
BOSS

The Biannual
Online-Journal of
Springsteen Studies

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Springsteen Studies

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Mission Statement

BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies aims to publish scholarly, peer-reviewed essays pertaining to Bruce Springsteen. This open-access journal seeks to encourage consideration of Springsteen's body of work primarily through the political, economic, and socio-cultural factors that have influenced his music and shaped its reception. *BOSS* welcomes broad interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to Springsteen's songwriting and performance. The journal aims to secure a place for Springsteen Studies in the contemporary academy.

Submission Guidelines

The editors of *BOSS* welcome submissions of articles that are rigorously researched and provide original, analytical approaches to Springsteen's songwriting, performance, and fan community. Inter- and cross-disciplinary works, as well as studies that conform to specific disciplinary perspectives, are welcome. Suggested length of submission is between 15 and 25 pages.

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“Seeds Blowin’ Up the Highway in the South Wind”: Woody Guthrie’s Angry Sons and Daughters

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Abstract

Both anger and hope drive Woody Guthrie’s protest songs. Lyrics like “This Land Is Your Land” offer a hopefully angry voice that continues to be heard in the work of contemporary American singer-songwriters. This essay analyzes the ways in which Guthrie’s voice and vision continue to inform the songs of Bruce Springsteen, Steve Earle, Patty Griffin, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, and Mary Gauthier. By bringing Guthrie’s hopeful anger that insists on justice and mercy and precludes sentimentality, hostility, and nihilism into conversation with the artists who continue his legacy of activism, this paper looks to the “Seeds” Guthrie sowed.

In November 2009, at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 25th Anniversary Concert, Bruce Springsteen opened his set with an astute and angry commentary and then introduced the perpetually enraged Tom Morello before launching into a blistering version of “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” just one of many Springsteen songs that depend upon the work of Woody Guthrie. “If you pick up the newspaper, you see millions of people out of work; you see a blood fight over decent health care for our citizens, and you see people struggling to hold on to their homes,” Springsteen said: “If Woody Guthrie were alive today, he’d have a lot to write about: high times on Wall Street and hard times on Main Street.” Relatedly, when David Rawlings performs “I Hear Them All,” with or without

¹ Copyright © Roxanne Harde, 2018. Work on this article was supported by Fulbright Canada, for which I am grateful. I also want to thank the peer reviewers, whose comments helped make it stronger. Address correspondence to rharde@ualberta.ca.

Gillian Welch, he brings Guthrie's legacy into the midst of this song about social justice. Written by Rawlings and Ketch Secor, and recorded by The David Rawlings Machine, "I Hear Them All" offers that particularly Guthrian combination of hope and anger as it hears "the crying of the hungry" alongside "destructive power prevailing" as well as "the crooked wits of tyrants" against "the rattle of the shackle." On stage, Rawlings and Welch move from the final verse—which demands absolute egalitarianism with everybody taking their place at the table—into "This Land Is Your Land."² Moreover, they sing the verses that Pete Seeger insisted on singing with Springsteen at Seeger's ninetieth birthday party, the verses "that get left out," as Seeger noted, "about private property and the relief office." After their Guthrie interlude, Welch and Rawlings return to the chorus of "I Hear Them All," requiring that the audience hear the hungry as they stand outside the welfare office, and interrogate those who claim ownership of this land.

On the one hand, Springsteen is right that Guthrie would have a lot to say about the 1% enjoying high times and the 99% living with continual hard times; on the other hand, Guthrie is still having his say. His influence continues to be felt as often as his songs are still heard, as long as singer-songwriters continue to hear his voice and speak his language which comes, as Guthrie notes in his poem "Voice," from listening to the voices that are not heard in the dominant discourse. Hearing those voices inspired Guthrie to write dozens of angry, yet hopeful, protest songs, and his influence runs like a train through American music. "Bound for Glory"

² On the album, *A Friend of a Friend* (2009), Rawlings does not include "This Land Is Your Land," in the recorded version of "I Hear Them All," but he does tack a different protest song onto the track "Method Acting," ending it with a subdued version of Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer."

informs Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams," although the latter wrote of a far more inclusive train. And, Guthrie's "You Know the Night" informs the words and theme of "You Love the Thunder," by Jackson Browne, who set Guthrie's song to music and recorded it for the compilation album *Note of Hope*. Similarly, Jon Latham, a young Nashville singer-songwriter, who invokes everyone from Steve Earle and Ernest Hemingway to Charley Rich and Alan Ginsburg in his songs, draws from Guthrie's "Way Over Yonder in a Minor Key" to catalogue his own youthful scrapes and conclude, in "Major Key," that "all I needed was a major key." This essay examines some of the ways in which Guthrie's voice and vision inform and shape the criticism and the questions leveled by Springsteen and a few other American singer-songwriters as they consider the state of the union. I have no interest in cataloguing direct references to Guthrie's lyrics, nor am I focused on shaded borrowings of topics and themes. Rather, this paper analyzes songs driven by the hopeful anger so evident throughout Guthrie's oeuvre.

Anger is, of course, the emotive force necessary for protest and resistance; in *Cold Anger*, Mary Beth Rogers looks at the Industrial Areas Foundations whose organizations help "ordinary men and women awaken to their power to become 'we, the people'." This work fosters an "anger that seethes at the injustices of life and transforms itself into a compassion for those hurt by life" and affords "a new kind of intervention in politics by working poor people who incorporate their religious values into a struggle for power and visibility." Rogers calls it an "anger rooted in direct experience and held in collective memory. It is the kind of anger that can energize a democracy – because it can lead to the first step

in changing politics.”³ However, as Sara Ahmed contends “Hope is crucial to the act of protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible.”⁴ The best protest songs, those with the most potential to move their listeners to action, combine justified anger with hope and look to change and a better future. Noting that hopeful anger has been both a sacred and a secular tradition from the Stoic philosophers through the Christian tradition, James Gilman connects it to a covenantal justice that inspires us “to care for victims of injustice,” insists on mercy, and precludes sentimentality, hostility, and nihilism.⁵ In what follows, I trace the threads of hopeful anger woven through Woody Guthrie’s songs and those of the singer-songwriters, the sons and daughters, who continue his legacy and sing for a better America. I begin with a reading of Springsteen’s most political album, then trace Guthrie’s ideas about race and veterans in work by Patty Griffin and Mary Gauthier, and conclude with analyses of several lyrics that consider poverty and offer a counter-discourse to the social codes surrounding the economy.

“Darlin’ we’ll be alright”: Bruce Springsteen, Politics, and *Wrecking Ball*

On his final album, *A More Perfect Union* (2012), Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie’s friend and collaborator, included Springsteen on “God’s Counting on Me; God’s Counting on You,” a song that

³ Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger* (Denton, University of North Texas Press, 1990), 2, 3, 9, 10.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 184.

⁵ James E. Gilman, *Fidelity of Heart: An Ethic of Christian Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 117, 127.

harkens to Guthrie's "God's Promise." Both lyrics look to the goodness of creation and human responsibility. And both offer the conjoined discourse of hope and anger so often found in protest songs. Seeger begins his song with a gentle and general comment on the state of the country: "Things are not what they should be / God's counting on me / God's counting on you." Following Seeger and the chorus, "Hoping we'll all pull through," Springsteen sings, "It's time to turn things around / Trickle up, not trickle down." The song goes on to list several social and environmental concerns, but I find it telling that Seeger assigns the verse about the American economy to Springsteen. If "trickle down" is the economic theory that financial benefits accorded to big businesses and wealthy investors will pass down to profit smaller businesses and consumers, then what exactly do Springsteen and Seeger think will trickle up? I suggest that their hopeful anger is meant to move both upwards and outwards, politicizing their listeners along the way.

Like Guthrie, Seeger and Springsteen have spent their careers fostering this sort of anger, a hopeful anger that, as Rogers describes it, encourages listeners to enter "politics at the community level [and to] view politics as a long-term process to build relationships, new institutions, and humane communities."⁶ *Wrecking Ball* (2012) stands as Springsteen's most extended call to politics, a term that in this case covers both the party politics he demonstrated through several federal elections and politics, the way Engin Isin describes it, as that moment when an established rank—for example, the rich over the poor, the Christian over the Muslim, the white over the black, the male over the female—is challenged or subverted. Becoming political, Isin suggests, is that

⁶ Rogers, *Cold Anger*, 2.

“moment when freedom becomes responsibility and obligation becomes a right, and involves arduous work upon oneself and others.”⁷ Rather than coming as a “function of the fact that it is useful to assemble,” or “of the fact that assemblies are held for the sake of the good management of common business,” politics, Jacques Rancière points out, “is a function of the fact that a wrong exists, an injustice that needs to be addressed.”⁸ Politics, in short, is born of hopeful anger. If politics is that thing we do as citizens as we make collective decisions, including activism on behalf of specific issues or causes, then Springsteen has enacted politics for decades, as made evident in part by his early affiliations with and work for No Nukes, Amnesty International, the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, and Musicians United for Safe Energy. Moreover, while his early albums define him as a voice *of and from* the working class, he has long defined himself as a voice *for* the American working class.⁹ In a 2004 interview with *Rolling Stone*, reflecting on what it means to be an American, Springsteen described “issues that go right to the heart of the spiritual life of the

⁷ Engin F. Isin, *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 276.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, Translated by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), 97.

⁹ Reading the ways in which Springsteen intervenes in American politics in his last four studio albums, Ian Collinson contends that even though Springsteen has charted the disparities in American society for most of his career, he has been aligned and aware, rather than active and committed. Collinson puts him on the side of those “who map the political environment of their time and place,” instead of the “committed songwriters who try to change it.” While Collinson’s categories are useful, it seems to me that any artist with the kind of influence Springsteen wields can engender change simply by being explicit and persuasive about his political alignments (Ian Collinson, “‘A Land of hope and dreams’?: Bruce Springsteen and America’s Political Landscape from *The Rising* to *Wrecking Ball*,” *Social Alternative* 33, no. 1 (2014), 71).

nation," contending that the United States "can move toward greater economic justice for all of our citizens, or we cannot. I think we can move toward a sane, responsible foreign policy, or we cannot." These principles of citizenship, he argues "cannot be abandoned and [are] worth fighting and fighting and fighting for."¹⁰ In a 2010 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Springsteen focused on citizenship and the disadvantaged and oppressed:

Over the years I've tried to think long and hard about what it means to be American. ... I've tried to write songs that speak to our pride and criticize our failures. ... I've always tried to ask hard questions. Why is it that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens?¹¹

As I write in 2018, that promise seems to be in the wind, and Springsteen's increasing reliance on artists like Tom Morello to carry the torch indicates both his age and the country's need for more hopefully angry songwriters. However, music always exists in the now, and *Wrecking Ball* continues to stand as *the* album that demands change.

The most politically resonant song on *Wrecking Ball* is one that perpetually speaks to the nation's pride, criticizes its failures, and asks hard questions. "Jack of All Trades" offers a speaker very like the one in Guthrie's "I Aint Got No Home," a man unemployed and deeply, ploddingly depressed, offering a litany of menial tasks he will take on in order to provide for his family. Both speakers offer an abiding hope, one vested in the values of home and family,

¹⁰ Bruce Springsteen interview with Jann S. Wenner, "We've Been Misled: Springsteen Talks about His Conscience, and the Nature of an Artist and His Audience," *Rolling Stone* 959, October 14, 2004, 76.

¹¹ Bruce Springsteen, "Chords for Change," *New York Times*, August 5, 2004.

a solid work ethic, the American dream. But both also offer a bitter anger directed towards the rich and powerful. Guthrie's speaker points out, "Rich man took my home and drove me from my door," and moves on. But Springsteen's considers vengeance, right before the final sad chorus: "If I had me a gun, I'd find the bastards and shoot 'em on sight / I'm a jack of all trades, we'll be all right." Where does that anger come from so suddenly? It's been there for a long time and certainly throughout the album to that point. Like Guthrie's greedy bankers of the 1930s, Springsteen looked to the responsibility of those in the first decade of this century: "The genesis of the record was after 2008, when we had the huge financial crisis in the States" Springsteen noted, "People lost their homes ... and nobody went to jail. Nobody was responsible. ... a basic theft had occurred that struck at the heart of what the entire American idea was about. It was a complete disregard of history, of context, of community."¹² The first song on *Wrecking Ball*, the hopefully ironic "We Take Care of Our Own," juxtaposes the way things are—the powerful and rich ignoring the common person, good hearts turned to stone, no help as the cavalry stays home—with the way they should be, with the title repeated a dozen times.¹³ The following song, "Easy Money," functions like a rollicking "Atlantic City," as the speaker heads out on the town with his date and a 38 Smith & Wesson, "looking for easy money" after noting that "there's nothing to it mister / You won't hear a sound / When

¹² Quoted in: Eric Alterman, "Springsteen's Political Voice." *The Nation*, April 30, 2012, 150.

¹³ The cavalry, which he means, and Calvary, which he sings in the song, switch is Springsteen's most famous, and somewhat Freudian, misnomer/mispronunciation. Taken together, they imply that America has been abandoned by all its saviors.

your whole world comes tumbling down." The song immediately following "Jack of All Trades" foregrounds anger; "Death to My Hometown" works to "send the robber barons straight to hell," after figuring America as under attack by Wall Street. It begins with two verses listing and denying the trappings of war, "No bombs fell from the sky, / No blood soaked the ground . . . But just as sure as the hand of God / They brought death to my hometown." After this condemnation, "This Depression" offers a speaker like that in "Jack of All Trades" who looks to his partner for heart and hope. The title track follows, and in an *Esquire* article describing Springsteen's 2012 tour, Tom Chiarella talks about watching the E Street Band perform "Wrecking Ball." Chiarella was standing beside a man on crutches who habitually begged for and received concert tickets, and he asked "the Mooch" what he thought the song was all about and received this answer: "Tear it all down. That's what he's saying. . . . Whole fucking city, whole country. Just clear it out. . . . A wrecking ball makes a hell of a mess."¹⁴ The album ends with a song that builds it all back up, though. Sounding a lot like an Irish jig, "American Land" places a good deal of pride in the many peoples who came and shaped the nation, then it turns around and critiques America's growing resistance to and distrust of immigrants.

Eric Alterman correctly describes the "driving force of the album" as an "un-Obama-like anger at the increasing injustice of the American economic system."¹⁵ Springsteen was angry in 2008 when the economy tanked, and he remained angry, the controlled cold anger that Rogers describes, an anger that drives the protests

¹⁴ Tom Chiarella, "The Last Protest Singer," *Esquire*, November 13, 2012.

¹⁵ Alterman, "Springsteen's Political Voice," 15.

of *Wrecking Ball*. However, it's more than anger, too. In "Jack of All Trades," the lines following the one about shooting down the bastards responsible for all this misery, the lines that end the song, speak both to Protestant frugality and to a new way of thinking about politics and protests: "You take the old, you make it new / I'm a jack of all trades, we'll be alright." Noting that some emotions are better at motivating certain political actions than others, in a study of anger and hope-driven politics, Victoria Henderson argues that, "If anger is the dominant emotional response to perceptions of injustice ... and if it can fortify resolve to endure in the struggle for accountability, then its displacement in favor of a politics of hope must be challenged."¹⁶ I would argue that both are necessary, and, moreover, that an abiding faith bolsters the hope that runs through *Wrecking Ball*. "Jack of All Trades" begins with the handyman's litany of the things he will do, mowing lawns, cleaning gutters, mending roofs, grateful for "the work that God provides / I'm a jack of all trades, honey we'll be all right." So, religious faith comes into play, certainly, on this song and others, such as the hymn-like "Rocky Ground," which features gospel singer Michelle Moore as well as overtly religious lyrics.¹⁷

However, the faith that makes both hope and anger deeper and more meaningful is that complex of emotion and belief that

¹⁶ Victoria L. Henderson, "Is There Hope for Anger? The Politics of Spatializing and (Re)producing an Emotion," *Emotion, Space, and Society* 1, no.1 (2008), 28.

