In contrast, Seeger's song leaves the listener with the image of a widowed wife and orphaned children and accordingly adopts a spare and mournful tune. Like the changes to the lyrics, the upbeat tempo Springsteen employs signify the differences from Seeger's song. Rather than lying in the

²⁸ Don Fowler, "On the Shoulders of Giants: Intertextuality and Classical Studies," *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 39 (1997), 18-19.

American land, Springsteen's character, as the refrain emphasizes, makes his home there. Through the technique of correction, Springsteen evokes Seeger as a model but presents a contrasting view of American immigration. This correction does more than present a dissenting opinion: it makes a political point. Seeger's song observes while Springsteen's directs. Springsteen makes a charge to the audience: respect and value the labor of immigrants. The men and women who have come to this country are not tragic, but heroic, figures whose courage and hard work built the American land.

In "Land of Hope and Dreams," Springsteen again employs correction to revise a traditional song. The song takes as its model "This Train," also known as "This Train is Bound for Glory," which exists in many versions with various lyrics.²⁹ The song's underlying theme is salvation for the righteous, evident in Woody Guthrie's version. The train itself represents selection: it excludes gamblers, liars, con men, hustlers, and the like. It takes as passengers only the "righteous and the holy." Springsteen's train in "Land of Hope and Dreams," on the other hand, represents inclusion. Springsteen's train has the saints but also the sinners as well as the whores, gamblers, losers, and winners. All must take the ride together.³⁰ While Guthrie's version evokes salvation for the worthy, if Springsteen's composition suggests an afterlife, all are heading there together. Owen Cantrell detects utopian themes in

²⁹ W.B. Waltz and D.G. Engle, *The Ballad Index*, s.v. "This Train." <http://www.fresnostate.edu/folklore/ballads/LoF255.html>. Retrieved June 30, 2016.

³⁰ Roxanne Harde, "Living in Your American Skin: Bruce Springsteen and the Possibility of Politics," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 43, no. 1 (2013), 133-134.

Springsteen's song, while Spencer Allen characterizes it as eschatological, but both agree that the future toward which Springsteen's train proceeds represents a reality that the train's passengers must create for themselves.³¹ Earlier versions of "This Train," however, place characters within an established framework of division, implying that saints and sinners will reach the traditional destinations of heaven and hell, respectively.

In concert, Springsteen often combines "Land of Hope and Dreams" with a partial cover of Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready." Using multiple reference in performing this song reinforces Springsteen's use of correction. Mayfield's song also refers to the exclusion of sinners, but the portion Springsteen uses (the first verse) speaks only of inclusion, particularly the lines "Don't need no baggage, you just get on board" and "Don't need no ticket." "Land of Hope and Dreams," when considered with its intertexts, not only emphasizes the theme of connection that runs through so much of his catalog but in fact it constitutes a polemic that engages a debate central to the idea of America. American legends often depict this country as a place of refuge and a melting pot—a place where old world divisions will not persist. However, as Charles Hirschman notes, actual events often do not reflect this ideal.³² More often, the reality resembles the Puritan habit of

³¹ Owen Cantrell, "'To Stand Shoulder to Shoulder and Heart to Heart': Authenticity, Community, and Folk Music in the Recent Work of Bruce Springsteen" in *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture* ed. William Wolff (New York: Routledge, 2017), 153; Spencer Allen, "'There's a New World Coming': The Eschatology of Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25, no. 2 (2014), 203.

³² Charles Hirschman, "America's Melting Pot Reconsidered," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983), 397.

dividing society into saints and sinners.³³ Springsteen evokes the religious ideas of saints and sinners, good and evil, to reframe the issue: rather than an in-group and an out-group, he envisions just one group—a diverse group to be sure—that travels a common trajectory and thus must coexist. In this respect, the song expands on a frequent exclamation Springsteen made in the mid-1980s in introducing “Born to Run”: “Nobody wins unless everybody wins!”³⁴ Expressing the idea of success as something that all must share by referencing antecedents that pointedly divide society makes the notion of collectivity that much more emphatic. The device of correction reminds listeners to think critically about the tradition even as they appreciate it.