¹⁷ In other readings of the religious connotations of this album, Jacqueline Lapsley compares Springsteen's public witnessing of oppressions to that in Psalm 73, and Spencer Allen examines its eschatological desires, cited below. Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "'Bring on your Wrecking Ball': Psalm 73 and Public Witness," *Theology Today* 70, no. 1 (2013): 62-68; Spencer L. Allen, "'There's a New World Coming': The Eschatology of Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 202-214.

theologian-theorists like Wilfred Cantwell Smith and James Fowler describe as a way of “finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives.”¹⁸ Faith might be religious or it might not, as Smith points out, but it is always an orientation of human response to the world, to experiences, to others, which makes it, “a quality of the person, not of the system.” Faith comes through as the jack of all trades settles in to work as a carpenter or mason, an itinerant agricultural worker or mechanic, and insists on a positive outlook (if not outcome): “I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right.” At its best, Smith notes, faith takes the “form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service” and enables one to find “meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event.”¹⁹ Faith, then, looks a lot like Springsteen’s “Jack of All Trades”; after the storm, the world can change: “And we’ll start caring for each other like Jesus said that we might / I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right.” In Fowler’s terms, though, faith also looks a lot like anger at the world’s various injustices: faith is a state of ultimate concern, a “serious business [involving] how we make our life wagers, [shaping] the ways we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties.”²⁰ “It is through the truthful exercising of the best of human qualities—respect for others, honesty about ourselves, faith in our ideals—that we come to life in God’s eyes,” Springsteen writes, “It is how our soul, as a nation and as individuals, is revealed. Our American government has strayed too

¹⁸ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 4.

¹⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12.

²⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 5.

far from American values.”²¹ His speaker in “Jack of All Trades” reifies those foundational values.

As “Jack of All Trades” winds towards the moment when the speaker longs for a gun and vengeance, he pauses over America’s current economic crisis, looking to the bankers who continue to accumulate wealth as the working class moves deeper into debt, and notes that this crisis is cyclical, happening repeatedly in the course of any American’s lifetime. This verse draws on the term, ‘you can bet your life,’ but inverts it, making sure that listeners understand that it’s their lives and livelihoods at stake. *They’ll bet your life* forefronts the anger over this particular type of social injustice, but the next few lines add that stoic hope through the speaker’s faith in an America that has the potential to perpetually rejuvenate. The song ends with a holstered gun—a marked contrast to the gunshot ending “Death To My Hometown”—as the speaker uses the inclusive “we” to build a community that stands, prays, and stays together. The song’s protest offers an angry hope that affords a patient politics; this man has settled in for the long haul, as had Springsteen, according to the comments on his website during Barack Obama’s second presidential campaign: “For me, President Obama is our best choice because he has a vision of the United States as a place where we are all in this together. We’re still living through very hard times but justice, equality and real freedom are not always a tide rushing in. They are more often a slow march, inch by inch, day after long day. I believe President Obama feels these days in his bones and

²¹ Springsteen, “Chords.”

has the strength to live them with us.”²² The hopeful anger that grounds and runs through *Wrecking Ball* continues to stand alongside Guthrie’s calls to activism.

“What can a poor man claim”: Guthrie, Hopeful Anger, and the Meanings of Marginalization

Woody Guthrie continually looked towards the justice and equality that Springsteen looked for in *Wrecking Ball*. And songs that are angry about injustice and oppression continue to harken to Guthrie’s work. I turn now to social marginalizations critiqued in songs that are both specific and symptomatic and follow firmly in Guthrie’s footsteps. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Patty Griffin explained to Nick Murry that “Good and Gone,” one of the more troubling songs on her newest album, *Servant of Love* (2015), “was inspired by the shooting of John Crawford in a Walmart in Ohio. I was thinking about the young man who made the phone call.”²³ In 2014, John Crawford III, an African-American man, was shot by a police officer while holding an unloaded pellet gun. Griffin refers to the man who called 911 and accused Crawford of waving a loaded gun at children in the store. Neither the caller nor the officer were charged. Griffin positions the song’s speaker as the 911 caller, depicting him as a bitter and vengeful white man looking to make a black person pay for the systemic injustices he suffers. On the one hand, there is vindictiveness, “I’m gonna make sure he’s good and dead / I’m gonna make sure he knows his place ... Wipe that smile off of his face / Find a way to lay him low / I know things that he

²² Bruce Springsteen, “A Message from Bruce,” accessed July 1, 2017: <http://brucespringsteen.net/news/2012/a-message-from-bruce>

²³ Nick Murray, “Patty Griffin on How Police Shooting, ‘Darkness’ Led to New Album,” *Rolling Stone*, October 2, 2015.

don't know." On the other hand, there are the reasons that underlie a good deal of racially-motivated violence, the things this speaker knows. Griffin outlines this man's disenfranchisement, as he juxtaposes his poverty against the wealth he sees around him and understands that he's simply a pawn in games he does not have the power to play autonomously. Griffin has him describe his horrific action as a distracting fire, pulling attention away from all he has lost and likening it to a burning cross. Turning to the widespread racism running through American culture, he notes the ease of displacing his frustration and anger onto someone else, of finding a victim that he can break, and Griffin thus implicates society at large in this judicially-endorsed murder. Gilman notes that "habits of remembrance and responsibility provide two ingredients, identity and moral orientation."²⁴ "Good and Gone" stands as a marker, insisting that Crawford's death stay in society's purview, insisting that society take responsibility alongside the caller, and insisting on justice.

Guthrie made many similar implications and calls for justice. In a discussion of Guthrie's song "Old Man Trump," Will Kaufman touches on several songs Guthrie wrote about racially-motivated crimes, and notes that he had "learned along the way that the North held no special claim to racial enlightenment."²⁵ If that song sees America's national balladeer rage against the racist foundations of the Trump real estate empire, calling out the father of the current president for stirring up "racial hate ... in that bloodpot of human hearts" with his refusal to rent to African-

²⁴ Gilman, *Fidelity of Heart*, 126.

²⁵ Will Kaufman, "Woody Guthrie, 'Old Man Trump' and a Real Estate Empire's Racist Foundations," *The Conversation*, January 21 2016.

Americans, Guthrie's "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son" adumbrates "Good and Gone" by situating the speaker, and the audience, in the midst of a particular tragedy. Where Griffin writes from the stance of the person who precipitates the murder, Guthrie shades his speaker through indeterminate positions: he observes, but does he participate in the lynching? He might have done; Guthrie's father, Charley Guthrie, witnessed or was part of the lynching of Laura Nelson and her teenage son, Lawrence, in 1911.²⁶ In "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son," Guthrie's speaker hears the cry of Nelson's husband, who was arrested and convicted later. The speaker describes the imprisoned man's sorrowful lament and repeats his plea, "don't kill my baby and my son." The speaker then layers anger over the sorrow, and connects that anger to social change: "that long, lonesome cry shook the whole wide world / And it come from the cell of the jail." Where Griffin keeps the whole of "Good and Gone" in the voice of the 911 caller/perpetrator, Guthrie switches voices from the past, from the time of his father and the lynching, to the present and a speaker who discusses the infamous postcard made from a photograph of the lynched bodies, a picture of the Canadian River Bridge with "Three bodies hanging to swing in the wind, / A mother and two sons they'd lynched." If Guthrie saw the postcard, he knew that there were only two bodies, the mother and her teenage son. His description of three bodies either means that he did not see the postcard, misremembered it, or that he, like so many others, remained curious about the fate of Nelson's nursing infant, who had been imprisoned with her. But if the verses move from speakers affected by this crime through a good deal of the century, the choruses remain in the voice of

²⁶ Rob Collins, "Picture of Horror," *Oklahoma Gazette*, May 25, 2011.

Nelson's husband, who follows his plea for the lives of his family with the offer of his life for theirs. Guthrie is far more likely to use the word baby to denote a child than a woman, so this song seems as preoccupied with the fate of the Nelson infant as are the reporters and scholars who discuss the case.

Gilman examines the hopeful anger that comes from witnessing injustice which then inspires "care and compassion for the victim of injustice in order to alleviate her suffering and reproof for the unjust offender." If anger is an appropriate response to social evils, like prejudice, oppression, and violence, and hopeful anger, "seeks transformation and redemption," then Griffin's angry reaction to the killing of John Crawford led her to the fitting construction of a racist speaker who somehow manages to make Griffin's audience hate his actions but nevertheless understand the social conditions that have made him so hateful.²⁷ And therein lies the hope, the possibility for transformation and redemption. The affective positions of Guthrie's lyrics, moving from the horrified witness to the pleading father to an outraged present-day speaker offer this same type of anger that pushes for justice. That witness, given Charley Guthrie's involvement in the murders on the bridge, also implicates the dominant culture in the way of Griffin's underprivileged speaker. Guthrie's present-day speaker simply moves the murder of the baby, whether mother or infant or both, into the here and now, and alongside his other songs about racism and poverty, like "Old Man Trump," to comment on racially-motivated oppressions.

As a less obvious marginalized group, veterans often seem to fall through the social networks that should be supporting them,

²⁷ Gilman, *Fidelity of Heart*, 116, 117.

though not in American song. In 2003, the punk band Anti-Flag set music to Guthrie's "Post War Breakout," a relentlessly frenetic poem (even before the band got hold of it), spoken in the voice of a soldier or soldiers struggling with the return to civilian life. The lyric first establishes the speaker's past and present: "I'ma post war breakdown ... And a post war hero." This hero then describes the mental torture he continues to suffer, calling himself a "skitzoe ... nerve case ... psykoe pathy." After noting the heroism that earned him a medal, he begins to describe the poverty of his life as a veteran, and how society sees him as a hobo, drifter, and insane raver, which makes him an "Ex G.I. for sure sure." Guthrie's poem works to give voice to people who are often silenced, to make their plight known, and to inspire angry social reactions that hopefully will lead to the support they deserve.

In terms of angry songs about veterans, Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." seems an obvious choice for comparison with Guthrie's. The song makes palpable the speaker's frustration with a failing economy and the failure of Veterans Affairs to help him deal with his financial and emotional problem. And the chorus, a much-misused anthem, offers Springsteen's bitterest commentary on the American dream. Similarly, Griffin's "Not a Bad Man" echoes the loss felt by Guthrie's "Post War Breakout" speaker. From the album, *American Kid* (2013), the title of which comes from this song, "Not a Bad Man" features the voice of a deeply troubled veteran who both regrets and justifies his actions: "Got some pills to get my head right / But they don't work so well / So I drank a little more tonight." The chorus affirms "I am not a bad man / Just an American kid," thereby also calling into question the American dream and the ways in which the country treats its veterans.

However, the better song in which to trace Guthrie's influence is Mary Gauthier's "Soldiering On." The lead song on her album *Rifles & Rosary Beads* (2018) brings the same emotive force found in Guthrie's song, combining the desolation at the core of Griffin's lyrics and the resentment that drives Springsteen's into a doggedly hopeful anger.

"Soldiering On" differs from these songs in its focus on service. Co-written by former Marine Jennifer Marino, every verse looks to the reasons people join the military: commitment to country and humanity, to the mission and everything the uniform stands for. And each verse emphasizes the speaker/soldier's understanding that she or he looks to the good of the many instead of the individual. The song begins, "I was bound to something bigger / And more important than a single human life," and stresses that soldiers fight not for themselves but for each other. At various points, the speaker repeats that she does not see her service as a sacrifice, and this call to serve elevates the song and keeps it hopeful. Anger underscores the lines that end each verse as Gauthier emphasizes that "what saves you in the battle / Can kill you at home." And while the final line of each verse returns to the titular call to stoicism and duty, the bridge makes an angry call for help as it repeats the message society gives its veterans, that "A soldier is a cog inside a wheel," and their feelings do not matter as they're told to shut up and "suck up" their pain. As Gauthier's restates that everything that keeps a soldier alive during duty works to kill them when they are decommissioned, this song, like "Post War Breakout," angrily affirms that sucking it up does not work for victims of trauma, and that shutting down cannot be sustained. Hope comes through in the song as the soldier soldiers

on, but it also comes through the NGO project, SongWritingWith: Soldiers, which gave life to the song and gives renewed life to many veterans by putting them in workshops with people like Gauthier and offering them a forum in which to begin exploring their experiences and expressing their reaction.

“To feed the ones who starve”: Hopeful Anger and Poverty

Throughout his too-short career, Woody Guthrie offered a counter discourse that challenged the truth, morality, and meaning offered by the dominant American economic discourse—one suspects he would have loved the Occupy Wall Street movement. Guthrie rejected the norms that made individualism good and socialism bad, and by using the medium of song, folk song, no less, he subverted and sidestepped the marginalization that so often comes to that lone voice. In the terms of Foucauldian analysis, Guthrie responded to the challenges of poverty with multiple narratives and a multi-vocality that honored those narratives and voices that have been silenced and that analysed the mechanics of power that caused that silencing. His speakers are farmers blown out in the dustbowl storms, laborers with dirty overalls, union organizers trying to support working people, hobos hiding from the police, soldiers suffering or wreaking destruction, and the list goes on.

In their attention to crafting multiple voices and the details of multiple lives, the songs of Gillian Welch and David Rawlings seem predicated upon Guthrie's. “I Hear Them All,” as I've noted, listens to multiple voices and brings them to the table through the representation of their holy men and prophets. That Rawlings follows that verse with several from “This Land Is Your Land”

aligns Guthrie with those prophets even as it insists that the voices Guthrie heard be heard again and again. “Heard reflections, recollections, seen faces in memory,” Guthrie writes in “Voice”: “Heard voices untangle their words before me / And I knew by the feeling I felt that here was my voice.” Those multiple voices comprise much of the work of Welch and Rawlings, for example “Miner’s Refrain” from *Hell Among the Yearlings* (1998) or “Hard Times” from *The Harrow and the Harvest* (2011). “Annabelle,” the second track on their first album, *Revival* (1996), harkens to Guthrie’s running commentary on the Great Depression as the speaker describes the handful of dust her family gets from the crops planted on their leased land. For Guthrie, there was never a casual acceptance of America’s reality, and Welch’s speaker iterates that questioning spirit in the chorus: “We cannot have all things to please us / No matter how we try / Until we’ve all gone to Jesus / We can only wonder why.” While the chorus gestures towards that traditional blend of passive acceptance and Christian consolation in the face of human suffering, its final line counters with a continued questioning. The song moves into its focal point, the daughter named Annabelle, the apple of the speaker’s eye and the reason for continual striving to give her a better life, but it ends with the speaker seeing the end of a sorrowful life as simply ended—there’s no going home to Jesus for her—and Annabelle is dead, “She’s only got these words on a stone.” The words of the chorus circle back here, and stand as empty consolation in the face of overwhelming loss. However, this loss also invokes the issues and implications of poverty. The song names the Alabama Trust as the landholder and thereby pushes the speaker’s wondering into an economic analysis that questions why poor children die, a

questioning that brings to light the relationships between power and poverty. Welch's remarkable gift for a "sad song," her ability to give the poor names and narratives, offers a counter discourse to official narratives of poverty and statistics that suggest the infant mortality rate is so high among the poor because they do not know how to care for children.

Turning to issues of personal responsibility, Guthrie's "we" and "us" underlie the humor in "Christ for President," because that's who "waste[s] enough / To feed the ones who starve," and who builds up our society only to "shoot it down with wars." Steve Earle has long drawn on Guthrie, calling him to come back to us in "Christmas in Washington" and offering a Guthrie vision of reform in "The Revolution Starts . . . Now." The song is an anthem of hope that emphasizes the relationship of self to state, how power relations work, and how every individual can become a mechanism for change: "In your own backyard / In your own hometown / The revolution starts now." Earle specifically challenges consumerism, asking listeners to pay attention to where they spend their money, which makes the song an agent of change, and a natural anthem for the Occupy movement. Like Guthrie, Earle invokes free speech as a revolutionary tool: "What you do and what you say / The revolution starts now." His clear, and often harsh, critiques of his nation rest on his commitment to the foundations of American society and citizens; his machine, often a bouzouki, also kills fascists. Similarly, in "God is God," Earle comments on personal responsibility and the divine, albeit without Woody's humor. "I receive the blessings," Earle sings, "That every day on Earth's another chance to get it right." In Earle's admonition that "even my money tells me it's God I need to trust," and his shifting chorus as

he affirms that no human is God, "God is God," equalizes the trend to see the discourses of religion and commerce as both truth and freedom. In his opposition to any discourse that described itself as liberatory, Foucault was right to take aim at economics.²⁸ Celebrating the marketplace as the proper outlet for free but socially beneficial expression is simply, as Guthrie and Earle see it, delusional. It's no coincidence that "God Is God" became the theme song for an Occupy protest outside Verizon's shareholder meeting. There is no disinterested side to economics, as Guthrie and Earle make clear with their call for personal responsibility. As he exhorts his audience to attend to their choices as consumers and to prioritize a divine call to social justice over the dollar, Earle emphasizes that all economic discourse needs to reveal its intersections with, investments in, influence on and from, relations of power.

Moreover, economic discourse needs to recognize the systems of exclusions that inform it, and this is where Guthrie's universal particularity, his compelling narrative, matters most. Many of the narratives that comprise much of Patty Griffin's body of work offer social critique: "Making Pies" comments on war, as does "Chief." Her Grammy-winning album *Downtown Church* (2010) conjoins gospel and social justice, and it's no surprise that she was one of Pete Seeger's choices to sing with him on his final albums, one of new material and the other a tribute to Guthrie. Griffin's "Poor Man's House," is both particular and universal and, like Guthrie's "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee)," offers a

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Translated by A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Routledge, 1972), 76-77.

shifting perspective that places the listener on both the inside and the outside of the dominant discourse, a shift that makes visible that which is regularly invisible. Guthrie's speaker is first the observer, maybe the farmer, who watches as his workers, illegal immigrants, are sent back to Mexico; he then becomes the persecuted immigrant, dying in your deserts and valleys. In "Poor Man's House," Griffin crafts the voices of children, those who live in poverty and those who do not. The poor child is comforted by a mother who "says God tends to every little skinny," and the knowledge that poverty isn't a judgment: "Daddy's been working too much for days and days and he doesn't eat . . . It isn't that he isn't strong or kind or clever." Mockery comes from another child, one who stands inside the dominant discourse and mocks this family for both their home and their marginalization. As in "Annabelle," this song refuses to settle for Christian consolation, and chooses to see how it and economic discourse are disabling. As a response to Jesus's comment that the poor are with us always and we're better off focusing on our spirits, Griffin counters with her vision of the poor in heaven, "There's nothing like poverty to get you into heaven," and then uses the terms of slavery, whips and shackles, scars and missing digits, to describe the earthly misery that enables heaven. Her bridge, accompanied by an overwhelmingly angry acoustic guitar, again shifts perspective, as the privileged child questions the habits and codes of poverty with a focus on the manual labor he or she has never experienced, and the poor child claims the chorus and reaffirms the poverty that engenders marginalization and hopelessness. By using the voices of children, Griffin asks listeners to question which sources and voices are honored and which are disqualified. Like Guthrie's

farmer and immigrant, Griffin's children insist that we see the relationships between poverty and power. This poor father is hardworking, honest, kind, and yet endlessly poor. Griffin's counter-discourse refuses to allow events and people to become statistics, to hide truth behind the official narrative. She makes the numbers back into people, and offers the realities against which statistics and headlines and stereotypes should be read.

And so too does Bruce Springsteen. In the *New York Times*, David Brooks argues that Springsteen's particularity – the detailed lives and landscapes he presents to his audience – accounts for his worldwide popularity. Beginning with childhood imaginary worlds (think of *Where the Wild Things Are*), these "paracosms," as Brooks puts it, "help us orient ourselves in reality. They are structured mental communities that help us understand the wider world." A paracosm is the reason 56,000 enraptured Italians or German sing "Born in the U.S.A." at the top of their lungs. Notably, Brooks points out that in the specifics of his own New Jersey working-class background, Springsteen "processed new issues in the language of his old tradition, and now you've got young adults filling stadiums, knowing every word to songs written 20 years before they were born, about places they'll never see." In his exhortation for writers to be like Springsteen, he calls on them to "Go deeper into your own tradition. Call more upon the geography of your own past. Be distinct and credible." Brooks might well have been describing Woody Guthrie.²⁹

Like Guthrie, Springsteen's distinctness and credibility are tied up in his ongoing commentary on the historical, social, and economic conditions that created and sustain poverty and how

²⁹ David Brooks, "The Power of the Particular," *New York Times*, July 25, 2012.

these conditions breed various forms of violence and abuse, legitimize powerlessness, and normalize the discourses of power. Eric Alterman describes a concert where Springsteen “gave a short speech on the political, social, and psychological dangers of economic inequality, in which he suggested his audience focus not on “which side of the 99 percent you’re on but which side of history you’re on.” This counter-discourse includes the creation of possibilities, of hope, even as it holds up the specific conditions and challenges that are posed by both economic conditions and the dominant discourse. If Springsteen has always invoked the ghost of Tom Joad alongside the spirit of Woody Guthrie, he has never done so with the relentlessness of *Wrecking Ball*. From the first song, which challenges American power structures to take seriously the mandate that “We Take Care of Our Own,” to the last, which reminds his fellow citizens how and why most of them live in “American Land,” the album challenges systems of exclusion. In Foucauldian terms, economics is one of the organized knowledges most prone to exclusion, particularly through the distinction between true and false discourse. And of course, the dominant discourse both presents itself as devoid of desire and masks its own will to truth in so many affirmations of its neutrality. By insisting his audience consider history, consider the social codes and economic practices that privilege only 1% of Americans, Springsteen calls them to question what has been accepted as truth.

Other songs on the album take on the disabling discourses of religious, economic, and judicial power structures, the ones Guthrie also took on: churches, banks, and cops. “Rocky Ground” calls on Jesus’s words to revise attitudes towards economic discourse, and possibly to exhort ministers, the shepherd who

should arise and lead the way. "Death to My Hometown" calls on the metaphors of war to describe exactly what financial institutions have done to the country and its citizens. "We Are Alive" calls on specific injustices, bombs in Birmingham and murdered strikers in Maryland, to tie the 99% together in a unified force.

One of the songs that interests me most, however, is a song of the worker's body. Like Guthrie, Springsteen is a writer of the body, the loving body, the active body, the procreative body, and the docile worker's body, the body ready, willing, and able to provide its labor power to a supervisory force, the body that is accumulated, distributed, managed, and subjected to the discipline of the field or factory as established by the norms of utility and efficiency. If Foucault is right in his gestures towards defining economics as a human(ist) science, then economic discourse will divide up the human body, its desires, behaviors, reproductions into units of investigation and exploitation.³⁰ As a purported discourse of truth, economics subjects that body to the techniques of power that are the prerogatives of knowledge. So, the working man's body in "Shackled and Drawn" seems, particularly alongside the rollicking melody, to be quite happy to "Pick up the rock son, carry it on," because, "Freedom son's a dirty shirt." However, even as he glorifies the American work ethic, Springsteen iterates the captivity of this working body: it's shackled, drawn, close to the grave, and trudging along because, in times like these, the "workingman pays the bill." "I have spent my life judging the distance between American reality and the American dream Springsteen said in a *Guardian* interview, "What

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 135-139.

was done to our country was wrong and unpatriotic and un-American and nobody has been held to account. . . . There is a real patriotism underneath the best of my music but it is a critical, questioning, and often angry patriotism."³¹ The speaker of "Shackled and Drawn" extends that anger, and employs the same comparison Guthrie used in "I Aint Got No Home": the gambler/banker and the workingman: "Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man is poor, / And I ain't got no home in this world anymore." In "Shackled and Drawn," Springsteen accuses both gamblers and bankers of making the worker pay for their lifestyles. While these lyrics are driven by anger, they are songs, and hope comes through the music. Both are rollicking ballads, polkas rather than waltzes. Their upbeat tempos insistently offer a counter discourse of hope that the American economy will recover along with its working class. Further, both words and music emphasize the collective, focusing on the we who work, and dance, together. Both speakers move into community with other working bodies and away from violence.

"I guess I planted some long lonesome seed": Guthrie's Seeds

In January 2017, before Donald Trump moved into the White House, Springsteen staged an intimate acoustic concert for Obama's White House staff, a gesture of deep appreciation for their work. Springsteen later credited that gig as the inspiration for his Broadway show, which began that October.³² Although he was a vocal and visual presence through Obama's presidential

³¹ Fiachra Gibbons, "Bruce Springsteen: 'What was done to my country was un-American,'" *The Guardian*, February 17, 2012

³² Daniel Kreps, "Bruce Springsteen: Intimate White House Gig Inspired New Broadway Run," *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2018.

campaigns and terms in office, and although he criticized Trump numerous times before and after the 2016 election, infamously calling him a “moron” in a September interview with *Rolling Stone*, Springsteen has largely absented himself from American politics of late. In April 2017, he sang on Joe Grushecky’s “That’s What Makes Us Great,” a song that overtly criticizes Trump, calling him a liar and a con man. Conversely, Springsteen also affirmed that his next album will be solo and not political, or topical, as he phrases it: “topical writing at the moment doesn’t hold a lot of interest to me. I really got out a lot of what I had to say in that vein on *Wrecking Ball*. I’m not driven to write any anti-Trump diatribe; that doesn’t feel necessary.” Discussing music and politics with Jon Blistein, Springsteen seemed conflicted about politics, or “getting on a soapbox” as he put it, because his audience wants him “to go deeper than politics, they want you to reach inside to their most personal selves and their deepest struggles with their daily lives and reach that place.” However, he also mused about following the example of Woody Guthrie, looking to him as the best example of a songwriter who was both political and focused on people, noting Guthrie’s songs “weren’t hollow, they weren’t one-dimensional; they were these very full character pieces about the times ... I still aspire to that, really, and if it has political implications that’s fine and if it doesn’t that’s fine too.”³³

On the one hand, Springsteen has said that his inspiration for *The Rising* (2002) was a fan expressing the world’s need for him to help us respond to 9/11. Given the waves of unhappiness now circulating through social media regarding the Trump

³³ Jon Blistein, “Bruce Springsteen: Writing Anti-Trump Songs ‘Doesn’t Feel Necessary,’” *Rolling Stone*, October 3, 2017.

administration's policies, it looks like Springsteen should again work to help his fans face the many challenges that are eroding the core of what he believes makes America great. He could follow Guthrie's example in the work collected in *Songs Against Franco*, and find ways to uncover growing fascist trends in America.³⁴ Hopefully, Springsteen's new songs will have those political implications. On the other hand, like literature, songs always exist in the here and now; *Wrecking Ball* and the political songs scattered throughout Springsteen's body of work continue to matter politically today as much as they did when they were released. Guthrie's guitar still (metaphorically) kills fascists, as does Steve Earle's bouzouki. Spreading hopeful anger can mobilize collective action and support social change; the student survivor-activists from the Margory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting are currently proving that. Other proof comes from social scientists: Anna Wlodarczyk and her team used field studies of the 15-M Movement in Spain to prove that anger and hope together support mobilization in collective action. They note the importance of anger in motivating political action but establish the necessity of hope in the effectiveness of that action, especially in the formation of group solidarity and motivation: hopeful anger "can act as a bridge between sensitivity to social problems and active commitment to a social movement."³⁵ Similarly, Jochen Kleres and Åsa Wettergren analyze narratives of climate activism to argue that collective action often arises from the combination of hopeful, but angry, ascription

³⁴ Will Kaufman offers a sensitive reading of this work, newly discovered in the Guthrie Archives.

³⁵ Anna Wlodarczyk, et. al., "Hope and Anger as Mediators Between Collective Action Frames and Participation in Collective Mobilization," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2017), 204.

of responsibility; the combination of these emotions motivates and shapes activism, and anger tempered by hope “in collective mobilization carries an inherently politicizing power of conflict, ascribing guilt to power-holders.”³⁶

Change, notes Foucault, requires the possession of the means of widespread communication. Like Woody Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen reaches a vast audience and insists that America reconsider the discursive status quo created and perpetuated by those economically situated to have power and control means of communication. He has always been taken seriously and his work has been effective, or as the *Guardian* phrased it, “He’s never been Dixie-Chicked.”³⁷ During the worst part of the recession in the 1980s, Springsteen wrote “Seeds,” a song he has only ever recorded live, live and angry. The song ends with desolation and desperation, as its protagonist warns away anyone who thinks they can make a living in the Texas oil patch. “You’re better off buyin’ a shotgun dead off the rack,” Springsteen sings, because you’ll end up living in your car with sick children and no money to get them to a doctor. But when he ends with “You ain’t gonna find nothin’ down here friend / Except seeds blowin’ up the highway in the south wind,” he ends on a note of promise. Seeds take root, even in “This Hard Land,” something Guthrie contemplated when he realized that his songs had led to positive change. In the poem “I Guess I Planted,” set later to music by Billy Bragg, Guthrie, considers the “long lonesome seed of a song” that he planted “Way down inside me long ago.” The poem offers an extended discussion

³⁶ Jochen Kleres and Åsa Wettergren, “Fear, Hope, Anger, and Guilt in Climate Activism,” *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 5 (2017), 517.

³⁷ Ed Vulliamy, “Bruce Springsteen: Last of the Protest Singers,” *The Guardian*, June 10 2012.

on how “such a little song” led to solidarity, to resistance, and finally to change. The speaker notes that his little song, “joined up with the rest of them and grows,” becoming a union song that eventually “added up. Won us all what we got now,” and traces the way the song grew to bring about change. The people moved from being “separated / Hurt, apart, and afraid,” into a movement, “Singing and working, fighting till we got it.” Now, maybe more than ever, America needs songs of hopeful anger: songs that will unite a people and country increasingly divided; songs that will affect positive change, like Guthrie’s union songs; songs that will challenge the dominant discourses about the economy, and race, and gender; songs that will negate difference and inspire solidarity. Those songs have, are, and will continue to be written and sung, many of them growing, in some way, from Woody Guthrie’s lonesome seed.

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

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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.

Bruce Springsteen as Post-Christian Pastor

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Abstract

This article explores how Bruce Springsteen embodies a North American/Western European twenty-first century religious sensibility that encompasses a secular outlook but is colored by the Christian tradition and is informed by biblical language, images, and ideals. Because Springsteen is able to give voice to an orientation to the world that resonates with the experiences, aspirations, and religious understanding of those who have grown up in the same world as him, Springsteen has become a pastoral/priestly figure to the extensive community that identifies with his work.

The poet's job is to know the soul.¹

– Bruce Springsteen

The pastor's job is to care for the soul.²

– Eugene Peterson

The venture of trying to know the soul has been a driving force behind the songwriting of Bruce Springsteen for a long time. Of course, the word “soul” is nebulous and notoriously hard to define. But at its core it connotes the deep place of human existence, the spiritual (another nebulous term) side of life. For many, it carries an inescapable religious implication. No matter how one understands the term, there is little doubt that Springsteen's music

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¹ Bruce Springsteen interview with Will Percy in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches and Encounters*, ed. Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 251.

² Adapted from Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 57.

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goes to that deep place for many of his fans, even those who would not consider themselves religious and even for those who may not think of themselves as fans but who have been touched by his music at a particular moment in their life.