Fans may think of Springsteen’s involvement with the folk tradition as something that developed in recent years, but it dates to the late 1970s and early 1980s when Springsteen’s emerging political awareness coincided, according to Garman, with his “expanding interest in classic country and traditional folk music.”³⁵ It is unclear, however, if political engagement led to exploration of these genres, in which musicians tackle social issues, or vice versa. Garman pinpoints the Three Mile Island accident in March of 1979 as the seminal event in Springsteen’s political awakening. Whether or not a causal link exists, a correlation certainly does, and folk provides an ideal medium in which to explore the cultural forces shaping the lives of his characters, a theme that surfaces in some songs on *The River* and that pervades *Nebraska*. Before the recording

³³ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1997), 1-2.

³⁴ Jim Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* (New York: Harper Perennial 1998), 12.

³⁵ Garman, *A Race of Singers*, 202.

of "The River," Springsteen had listened to the music of Hank Williams and, in November 1980, Springsteen received a copy of Joe Klein's *Woody Guthrie: A Life*.³⁶ This book marked Springsteen's full initiation into the American folk tradition and helped shape the songs on *Nebraska*.

In "The River," recorded in July or August of 1979, Springsteen creates a story from the perspective of one individual meant to speak to broader, universal truths. The song's stark lyrics and melancholy folk-ballad melody create a timeless feel, while the story draws inspiration from Springsteen's sister's life. Though the narrative is biographical, it also alludes to Hank Williams' "Long Gone Lonesome Blues:"³⁷

Williams:

I went down to the river to watch the fish swim by;
But I got to the river so lonesome I wanted to die, Oh Lord!
And then I jumped in the river, but the doggone river was
dry.
She's long gone, and now I'm lonesome blue

Springsteen:

Is a dream a lie if it don't come true
Or is it something worse
That sends me down to the river
Though I know the river is dry

³⁶ Dave Marsh, *Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts: The Definitive Biography, 1972-2003* (New York: Routledge 2004), 210.

³⁷ Garman, *A Race of Singers*, 203.

Springsteen's tale lacks the dark humor of the failed suicide attempt described by Williams, making his reference another example of correction, since Springsteen's river, when dry, constitutes both a symbol of lost hopes and a reminder of a happier past—a combination both comforting and tragic. The change in tone from dark comedy to genuine pathos exemplifies the aspect of correction that involves frustrated expectations.³⁸ The verbal echoes ("down to the river"; "river was dry") are specific enough to evoke Williams's song, and listeners who get the reference are rewarded with deeper insight into the Springsteen song's male character, who implicitly rejects the exit suicide could offer. Springsteen's character still has a connection to his partner, while in Williams's song "she's long gone." At the end of the Springsteen song, the woman remains present, as the line "down to the river we ride" affirms. Despite great adversity, Springsteen's character will persevere. The possibility of a very different outcome that the Williams reference implies adds to the understanding of the possibilities facing Springsteen's character.

On *Nebraska*, connection to the folk tradition comes in yet another form, one that is organic to the album's creation. Hoping to speed up the recording process in the studio, Springsteen made a demo of the album at home by taping himself singing the songs accompanied only by an acoustic guitar. In the studio, it proved impossible to create as appropriate a backdrop for those songs as the extemporaneous feel Springsteen achieved in his home recordings, complete with occasional creaking of his chair.³⁹ This

³⁸ Heather van Tress, *Poetic Memory: Allusion in the Poetry of Callimachus and the Metamorphoses of Ovid* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 14.

³⁹ Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 341.

circumstance comes as no surprise because, at its heart, *Nebraska* is a folk album and the home recordings perfectly capture the folk process. Springsteen's recordings evoke the work of ethnomusicologists who preserve traditional music through field recordings.⁴⁰

Steven Van Zandt recognized immediacy as the key aspect of the *Nebraska* recordings, and he advised Springsteen not to try to improve on the home demos: "This is going to sound odd, but it should be released as it is – the fact that you didn't intend to release it makes it the most intimate record you'll ever do."⁴¹ Indeed, folk music lacks mediation between singer and audience. As Bob Dylan discovered, electric amplification disrupted the folk experience by increasing the distance between artist and listeners and detracting from the 'natural' relationship with the audience.⁴² McDonald writes that folk, in its pure form, represents "a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people."⁴³ These basic tenets define *Nebraska*.