While exploring matters of the soul does not have to be an explicitly a religious pursuit – and Springsteen places it squarely in the artistic realm of the poet – it is still very much the work of the religious leader: priest, pastor, Imam, rabbi, guru. Further, even when not tied to organized religion, any venture into the realm of the soul is sure to touch on spiritual sensibilities. As this article will suggest, Springsteen’s attempt to ‘know the soul’ has resulted in numerous people having a spiritual experience (or experiences) similar to encounters of those who belong to a religion or who are connected to a religious leader such as a priest or a pastor.

This article will explore how Springsteen functions like a pastor/priest to the extensive community that identifies deeply with his work. Specifically, it explores how Springsteen embodies a North American/Western European twenty-first century religious sensibility that encompasses a largely secular outlook but is colored by the Christian tradition and is informed by biblical language, images, and ideals. This blend of characteristics, which may once have been thought of as contradictory, positions Springsteen as a kind of post-Christian pastor to his fans and followers. He embodies and gives voice to an orientation to the world that resonates with the experiences, aspirations, and religious understanding of those who have grown up in and currently live in the world that Springsteen himself inhabits and describes in his music. The fundamentally irreligious but referentially Christian body of work and persona that Springsteen

offers has formed a community who have found in him one who knows the soul, and this fact places him in the center of the community as its chief poet but also as its spiritual leader and pastor/priest.

In order to explore this role that Springsteen plays for his fans, this article begins by exploring the term “post-Christian,” the community of Springsteen fans, and also the meaning of the designation “pastor.”³ Thereafter, it will consider some ways that Springsteen has emerged as a pastoral figure for his fans and even to the larger culture. This article draws primarily from two of Springsteen’s twenty-first century albums, *The Rising* (2002) and *Wrecking Ball* (2012), as well as his live performances around the time of those recordings. Both of these records are explicit responses to occasions of human tragedy and suffering: the attacks of 9/11 in the case of *The Rising* and the financial scandals and economic crises of 2008-2009 in the case of *Wrecking Ball*. While the power of Springsteen’s music to engage the human spirit and to ignite religious consciousness goes back well before these albums, these works might be considered as pastoral responses to these crises in that they are explicit attempts to help people reflect on these events and provide perspective. As well, these records offer comfort, hope, love, critique, personal identification, and even an encouragement in faith. Further, as Irwin Streight has argued, there has been a notable rise in the prominence of explicit Christian language in Springsteen’s music in this part of his career. Streight

³ I use the term “pastor” for several reasons: it is reflective of the Christian tradition that shaped Springsteen in his childhood (although his is the Catholic tradition and “pastor” is largely a Protestant term). Also, as this article demonstrates, this term is more malleable in its usage and application than other terms that designate a religious leader.

notes the increase in positive references to religious and even specifically Christian ideas in Springsteen's music since 9/11. He states,

even more than on *The Rising*, with its gospel themes and anthems, or on *Devils & Dust* [2005], Springsteen's songs on *Wrecking Ball* inhabit the "internal landscape" of his Catholic sensibilities and reflect a growing Christology. With only six references to Jesus in over forty years of songwriting preceding *Wrecking Ball*, and four of them decidedly irreverent, it is noteworthy indeed that Springsteen reverently uses the name *Jesus* twice in the *Wrecking Ball* songs and makes two references to the salvific nature of Jesus' crucifixion.⁴

While it is important not to read too much into this recent trend in Springsteen's music, it does correlate with the fact that two of his most recent albums are clear responses to specific American crises, responses like those of a pastor coming to the aid of his community.

The Post-Christian Context

For centuries, Christianity stood at, or at least near, the center of Western culture, and, until the end of World War II, the social practice of religion in Canada and the United States reflected this cultural reality. This meant that Christianity could presume for itself a privileged voice in the public discourse. Of course, over the last few decades, this (somewhat loose) consensus has begun to unravel and the church has watched its long-held place at the center come to an end in most parts of Western Europe, Canada,

⁴ Irwin Streight, "The Christology of Bruce Springsteen," Paper presented at the CLSG/ACCUTE conference, Ottawa, Ontario, June 1, 2015.

and the United States. This is evidenced in numerous studies and polls which demonstrate that, by most measurable standards, involvement in church life and the practice of traditional Christian beliefs and values has waned in the past several decades.⁵

Walter Brueggemann's observations concerning the impact of these changes upon the practice of Christian religion in American culture apply to Western culture as a whole:

There was a time ... when a Christian preacher could count on the shared premises of the listening community, reflective of a large theological consensus. There was a time, when the *assumption of God* completely dominated Western imagination, and the holy Catholic Church roughly uttered the shared consensus of all parties. That consensus was rough and perhaps not very healthy, but at least the preacher could work from it.⁶

Brueggemann's comments present a fair picture of the contrast between a previous era and the situation as it now stands. Bruce Mullin traces this change in *A Short World History of Christianity* (2008). He writes that "in the 1960s many began to question foundational assumptions that marked the careful marriage between Christianity and Enlightenment that had been a hallmark of Western society for a century and a half."⁷ While this questioning

⁵ For Canadian data see Reginald Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religions Demise and Rise and Why it Matters* (Lethbridge, AB: Project Canada Books, 2011). For an American perspective see the Pew research data of May 2015 as reported by CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/12/living/pew-religion-study/index.html>.

⁶ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 1.

⁷ Robert B. Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 262.

goes back further than the 1960s, it was at that point when Western society began experiencing the brunt of the shifts that were taking place in the relationship between Christianity and culture. At its core was a rejection of traditional views on the Bible and important ideals of the Christian faith. Even Protestant writers began to question whether the God of Christianity could be the object of faith. In his reflection on this development in Western culture, philosopher Charles Taylor defines the change as one that takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.⁸ Clearly, Western civilization has experienced a decisive move away from a culture that was shaped by Christian faith into one that no longer is. Stuart Murray puts it this way, "Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence."⁹

Murray captures the changing place of Christianity in the contemporary culture that was finding its legs in the 1960s. The generation that was coming of age at that time may have had some connection to the church and its teachings, but they were not as actively engaged in the life of a congregation as they, or their parents, intentionally began to separate themselves from institutional Christianity. These changes in Western culture seeped into the lived reality of people growing up in the 1960s, even in

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MS: Belknap, 2007), 3.

⁹ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 19.

small, conservative towns like Freehold, New Jersey, where a young Bruce Frederick Joseph Springsteen was growing up and entering his teenage years. However, the shift in Christianity's cultural status did not mean a complete departure from faith altogether. There remained (and remains) a collective religious, even Christian, memory that still resides in those who were raised in the mid-late decades of the twentieth century, when Christianity was waning but still held an influence in the collective psyche. This meant that many from these generations embraced a less explicit religious commitment. They rejected many of the forms of established Christianity and were shaped by secular influences.

However, for many who grew up and entered adulthood during those decades, their departure from the church did not mean an outright rejection of everything that it stood for. In fact, the Christian faith that they were raised in may still provide a certain touchpoint in their lives. The values that Christianity espouses, and maybe even in some cases the positive memories of church experience, provide an anchoring ideal or at least a language that points toward the possibility of stability and hope. They remain spiritual, if not religious. However, their spirituality is at least somewhat shaped by their Christian heritage, even if they have rejected institutional religion and its authoritative claims.¹⁰

In a number of ways Springsteen embodies this experience. Many of Springsteen's songs allude to biblical and Christian scripture, drawing on his own and the United States' predominantly Christian heritage. Thus, they resonate with his audience in part because in many cases the religious imagery is familiar and his listeners feel called to action or to personal

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 508.

reflection based on familiar ideas. While these images are Christian in nature, Springsteen's use of them is post-Christian in that they are not a summons to Christian dogma as much as an invitation to embrace a humanistic spirituality that may be informed by Christian tradition because it is what the majority of Americans grew up with.¹¹

Thus, Springsteen mirrors the experience of many of his generation and even subsequent ones. Many people feel alienated by the church, are secularized by an increasingly post-Christian culture, yet remain connected to the Christian faith that was central to the cultural and family life of their youth. While Springsteen, like many in his audience, has been alienated from traditional, organized religion and is largely secularized in his outlook, Christian faith remains a foundational, formational story that informs his work and his identity. While he is leery of heavenly decrees and theological certainty, an appeal to the kind of virtue that is found within the Christian religion permeates his music.¹² For Springsteen, the Christian story remains a dominant force in his psyche and some of its ideals—hope, faith, love, forgiveness, redemption, and even the possibility that God is present in all of the realities of life—come through in his music. Springsteen's songs, while largely rooted in a secular worldview, often reinterpret the Christian story of salvation history in a way that

¹¹ Of course, Springsteen's own experience with the Christian religion is famously negative. He was abused and made an outcast in his Catholic schools and Church. See: Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 16.

¹² See David Masciotra, *Working on a Dream: The Progressive Political Vision of Bruce Springsteen* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 149. Masciotra compares Springsteen to Confucius and offers that both act as spiritual and moral guides.

suggests he remains connected to that story in a formative way.¹³ This likely mirrors the experience of many who have brought his music into their lives.

Springsteen as Post-Christian Pastor

Applying a term like ‘pastor,’ usually denoting a religious leader, to a rock star may not seem appropriate at first. However, this designation becomes more clearly fitting when one understands the role that Springsteen plays within the community that has developed around him, his band, and his music.

Over the years, Springsteen fans have developed a distinct community around the musician. In fact, the cultivation of this community has been central to Springsteen’s work.¹⁴ “Community” can mean a lot of things; the term can be used to identify a geographic location, but it also indicates identification with others who share common interests, customs, and behaviors. The Springsteen (or E Street) community comes together around the words, ideas, and vision of Springsteen, who functions as its tacit center and leader. As Linda K. Randall reminds us, citing the work of sociologist Amitai Etzioni, community is often established by a moral voice that brings people together to encourage one another to behave in a more virtuous way than they would if they were not a part of the community.¹⁵ Springsteen acts as that kind of

¹³ Irwin Streight, “The Flannery O’Connor of American Rock,” in *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen*, eds. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight (Lanham: Lexington, 2010), 69.

¹⁴ In an interview with John Pareles, Springsteen calls his career “community in the making” (Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 214).

¹⁵ Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 61, 62.

catalytic voice for his fans. This community is both ideological – it is formed around the music, persona, and vision of Springsteen and his band – and geographic – when fans congregate to experience a concert or to discuss Springsteen on internet message boards.

David Masciotra describes the ethos of the community that can be observed before, during, and after a Springsteen show. “Fans exhibit a mutually reciprocal understanding, kindness and in-the-know dialoguing that can be called cultish by some less dedicated attendees or warmly charming by others.”¹⁶ Beyond these rudimentary markers of community, the Springsteen community takes on religious overtones in ways that make it distinct from other communities of fans of rock artists. Randall, reflects on her experience researching the Springsteen community, noting that she was “intrigued” by “the way that Springsteen fans referred to the concerts and to their discovery of his music and fan community; the language was that of religion, where fans spoke of ‘conversions’ and ‘redemption,’ ‘epiphanies’ and ‘faith.’”¹⁷ In many ways, Springsteen’s music and the community it forms functions in the way that a religious community does.

From religious upbringing, to rejection of the faith, to a personal reinterpretation of the faith that keeps him connected to the religion of his childhood, Springsteen embodies an alternative spirituality that reflects the culture’s evolving relationship with Christianity. He rejects traditional, organized religion, but faith still provides a source of wisdom, values, and meaning-making. Thus, many people find a like-minded community as they come together

¹⁶ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 209.

¹⁷ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 12. This argument was initially posited by Daniel Cavicchi in *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998).

around Springsteen and his music. The Springsteen community is very similar to the communities that used to be centered around more explicitly religious ideals.¹⁸ Within this community, Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde write, Springsteen is venerated like a “spiritual master, a pop philosopher, a revolutionary, a head of state, or a saint.”¹⁹ It is not difficult to add pastor to this list.

At its core, pastoral ministry is akin to the ancient work of shepherding. The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines the term ‘pastor’ as “A shepherd of a flock.”²⁰ In fact, the word ‘pastor’ is derived from the ancient Greek word *poimain*, which literally means “shepherd.” Thus a pastor is one who comes alongside the people under his or her charge and helps them make their way through the realities of life. While in the truest sense it is a deeply religious vocation, it is a necessary role in human community. We need people who provide guidance and perspective, and who help us make sense out of life by describing the world for us. Some of these people live close to us; others serve their pastoral purpose from afar. But their ministry is still profound. If pastoral ministry is, as pastoral theologian Michael Jinkins states, at least in part “helping people to understand their lives,” then for many fans and followers, Springsteen fills the role of pastor.²¹

In the post-Christian context of Western culture, where definitions of religion have expanded to allow new ways of believing and to meet our need for belonging, for meaning, and for

¹⁸ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 21, 25.

¹⁹ Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde, “Introduction” in *Reading the Boss*, 7.

²⁰ Donald K McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 203.

²¹ Michael Jinkins, *Letters to New Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 27.

experiencing the transcendent, a figure like Springsteen can function in a pastoral role in a way that would not have been imagined in previous times. Because his music moves in ways that reflect explicitly biblical language and spiritual themes, and because his live shows provide an almost religious, revival-like atmosphere, Springsteen is particularly suited to this role. Streight comments that “Springsteen is an artist whose songs seek both to reflect and to remediate the social and spiritual malaise of America.”²² While on personal matters of faith Springsteen has taken a conflicted approach, he demonstrates, according to Masciotra, how “one can acknowledge the sacred and the mysterious but still find happiness without solely leaning on the promises and platforms of organized religion.”²³ This is a perspective that connects with the community that has formed around him in an age that has increasingly become post-Christian in its outlook.

If pastoral work is partly about helping people make sense of their lives and journeying with people as a shepherd journeys with his or her flock, then Randall captures part of the essence of Springsteen’s pastoral power when she writes, “To have a meaningful artist who has aged with us, remained vital, and not drifted into nostalgia to become a rock caricature tells us that we, too, can still maintain the optimism and vitality of our younger selves.”²⁴

It is true that the role of pastor has evolved and emerged in Springsteen’s relationship to his community in his more recent

²² Streight, “Flannery O’Connor of American Rock,” 73.

²³ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 127.

²⁴ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 13.

work, especially in the twenty-first century. *The Rising* and *Wrecking Ball*, in particular, represent pastoral responses to great American crises: the 9/11 attacks and the financial meltdown of 2008-2009. In these works, Springsteen is clearly interested in trying to respond in a way that brings comfort, hope, perspective, and justice. It may even be that he wants to help his listeners engage with God as they process these events. Through these albums, Springsteen seems to believe that he could make a difference to his listeners' lives. In an interview following the release of *Wrecking Ball* he talked about the "need to be constructive." He is clear that the motive of his work is to address the realities of people's lives. "I'm motivated circumstantially by the events of the day," he noted, "that's unfair, that's theft, that's against what we believe in, that's not what America is about." As an artist/pastor Springsteen wants to speak into the deep realities of his community's lived experience. He wants to be useful to them. In the same interview he goes on to say, memorably,

My work has always been about judging the distance between the American reality and the American dream. If you look at this record the question is asked, 'Do we take care of our own?' Then there are scenarios where you meet the characters who have been impacted by the failure of these ideas and values.²⁵

In this way Springsteen embodies classical pastoral impulses. He wants to identify the struggles of his community and to speak meaningfully about their lives.

²⁵ Bruce Springsteen interview at International Press Conference in Paris, February 2012, in *Talk About A Dream: The Essential Interviews of Bruce Springsteen* eds. Christopher Phillips and Louis P. Masur (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 407-408, 415.

What enhances the pastoral aspect of Springsteen's work is that there is often a spiritual element to his music. For example, Springsteen explains that the inclusion of the song "Land of Hope and Dreams" represented a direct attempt to bring a spiritual element onto the record.²⁶ In this way, Springsteen embodies and expresses the life that members of this community have themselves lived. He is one of them, and he has been called to shepherd them on their collective journey. He desires to offer something that is transcendently meaningful and will help his audience to find and experience something, both within and outside of themselves, that will provide hope and sustenance for their individual journeys.

The Rising and Wrecking Ball as Pastoral Response

During the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978) tour, Springsteen often broke into mid-song monologues to tell a tale about his past and its relationship to a particular song or the history of his relationship to the E Street Band. An example of this came in Cleveland, Ohio, on August 9, 1978. That night Springsteen told a story that was a regular part of the concerts on that tour. He spoke about how his parents had sent him to see his priest to talk about his "vocation." The priest advised him to consult with God for clarity about his calling. Springsteen then tells about meeting God and asking him about what he should do with his life. He concludes the story by reporting that God said to him, "Let it rock!" While the story is meant to be humorous and heavily tongue in cheek, it nonetheless offers some insight into Springsteen's sense of identity. While he may feel alienated from the church and the Christian faith overall, he still has a sense that what he is doing is part of God's

²⁶ "Wrecking Ball," around the 8:16 mark.

calling. What he does is important, it is a God-given vocation, even if it is outside of what his parents and perhaps his priest would have wanted for him. He is a religious outsider, but that does not mean that he cannot serve God's purposes.²⁷

Years later, Springsteen disbanded the E Street Band and then regrouped them in the late 1990s for a reunion tour. In a concert at Madison Square Garden on July 1, 2000, near the end of the main set of their final concert of the tour, Springsteen addressed the crowd and expressed his desire that this tour would be a renewal of his and the band's commitment to "serve you."²⁸ This is a telling statement regarding Springsteen's vision of his and the E Street Band's work. With its emphasis on the audience and their needs, Springsteen's utilizes pastoral language. He expressed a realization that the fan community that has formed around him and the E Street Band is a unique coming together of people whom Springsteen and the band serve through their art and their performances.²⁹

In his biography of Springsteen, Marc Dolan writes about the "gospel impulse" that Springsteen acknowledges drives his

²⁷ My recounting of this story comes from hearing it told numerous times in concerts broadcast on E Street Radio. Springsteen himself reflects on this sense of calling when he writes about his friendship with Clarence Clemons and remarks on them together "doing our modest version of God's work." See Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 475.

²⁸ This sentiment was a recurrent theme throughout the Reunion Tour. See Peter Ames Carlin, *Bruce* (New York: Touchstone, 2012), 400.

²⁹ Just prior to the beginning of the Reunion Tour, in his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction speech on March 15, 1999, Springsteen "insisted in mock-preacher tones that he had *re-educated and re-dedicated, re-animated, resuscitated and reinvigorated [the band] with the power, the magic, the mystery the ministry of rock 'n' roll.*" (italics original) Marc Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock and Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 348.

music. Specifically, the reunion tour brought out a pastoral persona in Springsteen as he engaged his audience around the theme of needing others, in his case “a band,” to get through life. The need for connection – described through the performance of songs such as “Blood Brothers” and “If I Should Fall Behind” – was at the heart of Springsteen's personal revival at that time, for the band as well as the audience.³⁰

Subsequent to the reunion tour, Springsteen often recounted a famous story about an experience a few days after the 9/11 attacks, while he was at the Sea Bright beach in New Jersey looking at the drastically altered Manhattan skyline in the northern distance. Springsteen was pulling out of a parking space when a man driving by shouted out of his open car window, “We need you man!” Springsteen recounted in a television interview a year later, “I knew what he was talking about.” He understood that the man was calling him to help his fellow Americans process the tragedy. In the interview, Springsteen continues, “We’ve worked hard for my music to play a very central and ... purposeful place in my audience’s life. [So] it was a small wake-up call.”³¹ This experience reflects how Springsteen perceives his work and is perceived by his fans in particular, but also by American culture more broadly. He is someone people look to for meaning, perspective, and guidance. As Springsteen himself recounts, this experience was an affirmation of, or renewal of, this calling.

In response, Springsteen wrote and recorded *The Rising*. He saw that his role as a prominent music artist required him to speak to the grief, fear, and confusion that resulted from the horrific

³⁰ Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock and Roll*, 348-349.

³¹ Carlin, *Bruce*, 407-408.

events of 9/11. *The Rising* represents the most specific pastoral response Springsteen had offered to that point in his career, as he was motivated by a desire to provide counsel and, most importantly, to give voice to the pain surrounding the experience of 9/11. As Springsteen told biographer Peter Ames Carlin, “everything I wrote after September 11 was contextualized in some way by that event. I tried to find some emotional center that just felt right.”³² For most pastors, responding to tragedy is directed by both compassion and duty. Few pastors are eager to engage the depths of human despair, the raw emotions that come with terrible, senseless loss and the difficult questions that naturally ensue. However, engage they must, in part because it is their job. But for most pastors it is more than that; it is an accepted part of their calling. There is an inner desire to be there for people, to offer God’s help.

The Rising provides explicit pastoral care to its audience in the form of a collection of songs that provide a lens through which to examine some experiences of 9/11 and subsequent moments of recovery. In many instances, the songs point to the possibility of God’s presence and suggest that spirituality may play a role in healing traumatic memories. For example, in the title track, Springsteen takes us into the experience of a New York City firefighter wearing “the cross” of his “calling,” who climbs the stairs of a Trade Center building to perform his duties as a first responder. However, the image of ascent moves beyond the loss of life that many like this firefighter experienced that day and offers a vision of life. The song breaks away from the focus on duty, personal calling, and the horrors of the day and into the hope that

³² Carlin, *Bruce*, 180.

the first responder's sacrifice offers, and perhaps even into the hope of the afterlife. The song's main character speaks of "spirits, above and behind me," and he clings to the hope that their "precious blood" will bind him as he stands before the Lord's "fiery light." Here the song hints at an eschatological vision. The image of spirits all around, the reference to the efficacy of blood as a form of hope, and the picture of standing before the Lord, all point to the idea of the first responder slipping from one world into the next. In the song's refrain, the narrator speaks of a vision of Mary in the garden with "holy pictures" of their children. It could be a vision of the narrator's wife as he catches final glimpses of his life in this world, or perhaps it is a reference to Mother Mary as he catches initial glimpses of life in a world to come. In its essence, as Roxanne Harde comments, the song is a hopeful affirmation of life that looks past mourning to offer hope.³³ Masciotra reflects on this as he observes that the song depicts its characters "entering into something more dramatic, beautiful and uplifting. It is the gospel."³⁴ As a post-Christian pastor would, Springsteen in this song clearly offers hope in response to the terrible realities of 9/11. In part this hope is situated in the example of those who sacrificed their lives for the sake of others, and perhaps it is also found in the possibility of a life to come.

In "Into the Fire," Springsteen offers the perspective of a 9/11 widow who understands her lost husband's calling (presumably that of another first responder) to a greater duty. That higher calling implies that his death can have meaning in the lives of others by inspiring them to live lives of greater virtue. Azzan

³³ Harde, "May Your Hope Give Us Hope," in *Reading the Boss*, 262.

³⁴ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 224.

Yadin-Israel notes that this song connects to the story of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who upon his death disappears into heaven on a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11-12). Elijah's death provides inspiration for his successor Elisha, who goes on to preserve Elijah's prophetic mission. Further, Yadin-Israel offers that the allusion to the laying of hands motif that is part of the song is a biblical motif that often signifies the transference of power from one person or leader unto another. In Springsteen's song, the allusion to the Elijah-Elisha relationship and the theological motif of laying of hands acts as a transfer of inspiration, as Yadin-Israel states, "both entail the imminent death of a leader and bespeak the hope to be worthy successors. And this is precisely the hope of 'Into the Fire.'"³⁵

Here Springsteen is doing the pastoral work of helping people make sense of their lives and giving his community direction in making sense of the tragic death of a heroic first responder. His death has meaning if it inspires us to live better lives ourselves.

Other songs in the album continue in this vein. In "Nothing Man," Springsteen offers a reflection on the post 9/11 experience of a man who becomes a local hero because of his actions but who wrestles with his newfound status and the thoughts of suicide that he struggles to keep at bay as a result of his experiences that day. The desire for revenge flickers through the song "Empty Sky," and an exploration of the differences that divide those who orchestrated the attacks and those who may be sympathetic to them is articulated in "Worlds Apart." The album culminates with the song

³⁵ Azzan Yadin-Israel, *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen* (Highland Park, NJ: Lingua, 2016), 169, 170.

“My City of Ruins.” Originally written as a lament for the economic and physical deterioration of Springsteen’s adopted hometown of Asbury Park, New Jersey, on *The Rising* this song evokes a deep empathy with New Yorkers and moves into a gospel tinged chorus that seeks to raise up his audience. The song closes with prayers for strength, love, and faith and provides a hopeful conclusion to the record. Throughout, the album is an empathetic, honest, and loving response to the events and experiences of 9/11.³⁶ Springsteen’s songs offer not only perspective, but post-Christian spiritual direction to his flock or community and to the country as a whole.

What makes a pastor (or a rabbi or an Imam) different from all the other helping professionals is that his or her orientation to provide aid is explicitly centered around God. In offering *The Rising* to his American audience, Springsteen did not forget that element. As a post-Christian pastor, Springsteen brings God and faith into the conversation as a way to inform the experiences of those who engage with his music. Jeff Symynkywicz in *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen* observes that there is a dependence upon God intrinsic in the culminating song on *The Rising*, “My City of Ruins.” This song, he writes, “suggests that we look within (and beyond) and seek to discern the divine light we will need to find our way

³⁶ In the aftermath of the tragedies, Springsteen was reportedly moved by the many times his name was mentioned in the obituaries of 9/11 victims. Further, it is widely known that he contacted a number of family members of these victims to offer condolences and in order to better understand their experiences so as to represent them faithfully in his work. See Ryan White, *Album by Album* (New York: Sterling, 2014), 180-81. Any good pastor who is about to preside at a funeral or memorial service essentially does the same thing, particularly if they did not personally know the deceased. Genuine compassion and the hope to be of use to those who remain demands such courtesy.

through this encircling gloom."³⁷ The repeated admonition to rise up, suggests Symynkywicz, alludes to the hope of resurrection and points to the possibility that God will provide a renewed life to America despite the death and destruction of 9/11. This is the kind of work pastors attempt to perform regularly.

If *The Rising* is Springsteen's most specific pastoral response to a particular event, then 2012's *Wrecking Ball* follows in that vein by responding directly to the financial scandals and subsequent crises of the late 2000s that cost many Americans their homes, jobs, and life savings. With *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen offers a collection of songs that gives voice to the experiences of those who lost not just money and property but dignity and control over their own destiny. Springsteen says of the album, "*Wrecking Ball* was a shot of anger at the injustice that continues on and has widened with deregulation, dysfunctional regulatory agencies and capitalism gone wild at the expense of hardworking Americans." Further, he reflects on his sense of responsibility to respond when he writes, "I knew this was the music I should make now. It was my job."³⁸

Like *The Rising*, *Wrecking Ball* introduces the listener to many different characters who embody disappointment and struggle in the aftermath of the debacle of the financial crash. The opening track presents the sentiments of a cynical victim who sarcastically recites the well-worn American slogan, "we take care of our own," as an indictment of a system that cannot deliver on what it promises. We meet a "Jack of All Trades" who promises his wife that they "will be alright" because he is determined to use whatever

³⁷ Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz, *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen: Rock and Redemption From Asbury Park to Magic* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 139.

³⁸ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 468, 469.

skills he has to cobble together the work “that God provides.” The narrator of the song wistfully longs for the day when people will take care of each other “like Jesus said that we might.” This line offers a contrast to the lack of care shown by those who have caused the crises that have now deeply affected his and his family’s life. The working man in “Shackled and Drawn” just wants to go to work because that is where he finds dignity and self respect, but while the bankers keep the party going strong, he is left below in chains. The song “Death to my Hometown” is a lament to a hometown once vibrant, now destroyed not by cannonball, rifles, or dictators but by economic distress perpetuated by robber barons who go unpunished for their crimes.

However, there is also hope infused throughout this album. Two older concert songs are included, and each takes on new meaning in the collection. The title track is a song originally written for the occasion of the demolition of Giant’s Stadium. On *Wrecking Ball*, the words to the chorus become the cadence of one’s determination not to be bowed by those whose actions have impacted so many lives negatively. Additionally, “Land of Hope and Dreams” offers a vision of a better land where all are welcome. In certain ways it rings not just of a better country that awaits us but of an eschatological land where all the travails of life find their resolution. It is a land of sunshine, not of darkness. The song “We Are Alive” reminds us that the past can inform the present as it offers hope for those freedom fighters and justice seekers who have come before us. Their lives can inform our own if we are willing to let them speak to us from the grave.

Like *The Rising*, *Wrecking Ball* also directly addresses the issues of God and faith. “Land of Hope and Dreams” offers

listeners a vision of redemption that plays with the line between the hope that there is a better land still possible in this world and the ultimate eschatological hope of a land that is to come. The land that Springsteen speaks of is a place where you “don’t know where you’re goin,” but you know “you won’t be back.” It offers a picture of beauty that reflects the world but signals something more perfect. While Springsteen’s own vision of faith is firmly rooted in the realities of human life, “Land of Hope and Dreams” engages with the traditional American gospel song “This Train,” sometimes titled “This Train is Bound for Glory,” and is laced with a definite eschatological vision. In addressing the financial meltdown, Springsteen informs his flock that there is still the hope of redemption, and perhaps that this redemption comes in multiple forms. Unlike the original “This Train” that presents an exclusive version of salvation for only the “righteous and the holy,” Springsteen’s song is wide and inclusive.³⁹ Having a seat on Springsteen’s train does not necessitate that the passenger be free from all sin. To get on this train “all you gotta do is just thank the Lord.” This calls for faith and also points to the Christian idea that salvation is by faith and that trust in God is at the heart of salvation and the key to entry into the life to come. Springsteen’s song clearly offers a message of hope, a word of encouragement to persevere, and a call to faith in God.

“Rocky Ground” is also thoroughly Gospel-tinged and contains several biblical allusions. The singer addresses the “shepherds” who care for their flocks and enjoins that they take them to “higher ground.” The narrator speaks prophetically that the shepherds’ lack of care for their people will result in their being

³⁹ Dolan, *Promise of Rock and Roll*, 353-54.

judged, presumably by God. However, besides being a prophetic rebuke to the lax shepherds, the song is also an exploration of personal faith. The narrator's faith is not without its own struggles. Even when you "pray your best" and try to raise your children to do right, when you ask for divine guidance, you find none. Thus, where there once was faith now "there's only doubt." Nonetheless, in a clear allusion to Noah's flood (Genesis 6-9), the song assures that a flood is coming that will bring a new world. The closing chorus reminds listeners that "there's a new day coming," perhaps once again pointing to an eschatological ideal that is the ultimate answer to the corruption of this world. Hope that is attached to faith in God's deliverance, despite the struggle to remain faithful, is at the core of this song. Any pastor acting faithfully on behalf of his or her congregation in the aftermath of a national disaster would be serving the people well to offer a message like this. Springsteen points his audience to a biblically-informed hope that is often uncertain about where God is, yet acknowledges the need to trust His work in this world. Nonetheless, Springsteen assures his audience, a new day is coming when God's justice and judgement will bring better times.

Despite being a religious outsider who has been ambiguous about his own theological beliefs, on these albums, Springsteen serves his flock by engaging with the specific challenges they face. As Ryan White notes regarding *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen takes religious language usually used by those on the right of the political spectrum and co-opts it for those on the left.⁴⁰ This is central to Springsteen's pastoral method: he is able to take religious ideas and employ them in ways that evoke the power of their meaning but in

⁴⁰ White, *Album by Album*, 250.

a way that is accessible and meaningful to his largely secular and politically diverse audience. Guided by a sense of responsibility for his gift as an artist, his connection to his fans, his country, and his desire to be of service to others, Springsteen offers two collections of songs that go where a pastor goes and try to do what a pastor tries to do.