The lyrics, too, contain folk elements. A key example is the repeated use of casual reference, in which language recalls antecedents in general without pointing to a particular locus. For instance, in the title song, Springsteen addresses the listener as "sir" four times, punctuating the track with reminders that the narrator

⁴⁰ Garman, *Race of Singers*, 88.

⁴¹ David Burke, *Heart of Darkness: Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska* (London: Cherry Red Books, 2011), 61.

⁴² Lee Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star* (Boston: Polity Books, 2007), 76.

⁴³ Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture" in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: MacMillan, 1957), 60.

is of a lower status.⁴⁴ Parallels can be found in folk songs from the Ozarks. “Sugar Hill” uses “sir” in the same way: “Kind stranger, if you’ll listen, sir, my name is Ransom Bill / I got my reputation, sir, way out on Sugar Hill.”⁴⁵ Characteristic of casual reference, however, the allusion does not depend on the listener recognizing a specific antecedent but serves to evoke an atmosphere.⁴⁶ Springsteen also uses non-standard syntax – “me and her” – which marks the narrator as lacking in formal education and thus being from the “common people.”⁴⁷ Indeed, *Nebraska* contains numerous dialect forms identified as Appalachian English, including the contractions of “would” and “than” (e.g. “soul’d” in “Nebraska,” “dog’d” in “Reason to Believe,” and “more’n” in “Johnny 99”), the personal dative (“we had us” in “Nebraska”), and plural subjects with singular verbs (“it’s just winners” in “Atlantic City”).⁴⁸ Casual references combined with dialect forms situate *Nebraska* in the folk genre, as surely as does the sound of the recording.

⁴⁴ See Alan Rauch, “Bruce Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue,” *American Studies* 29 (1988), 35.

⁴⁵ Complete lyrics and a recording can be found at <http://scipio.uark.edu/cdm/ref/collection/OzarkFolkSong/id/3048>. Other examples include “When I left Old Ireland” (“When I left old Ireland, I resolved to see the world, sir”; <http://scipio.uark.edu/cdm/ref/collection/OzarkFolkSong/id/1583>) and “Darby Ram” (“Fill my Darby Ram, sir”; <http://scipio.uark.edu/cdm/ref/collection/OzarkFolkSong/id/690>). All retrieved on July 2, 2016.

⁴⁶ Thomas, “Virgil,” 175.

⁴⁷ Norm Cohen, *Folk Music: A Regional Exploration* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), xxii.

⁴⁸ Donna Christian, “Variation and Change in Geographically Isolated Communities: Appalachian English and Ozark English.” Research Technical Report BNS-8208916 (Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1984), 89, 184.

The roots of the *Seeger Sessions* appear already in “The River” and in the songs of *Nebraska*. In its earliest stages, as in its full realization, Springsteen’s engagement with the folk tradition leads the audience through a network of intertexts. These allusions form threads of connection that anchor Springsteen’s originality within a tradition. Springsteen selects from several types of reference—single reference, multiple reference, correction, and casual reference—depending on the relationship his composition has to its antecedents. Listeners who recognize these intertexts gain insight not only into Springsteen’s work but also a fresh perspective on the songs his work is modeled on thanks to the commentary offered by Springsteen’s lyrics.

The question remains, however: how consciously does Springsteen employ these techniques? Has he internalized the lyrics of his predecessors to such an extent that they organically seep through in his compositions? While Springsteen tends not to comment on his lyric writing, he describes in *Born to Run* (2016) the effect of originality within prescribed limits—not in terms of lyrics but of musical solos. One of the book’s final chapters eulogizes Clarence Clemons, the E Street Band’s iconic saxophone player. Of Clarence’s solos, he says, “The solos themselves are beautiful. They’re simple, elegant I suppose, but they’re not going to win us any blue ribbons at Berklee College of Music unless you understand how difficult it is to create within a framework of limits something slightly new under the sun.”⁴⁹ In this way, Springsteen acknowledges the skill required to create within the limits of a tradition and the impact this type of creation can have.

⁴⁹ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 482.