Live Performance and Springsteen as Pastor

Pastoral work is public work. While much of a pastor's time is spent away from the public eye engaged in one-on-one discussions, board and committee meetings, and preparing weekly sermons, inevitably the pastoral calling involves standing in front of an audience and doing the public work of one's craft. For pastors, this may take the form of presiding at a wedding or a funeral, preaching a sermon, leading prayers, or giving direction to a worship service. The public nature of the pastoral office is a crucial element of the work because in these times of public gathering pastors have the potential to serve the entire community. What takes place in times of collective experience is the stuff of transformation. Any pastor who understands his or her calling understands that their leadership when the community gathers will determine their overall effectiveness as a ministering voice in that community. The right words at the right time, the right demeanor, the appropriate vision shared, and the ability to portray an authentic solidarity with the daily lived experience of the congregation is crucial to a pastor's ability to serve a church effectively.

For Springsteen, the public aspect of his work has always been one of his greatest pastoral strengths. As a performer, often

with the backing of the E Street Band, Springsteen has always been able to connect deeply with his audience, so much so that his concerts almost take on a revival-like atmosphere. Indeed, for many who attend, Springsteen's concerts provide experiences of transcendence. Robert Duncan captures this notion in his article for *Creem Magazine* that recounts his experience of covering Springsteen and the E Street Band in 1978:

I was on the road three days and nights with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, and that's about as good a time span in which to hold a resurrection as I can think of . . . [some] speak glowingly of Bruce in terms of "charisma." But charisma has the odor of the secular. After what I saw, heard, and felt, I'm looking for a word that's something more in the religious price range.⁴¹

Perhaps one of the most significant markers of Springsteen's pastoral role was made clear immediately after 9/11. At a fundraiser for the families of 9/11 victims in his local community, Springsteen was asked if he was going to respond to events with new songs. He reportedly replied, "What ever music we can do, we'll do." Further, shortly after 9/11, a fundraising telethon was held broadcast on all four major television networks and viewed by millions of people around the world. This was more than a fundraiser; it was also a communal event of coming together to continue the healing process. The opening slot was a key place and needed a particular touch (one may say a pastoral touch). For a time such as this, Springsteen was asked to offer his services. With just

⁴¹ Robert Duncan, "Lawdamercy, Springsteen Saves," in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches and Encounters*, Jeff Burger, editor (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 87. (reprinted from *Creem*, Spring, 1978).

an acoustic guitar, harmonica, and a group of back-up singers, including his wife, Patti Scialfa, and bandmates Clarence Clemons and Steve Van Zandt, Springsteen performed the song that would eventually close *The Rising*, "My City of Ruins." It was sung as a lament, a prayer, and a vision of hope. It was a pastoral offering for a grieved and confused nation.⁴²

In the summer of 2002, *The Rising* was heralded as the first major cultural response to the events that had taken place on September 11, 2001. NBC's *Today Show* dedicated a whole two-hour episode to the album. Springsteen and the band also appeared for two consecutive nights on *Late Night with David Letterman* and three straight on *Nightline* with Ted Koppel. It seemed like a significant portion of the American population was looking to Springsteen to give some perspective to the national tragedy of 9/11.⁴³

There are times when a pastor is asked to step into particularly sensitive situations to help make sense of them. However, usually a pastor's work is day to day, week to week, offering pastoral gifts to a congregation. This may be done in public, at times in situations that are highly volatile or emotional. Nonetheless the pastor's job is to help people connect with the deeper things of life, to facilitate experiences of transcendence that help to provide people's lives with meaning and insight. Springsteen's live performances offer exactly this. Masciotra writes, "The fact that Springsteen walks into each concert with the aim ... to create such a well-rounded spectacle of transcendent, challenging, and comforting music is of particular interest to anyone who finds any value in his body of work because it is in the

⁴² Dolan, *Promise of Rock and Roll*, 167.

⁴³ Symynkywicz, *The Gospel*, 140.

live setting that it most potentially thrives.”⁴⁴ Likewise, Linda K. Randall gives testimony that the only other “public” experience in her life that came close to resembling a Springsteen concert was “a Billy Graham crusade I attended as a young teen.”⁴⁵

Recently at a show at State College Pennsylvania, I experienced what is a normal occurrence at a Springsteen concert. During the performance of “The Rising,” as the band slowed the song down for the bridge, thousands of hands went up throughout the crowd just as they do on Sunday mornings in many evangelical church gatherings. This gesture is a response to something transcendent that is taking place between Springsteen as a pastor/artist, the band, and the people gathered. As the song continued and Springsteen sang the pensive lyrics of the song’s bridge, arms remained outstretched and hands were held high. People were responding to the way that the song takes them back to the losses of September 11, 2001. When the band kicked back into the high-powered chorus, more hands went up and they remained there until the end of the song. Then the people started moving, swaying, bouncing. The crowd was celebrating the hopeful idea of a rising. Perhaps it was the strength of the human spirit determined to not be defeated by terrorism, perhaps it was hope in the eschatological idea of resurrection, when the dead will rise and we will once again all be reunited. Perhaps it was both, or something else entirely.

Ultimately, this experience is a combination of communal solidarity and deep resonance with the poignancy and performance of the song. The experience is both an act of

⁴⁴ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 208-9.

⁴⁵ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 8.

remembering the great loss of that fateful day and a celebration of the people who acted so heroically. Moments of reflection and emotion like these are indicative of what often takes place during a Springsteen show. The crowd is invited to reflect on the ups and downs of life and is inevitably offered hope in the journey and for the future. These moments are honest: they may remind us of our pain, but they always seem to give way to celebration and joy. Pope Francis says, "A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed: this is a clear proof. When our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news."⁴⁶ Few ever leave a Springsteen show feeling as if they have not heard and experienced good news.

The performance halls, hockey arenas, and football stadiums that host Springsteen's concerts function today like the cathedrals of a by-gone era. They are the primary gathering places for the masses. While it may seem to be the desire to be entertained that brings people together in these places, there are always deeper impulses at work. What brings us together is the desire to experience something unique, to be transported beyond the mundane, and to go there with a community of others. This is also at the heart of religious life and practice. Thus, many who come to see Springsteen in concert are drawn by all these things as well as a desire to connect, or to re-connect, with a message and a messenger who provides a degree of sustenance, meaning, and hope for the ongoing journey of life. Where the church and the

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola, 2014), 93.

pastor may have played this role in days past, today it is artists like Bruce Springsteen who fulfill this crucial role in people's lives.

Springsteen & I: A Documentary Analysis of Springsteen's Fan Base

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Abstract

Music is an international code of interaction which allows listeners to enhance their knowledge of other countries and cultures. This paper offers a study of music fandom, of the ways in which people form special, sustained attachments to musical performers or genres. The focus for this study is to analyze the 2013 documentary, *Springsteen & I* through the lens of studies of fandom. This documentary is comprised of fan clips and, using this movie as a cultural artifact, we examine the documentary to see how Springsteen fans, both in the United States and internationally, employ their activities and experiences with the music of this artist.

Fans of Bruce Springsteen are committed, ardent, and passionate about both the man and his songs. While music enthusiasts typically embrace the artists they admire, hardcore Springsteen fans border somewhere between adulation and veneration. The level of fandom is not unique to Springsteen. Indeed, music is one of the most widely used forms of human communication, with the ability to transcend boundaries and generate new subgroups and subcultures. Fans of particular music artists become part of a culture of individuals who follow that musician or expert observers of the artists' canon and concert performances. In his ethnographic study of Springsteen fans, Daniel Cavicchi defined music fandom as "the ways in which people form special, sustained attachments to musical performers or genres."² Springsteen's fans come from all

¹ Copyright © Anthony Esposito and Ronald K. Raymond, 2018. Address correspondence to aesposito@edinboro.edu.

² Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

walks of life and all corners of the globe. Rather than simply the recipients of the gospel of Springsteen, his fans embody John Fiske's description of fan culture, particularly the fact that fans "are active producers and users of such cultural capital."³

In fact, Springsteen helps his fans grow as individuals, especially through the framework of emotional appeals. The emotions of audience members, especially during Springsteen's concert performances, help influence the feelings of those around them through emotional contagion, which is the process by which emotions are transferred from one person to another.⁴ Daniel Goleman showed the importance of emotions explaining that, "We catch feelings from one another as though they were some kind of social virus."⁵ This notion resonates with the purpose of this study, which is to explore how Springsteen fans share their emotional connection to Springsteen with other members of his audience.

This article examines fans' relationship with Springsteen through the 2013 documentary *Springsteen & I*, using the film as a rhetorical artifact which, though only including a miniscule percentage of Springsteen fans worldwide, provides insight into fans' general relationship with him and his music. We begin by discussing our theoretical approach, followed by a section highlighting some of the previous research on Springsteen. Then this article explores the rationale behind the making of the documentary and we review several video clips. While the popular

³ John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* ed. In Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 33.

⁴ Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppa, and Richard L. Rapson, "Emotional Contagion," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 2 no. 3 (1993): 96-99.

⁵ Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam, 2006), 115.

image of the prototypical Springsteen fan is a white American male, Springsteen has a passionate fan base of female devotees whose perspective we examine in the following section. Thereafter, we explore how nationality shapes fan responses to Springsteen's music, including analysis of fan reaction to live performances, participation in the concert experience, and narratives that aid in understanding the identification between Springsteen and his fan culture.

Methodology

This study involves a combination of rhetorical criticism and thick description, which assists us in analyzing divergent fan voices contained within the film. Rhetorical criticism is an excellent tool to study the selected clips, as it allows for recognition of the rhetorical potential of the video excerpts, suggesting inferences about the connection of Springsteen to his unique cultural community. Valerie Renegar and Jennifer Malkowski defined rhetorical criticism as "the process of examining a text to see how it works communicatively."⁶ We look at how the movie works as a text. What impact does it have upon the viewer and critic? Examining different voices within the film through a rhetorical lens enables an illustration of the importance of Springsteen's music to the lives of his fans. Since viewers get a first-hand glimpse into Springsteen's influence on the life of his fans, it is important to expound on their lived experience with his music. Along with rhetorical criticism, we study these clips as a form of ethnography. Clifford Geertz defined

⁶ Valerie R. Renegar and Jennifer A. Malkowski, "Rhetorical and Textual Approaches to Communication," In *21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook* ed. William F. Eadie (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2009), 51.

ethnography as thick description, saying, “Doing ethnography is like trying to read a manuscript ... written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but transient examples of shaped behavior.”⁷ These video narratives offer their own “thick description” of fans’ experiences with lyrics, music, and concerts. These voices arrived to the documentary makers unfiltered and unedited and were specifically chosen to be included because of the unique way they describe connections to Springsteen’s music. The film offers unique perspective on the identification between Springsteen and his fans.

In particular, the film focuses on Springsteen’s emotional importance for his fans, specifically the fact that the experience of Springsteen is transactional. Springsteen does not simply preach while his fans listen. Audience members experience the music and concert performances and share their encounters with other members of the Springsteen community. For many fans, immersion into the music, lyrics, and performances, result in spontaneous pleasure. Devout fans become expert spectators and take part in the communication process between the artist and his listening audience.

Previous Scholarship

A number of works have endeavored to explore Springsteen fans and their relationship to the artist. For example, Cavicchi explored how Springsteen’s audiences are connected through his songs, lyrics, and concert experiences, providing an in-depth ethnographic study. In a book released just three years before

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

Springsteen & I, Linda Randall also used an ethnographic approach, as she examines how Springsteen fans have created a global community that provides emotional and material support to other members of his fan base.⁸ In addition to studies of Springsteen fans, a growing number of works have looked at the relationships between fans and other musicians. Previous studies have explored the fan-artist connection through case studies on Elvis Presley, Kiss, the Rolling Stones, and Michael Jackson.⁹

However, new studies are needed to achieve a more enhanced understanding of the ways in which fans produce meaning as a cultural community. This work differs from previous studies in that the documentary shows emotional and nonverbal variables not present in static reports. According to Ronald Adler and Russell Proctor, “Nonverbal communication performs a third valuable social function: conveying emotions that we may be unwilling or unable to express” and that “it is impossible to study spoken language without paying attention to its nonverbal dimensions.”¹⁰ *Springsteen & I* offers a unique opportunity to explore new dimensions of fans’ connection with Springsteen and analyze how describe their fandom.

⁸ Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010).

⁹ Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Images* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Steve Bailey, *Media Audiences and Identity: Self-Construction in the Fan Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Andrea Baker, “Mick or Keith: Blended Identity of Online Rock Fans,” *Identity in the Information Society*, 2, no. 1 (2009): 7-21; Matt Hills, “Michael Jackson Fans on Trial? “Documenting” Emotivism and Fandom in Wacko about Jacko.” *Social Semiotics* 17, no. 4 (2007): 459-19.

¹⁰ Ronald B. Adler and Russell F. Proctor II, *Looking Out, Looking In* (Boston, MA: Cengage, 2017 [1974]), 213.

The Documentary

Springsteen & I was produced using video and photo submissions from around the world in order to provide unfiltered access to the voices of Springsteen's fans. Following a call for submissions, fans sent in over 300 hours of footage, which were eventually edited down into a 77-minute film. Director Baillie Walsh, a British music video and film director who has worked extensively with music artists such as Boy George, Kylie Minogue, and Oasis, collaborated on the documentary with producer Ridley Scott, who has an extended history of television and motion picture projects. The result, according to Donna Luff and Lorraine Mangione's review for *BOSS*, is "an inspiring funny, poignant, and creative array of videos showing fans discussing their feelings for Springsteen, their encounters with him, as well as his place in their lives."¹¹ Though the videos are diverse in their content, they consistently touch on several themes: Springsteen fans as a cultural community, the importance of both individual and collective experiences at live concerts, how gender shapes Springsteen fandom, and Springsteen's global appeal.

The documentary begins with footage of Springsteen introducing himself and his band to an audience at a concert in England. From the opening moments of the show, Springsteen highlights the importance of the audience: "We are here for one reason: because you are here." This communal framing shows the respect and reciprocity between Springsteen and his audience as Springsteen frames the concert as a journey shared by the audience, the artist, and the band. The documentary goes on to document that

¹¹ Donna Luff and Lorraine Mangione, "Review: *Springsteen and I*," *BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), 125.

journey. Fan after fan recounts how Springsteen's music represents a daily presence in their lives. Many describe moments when Springsteen's music or live performance assisted them through difficult life experiences. Springsteen has served the same function as family members or close personal friends: his ardent fans feel as if they know him and that he knows them. Jo Littler posited that this desire to understand the inner person

informs the way we connect to celebrities, whether as abstract friends, as offering us glimpses of what we would like to be; of lifestyles we wish to inhabit, spaces of impossible longing, characteristics against which we measure ourselves, or mechanisms through which we bond with other people.¹²

Springsteen's large fan base may connect with him in any or all of these ways, and, though most members of this fan community are not familiar with one another, they are bonded by the commonality of their connection to Springsteen's music.

One video segment centers on a middle-aged man, driving in his car, discussing why he liked Springsteen's lyrics and music. He explains that "Bruce" – referring to the artist by his first name, a mark of familiarity – "has always made me feel like I was going through someone's family photo album, and looking at their life. Smelling their coffee and feeling their sadness and triumphs." As he concludes his statement, the man begins to sob. This clip poignantly illustrates the emotional impact that even a description of Springsteen's music can have for listeners. In particular, showing a man in tears, overcome by emotion as he tries to describe his

¹² Jo Littler, "Making Fame Ordinary: Intimacy, Reflexivity and 'Keeping it Real,'" *Mediactive* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003), 5.

feelings for an artist he may have never met personally, dispels the stereotype of the stoic masculine male. Men who readily share their emotions have traditionally been seen as weak and feminine. In fact, research on emotional expression indicates that men mask their emotions more than women, which leads to the stereotypical notion that men should not share their emotions, especially tears, which would be seen as a major weakness.¹³ Yet in this instance, the director is not apprehensive about showing male emotionality, and the fan's reaction appears heartfelt and genuine, supported by both his facial expressions and bodily movements. This video clip plays on the stereotype of male stoicism to illustrate the depth of the connection between Springsteen and his fans. Springsteen's music is so powerful, *Springsteen & I* implies, and that it can make grown men weep.

The Female Fan

Another recurring theme in the documentary is the voice of the female Springsteen fan. These fans, we contend, offer a particular relationship with Springsteen, often, though not always, incorporating sexual attraction. For instance, in one video, a middle-aged woman discusses her experience of seeing Bruce Springsteen in concert when she was in ninth grade. The story was very detailed and presented in a way that could parallel an account of a sexual experience, with the individual perceiving the subsequent changes she noted in herself after the event. She explains that her experience at a Springsteen concert

¹³ Adrienne W. Kunkel and Brant R. Burleson, "Assessing Explanations for Sex Differences in Emotional Support: A Test of the Different Cultures and Skill Specialization Accounts," *Human Communication Research* 25, No. 3.1 (1999): 307-340,

became something bigger and more powerful than anything I understood or knew yet, in my young body. I grew a few years and a few inches. But it was like the genie had been let out of the bottle, and for me there was no going back. I think I cried, I must have. I was ripped out of my skin. I was ripped out of my senses. I look around and there are men around me smiling. I am soaked to the skin, and I am wearing red satin.

This quote is significant for a number of reasons. First, a major epiphany in her life occurs at a Springsteen concert, which she presents as a coming-of-age moment. Second, her growth is both physical and emotional. One study suggests that either positive or negative emotions come primarily from the label we assign to some physical symptoms at the time.¹⁴ In this instance, her memory of an earlier time in her life signifies her reaction to her personal experience at her first Springsteen concert. Her response to the event served as a catalyst in her growth as a woman from both a physical and emotional frame of reference. In addition, tones of sexuality permeate her story. Specifically, her account seems to say she is leaving behind her little girl status, that she is becoming a woman, with Springsteen serving as the catalyst. This clip emphasizes the growth of one's individual self as it relates to a concert experience in the life of a teenager, now explained from an adult perspective. Luff and Mangione emphasized the importance of these experiences, explaining that the film argues that "Springsteen is the facilitator of self-development."¹⁵

¹⁴ Phillip G. Zimbardo, *Shyness: What It Is, What to do About It?* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

¹⁵ Luff and Mangione, "Review," 126.

Though he had been involved in music for well over a decade, Springsteen became a mega star in 1984 with the release of his seventh studio album, *Born in the U.S.A.*, which would eventually result in sales of over 15 million units in the United States alone and double that worldwide. The album spawned seven hits, including the chart-topping, pop-oriented “Dancing in the Dark.” The song’s accompanying video showed Springsteen performing the song in concert, and toward the conclusion inviting a female audience member (Courteney Cox) to dance with him on stage. This scenario has often played out in reality, becoming a staple of the relationship between Springsteen and his female fans. This is evidenced in the documentary at a concert in England when Rachel brings a sign to a Springsteen concert asking him to allow her to dance on stage with him during his performance of “Dancing in the Dark.” She described the fulfillment of her dream in this way:

I had my “I will be your Courteney Cox” sign. I had my Courteney Cox tee shirt on. And then [my friend] James said to me, ‘Rachel, come on and get on my shoulders.’ And I was like, ‘I don’t want to.’ ... [He said] ‘come on, you never know if we are going to see Bruce again.’ Literally, a couple of seconds into the song, Bruce spotted me, and started laughing. And he was pointing at me, and I was waving at him. Next thing I know I get put on the big screen with my sign. ... The next thing I know is I am being pushed through a sea of black bodies. ... I am dancing with Bruce Springsteen.

The video of the concert accompanies her narrative, which includes her dancing on stage with Springsteen, playing a role beyond just spectator, participating with the band in the event. This type of

reciprocity between Springsteen and his audience has become expected and endears him to his fan community. Linda Randall expounded on this point, explaining, "Fans know they are in the company of other acolytes, and trust is established (to varying degrees) around this fact; the concert hall or stadium becomes a place filled with like-minded individuals 'tramps' all joined in mutual admiration and trust."¹⁶ In Rachel's narrative, she was assisted and cheered on by the Springsteen community. During live performances, the film contends, there is just a thin line between artist and audience. All attendees, including Springsteen himself, are participating members of the larger community.

The actual involvement of Springsteen in fans' lives is prevalent throughout the movie. In Rachel's case, she had a chance to dance with him onstage. For others, Springsteen can change their lives without being physically present in them. For example, Jane from Denmark states a claim of kinship with Springsteen:

I'd like to say something about me and Bruce. We have been friends ever since 1985, though he does not know me. Every day when I go home from work I hear his records in my car. I just love listening to his music.

Whether in concert or on cassette, Springsteen remains a constant presence in his fans' lives. In particular, Springsteen's presence facilitates individual growth, whether personal or sexual, or simply offers a comforting daily presence.

Audience Participation

Non-Americans fans have become an important component of Springsteen's fan community for decades. Springsteen's first ever

¹⁶ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 24.

live performance outside of the United States took place in London on November 18, 1975, a show arranged by Columbia Records to widen his appeal. His premier concert at the Hammersmith Odeon went a long way toward solidifying his connection with the European audience. In the liner notes for the DVD recording of the concert, Springsteen wrote, "It was the show that put us on the map in England and began a long and beautiful relationship with our fans overseas." In 1999, Springsteen noted the importance of his European audience with whom he felt he "really connected." "The greatest thing that I did was go back in the '80s and to continue to go back. It has been the center for an intense interest in the work that I've done."¹⁷ In fact, previous research has suggested that Springsteen's international fan base is more demonstrative in concert than are fans in the United States. Randall observed that the "Euro fans tend to be more enthusiastic and loud, waving and clapping in a hypnotic, synchronized motion... I was assured that the German audience ... would make American audiences pale in comparison."¹⁸ The documentary includes a portion of a concert performance by Springsteen in 2012 at the Hard Rock Calling in London, and the clip shows the large number of young Springsteen fans overseas. As clips of performances in the United States make clear, Springsteen's American audience is aging, but elsewhere in the world his music has resonated with a younger and more passionate fan base.

An implicit argument of the documentary is the similarity between fan-Springsteen relationship in the United States and that

¹⁷ Bruce Springsteen interview with Mark Hagen, *Mojo* 1999 in *Talk About a Dream: The Essential Interviews of Bruce Springsteen* eds. Christopher Phillips and Louis P. Masur (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 246.

¹⁸ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 46.

same relationship for fans in other countries. Language or national boundaries are not an impediment to connecting with the artist. A mid-thirties male fan from Denmark related his experience of witnessing Springsteen as both a nine-year-old boy and again as a 21-year-old. He described his boyhood experience as a “great day” and “priceless,” indicating he recorded the entire three-and-a-half-hour show on cassette tapes that he kept for years. As an adult, he attended Springsteen’s reunion tour with the reunited E Street Band on June 26, 1999, in the same venue in which he saw the show as a young boy. It was another meaningful experience:

It was one of these nights to remember. I remember during the encore of the show, Bruce decides to play “Blood Brothers,” beautiful song, beautiful, beautiful song. During the last verse of the song the guy next to me, I don’t know his name, I haven’t seen him before, and I haven’t seen him since. He puts his arms around me. All of a sudden this big guy is having his arm around me, it was just one of those moments, where it didn’t seem weird at all.

Cavicchi helps explain this fan’s experience, arguing that “Music is not a product to be consumed but rather a performance to be experienced.”¹⁹ This man explains his experience with both depth and specificity. Within the context of the song, it became permissible for personal space to be violated and the excitement of the concert experience was spontaneously shared with another member of the Springsteen community. This brief narrative illustrates in a particular instance how the man becomes part of the concert performance through his unexpected interaction with another Springsteen fan. Though he was not onstage, his presence

¹⁹ Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 89.

in the arena brought him closer to Springsteen and to Springsteen's music than he could have come listening at home by himself. The documentary shows Springsteen overcome with emotion while performing "Blood Brothers," and the fan's story offers an apt comparison, as he hugs a stranger while an emotive Springsteen and his band members clasp hands together. The documentary implies that the relationship between fans, even those who do not know each other, is akin to Springsteen's relationship with his band, with whom he has performed for years. Such is the power of Springsteen's music, that it can turn strangers into emotional companions.

American Fan Experiences

Such fan experiences are not limited to overseas audience. The prominence of signs brought to concerts by audience members suggests an important interaction between Springsteen and his fans. It is common for concert-goers to use signs to request specific Springsteen songs or ask him to cover tunes from other performers that he may have enjoyed playing as a young artist. At a Springsteen concert in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, about 10 years ago, one of the authors of this article saw an audience member holding a sign asking the band to play Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." Springsteen complied with a memorable performance. Like virtually every artist, Springsteen has an organized set list for each concert. However, unlike those who maintain the same structure throughout a tour, Springsteen varies his list considerably from one performance to the next, sometimes (as in the case above) responding to signs and song requests from the audience.

Fans at Springsteen concerts around the world use signs, primarily to request particular songs or to ask for an opportunity to join him on stage. In allowing audience members to be a part of the performance narrative, Springsteen strengthens emotional connections with his fan base. This is discussed by Randall, who writes, "The notion of Bruce understanding who his fans are, what they are going through, is a strand that runs through many fan stories and no doubt accounts for much of the emotional attachment many fans feel."²⁰ Fans believe that Springsteen understands them and their struggles. They believe that by making his audience part of the concert experience he is providing a service to his audience. By bringing them onstage, for instance, he is giving them a chance for their dream to come true.

This is evident in a video segment centered on an audience member who had just experienced a relationship breakup. The man's sign read, "Hi Bruce—I just got dumped—'I'm Goin' Down.'" Noting the sign, Springsteen took the time to encourage the man and eventually welcomed him on stage for a hug before launching into the song, "I'm Goin' Down," a song about a breakup. The interaction went as follows:

Springsteen: "Hi Bruce. I just got dumped." We all know what that is like. Where is my man, right there? What happened, bro?

Fan: She didn't think I was spending enough time with her.

Springsteen: You probably weren't. What, can you get a hug? Come on up here. It's gonna be OK. It's gonna be alright. Don't worry about a thing. I got dumped many times myself. Oh, they are regretting it now. That's right, she be

²⁰ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 90.

regretting it. That's right, they left too soon man, too soon. They left that record company advance money. They left too soon.

While this interaction is comedic, it also indicates the identification between Springsteen and a member of his fan community. As Kenneth Burke writes, "You persuade a man insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his."²¹ Through his interaction with this young man, Springsteen indicates that the young man's experience is not unique. He shares that even he, a famous rock star, has gone through broken relationships, implying that perhaps this fan's former girlfriend will regret her decision, just as his ex-girlfriends regret theirs, thereby equating himself with his fan. The audience thoroughly relishes the interaction, identifying with Bruce as one of them even though his success has afforded him a lifestyle far beyond what most of them enjoy. But most of all, the message is that Springsteen is like his fans. He has experienced heartbreak himself, understands what his fan is going through, and wants to offer counsel – however brief – for his struggles.

Conclusion

This study has emphasized the impact Bruce Springsteen's music has had on his diverse fan base through the divergent perspectives established in the video segments highlighted within the documentary *Springsteen & I*. As Luff and Mangione write, "*Springsteen & I* depicts the Springsteen fan experience as a journey

²¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 49.

of finding oneself through his music.”²² Each clip is different: in some, individuals described incidents of personal growth—often life-changing events—derived through his music or the concert experience. For others, Springsteen is the catalyst of moments of connection with other fans. The film provides a miscellany of individual experiences that, taken together, provide an understanding of the impact Springsteen has made and continues to make today.

Understanding his concerts and music as a shared experience indicates Springsteen’s influence upon the lives of his fans. The fan videos meld verbal narrative with raw emotion and other non-verbal communication. Viewers gain a clearer understanding of the participant’s dedication to Springsteen’s music and what value fans get from their fandom, specifically faith, drive, vision, and a sense of community. Yet, while the videos highlight multiple voices, including female, male, and international fans, one voice that was notably absent was that of people of color, an issue raised in previous research by Cavicchi. This is an area of study that needs further development: assessments of the relationship between Springsteen and nonwhite audiences. Furthermore, the film speaks to the value of film as a text in ethnographic research when compared with transcribed interviews. Researchers in the future could use this template when studying differing fan cultures. This type of approach will allow future researchers to study the emotion inherent in fandom and the developmental bounds that unite fan communities.

²² Luff and Mangione, “Review,” 126.

Reviews

Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture, edited by William I. Wolff (London: Routledge, 2018. 222 pages).

Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture is an edited collection comprised of thirteen essays. The essays are subdivided thematically into three sections: Politics, fear, and society; Gender and sexual identity; and Towards a rhetoric of Bruce Springsteen. In sections two and three, the essays are further divided by brief, editorial "Dialogues" that pose questions, suggest links between the essays, and provide context. The collection is edited by William Wolff, assistant professor of communication studies and digital media at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. The contributors span a wide spectrum, and the book presents itself as an interdisciplinary volume offering perspectives on and approaches to Springsteen from the disciplines of musicology, journalism, sociology, psychology, literary studies, theology, and communications, among others. The editor has also included some fan writing in this collection, asserting that, together, scholarly and non-scholarly writing help to provide a "more nuanced understanding of an artist" (i). *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* is particularly timely, the editor asserts, because it appears at a moment when Springsteen's "contemporary work is just beginning to be understood in term of its impact on popular culture and music" (i).

Part one of the collection includes four essays concerned primarily with Springsteen and politics. Jonathan Cohen's piece, "Lost in the flood: Bruce Springsteen's political consciousness and the Vietnam War, 1968-2014" focuses on biography and argues that Springsteen was politically engaged much earlier and more substantially than is commonly thought, and that even as his songs seemed to coalesce around issues of class in the

1970s and 1980s, it is Vietnam and veterans that stand “at the core of his musical politics” (17).¹ Sara Gulgass’s essay, “Youngstown,” provides a striking counterpoint to the other pieces in the volume, focusing on the punk band You Are the War That I Want’s critical response to Springsteen’s song. Gulgass describes how “Fuck You Bruce Springsteen (an Ode to Youngstown)” challenges the Boss’s romantic-elegiac account of an unemployed steelworker in an attempt to “shift the city’s association from one of declining deindustrialization to one of reinvigorating post-industrialization” (32). Karen O’Donnell offers a theological take on Springsteen in her contribution, “Our Lady of E Street: The Boss’s Virgin, 2002-2014,” tracing Springsteen’s relationship with religion in his post-9/11 songs through his various invocations of Mary: from “Mater Dolorosa” to “Mary, Mediatrix” to, ultimately, Mary as a “liminal figure inhabiting the space between the natural and supernatural” (45). Part one of the collection concludes with Jason Stonerook’s “‘This turnpike sure is spooky’: Springsteen and the politics of fear,” in which he focuses on songs in Springsteen’s oeuvre that illustrate fear and anxiety, real and imagined – over the Cold War, the economy, the government/authority, terrorism, etc. – in the context of a liberal society.

Part two of *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* focuses on gender and sexuality and includes four essays and one “Dialogue.” Pamela Moss’s essay, “*American Beauty* nomads?: Ontological security and masculinized knowledge in uncertain times,” addresses the “meaning of being American” in the aftermath of such troubling events as 9/11, Abu Ghraib, and Hurricane Katrina. Moss, via a feminist materialist perspective, deconstructs a small collection of Springsteen songs that are nominally about “norms of trust and order” but in fact can be shown to reveal –

¹ Jonathan Cohen, who serves as the managing editor of *BOSS*, recused himself from any editing of this review.

though an examination of the subjects (and in particular, the feminine subjects) that emerge through the song lyrics—“indecision, edged with doubt” and ambiguity (74-75). The remaining essays in Part two are prefaced by a one-page “Dialogue” entitled “Springsteen and Women,” which draws the reader’s attention to the tensions between fan and scholarly interpretations in the three essays that follow. Nadine Hubbs blends feminism and musicology in her piece “The Promised Land: Springsteen’s epic heterosexuality, late capitalism, and prospects for a queer life.” Hubbs juxtaposes the “larger-than-life drama of heterosexuality” (91) at the heart of songs like “Born to Run” and “Thunder Road” with queer and racialized elements in Springsteen’s music and performance. Holly Casio’s contribution to the collection, “Is anybody alive out there?: Growing up queer with Bruce,” is a confessional essay written and typeset as though it were part of a fanzine and documents the author’s interpretation of Springsteen’s songs as queer anthems that provided her with emotional support during her teenage struggles with sexuality. “Who is Springsteen to his women fans” by Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff is something of a companion to Casio’s personal essay: it is a study that, drawing on a survey and fan scholarship, characterizes Springsteen’s relationship to female fans in terms of a “psychological and existential journey” of healing and growth, with the Boss as a “companion” (126).

Part three of the collection consists of five essays and one “Dialogue.” Like the preceding section, the focus here is on the construction of identity and on relationships between performer and audience, as constituted rhetorically. Eric Rawson’s “When words fail: Non-lexical utterances and the rhetoric of voicelessness in the songs of Bruce Springsteen, 1975-1984” offers a study of songs in which Springsteen has exhausted his literary lexicon, turning to wordless sounds to express the inexpressible and give voice to the voiceless. In “‘To stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart’: Authenticity, community, and folk music in

the recent work of Bruce Springsteen," Owen Cantrell examines Springsteen's connections to folk music traditions, focusing on his 2006 homage to Pete Seeger, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*. Cantrell argues that Springsteen's use of folk music has evolved over his career: once a marker of authenticity and connectedness to a tradition and community, folk music for Springsteen in recent years has taken on more of Seeger's "politically revolutionary usage" (147). The subsequent "Dialogue" asks the question "How do listeners and audiences interpret a Springsteen song?" (161) and links the essays that follow with respect to the semiotic challenges the music-with-a-message presents. Like Cantrell, Jason Schneider considers Springsteen as a folk musician in his essay "'Bring 'em home!': The rhetorical ecologies of *Devils & Dust*," but within a broader, "ecological" framework that posits Springsteen's music—specifically the 2005 *Devils & Dust* album—as a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (universal artwork) that informs the rhetorical strategies Springsteen uses to catalyze his audience to political action. Journalist Peter Chianca contributes a short essay about the thematic narrative structures of Springsteen's set lists and how they are part of a delicate, carefully crafted negotiation with his audience and its expectations. The final essay in the collection, Scott Wagar's "'They don't just see some person with a guitar': Springsteen and rhetorical identification," considers popular music in general as rhetoric, but looks specifically and critically at how Springsteen seeks to forge connections—successfully or otherwise—with his audience through the rhetoric of his songs and how audiences in turn identify with the Boss.

There are some very strong contributions to Springsteen scholarship in this volume. Jonathan Cohen's historical-biographical account of Springsteen's political engagement is well-researched and compellingly argued: his conclusion that future scholarly examinations of Springsteen and his music as "the particular product of the troubled political atmosphere of the 1960s and early 1970s" (28) would benefit from the

careful consideration of historical context is particularly apposite. Karen O'Donnell's examination of Springsteen's Marian themes and references in his recent music is likewise engaging and thought-provoking and offers some new insights into what O'Donnell rightly describes as the liminal and complex figure of Mary, who becomes even more complex in the context of Springsteen's oeuvre. Owen Cantrell's essay provides an apt deconstruction of Springsteen as a folk musician, resituating him with respect to tradition and authenticity. He makes a convincing argument that Springsteen is not promulgating the folk singer's "cult of authenticity" but rather is thinking about the present while offering an invitation to the richness of history through folk music. Sara Gulgas' essay on punk criticism of Springsteen is likewise a standout in this volume, as it effortlessly integrates cogent musical analysis into a well-written and fascinating comparative study.

Editor William Wolff is clear from the outset that *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture* is intended as both an interdisciplinary volume and as an effort to merge scholarly and fan discourses. To that end, it is well-curated, with essays grouped sensibly into broad thematic areas and with the inclusion of both fan scholarship and contributions from non-academic writers; and it certainly seems "interdisciplinary" as advertised, with contributors running the gamut from sociology, psychology, English, digital pedagogy, women's studies, musicology, and so on. With respect to the volume's interdisciplinarity, my chief concern would be that it is very nearly non-disciplinary, insofar as many of the contributors seem to occupy nebulous, if not outright mysterious, niches within the academy. As a musicologist, moreover, I take issue with the editor's claim that this book—nominally about popular music—includes much of anything that could be considered musical scholarship. Indeed, for a book about music, there is almost no discussion of 'the music itself.' Springsteen's songs are sonic artifacts, not

merely delivery systems for lyrics or flotsam within a socio-cultural nebula of emerging subjectivities and competing discourses of power. Some readers may find it frustrating to read a 221-page book entitled *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* only to find no sustained discussion of the songs as musical objects. Pamela Moss's essay is emblematic of this particular concern. In addition to its jargon-laden and unwieldy prose—it contains, for example, the non-sentence “Discourses circulating around the masculinized subject, such as domination, love, heterosexuality, and security, support and reproduce the masculinized subject positioning affixed to the humanist knowledge that Springsteen as a songwriter is located” (83)—it is almost entirely about theory, and I struggled through it waiting to read something substantial about Springsteen and his music. I take issue, too, with what seems to me the gratuitous inclusion of Holly Casio's pretentious, faux-typeset, fanzine-style essay in this volume: it epitomizes the lack of objectivity of fans/fan scholars, and reinforces the tendency towards hagiography in Springsteen Studies. It is jarringly out of place in a scholarly book on popular music, and especially in a book about a songwriter of Springsteen's gravitas and import.

As I noted at the beginning of this review, editor William Wolff asserts in his introduction that this volume is a timely addition to the “conversation” about Springsteen and popular music, given that now is the moment at which the Boss has “reinforced his status of global superstar and achieved the iconic status of ‘observer of America’” (6). This is an inauspicious start, and I fear Wolff has missed the boat by several years, if not decades, with this claim. Eric Alterman's 1999 book, for instance, already and compellingly made that claim, namely that Springsteen had become an “inescapable icon of American culture” as early as the mid-

1980s, immediately following the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour.² Jimmy Iovine boldly re-inscribed this iconic identity nearly 15 years ago, including Springsteen in a triumvirate with Elvis and Bob Dylan – going so far as to suggest that Springsteen was the apotheosis of Dylan and Elvis – in a 2003 *Rolling Stone* article.³ Over ten years ago, Melissa Etheridge lionized Springsteen as an American icon in an essay for *Razor Magazine*, tying his iconicity to even earlier albums (ca. *Born to Run*).⁴ All of this is just to say that Wolff's suggestion that Springsteen is at this moment somehow especially timely seems stale; to suggest he is emergent as an American icon – an “observer of America” – in 2017 is absurd.

Ultimately, this collection could easily and more honestly be renamed *Bruce Springsteen and Contemporary Culture*, as the Boss's music is often given second billing (at best) to the social, cultural, and political issues linked to Springsteen's oeuvre. When the volume focuses on the literary aspects of his songs, and specifically on rhetoric in the final section of the book, the results are often fruitful and fascinating, but there is such a thing as musical rhetoric: its history goes back centuries. Eric Rawson's essay on “the rhetoric of voicelessness” in this final section is particularly ironic in this regard: the author wants to address the moments in Springsteen's songs when the Boss's rhetoric switches from the lexical – words – to the non-lexical – i.e., when language becomes (musical) sound; when language becomes purely sound-as-meaning in the form of vocables ranging from shouts, moans, and wails to “hey, hey” or “la la” – but instead, Rawson ends up crafting a verbose essay that says almost nothing specific about these sounds and with almost nothing in his bibliography relating to the

² Eric Alterman, *It Ain't No Sin to Be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1999).

³ Jimmy Iovine, “American Icons: Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan & Bruce Springsteen” *Rolling Stone*, May 15, 2003.

⁴ Melissa Etheridge, “American Idol: Bruce Springsteen,” *Razor Magazine*, May 7, 2005.

materiality of the voice or the function and meaning of vocables (Roland Barthes's seminal essay "The Grain of the Voice" would have been a likely starting point for any study of a performer's 'voice').

Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture includes enough decent essays to recommend it to pop music scholars, but surely, when studying a musician-bard of such range and influence as Bruce Springsteen, a deeper investment in the relationships between words and sounds – of course, as part of an holistic approach that also includes reception history, the socio-political elements of songs and performance, biography, etc. – is warranted?

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For the Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen by Azzan Yadin-Israel (Highland Park, NJ: Lingua Press, 2016. 202 pages).

Contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor's magnum opus *A Secular Age* surveys the landscape of spirit and belief in Christendom from 1500 until today. It's a map of places, ideas, and practices in the lands that might be called the Rock and Roll Empire—that realm where music dominated popular culture for much of the second half of the twentieth century and where Bruce Springsteen ruled off and on for decades.

Taylor outlines a seismic shift in the role of religion in Christendom and asks what caused it:

[W]hy was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?

He describes a state of relative equilibrium within basic religious social units of individual, society, and the divine before the cusp of modernity in the sixteenth century. "Human agents [were] embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporate[d] the divine," Taylor says. But beginning around 1500, as a result of the natural evolution of corporate religion, various movements of religious reform, as well as the Enlightenment, relatively static relationships between people, society, and the divine were no longer stable if they continued to exist at all.

Individuals who had once been "porous" selves receptive to the influence of divine or supernatural forces and defined primarily by communal function and ritual as prescribed by tradition became "buffered" selves, protected by rationality, focused internally on their unique experience of the world. This new self compartmentalized each individual mind and body in distinction from the outer world—including traditional communal religion. Taylor describes this dramatic shift in basic forms of human meaning in Christendom with a single word: disenchantment.

His concepts of enchantment and disenchantment are derived from German sociologist Max Weber, a contemporary of Emile Durkheim, who in turn had borrowed the term from the German poet Friedrich Schiller. The “enchanted world” is defined by social imagination and energy animated by faith, superstition, magic, myth, and chains of tradition both written and oral that connected people to communal meaning within the predictable tensions of person, society, and the divine. The notion of disenchantment – a state of something missing, of longing for connection and being part of a greater whole while remaining alienated from both the divine and deep social roots should sound very familiar to anyone who has traced the themes of Bruce Springsteen’s work over the past decades. Indeed, perhaps more than any other rocker, Springsteen has taken on spiritual and cultural stasis of the last part of the twentieth century and pushed his audiences, the social landscape, and above all himself towards reenchantment, a one-man movement (with the help of a band) of spiritual renewal which both rejects and seeks tradition and embraces individual destiny and the necessity of community.

Springsteen’s wrestling with the divine, with theology, with issues of grace, justice, connection, purpose, sin, and community are familiar to students of religion generally as well as within Catholicism, where the same questions troubled Augustine and Aquinas and Sir Thomas Moore. According to Taylor, even in the confusion of a “secular age,” these are the raw materials for contemporary struggle for spiritual purpose and cohesion. And this quest for redemption in the secular age is the topic which Azzan Yadin-Israel explores admirably in his book *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen*.

Yadin-Israel, a scholar of the rabbinic culture and texts of the late Roman Empire, begins with a fine contextualization of the place of rock and roll in the study of contemporary religion. He calls upon a wide-ranging bibliography and an academic structure accessible to lay readers and does

well in showing rock and roll as continuous with poets and philosophers—particularly those in the nineteenth century—wrestling with religious sensibilities and with religious doubt. This is a route that many have travelled, a kind of traditions history of rock. Greil Marcus mastered this approach not only in his early work in *Mystery Train* (1975) but most cogently in his work on Bob Dylan. A small library of work on Springsteen has emerged in recent years as well, and Azzan-Yadin references it thoroughly and skillfully.

The case for Springsteen working with the same essential raw materials as other great America poets and thinkers, from Walt Whitman and William James to Woody Guthrie, makes sense for studying Springsteen, and, probably—thanks to the tutelage of his manager Jon Landau and Springsteen’s own self-education—is a good way for understanding how Springsteen conceives of himself as part of the religious canon of the secular age. Beyond theory, though, millions can attest that Springsteen’s marathon concerts, the tenor of much of his lyrical work, and how he thinks about his role as a musician all engage transformation within the “church” of rock and roll where he is the highest ranking clergy.

Once Yadin-Israel outlines the historical and sociological landscape where this mission can take place, he lays out a plan to explain how Springsteen charted this landscape though passionate, very public trial and error for nearly fifty years, Springsteen’s “non-traditional, immanent path to redemption” (*Grace*, 49). Then Yadin-Israel turns to a chronological survey of Springsteen’s life through 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*—essentially the age of Springsteen crying out and feeling powerless, even if empowered, by music and love and his band; for the most part, he is suffering and running away because of all of the alienation he feels.

Next, in thematic chapters focusing on sin, grace and redemption, and the struggle within (personal struggle), Yadin-Israel offers close readings of songs with some attention to both historical context and

Springsteen's personal circumstances. The style of the scholarship, however, is classical close readings, a focus on the text from the inside out which offers many thoughtful commentaries even if the chronological flow of the book is interrupted.

Finally, Azzan-Yadin plies his trade as a student and teacher of midrash – the ancient Jewish art of interpretation of sacred text – on select portions of the Springsteen canon. He looks for biblical references and themes and watches Springsteen attempt to spin, unravel, or understand them. There are many moments of subtle, generous listening to Springsteen's lyrics. These are poetic twists on poetry – though often not Springsteen's best because, indeed, when Springsteen works as a commentator, songs can sound forced. The same can be true of Yadin-Israel or anyone trying to squeeze further meaning from lyrics. At times, the interpretations of Springsteen on the Bible and Yadin-Israel on Springsteen fall flat.

But still, this is a thoughtful, well-written, colorful, and deeply researched book, useful for scholars who care about rock critique, students of religion who care about the world as it is today, and, of course, anyone who loves the music of Bruce Springsteen. It adds to a body of scholarship that has come to appreciate rock and roll as an important liberation movement even as rock's social impact has faded dramatically over the course of Springsteen's career.

If the world before the Age of Enlightenment was enchanted by rich traditions of religious meaning, community, and the "porous self," the Rock and Roll Empire addressed the abuses of overly dominant religious authority and the longing of disenchantment.

"We can *feel*" – wrote Rudolph Otto, a theologian of the first part of the twentieth century who also innovated broad new horizons for thinking about religion and modernity – "without being able to give it a clear conceptual expression." And in the end, both as a kind of theology to rescue

communities and *communitas* and to engender grand largeness of feeling, Springsteen is preaching the feeling, why it matters, *and* what he thinks should be done about it. He is, as Yadin-Israel points out rightly, a freely feeling Romantic and, despite his doubts, a new kind of secular age believer.

Yadin-Israel's scholarship takes aim at what Springsteen meant in taking on these issues, finding lovely readings of particular songs, strong theoretical context for continuing study of Springsteen's work, and a refreshing review of how the artist has grown and struggled with themes of religion in a secular age that continues to shape society as a whole. He also affirms Springsteen as an artist – even a kind of prophet – both of his times and also calling out for something deeper, more connected, and even redemptive in future times in this world, lest we wait for such changes in the world to come.

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